

# Nostariel

*by bound\_by\_passion*

Hermione, Remus, Severus and Neville have to get to Hogwarts. But the Dark Lord's forces are hot upon their trail. The full moon is only a few days away, and with Severus badly injured, only one question remains: will they make it in time?

Fantasy. Not DH compliant.

## Chapter One

*Chapter 1 of 1*

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For geminiscorp

*Eyes of fire, claws of bone,*

*Skin hangs limp from frame,*

*The Dead walk amongst the living,*

*Through water, wind and rain.*

*Run, hide, do not be seen,*

*The Witch, she lies in wait,*

*Until a boy, both strong and true,*

*Deals wicked cards of fate.*

*~ Nostariel, from the Manuscripts of Aelgar*

*It is only in darkness that we are able to find happiness.*

So Hermione thought as she walked upon the cobbled streets of Diagon Alley, her hand clasped in Ron's. His fingers were warm around her own, staving off the chill of the evening wind. Her cloak was back at Grimmauld Place, and left only in her thinnest of robes, she huddled closer to him for warmth.

It was the first time she had left the house in weeks. The end of the school year had come and gone in what seemed like the blink of an eye, leaving her floundering in a war-ridden adult world. All the dreams she had held in those seven long years of tuition had evaporated, her head now empty of all but the desire to see Voldemort gone. The future looked gloomy, the way cast in a shadow so great it blocked out the sun. And when she looked ahead, she could not see a future for herself, only darkness tinged with a slight hope that she would make it out alive. That they all would.

Hermione brushed a curl back from her face, turning to watch the other Order members traipse up the trail behind them. To think that just a few years ago, all these people had been utter strangers to her, yet now they were closer and more dear to her than her own family. Harry and Ron, Remus and Tonks, Neville, Ginny, George... The list was large, but each week another name was struck from it, lost to the dead. It made her chest ache to think of all those she had loved and lost. And the worst was yet to come.

The tension that had been building over the last year was beginning to reach breaking point. It would all be over soon. Voldemort would make his final move across the board, eliminating as many pieces as possible in his quest for checkmate. She could feel it in the air, whistling with the wind. The time of change was upon them, and she felt helpless, unable to do anything other than watch and wait.

Sighing gently, she pushed forward, the soles of her shoes slipping upon the worn stone that made up the street. Now was not the time to be thinking such melancholy thoughts. Harry had begged for weeks for a day out, and Hermione was going to enjoy it whilst she could. She didn't relish being stuck back at the headquarters again for months on end with only Ron for company, Harry too occupied with Ginny to spend time with his friends. She knew it was petty of her, but she felt angry all the same, jealous of how easily happiness seemed to come to Harry. Love seemed effortless for him. He didn't have to work at it like she did with Ron. She had lost count of the tears she had shed in bitterness, cursing herself for being so childish as each droplet hit the pillow. War did funny things to people, and Hermione was no exception.

It was a sad state of affairs she found herself in, growing ever more bitter by the day. Molly would blame it on the tension, but she knew it was something deeper. Something that even the joy of summer couldn't quite cure.

"Do you think we'll have time for a bite to eat at the Leaky Cauldron before Mum forces us back to the headquarters?" asked Ron, breaking into her thoughts with a cheery voice.

Hermione tightened her grip on his fingers, pulling him forward as he began to slow and deliberate. A small smile graced her lips, growing ever wider as she looked at his rather wistful expression.

"You think of nothing but your stomach, Ronald Weasley," she said, laughing as he rolled his eyes. "You're going to end up with a paunch to rival Slughorn's if you carry on at this rate."

Ron patted his stomach with his free hand, grinning. "I should be so lucky. No idea where it goes, but it most certainly doesn't end up here."

"Just you wait until you hit middle-age. Then bam, beer gut. And what would your adoring Quidditch groupies say then, hmm?"

"They'd say, 'How about a shag?'" he teased. "And then jump me. Women like a man with a bit of meat on his bones, Hermione. It's a proven fact."

Hermione laughed, poking him hard just above the belly button. "You keep telling yourself that."

Ron opened his mouth to reply when Remus cut across the conversation, his anxious tone bringing Hermione back to earth with a bump.

"It's growing late. We must return before nightfall. These streets are not safe in the darkness."

