Snakebite

by ayerf

Magical Law Enforcement trainee Granger is called on to investigate a string of
deaths of suspected Death Eaters – all found bloodless.

Part 1

Chapter 1 of 1

Magical Law Enforcement trainee Granger is called on to investigate a string of deaths of suspected Death Eaters – all
found bloodless.

AN: Written for catherinecookmn in the Winter 07 SSHG gift exchange to this prompt: Snape was bitten by Nagini, but his body's missing. Some months later, Magical Law
Enforcement trainee Granger is called on to investigate a string of deaths of suspected Death Eaters -- all found bloodless.

Many thanks to my betas, septentrion and LadySunflower.

*

Feet pounding across the cropped grass of Hogwarts' grounds, Hermione Granger swore viciously when she almost tripped over her own robes. Shrugging them off, she
left them on the damp grass, preferring to suffer the chill of the early winter air rather than risk an injury. Hitching her robes up just wasn't an option, not when she needed
her hands free, and clothing modification spells were hardly her speciality.

'*Am I a witch or not?* Exasperated, Hermione directed her wand at herself and cast a Warming Charm.

'*I should have told Harry that this sort of thing is* his *speciality, not mine,*' she thought bitterly, doing her best to ignore the nagging stitch slowing her pace from a sprint to a
limping jog. '*He's the Auror, not me.*' Hermione knew that she was being unreasonable, as she was not the only Magical Law Enforcement employee involved with this
case. But, then again, the others from her department called upon to swell the depleted ranks of the Aurors were Hit Wizards. Hermione had signed up with the department
for more of a desk job than that, and was still a trainee to boot.

Her shadow, long in the setting sun, streamed ahead to touch her destination.

Levitating a fallen twig against the correct knot stilled the thrashing of the Whomping Willow, allowing Hermione to slide down under the roots. As soon as she landed,
Hermione rolled to her feet, but had to double over, wheezing, until she could breathe without her lungs and throat burning.

"*Lumos*," she muttered, wincing at how far her voice carried down the dark tunnel even at such a low volume. A Silencing Charm aimed at her feet minimised the dull
echoes caused by her footsteps as she began to creep down the low earthy tunnel, wand directed to illuminate the uneven ground.

The long tunnel seemed to take forever for Hermione to traverse, marked by the whisper of her feet on the floor and the pounding of her heartbeat rushing through her
ears. Eventually a patch of dim light marked the entrance to the Shrieking Shack. Hermione paused long enough to extinguish the light from her wand before cautiously
emerging from the so-called secret passage.

The way from Hogwarts to the Shrieking Shack clearly was not a secret anymore, not when a fugitive Death Eater had been spotted using it on the Marauder's Map. Harry

had turned the invaluable map over to the Aurory, feeling that he could trust the new Ministry under Kingsley Shacklebolt.

As soon as Hermione stepped foot in the infamous shack, she knew that the clandestine surveillance of Hogwarts had been for nothing. Failure left a leaden weight in her stomach, coupled with an awful sense of déjà vu as she gazed at the pathetic corpse slumped on the floorboards.

On slightly shaky legs, she moved to stand beside the body. All too used to the sight of dead bodies after the past week, on top of her wartime experiences, Hermione had developed a strong stomach, enabling her to take a closer look at the body.

The late Amycus Carrow lay on his side, his face twisted into a rictus of terror. Like every other dead Death Eater found recently, the pallid skin was stretched tightly over the underlying bones. From the gashes in his throat and complete lack of colour to his skin, Amycus should have been drenched in his own blood. But there wasn't so much as a drop to be found....

Imagining the pool of blood that should be surrounding this body reminded Hermione of the last body she had seen, in a very similar position to this one. Knees suddenly feeling weak, Hermione sunk into a crouch at the realisation that Amycus had fallen in the exact same spot as Severus Snape all those months before. She touched trembling fingers to the old, discoloured bloodstain surrounding the fresh corpse.

Rather than join in the victory celebrations after Voldemort's death, Hermione had been more concerned with the dead. Much to Ron's disappointment, she had rebuffed his attempts at seduction and instead dragged him to the Shrieking Shack to retrieve Snape's body. Except the body was gone by the time they had reached the Shack, the only evidence he had been there the bloodstain soaking into the floorboards. Ron had been all for Vanishing that, too, but Hermione had felt that there should be some evidence of Snape's passing beyond insubstantial memories.

By all accounts, Amycus had been a nasty piece of work, but Hermione doubted anyone deserved such a grisly, lonely end. Particularly when it meant that the war criminal had escaped the justice meted out by the Wizengamot.

Standing, Hermione gave the room a once-over for any clues, only to have the sinking feeling that the only thing to have changed since Snape's body vanished was the presence of the unlamented Amycus. Flicking her wand at his body, a non-verbal '*Mobilicorpus*' accompanying the movement, the body lifted to waist height.

Hermione didn't have much hope that the magical forensic specialists would find anything new after all, none of the other Death Eaters killed in this fashion had but she was a stickler for following procedures such as retrieving cadavers for analysis in unsolved cases.

Gingerly taking hold of Amycus's limp wrist, Hermione winced at the stone-cold feel of the dead man's skin; but rigor mortis hadn't yet set in, and the wide-open eyes were newly glazed. He hadn't been dead for long, and yet there was no sign of the killer. She Apparated outside to where her partner from the Aurory was supposed to be waiting for her, covering the supposedly sealed exits to Hogsmeade.

"Williamson?" Hermione called, unable to keep her voice from wavering. She told herself that the vocal weakness was simply down to the sudden change in temperature from inside the Shack to outside, but the absence of her Auror backup worried her. Besides, her excuse held no water as her earlier Warming Charm was still working.

Quickly conjuring a stretcher and lowering the body onto it, Hermione was free to focus her attention on finding her missing partner. In his habitual scarlet robes, Williamson should have been easy to spot. Hermione had the sinking feeling that his propensity for sticking out like a sore thumb had been his undoing.

Conjuring her Patronus and sending it to fetch Williamson, Hermione frowned after the silver otter. It was the first time since the fall of Voldemort that she'd felt the need to produce it. While still corporeal, the form was a little indistinct. Mouth twisting, Hermione reluctantly acknowledged that the cause of her blurry Patronus was the instability of her relationship with Ron.

One kiss in the heat of battle, and Ron had proposed as soon as he could lay his sweaty hands on a ring, fully expecting her to accept. After disabusing him of that notion, Hermione had softened the blow by agreeing to be his girlfriend. That was a decision she had begun to regret as it became clearer that they both had different goals in life.

Her attention was returned to the present by an all-too familiar feeling that she was being watched, her skin prickling; the sensation most intense on the back of her neck. Since the end of the war, Hermione had grown resigned to the unpleasant feeling of being watched. It was the price of being one of Harry Potter's best friends.

But this prickling feeling was something different, something that she'd only experienced during her pursuit of wayward Death Eaters and their killer. Some of Hermione's admirers in the wizarding world looked at her as if they were mentally undressing her, but this watcher actually made her feel as though she was naked in a lover's arms. It made her flush at the guilty pleasure it evoked. Hermione backed up against the Shrieking Shack to maximise her field of view, her wand raised.

"Who's there?" As could be expected, no one answered her nervous challenge. "*Homenum revelio*," she murmured, but the spell detected nothing in her vicinity. She noted that it didn't pick up dead bodies, as Amycus's corpse wasn't outlined by the specialised Revealing Charm.

The feeling passed, leaving Hermione slumped against the ramshackle building, eyes closed, as the arousal that had been humming through her body faded. When she opened her eyes, she was greeted by the sight of her Patronus, even more blurred than usual.

Running further away then darting back, the Patronus got the message across to her to follow it. Hermione did so, bemused by the unusual behaviour displayed. To her knowledge, Patronuses were restricted to acting against Dementors and as messengers.

Before she moved out of sight of Amycus's corpse, Hermione enchanted the stretcher bearing it to follow her. She turned back to her Patronus, which had run ahead to a ditch that lay between the rest of the village and the Shack. There was a patch of reddish-brown dimly visible in the shadows of the ditch, the sun too low to provide better light.

Forcing her legs to move closer, the patch of colour resolved into Williamson lying face down in the ditch. Kneeling down beside him, Hermione rolled him over. Dead, glassy eyes stared back at her. She hadn't liked the arrogant Auror, but Hermione hadn't wished him dead. With shaking hands, she pulled his long ponytail away from his throat, swallowing hard when she was confronted by the ugly gashes torn into his neck. Bloodless gashes....

Hermione was dimly aware of one of her hands rising to cover her mouth as the implications of this new murder occurred to her. Either the killer of the Death Eaters was now including Aurors on his (or her) to-kill list, or Williamson had actually been a Death Eater. Whichever was the truth, this didn't bode well for the Aurory.

* * *

"Hey! No civilians in this area...Granger? Where are your robes?" Gawain Robards, Head of the Aurors, had barred her way into the Aurory, until he had raised his glower from her clothes to her face.

"I left them at Hogwarts, sir. They weren't made for ease of movement." After using two of the Portkeys provided for the purpose of transporting the bodies to the Ministry mortuary, Hermione had forgotten to collect her robes. Perhaps if she hadn't cast a Warming Charm, the resulting shivering would have reminded her.

"Hmm. Well, they'll give the students quite the story to invent. I daresay we'll get a story in the *Prophet* about a naked witch haunting the castle," Robards muttered. "Did you find anything to report at Hogwarts?"

"Two more bodies, killed so recently that I swear I could feel the killer's eyes on me." Hermione bit her lip, unwilling to elaborate when there was a danger of eavesdroppers.

Clearly troubled, Robards led Hermione to his office.

"Were you able to identify them?" he asked as soon as the privacy wards were erected when the door shut behind them.

"Yes, sir. Both had been killed in the same way as the other Death Eaters. I found Amycus Carrow in the Shrieking Shack, and you're really not going to like this Williamson in a ditch outside."

Robards had walked over to his desk and had been about to sit down. He slammed his palms down onto the desk.*Williamson?!* Auror Williamson?" Sitting down heavily, he dropped his head into his hands. Hermione guessed that he was despairing over the implications. She fidgeted, waiting for him to speak.

"I trust you Portkeyed the bodies to the mortuary," Robards said, raising his head in time to see Hermione nod. "With this new development, I think it's time to update the Minister."

After Floo-Calling the Minister, Robards led Hermione to the mortuary. By the time they reached the dingy basement room, Kingsley was waiting for them.

"What is it that you had to show me with such urgency, Gawain?" Kingsley asked, impatience adding a growl to his deep voice.

Hermione looked sharply at Robards. She hadn't been able to hear the content of the Floo-Call, but she had assumed that Kingsley at least knew the basics. The poor Minister really was going to have an unpleasant surprise....

Inside the mortuary, all of the bodies associated with the case were arranged in rows. Unlike a Muggle mortuary, frigid temperatures were not required to preserve the cadavers. Preservation spells were used instead. Still, even without the need for Warming Charms, Hermione found mortuaries unpleasant. Judging by the grim, haunted expressions of the men accompanying her, they also wished to be elsewhere.

Leaning over the most recent bodies, Kingsley looked closely at them. "Some serial killers do use the same method every time, but this is the first time I've seen the same mortal wounds in identical positions on every..." Inhaling sharply, Kingsley cut himself off, eyes wide with shock. "Isn't that Williamson?"

Speaking up to reluctantly confirm that it was, Hermione watched as Kingsley closed his eyes, kneading at the bridge of his nose.

"Fuck," he eventually said, summing up the situation. "Either this killer vampire or killers is using Aurors as well as Death Eaters for food, or Williamson was a Death Eater. But then we've still got the problem of a vampire feeding on people without keeping them alive to come back for more."

"The murderer's definitely a vampire, then?" Hermione asked. She'd had her suspicions, but had been waiting for the results on the post-mortems.

"I keep forgetting you're not training to be an Auror, Granger. Although if you wore your robes, I'm sure your departmental colours would remind me," Robards muttered, casting an irritated eye over her hybrid wizard-Muggle casual clothes. He gestured at the corpses. "These bodies are prime examples of vampire attacks. To a practiced eye, the gashes on the necks are all inflicted by teeth. No other Dark creature completely drains their victims of blood, either."

Before Hermione could ask whether the identical placements of the bites meant that a single vampire was the culprit, Kingsley spoke from where he stood over Williamson's body. "A mortuary is hardly the best place for a conversation, even one concerning these poor sods. Might I suggest my office as a more comfortable place for an uncomfortable subject?"

* * *

Outside the Minister's office, Harry was squirming under the worshipful gaze of Kingsley's secretary. He looked up as Hermione and their superiors entered, a relieved expression on his face as he ducked into the office with them at Kingsley's invitation.