She turned to face him, the gentle light of the evening playing upon his face. He did not look well. It was ten days to the full moon, and already dark shadows circled his eyes, his face drawn and pale. Hair that was now more salt than pepper fell about the tips of his ears, scruffy in an unfashionable sort of way, giving him very much the air of a rogue. A tight smile played at his lips as he tried to reassure the rest of the party that all was well, but the haunted look that lurked in his eyes belied his expression.

Hermione removed her wand from her pocket, the carved handle smooth and comforting beneath her palm. Apparition was an uncomfortable business at the best of times, but the added complication of having to land directly upon the step of number twelve made it almost unbearable. They would have to go one at a time so as not to push anyone off the flat stone at the front door. It was inefficient and dangerous, but she couldn't deny it was quick. And quick was all that counted.

Tonks went first, disappearing with a loud crack. Harry second with Ginny close behind. And then Ron. Hermione let go of his hand and watched as he dissolved in a flurry of robes, but the crack that accompanied the Disapparation was lost in a much louder noise. The hissing of a spell as it flew past her ear.

Hermione turned on the spot, searching for the caster. There was a loud bang behind her as the curse hit the floor, exploding in a shower of dangerous red sparks. She ducked on instinct, sheltering her head as the remnants of the spell were blown outwards like shards of fractured glass. Her eyes wide, she scanned the almost empty streets but saw nothing save the other Order members, wands out, the tips blooming with light.

"Death Eaters to the west!" cried Neville, his voice loud and booming in the silence that had descended.

Three dark shapes graced the entrance to the alley, their black cloaks fluttering in the wind like great wings. Sunlight dripped off their silver masks, reflected back in a grotesque parody. Hermione rose to her feet, watching as the trio began to descend upon them, their wands sparking with blood-red light. The tallest of the three, the middle, made a bee-line straight for her, firing off a leg-locker curse with almost mind-boggling speed. She hastily raised her shield, deflecting the spell at the very last moment, sending back something far nastier. But the curse dissipated before it reached its target, fizzling into nothing as the Death Eater countered her attack. In a sharp twist of robes, he flexed both his wand and his free arm, sending the cobblestones beneath her flying up around her in an attempt to fell her where she stood. Screaming as her feet were torn out from under her, she fell to her knees upon the newly exposed soil, her carefully aimed hex changing course as she lost her concentration. The figure loomed over her, a pale, long-fingered hand grabbing a fistful of her robes, dragging her painfully upwards. The fabric tightened around her neck and she fought to breathe, the air rushing out of her lungs as fear took hold. She jabbed her wand into his stomach, hard, firing off a muscle-cramping hex. The man grimaced in pain but held her steady in his vice-like grip, unwilling to let go.

"Why must you meddle in things you do not understand, you silly little girl?" he hissed, his familiar dark eyes fiery behind the eye-slits of the mask.

Snap.

Her eyes widened in shock, betrayal making her heart clench painfully in her chest. A scream issued from behind her, but she didn't turn, her eyes fixed on those behind the mask. Shapes made of light and shadow twisted on the edges of her vision as the remaining members of the Order held their ground against the Death Eaters. Pops of apparition drowned out the sound of fighting as more of the Dark Lord's servants flashed into existence. It was almost unbearably loud, blocking out everything but the sound of loss. She barely heard the whispered curse before her world fell into darkness.

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Hermione awoke to the sound of muffled voices. Her head pounded, the pain becoming more intense as she opened her eyes, letting light flood in through her pupils. Dark shapes flitted about in her line of sight, becoming solid as her mind began to interpret the images.

"Hermione?" A figure bent down beside her, smoothing its hand across her brow. "Hermione, are you alright?"

Blinking, she fought to sit up, her muscles screaming in protest as they stretched. She grimaced in pain, her head swimming as the blood rushed downwards. Her hands fumbled in her pockets for a wand, but found nothing. She was defenceless.

"Where is my wand?" she asked, her words and her search frantic. Sleep still blinded her, and she lashed out against invisible enemies, her aching limbs thrashing. "My

wand!"

"Hermione, calm down." The clear voice of Remus cut through her thoughts, silencing her struggles. "You are quite safe."

Rubbing her eyes with the backs of her hands, she leant back down upon the ground. Remus' face swam into focus, lined with worry, and Neville's alongside it. She tilted her head, scanning the area, but saw nothing except desolate scrubland. In the distance, rising from a morning mist, the tops of far away mountains could be seen cresting the horizon. A thick carpet of green swept the base of the nearest, the forest coating the rock right up to the tree-line. It looked wild to her eyes, a tangled mane of creatures and plants with intents unknown.