Sitting down behind his massive, claw-footed desk, Kingsley motioned for his employees to follow suit. Stroking his hand over his shaven head, he turned to Harry first.

"Harry, you wanted to speak to me, I presume?"

"Yes, sir...I mean, Kingsley," Harry hastily corrected himself. Hermione presumed that, like her, he had been told to call the Minister by his first name. "I just got back from my meeting with the vampire clan leaders."

'*So that had been where Harry had vanished off to*' Hermione mused. She hadn't seen much of him recently, despite being assigned to the same case. It seemed that the Ministry had been making use of their famous employee as an ambassador, although Harry would doubtless refer to it as a 'glorified poster boy' in private.

"They all denied involvement of any of their clan members in the Death Eater murders."

Robards and Kingsley were silent, contemplating Harry's words. From what Hermione knew of vampires, it was quite an achievement to get the leaders of the various vampire clans to meet with each other, as they were all at each others' throats, locked in perpetual rivalry.

"While this case only concerned the murders of Death Eaters and suspected Death Eaters, the general public didn't really care," Robards said.

That was all too true. When Ron had found out about the case, he couldn't see what the problem was. In his eyes, there was nothing wrong with a vigilante killer targeting Death Eaters.

'*Perhaps if Death Eaters had killed or maimed my family, I wouldn't care if they were being killed by a vampire like a fox among chickens in a hencoop*' Hermione thought, although from a certain point of view she had lost her family due to the war. But she only had herself to blame....

Shortly after the end of the war, she had paid a visit to Australia to restore her parents' memories. But her Memory Charm had worked all too well: permanently erasing herself from her parents' lives. To add insult to injury, Hermione then had to Obliviate them of her attempt to bring their memories back.

When she returned to Britain, devastated by her own stupidity, things went from bad to worse. Due to the necessary robbery to acquire a Horcrux, the goblins had seized what money Harry and Hermione had in Gringotts. The Weasleys' vaults were spared down to Bill's influence, but were fined nonetheless. Without money, Hermione couldn't return to Hogwarts for her final year of schooling...unless she wanted to rely on her status as a heroine for funding, that is, but the concept was repugnant to Hermione. Instead, she got a job straight away, working from the bottom rung in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, rather than accept a higher level entry bought with borrowed fame.

"...Hermione?" A hand waved in front of Hermione's eyes, focussing them and her mind on the present. Harry, Kingsley and Robards were looking at her, eyebrows raised at her unusual inattention.

"Sorry," she blurted, blushing as she shook off the sadness that lingered with the loss of her parents, in mind if not in body.

"It's alright, Granger. We were just catching Potter up on the new developments; Williamson's murder, to be precise." Robards cleared his throat. "The vampire or vampires responsible for these murders must be found, before news of Williamson's death is leaked to the public. The last thing we want is a mob hunting down vampires, particularly as they're likely to be indiscriminate and killing regardless of guilt."

"How many known Death Eaters are still alive?" Kingsley asked.

"About a handful. At this rate, if we don't catch the murderer soon, it will be too late," Robards said, after flicking through a notepad pulled from his robes. Hermione leaned towards him to catch a peek of the contents. As she had expected, it contained a list of names, together with suspected locations. Most had a line crossed through them; clearly meaning that they were dead. As Hermione watched, one of the few uncrossed names suddenly flashed. Half expecting a line to form through it, she blinked when

the location changed instead.

Robards had been watching, too. He looked up, briefly meeting Hermione's gaze before turning to Kingsley. "We have a new lead. Thorfinn Rowle has been spotted leaving Malfoy Manor. The fool must have thought that we weren't keeping an eye on the Malfoys."

The Malfoys had escaped imprisonment in Azkaban, largely due to their actions ─ and inaction ─ in the last battle against Voldemort. But they hadn't escaped punishment for their crimes, as a heavy fine had almost emptied their coffers and they were under house arrest. It had been hoped that the Malfoys would serve as bait for the Death Eater killer, but there had been no success. Until now, when another Death Eater had paid them a visit.

"Thorfinn Rowle?" Hermione asked, frowning at the unfamiliar name.

"A big, dumb brute. He was one of the Death Eaters there when Dumbledore was killed," Harry explained. "Very good at casting the Killing Curse; but not very good at aiming, he killed at least one of his fellows with friendly fire."

"On the contrary, Harry, Rowle isn't stupid. He just has no respect whatsoever for the sanctity of life," Kingsley said. "A psychopath, with no concept of any emotions save his own. He simply wasn't intelligent or powerful enough to be a Dark Lord."

"As much as the bastard deserves to be sucked dry, we need to capture him as soon as possible. It's also clear from poor Williamson's fate that a pair is not a big enough team when the serial killer may well be around. This time, I'll lead a squad." Robards looked at Hermione and Harry. "As you're both here, and already briefed, you two might as well be part of it."

* * *

On leaving Malfoy Manor, a Tracking Charm had been placed on Rowle when he passed through the complicated wards cast by the Aurors. By the time Rowle noticed it was there, the squad of Aurors under Robards's leadership had cornered him in the Wiltshire countryside. Anti-Apparition wards had just been set up, preventing Rowle from Disapparating under their noses. His attempt to do so resulted in a sulphurous crack. Swearing at his failure to Apparate, Rowle ran for cover, his surroundings illuminated by modified Lumos Charms floating free of the wands that had produced them, allowing the casters to use their wands for other spells.

"*Finite Incantatem*!" the big, blond Death Eater bellowed, directing his wand at himself. If the Tracking Charm was still active, there would be no point in running or hiding.

Hermione watched the faint iridescence on Rowle's hair caused by the Tracking Charm fading. She thought about casting another one, but the need to duck a sickeningly familiar green flash distracted her.

His face distorted by an enraged snarl, Rowle redoubled his attempts to curse his way out of the trap that had been set.

Three of the four Aurors Robards had managed to find and brief dropped to the grassy ground. From the number of Killing Curses Rowle was throwing around, Hermione suspected that they were dead. That left Robards, Harry, Hermione and the surviving Auror to capture Rowle.

Watching one of her own Stunners fail to make Rowle so much as flinch, Hermione began to wonder if the massive Death Eater had giants somewhere in his ancestry. Or perhaps he'd taken some sort of Strengthening Elixir? Hermione knew such things existed, allowing the drinker to withstand more than the average mortal.

The fight went from bad to worse when Hermione watched, aghast, as Rowle killed the fourth Auror. She was ashamed to admit to herself that she didn't even know the poor Auror's name.