Shivering, and not entirely from the cold, she rubbed at the goose-flesh that coated her arms, willing herself to stop shaking. Her neck ached as she moved it, bruised by the robes that had strangled her the night before. Her blood froze in her veins as images of dark eyes and darker actions flooded back into her mind.

"Where are we?" she asked, pushing herself up to her feet. The ground was dry and dust swirled around her ankles, disturbed by her movements. She coughed as the grit tickled her airways, and was alarmed to find the phlegm streaked with pink. Whatever that last curse had done, it wasn't good.

"I can't be certain," replied Remus, shaking his head. He handed her a handkerchief, a worried look crossing his face as he saw the stains she dabbed from her lips. "Are you sure you're alright, Hermione?"

"I'm fine. That last curse may have caught something," she said, coughing again. The phlegm was beginning to run clear. "But the bleeding seems to have stopped."

Remus gave her a hard stare before replying, "You take care of yourself."

He took a step back, sinking down to a sitting position on what appeared to be a rock. Stubble covered his lower jaw, and he rubbed it with a gritty hand, smearing dirt into the short hair. He didn't look tired so much as troubled, his eyes tight against the light of the rising sun. Dark lines crept at the corners of his mouth, making him look far older than his thirty-nine years. Hermione felt a stab of pity and also fear. The full moon was just over a week away, and she wondered whether they would be rescued before the change. It would tear him apart, the grief of killing people he thought of as friends.

"I swear, I'll be fine," she insisted, handing him back the used hanky. He waved her away, and shrugging her shoulders, she tucked it into her robe pocket. "Where are the others?"

"Gone," said Neville, kicking at a stone on the ground. It skittered across the ground, disappearing out of sight as it landed deep in the scrub. "There was only the three of us here when I awoke. Oh, and these."

He produced two items from his pocket, the first a silver letter-opener with a long, thin blade. It sparkled in the morning sunlight, deadly-looking and razor-sharp. A silver snake twisted around the handle, ruby-set eyes glinting. Hermione shivered, thinking about whom something that evil might belong to. She had no doubt that Voldemort liked to begin his day with violence; the careful slashing of a blade through paper seemed fitting for a man like him.

The second item was a letter. Neville unfolded it, his lightly tanned fingers smoothing over the heavy paper. He handed it to her, an expression she had never seen before gracing his features. Deep blue ink marked the page in a hurried scrawl, the normally neat handwriting of a dicto-quill becoming scratchy and almost illegible in the writer's haste. Squinting, she bent her head very close to the paper and began to read.

*My dear friends,*

*I write this letter with haste in the hope that what little information I can provide will prove useful in the days to come. The Dark Lord tires of his war, and plays cat and mouse with his victims. He plans to attack Hogwarts before the month ends. Minerva must be warned before it is too late.*

*You lie eighteen days to the south of Hogwarts. You must travel through the Mountain Pass ahead and to the castle. He has taken your wands and broken them. The pieces lie sixteen miles west at the riverbank, cursed with a withering hex. Do not touch them. The damage will be irreversible. What little I could scrounge in supplies lies three-hundred paces to the north of where Miss Granger was laid (her feet point north). There is a compass in the pack. I'm sorry I could be of no more use to you.*

*The Dark Lord's forces are five days behind, six at most, and they are swift. A party of six of the lower ranking Death Eaters. Stay off the roads. There are Inferi posted every four miles, and a Death Eater every twenty. He's giving you a fighting chance, though he does not see it. To him, your death is certain. He wishes only to draw out the torture. But there is enough time for you to succeed if you are quick. Take the chance you have been given.*

*I have every faith in you.*

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Hermione scanned the letter a second time before folding it up and handing it back to Neville. He took it from her, slipping it back into the pocket closest to his heart. It was somewhere safe in a world that now seemed full of danger. He offered her the letter-opener, willing her to take a closer look, but she shied away from it. Something about it seemed off, and she was unwilling to touch it, lest it taint her with something unwholesome. It didn't seem to match the letter, cruel when the words left had been so kind, and a feeling of unease settled as she came to the conclusion that perhaps it had been left by another. Someone with less than savoury intentions.

"How much time have we wasted?" she asked, afraid to hear the answer. Who knew how far behind them Voldemort's forces were? How much distance they were gaining as they stood here now?

"I reckon we've lost less than a day," said Neville, tucking away the letter-opener. "Remus said he'd been dozing in and out of consciousness since we were captured. This is the first sunrise he's seen."