Channelling magic through her wand, Hermione was more aware of changes in the magic of her surroundings. She was all too aware of the static tingle she felt on her skin when the Anti-Apparition wards failed with the deaths of too many of the casters. Her eyes fixed on Rowle's contorted features, she also knew that he was just as conscious of the change. Not even thinking about it, Hermione darted forwards.

Just as Harry began to yell the first syllables of the Cruciatus Curse, Rowle spun on the spot. Hermione caught hold of his shoulder in time to be dragged into the compressing darkness of Apparition.

She had no time to observe her new surroundings upon their arrival a split-second later. Grunting, Rowle shrugged her hold off. A single, effortless swing of his arm hurled Hermione against a hard surface. After the initial explosion of pain along her head and back, she slid down into darkness.

* * *

The first thing Hermione was aware of was her head throbbing, closely followed by the sensation of something warm and strong holding her up. Something smooth was pressed to her lips. Struggling futilely to open her eyes, she turned away. She regretted the movement when it caused a sharp pang to shoot down her spine. The smooth thing followed her, a tangy scent reaching her nostrils as it did so.

"Drink." The familiar, deep, smooth voice brooked no argument.

Grimacing at the strong taste, Hermione obediently swallowed what was poured into her mouth, from what her foggy mind now recognised as a cup.

The headache and the fogginess gradually faded as the mysterious contents of the cup worked their way through her system. Swiping at her eyes, Hermione managed to clear enough sleep from them enough to blink them open.

As soon as she had managed to focus on the owner of that familiar voice, Hermione blinked again, unable to believe her eyes. Pinching herself, the sharp tweak proved the man sitting beside her ─ holding her up, even! ─ not to be a hallucination.

Severus Snape was alive.

Hermione was hard pressed to keep her jaw from dropping. She knew that she was staring, and had been brought up to know that staring was rude; but the part of her that could be arsed about manners noticed that Snape's dark eyes were watching her unblinkingly, so surely that cancelled out her rudeness?

'*Besides, it's rather rude to let everyone think you're dead. I mean, funerals are expensive, even when no body is involved!*' If Hermione had been more than just vaguely aware of the irreverent thought running through her mind, she might have had a fit of hysterical giggles. But accepting the truth of Snape's survival was taking up the majority of her brain power.

"Breathe, Miss Granger," Snape murmured, rolling his eyes. "For someone of your rumoured intelligence, my presence seems to have stumped you."

Sucking in a lungful of air, Hermione shook herself out of her stupor. Leaning forwards, she reached for Snape's neck. He tensed, but allowed her to tug his collar out of the way to expose his neck. At the sight of the faint red marks left by Nagini's bite, Hermione felt cold. Tracing her fingertips over the scars left by the bite, Hermione was reassured by the feel of the warm skin that he was really there.

It was only when she noticed Snape look down that Hermione realised that it wasn't the sight of the bite that made her cold. The blanket covering her had slipped as she leant forwards, leaving her chest bare.

'*Bare?!*' Hermione yelped, yanking the blanket up to her chin.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Overly modest of you, Miss Granger, really. After all, I saw everything that you have to offer when I was examining your injuries." Disconcerted,

Hermione watched as a slow, appreciative smirk spread on his face. Clearly he'd found the sight amenable.

Feeling her cheeks burning, Hermione soon forgot her mortification when she remembered how she had been injured: the fight with Rowle, his attempted escape and her painful encounter with a wall at his hideout. But what had happened after that? Obviously Snape had somehow rescued her, or Hermione had no doubt that she would now be dead. Still, she had to know.

"What happened to Rowle?"

Smiling grimly, Snape answered her. "Suffice to say that Thorfinn Rowle will never so much as touch a woman again."

"You killed him?" Hermione blurted. She fought the temptation to pull the blanket over her head at her ineptness. Interrogation had never been part of her training, after all.

He chuckled, sending shivers down her spine. "The need of a Blood Replenishing Potion did that." Slowly, very deliberately, he bared his teeth.

"So that's how you survived Nagini's bite," Hermione said faintly, all too aware that her neck was within easy biting range of a vampire. "All those rumours at school were true. You really were are, I mean a vampire." Even as she said it, Hermione could think of innumerable instances where she had seen contradictory evidence to those pervasive whispers at Hogwarts.

'*But what about all those times I saw Snape in direct sunlight? How was he able to handle garlic in Potions lessons? While he's certainly capable of inventing potions and spells to keep his vampirism secret, he's definitely aged during my time at Hogwarts. So when did he become a vampire?* Frowning, deep in thought, Hermione examined all that she knew of vampires for a clue. '*The only mark on his neck was Nagini's bite. Is it possible that he was bitten somewhere else? Or is that an indication that he has vampires in his ancestry. I did read that the best vampire killers were sired by vampires, and that it's possible for them to become vampires themselves. Was it his mother? His father? Muggles can be vampires, after all.*'

"You think very loudly, Miss Granger. My mother was nothing more or less than a witch. My father did nothing worthwhile in his entire miserable life." Contempt dripped from Snape's tone. "No, he was not a vampire."

"Then how..." Hermione managed to break herself away from his gaze long enough to look again at his neck. "Where were you bitten?"

"In the usual place," Snape said, indicating his neck.

Hermione felt her eyes widen. He was pointing to the snakebite. "Animals can be vampires too?"

"Silly girl, the fact that humans *are* animals should answer that question." The derogatory term almost sounded like a term of endearment to Hermione.

"But if Nagini was a vampire, why didn't Harry become one? She bit him around Christmastime last year." Feeling the blanket slipping to her shoulders, Hermione pulled it back up.

"Like curses, the effects of a vampire's bite have everything to do with intent. Nagini only intended to maim Potter, not to kill him or turn him." The way Snape was watching the blanket made Hermione suspect that he was willing it to slip down. He did look a little disappointed when she crossed her arms over her breasts to prevent it slipping again.

"Didn't Voldemort order her to kill you?" From Harry's tales, Hermione had been expecting Snape to have some sort of adverse reaction at the mention of the Dark Lord's name, but he didn't even blink.

"You would have to ask Nagini of her motives to 'spare' me." From the taunting look in Snape's eyes, he knew of the snake's fate.

The question of how Snape had become a vampire answered, Hermione turned her attention to his victims. "You killed all those Death Eaters? I mean, it was much better than turning them all into vampires, but the Aurors were hunting them down to bring them to justice."

He didn't try to deny it. "Would you believe me if I told you I was simply doing a public service?"

Hermione snorted.

"I thought as much. Apart from the fact that the Wizengamot's idea of justice is a joke when confronted by vaults of gold, I was satiating my hunger. Better I target Death Eaters than 'innocents', wouldn't you say?" Snape asked, raising an eyebrow.

She snorted again. From the way Snape had said the word, it was clear that he didn't think there was any such thing as an innocent person. "And what happens when you run out of Death Eaters to feed on?"

"I only have an appetite for those that have darkness within their souls." There was a strange glint in Snape's eyes as he looked at her, something between hunger and lust.

Hermione had to check that the blanket hadn't slipped, she felt so naked under his gaze. She inhaled raggedly as the feeling intensified, her skin prickling under the burning heat evoked by Snape's regard. It was worse than it had been outside the Shrieking Shack, this close to her watcher. During their conversation, Hermione had forgotten that he was still holding her up in a sitting position. Now, she could feel his hand, ice cold against the burning heat of her back.

"St-stop it," she gasped, all too aware that if he did anything more, she would jump his bones. "I-have-a-boyfriend."

"Such a waste," Snape murmured. Hermione could barely hear him through the pounding of her heart in her ears. When he stroked icy fingers down her cheek to cup her jaw, she couldn't stop herself from leaning into his touch, whimpering when he brushed his thumb over her lips.

Much like a puppet with its strings cut, Hermione slumped down onto the bed when Snape removed his hands and his seductive focus from her. It took her a while to recover, her heart gradually slowing to a more normal rate.

Sitting up, she looked around the Spartan chamber she and Snape were in. The only furniture was the bed she lay in, the walls hidden by bookshelves. A stack of books acted as an impromptu bedside table. Her wand lay on top of them, her clothes folded in a pile on the floor.

She noticed with grim amusement that Snape was watching her warily as she snaked an arm out from under the blanket to grab her wand. One spell later, and her clothes had vanished from the floor, reappearing on Hermione. Flinging back the blanket before she could overheat, she got out of Snape's bed, springing to her feet.

Standing over the still-sitting Snape, Hermione did her best to loom over him. While it had worked in the past to intimidate Harry and Ron, Snape was unimpressed, merely smirking at her efforts.

It was only the fact that he was a vampire that kept Hermione from slapping the smirk off his smug face.

"If you ever do that to me again, Severus Snape, I'll shove a stake where the sun doesn't shine," she said, her voice trembling with barely restrained anger. "And Ron is not a waste!" Hermione added, inwardly cringing that tackling the insult to poor Ron was an afterthought.

"Rest assured that it will not happen again, Miss Granger." His smirk widened to a malicious grin. "All that I meant was that the fact that you are taken was a waste. For you

to misconstrue that can only mean that you are wasted on Mr. Weasley."

"Leave Ron out of this," Hermione said wearily. With her doubts about her relationship with Ron, she found that she didn't have the willpower to argue.

"As you wish," Snape drawled.

The sight of Snape's fangs as he'd grinned reminded Hermione of the crimes committed using them. "I should arrest you for killing all those Death Eaters," she proclaimed, yet did not raise her wand.

Snape stood up, towering over her as he effortlessly demonstrated how to loom properly. He muttered something that sounded rather like 'I'd love to see you try', sneering at her.

Resisting the urge to roll her eyes, Hermione continued, "However, I'm not suicidal. There's no doubt that the Ministry can deal with vampires even you, Professor but I know better than to think that I can. I have a better idea."

"Do tell," Snape said. "And I'm not your professor anymore. You may call me by my first name if you wish."

"Fine. Severus, then. You might as well call me Hermione in return. After all, it's not as if you haven't seen me naked," she muttered, feeling her cheeks burning. Casting a Cooling Charm on herself dealt with her lingering embarrassment before Sna...before *Severus* had time to smirk at her.

Clearing her throat, Hermione launched into explaining her idea. "The remaining Death Eaters need to be hunted down. Instead of hindering the Ministry, you could help us capture them and bring them to justice."

Snape '*No, Severus*' expressed his opinion of that idea with a disgusted grunt, but otherwise didn't interrupt.

"Before I was drafted in to swell the numbers in the Aurory, I was working on something to make sure that the Death Eaters wouldn't be able to buy their way out of trouble. I found out that all of them have ancient, goblin-made treasures. If that's revealed to the goblins in Gringotts, in their present mood they'll confiscate the Death Eaters' vaults."

"You forget, I still need to feed from them." He idly ran a finger over his enlarged, razor sharp canines.

Hermione thought for a moment. "I've no problem with your feeding from them," she said, leaving 'in preference to innocents' unsaid. Technically she wasn't lying, so hopefully Snape '*Severus, dammit!* wouldn't notice. "But surely you can keep them alive? That way you could always go back for more."

"It's not nearly as satisfying that way. But you do have a point. However, the Ministry would never stand for it. They still hate 'half-breeds' like vampires."

"What the Ministry doesn't know won't hurt them. I'll keep quiet about your survival, and about your vampirism if you agree to my plan."

Looking down at her with an impenetrable look in his eyes, Snape mulled it over for a while, watching Hermione fidget, before he finally agreed.

"Excellent! Right, I'd better report back to the Ministry. I might hear something about where the last fugitives are thought to be hiding."

"Of course, you must reassure Potter of your continued existence. You have been unconscious for an hour, although most of that was so that I could heal you."

She winced. Harry would be worried sick. Had Ron been informed, too?

"Tell me, Hermione, if you are not wasted on Ronald Weasley, then why is he, yet again, an afterthought?"

That comment earned Severus a poisonous glare from Hermione. But there was no real venom involved, as poor Ron had indeed been an afterthought.

'*Hold on. It literally was an afterthought. I didn't voice it. GET OUT OF MY HEAD, SNAPE!*'It was very satisfying to see Severus flinch at the 'volume' of her thoughts.

"Kindly refrain from reading my thoughts," she bit out.

"Unfortunately, the only way that would be possible was if you were capable of practicing Occlumency. Besides, your mind being open to me makes it absurdly simple to find you once you have dealt with your little friends in the Ministry," he said, massaging his temples.

Hermione had thought that Severus had been soothing away the ache created by her mental yells. It was soon apparent that he'd had an ulterior motive, when Hermione found herself unable to look away from him. Pitch black eyes seemed to fill her vision, becoming her entire world.