She turned towards Remus for confirmation. He nodded.

"That leaves You-Know-Who's forces about four days or so away," Remus said, leaning forward, resting his forearms upon his thighs as he looked her straight in the eyes. "He's toying with us, so I doubt they have anything other than their own power for transport. Dragging out the torture seems to be his plan, and there would be no point to all of this if they were to catch us too soon."

"And they are following the roads. Just as they expect us to do. It will take longer for them to find us cross-country." Neville gave her a nervous smile. "We'd be like needles in a haystack."

"The problem, however," said Remus, his face grave, "is that without wands, we are virtually defenceless. Wandless magic was never a skill I attempted to master, and I know neither of you have sought tuition in that particular area either."

"Chance would have been a fine thing," muttered Hermione, but she regretted it the moment the words passed her lips. She flushed bright red, her gaze dropping to the dusty earth below her feet.

"Indeed it would, but the past cannot be changed. And Dumbledore would never have allowed it." Remus' tone was carefully neutral, and Hermione relaxed a fraction as she realised he hadn't taken offence at her sharp words. "It takes far too much energy. Three, four spells maximum before you're too tired to carry on."

Remus shifted in his seat and Hermione's eyes widened, suddenly realising what he was sitting upon. Three rucksacks that looked disconcertingly empty. There was no way there was enough food there for almost three weeks of travel, and without their wands they would be hard pushed to find more. The most they could hope for was a village nestled somewhere in the journey ahead. She shivered, wondering what would become of them. Whether a quick death would have been more preferable to the

starvation they would face.

"Well, what do you propose we do?" she asked, her tone one of defeat. The sun was rising higher in the sky with every passing moment. Time was running out.

"I suggest we start walking," said Remus, rising to his feet. He looked more weary than ever, his face gaunt and bruised. Picking up a pack, he gestured for the others to follow suit before pulling a silvery object from his front pocket. The compass. "North is this way."

Hermione shouldered the nearest pack, grimacing as she took the weight. It was heavier than it looked. Staggering slightly, she fought with gravity in an effort to keep herself upright, finally finding a position of the pack that suited her. Behind her, she could hear the heavy footsteps of Neville bringing up the rear. The scrub grass tickled her ankles as she pressed onward, following the path Remus had taken towards the distant mountains. She longed to itch them, but feared she might overbalance due to the pack and end up on the floor. Instead, she gritted her teeth and tried to distract herself.

Looking at the rising sun, she wondered what had happened to the others. Whether or not they still saw the light of the morning or lay cold in an open grave. She hoped with all of her heart that they had got away, Apparated to safety. But a traitorous part of her mind, a part that she desperately wanted to quash, told her that it was less than likely. The screams of the previous night still rang in her ears, mingling with the sounds of her pounding heart until there was nothing but violent noise filling up her body, trying to escape. She needed to know if they were alright. If Harry and Ron and Ginny were...

A tear slipped down her cheek, but she wiped it away before the others could see, keeping up the pace as though nothing was wrong.

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"Stop," she gasped, sinking to the ground. It was almost nightfall. They had been walking all day, and her feet ached something rotten. Taking another step was simply not an option. She felt as though her legs would shatter into a million pieces if she were to put weight on them. Leaning back against a large boulder, she mopped her forehead with the back of her hand, the sweat leaving a glistening trail upon her skin.

With a groan, Neville set himself down beside her, offering her a sip from his flask. She eagerly took it, wetting her parched throat. Not for the first time, she was grateful for their mysterious helper. It was doubtless that without them, they would have met their end very soon indeed.

They had been walking all day, stopping only at a brook around midday to re-fill their flasks. Scrub had turned to lush grassland beneath their feet as they entered the valley, great rocky outcrops rising from the ground like sharp teeth. Trees had sprung up around them, standing like sentinels over the wind-battered landscape, watching the mountains that lay upon the horizon. It was beautiful, in a wild way, and Hermione had found herself almost at ease as she pushed onwards, sparking up the odd conversation with Neville as she walked. Remus kept silent, despite her attempts to coax him into conversation, ever watchful for a glimpse of black at the edge of the landscape. However, what had begun as a mildly cheering walk had soon disintegrated into a hard slog as hunger and lethargy began to gnaw at her insides. An hour, or maybe two into the journey, she had fallen quiet, her breath too precious to be wasted in conversation. It had been several hours before she had found somewhere sheltered enough to spend the night.