She was dimly aware of her breath catching in her throat, and subsequently her body's urgent demands for oxygen but she was too enraptured by the vampire's enspelled gaze to care. Her heart beat rapidly, something Hermione was most conscious of at the pulse point at her neck... and between her legs.

Beyond the intensely physical sensations evoked by his gaze, the only other thing Hermione was aware of was a vague tickling sensation behind her temples.

Just as black spots began to dance across her vision, Severus released Hermione from his mental grip.

"Wh-what did you just do?" Hermione wheezed, doubled over and gasping for air. Recovering her senses, she recognised the uncomfortable ache below the pit of her stomach as unfulfilled desire. "Bastard! I told you not to do that again!" Without thinking of the possible consequences, she pulled her hand back, swinging it forwards with considerable force at Snape's cheek. Before it reached him, Snape moved faster than Hermione thought possible to grab her wrist and halt her attempting slap.

"Think, you foolish girl, do you really want to risk slapping a vampire?" Severus asked, his voice dangerously low and a matching glint in his eyes. "I did not do 'that' again. All I did was form a mental link between us, so that you can call for me from the ends of the Earth, and I would still be able to hear you."

"I see. Sorry for overreacting," Hermione muttered sheepishly, unable to meet his incensed glare. She almost asked whether he would eavesdrop on her every thought over any distance, but discarded the question as irrelevant. He'd need to be listening in to her thoughts in order to know when she needed him.

"Apology accepted," Severus said, releasing her wrist, the scowl on his face at odds with his words. He seemed to be taking her assuming the worst of him as an insult. "Allow me to let you out." He stalked over to the door, tapping it with his wand. The tell-tale shimmer of the wards faded, allowing him to yank the door open. Mock-courteously, he held the door open for her as she sidled past him. It slammed shut as soon as she stepped outside, leaving her in pitch black darkness.

'*Lumos!*' The light shed from the tip of her wand revealed a dingy staircase. Hermione cautiously made her way down it, pushing open the door at the bottom. Wondering why it wasn't locked, she stepped outside into the deserted dimly-lit street outside. Turning around, she just managed to see the door swing closed before it vanished. Severus's hideout was apparently under the Fidelius Charm.

Looking around to check that she wasn't being watched, Hermione was on the point of Disapparating when something occurred to her. Glaring at approximately where Snape's door had vanished, she decided to test the new mental link rather than yelling at the top of her voice.

"As requested, the corpse of Thorfinn Rowle."

Hermione almost jumped out of her skin when Severus spoke from right behind her. He must have used his vampirism-gained inhuman speed to move so fast, as she'd

only just finished mentally asking him for Rowle's body.

'*But Rowle's body wasn't in the room we were in, was it? Good Lord, Severus must have moved unbelievably fast. Those Death Eaters never had a chance against him. I wouldn't stand a....*' She strangled her train of thought, as it wouldn't do her sanity any good to mull over those things with a vampire more or less breathing down her neck. Figuratively speaking; it wasn't like he needed to breathe anymore.

Turning to face Severus, she almost tripped over Rowle's body. Swallowing hard, she avoided looking too much at the corpse, only observing enough to note that the mortal wounds matched the positions of the other victims.

"Thank you," Hermione said, her voice shaking, thoroughly unnerved despite her best efforts to dispel the feeling. Yet at the same time she found herself oddly allured to Severus, which only made her more discomfited.

Crouching down, Hermione fished one of Portkeys to the Ministry mortuary from her robes, fumbling with it as she touched it to Rowle's body. When she looked up, Severus had gone. Either he had melted into the shadows or he'd gone back inside.

"Honestly! He could have at least said 'goodbye'," she grumbled to herself, jabbing the Portkey with her wand to activate it. She found that she'd used a little too much force with the spell when it triggered before she could let go.

'*Oh, bugger. The mortuary door doesn't open from the inside*!

* * *

Much to her annoyance, Hermione had to wait with the grisly company provided by the mortuary until her Patronus had summoned help. In their infinite wisdom, the Ministry had set up the mortuary so that the door stayed open until it was manually closed... but it couldn't be opened from the inside, even by a spell. Granted, in ordinary circumstances, no one left inside a mortuary would need to open it, but accidents did happen. And pranks. Hermione had filed a complaint, petitioning for the door to be modified as common sense demanded, but there had been no response. The Ministry was obviously too busy rebuilding itself to rectify anything so mundane as a poorly designed door. She would have done the job herself, with a little research to know what spells to use, but so far she had been overrun with the work assigned to her.

'*Well, at least the lights are the ordinary sort in this stupid building and can be turned on from inside the room. It would be even creepier just by wand light.*

Finally the door swung open. Harry burst inside, his wand drawn. Hermione took a step back, almost raising her own wand before she realised that doing so would result in someone getting hexed. Quite possibly her; Harry was the better duellist.

"Who were you trying to turn into when you had a Polyjuice accident?" Harry asked, his eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"Millicent Bulstrode, of course, but why do you need to check my identity? You saw my Patronus..."

Harry cut her off, slowly lowering his wand. "I saw a blurry Patronus that spoke with your voice. Is it changing?"

"I think it might be," Hermione admitted, and hastily changed the subject before Harry could realise what it implied about her relationship with Ron. It was also possible that Harry would jump to the wrong conclusion that her blurry silver otter was just adjusting to a deeper love for Ron. "Honestly, Harry! If I was someone impersonating me, the voice of my Patronus wouldn't have been mine."

Apparently satisfied of her identity, Harry tucked his wand into the holster up the left sleeve of his robes. He grabbed hold of her upper arms as if he needed to reassure himself that she was really there.

"Good, it's really you. Now, *where the hell have you been?*' he demanded, unconsciously trying to shake an answer out of her. "We thought you were dead when you didn't respond to Patronus messages! Owls couldn't find you either!" Harry abruptly stopped shaking her and looked around at their grim surroundings, a slight frown creasing his face. "How on earth did you end up in the mortuary anyway?"

"Portkey," Hermione said, pointing at Rowle's body and the tatty badge on it that had been her method of magical transport. "It was an accident..."

"Of course!" Harry exclaimed. He let go of her and began pacing up and down in the limited floor space between a couple of the rows of bodies. "That explains something. While we were hunting Rowle, someone stole a dead Death Eater without opening the mortuary door. There must still be a crooked Auror around, as we only issue those Portkeys to people employed by the Aurory."

Hermione rubbed her arms, soothing away the ache caused by Harry's tight grip. "You forget that it's not just Aurors in the Aurory at the moment."

"Fine, a dirty rotten snitch of a Ministry employee, then," he said impatiently, grabbing hold of her hand and virtually dragging her out of the mortuary. "Come on. Robards will want to hear about what happened, too." He closed the door and resumed pulling Hermione along like an overenthusiastic dog on a walk.

Stifling a sigh of relief that it seemed she would only have to tell her tall tale once, Hermione quickened her pace to avoid the danger of Harry accidentally dislocating her arm in his hurry.

"Granger!" Robards barked as soon as he caught sight of her, when Harry dragged her into the Auror Headquarters. "Report." He crossed his arms, frowning down at Hermione.

At last Harry let go of her, allowing Hermione to massage some feeling back into her numbed hand as he moved to stand next to Robards.

"There's not much to tell," Hermione began, making sure that she kept her body language under careful control as she spoke so that she wouldn't give herself away. "Rowle knocked me out as soon as we'd arrived at his hideout. I regained consciousness an hour later, his dead body sprawled on the floor beside me. The killer was long gone."

"I see. In that case..." Robards trailed off, his lips thinning to a white, tense line. He suddenly drew his wand, a flash of white flying from the tip straight at Hermione.

She flinched as the mysterious spell made contact with her, momentarily flummoxed when nothing happened. A moment later a red glow appeared, shining through her clothes. It brightened and dimmed with a steady frequency. It didn't take Hermione long to realise that it was in time with her heartbeat.

"If you're a newly fledged vampire, you're hiding it well," Robards observed, ending the spell. "I needed to check that you weren't bitten. The last thing we need is another vampire, one with forced allegiance to the killer."

Robards Summoned a sheet of paper, scribbled something on it with a bedraggled looking quill from one of his pockets, and tapped the sheet with his wand, causing it to fold up into one of the Ministry memos. It flew off, almost getting tangled in Harry's hair as it did so. "The Minister will be relieved to hear that you're back unscathed, Granger."

"Er, sir, as Hermione wasn't bitten, doesn't that give more weight to the theory that Williamson was a Death Eater?" Harry suggested, attempting to smooth his hair down so that no other memos would be able to snag themselves in it.

"It does... other possibilities to investigate... killer vampire... found... justice."

Lost in thought, Hermione wasn't really paying attention to what Robards was saying. Severus had said that he targeted those with darkness in their souls, specifically Death Eaters at the moment. It was possible that Williamson had been a Death Eater, but it was also possible that Williamson's soul was too dark for him to be safe when Severus came out of the Shack. She made a mental note to ask Severus about it, or rather to get an answer out of him as he'd probably 'heard' the thought as it passed through her mind.

"...Granger?"

"Hermione?"

"Huh? What?" Hermione shook herself, looking around at Robards and Harry with genuine bewilderment.

"Granger, when was the last time you slept?" Robards asked, a reproachful look on his face.

"Er...." Hermione fumbled for an answer. She had been so busy with the case that sleep hadn't been one of her priorities. Her time unconscious when Severus had been healing her had helped, but she could hardly tell Harry and Robards about that.

"And the last time you ate anything?" Harry added, looking as though he knew the answer would not be encouraging.

"Lunchtime," she answered promptly, only to look down at her watch and realise that she had missed dinner. Her stomach growled in protest.

"Right, no arguments, Granger. Get something to eat and rest. I don't want to see you in the Ministry again until tomorrow. It may also be an idea for you to see a Healer, as being unconscious for an hour can't be a good thing, magically induced or not," Robards ordered her.

"But the Death Eaters!" Hermione protested.

"Are not your concern at the moment. There's a shift of Aurors working on the case around the clock, and your shift is over. Go!" barked Robards, pointing towards the exit. He turned to Harry, who was nodding emphatically in agreement with him. "As for you, Potter, your shift is also over. You only recently got back from an undoubtedly tiring trip, so be off with you."

While Harry tried to argue with Robards, Hermione took the opportunity to sidle over to Robards's desk. His magical notebook was there, in prime position for Hermione to purloin. It would be invaluable for tracking the Death Eaters down with Severus; but Robards would surely realise who had stolen it if she took it. So while keeping a careful eye on Harry and Robards, Hermione used a modified Protean charm to make a copy of the contents of the notebook into another, newly Transfigured from a paperclip off the desk.

Harry was still refusing to leave when Hermione made her way to the exit clutching the precious copied notebook, allowing her to sneak it out under Robards's nose. She just hoped that her lack of argument wouldn't raise any suspicions.

* * *

Hermione almost choked on the last mouthful of her baked potato when Severus appeared at her side so suddenly he must have Apparated into her bedsit, as there were no shadows around for him to have emerged from.

"It was implied that you would summon me after leaving the Ministry, Hermione, not that you would call for me as and when it was convenient for you," he admonished her, ignoring his own display of appalling manners by Apparating directly into Hermione's home.

"Sorry, but I was brought up to believe that it was rude to eat around guests without offering them anything," Hermione said, her throat tight at the inevitable reminder of her parents. "As far as I know, blood is the only foodstuff for vampires, and I can't spare any of mine."

"There are such things as blood donors," Severus muttered.

"Yes, but I'm not one. I have low blood pressure, so I can't give blood, however much I'd like to," Hermione explained hastily, her heart skipping a beat at the hungry glint in Severus's eyes as he looked at her.

"Pity," he drawled.

Swallowing nervously, Hermione tried to work some moisture back into her mouth. "My soul isn't dark, is it?" she asked hesitantly, almost afraid to hear Severus's answer.

Lips twisting into a sneer, Severus snorted derisively, shaking his head. "Yours would be unpalatable, far too self-righteous for my tastes."

Years of hearing similar derogatory barbs at Hogwarts allowed her to ignore the implied insult. However, Hermione had to fight back the temptation to ask how Severus knew what she would taste like. From the smirk on his face, she might as well have voiced the thought.

The smirk faded as Severus spotted the copy of Robards's notebook lying open on the table next to Hermione's plate, where she'd been keeping an eye on it as she ate. He pulled it towards himself, his eyes narrowing as they focussed on something on the page. Hermione shifted next to Severus in order to get a closer look at it and saw that the names of the few Death Eaters still at large were flashing.

"That doesn't make sense!" Hermione blurted as soon as she read the newly appeared information.

"On the contrary, it would if you had as much knowledge of the Dark Arts as I do," Severus said, in the same superior tone of voice he had used during Potions lessons. "The only reason for the last surviving Death Eaters to be seen meeting, together with the stolen corpse, is to use their comrade's body in a Dark ritual to track down the killer: namely me."

Opening her mouth to ask how he knew about the body, Hermione hastily snapped it shut as the obvious answer occurred to her. Flushing, she deliberately avoided Severus's likely patronising gaze as she recalled that he had been reading her mind... and still was.

An ominous thought occurred to Hermione as she watched the notebook flash again, with the information that the Death Eaters had escaped an attempt by the Aurors to capture them, and that they showed no signs of splitting up. Depending on the sort of ritual involved, the Death Eaters might be able to Apparate directly to the location given by the spell....

She frowned when Severus didn't confirm or refute that theory. Looking up, Hermione's frown deepened with concern when she noticed Severus kneading at his temples, grimacing as he did so, the tips of his fangs showing through the gap in his lips.

Before she could ask him what was wrong, multiple Apparition cracks resounded through the small room. Acting as her screaming instincts dictated, Hermione lunged at Severus, tackling him to the floor. Drawing her wand, she aimed it between the table legs at the cloaked forms of the intruders, sparing a second to count them. Tilting her head down, trailing her hair on the floor, Hermione caught sight of a flash of silver at the head level of the four intruders: obviously Death Eaters, wearing their characteristic masks.

As the first curses began to fly, impacting onto the table overhead, Hermione was vaguely aware that it was just as well that she had placed an anti-splinter enchantment on all of the wooden surfaces. The plate flew off the table to shatter on the floor behind her, the notebook presumably blown to so much ash judging by the lingering acrid stench of smoke.

"*Avada Kedavra*!" The Death Eaters seemed to have rapidly abandoned lesser curses, their cries of the Killing Curse blending together into a sort of macabre parody of 'Abracadabra'. A small, etiquette-obsessed part of Hermione's mind was fuming at the appalling manners being displayed. It was bad enough to Apparate into someone's home uninvited, and beyond the pale to do so with murder in mind.

A flash of sickly green flew over Hermione's shoulder to hit the closest Death Eater, who had started to edge towards the table. Whoever it was toppled over, so close to the table that Hermione could see the sightless eyes staring through the mask.

"Kill or be killed," Severus breathed in her ear, shaking her shoulder in an attempt to snap her out of her stupor. Quite why Severus was using magic instead of his inhuman speed and strength was a mystery, but Hermione suspected that it was something to do with his pained behaviour right before their uninvited guests arrived.

His point about their perilous situation was hammered home when the remaining three Death Eaters dropped to their knees, wands tracking towards Severus and Hermione, the first syllables of the Killing Curse filtering through their masks.

'*Depulso!* Hermione jabbed her wand at the table, hoping that the Banishing Charm would overturn it in time to shield Severus and herself. She was taken aback when the table not only overturned but also hurtled across the room towards the Death Eaters. Severus must have used the same charm....

From behind her, Severus tugged Hermione up to crouch next to him, turning so that he partly shielded her with his body. Just as the Killing Curses hit the table, wreathing it in a sickly green glow, he hissed an order in her ear. "*Protego* now!"

"*Pro*..." The table shattered into an explosion of splinters, the enchantment Hermione had cast on it destroyed by the magical reaction akin to an unstoppable force meeting an immovable object. "...*tego!*" The combined Shield Charms withstood most of the bombardment of splinters, but failed just as the last wave of wooden shards hit them. Hermione turned her face away, eyes screwed shut as she brought her arms up to shield her head.

* * *

It took a while for Hermione to come to her senses, and a little longer still for her to realise what had happened. Before the splinters had hit, Severus had shoved her onto the floor, his inhuman speed apparently returned to him. The impact had stunned her, but had kept her out of the way of any splinters.

Looking across her ruined bedsit, Hermione could see that the Death Eaters were slumped on the floor, blood slowly trickling out of wounds inflicted by the wrecked table.

"*Homenum revelio*," she murmured, slightly surprised that her wand was still in her hand; but then, she had been holding it in a virtual death grip. None of the Death Eaters were detected by the spell, although considering the nature of their wounds it would be a miracle for them to have survived.

A pained grunt from behind her drew Hermione's attention to Severus. He was slumped against the wall, attempting to pull out the splinters lodged in his left shoulder, but his right arm was shaking too much.

"Let me," Hermione offered, climbing to her feet and walking over to him.

It was obvious why he hadn't used his wand to remove the wood, as on close inspection it was clear that he'd come close to being staked: there was a shard embedded in his chest, within an inch of where his heart must be. While undead, Severus could clearly still feel pain, his face contorting as she began to remove the splinters, watching with some amazement as they healed before her eyes to faint scars. The last of the splinters was also the worst, dark blood trickling from it before it could close.

"Thank you," Severus murmured, taking her left hand to raise it to his lips, his eyes intent on hers. His skin was icy cold and seemed to drain the heat from where he touched Hermione. "However, I need something more from you." He pointedly looked at the dead bodies. "Something that these fools can no longer provide."

Hermione found that she couldn't move, even to widen her eyes in alarm at his words. *He can't mean... he said my soul was unpalatable*...'

His dry chuckle raised the hairs on the back of her neck. "I lied." Severus lunged, grabbing hold of her, his teeth tearing into her pulse point as his lips closed around the wound, allowing no blood to escape.

Mouth opening in a silent scream, Hermione's eyes rolled back as the pain overcame her. Her wand clattered to the floor as it dropped from her slack grasp, and she dimly felt her legs begin to give way beneath her: the loss of blood must be making her feel faint. Severus's grip tightened, cradling her close to him as he continued to drink. His skin was growing warm, in contrast to her own.

Trembling with the effort, Hermione brought her hands up to rest on Severus's shoulders, digging her nails in. If he didn't stop feeding from her soon, she would die. But even if he stopped immediately, she'd need a Blood Replenishing Potion or two before she was out of danger. Her thoughts moved sluggishly, but the sneaking suspicion that Severus didn't intend to stop cut through the mental quagmire.

Suddenly the pain seemed to change as the flow of blood slowed. It was still agony, but more akin to the frustration of unfulfilled desire than to being Cruciated. Through the mental haze, Hermione felt as if she could feel Severus with her, mentally embracing her as her thoughts slowed further with her heart. She held onto him as tightly as she could, both physically and mentally, unwilling to let go of life, yet powerless to keep the darkness from claiming her.

Nox