Hermione rubbed the exposed part of her collarbone, wincing slightly at the soreness the slight movement had created. The summer sun had beaten down its rays relentlessly upon them throughout the day, and Hermione's neck and face felt hot with sunburn. She had blisters upon blisters that rubbed against the soft leather of her shoes making every step more painful than the last. Yet she had not stopped, fear of what lay behind keeping her moving through the discomfort. Wave after wave of exhaustion rolled over her until every muscle ached, and she found herself unable to continue.

"We must keep walking," said Remus, looking down at them with a stern expression. "It's not safe out here in the open."

"I can't walk another step," she said, closing her eyes for a moment. "And neither can you. You're dead on your feet, Remus. We are sheltered enough here."

"We cannot afford to stop."

"They will rest too. No doubt they have made camp for the night already," sighed Neville. "Keeping up such a punishing pace will only hinder us in the long run. Sleep is not a luxury."

"Besides, we won't be able to negotiate our way through the darkness. We have no wands, no light. And who knows what nocturnal terror we might meet," said Hermione, slipping her shoulders from the backpack. "We'll wake at sunrise to make up for the time lost."

Remus sighed in defeat, slipping the pack from his shoulders and kneeling down. He unzipped the main pocket, reaching in and bringing out a tin of processed meat. Looping his fingers through the pull-ring, he tore it open and split the contents of the can between them. Corned beef. Hermione ate it hungrily, the pitiful meal barely filling the hole in her stomach. It was the first thing she'd eaten since the night before, and it tasted like magic to her starved tongue. She longed for more, but knew what little they had must be kept for the days ahead. They had yet to touch the contents in her pack, and Neville's contained nothing but blankets and water.

Licking the last of the taste from her fingers, Hermione glanced at Remus. She noticed that as he sat and ate he was constantly alert, his eyes peeled and his ears pricked. Tension seemed to emanate from him, flowing over both herself and Neville, striking a chord of something that wasn't quite fear within them. It felt odd, as if he was only half there.

Beside her, Neville began rummaging through his pack, drawing from it three blankets. They were brown and made of scratchy wool, lightly oiled to keep out as much of the rain as they could. Hermione took the one she was offered, drawing it around her shoulders to protect herself from the chill that had set in with the evening. It made her skin itch, but she was grateful for the warmth it provided. The sweat generated by their travels had cooled uncomfortably upon her skin, leaving her shivering and blue, and they weren't light a fire for fear of being seen in the rapidly falling darkness. She longed for a hot bath, to be clean and safe back home.

Home. She longed for home more than anything. To see her friends again, have her worries eased. But the closest thing to home lay far to the north, nestled amongst the jagged teeth of the mountains. Merely the thought of the journey ahead made her limbs ache with tiredness and her heart pound with fear. There was a reason Hogwarts had been built out in the middle of nowhere. Tales told of unsavoury things that lived in the wilds, waiting to pounce on unwary travellers. She shuddered at the thought, the pages of *Hogwarts: A History* she wished she'd never read floating to the surface of her mind.

"Do you think the others are safe?" asked Neville, cutting through her thoughts. His face was sombre, his eyes worried.

"I don't know," replied Remus, staring listlessly at the now empty tin. He took a blanket from Neville, sitting upon the dusty soil and wrapping it around himself. "I hope so."

Hermione nodded in agreement. She hoped too, however futile it may have seemed.

"We should never have left the house," he hissed, tossing the tin into the backpack. He leant back against the rock, his greying hair silver in the light of the waxing moon. "I was a fool to think we'd be safe. And now look at us. Lost God knows where, with nothing but a slip of paper for guidance. Written by a traitor, no less."

"You think Professor Snape wrote the letter?" Neville's eyes were wide and unbelieving.

Hermione felt her blood run cold in her veins at the mention of his name. Dark eyes flashed in her mind, the rest of his pale face hidden by the mask that haunted her dreams. Her breath caught in her chest as she thought of how close he had come to killing her the night before. She closed her eyes, trying to calm her racing heart.

"It fits, doesn't it?" said Remus. "And I can think of no other within You-Know-Who's ranks who would do such a thing."

"He couldn't have written it," whispered Hermione, her soft words cutting through the night like a knife. "He led the attack last night. Why would he save something he worked so hard to destroy?"

"Because he is a good man," said Remus with conviction. "He is a fool, but he has a heart."

She tried to believe him, but the bruises that graced her neck told her a different tale. Rubbing absentmindedly at the darkened flesh, she thought hard about everything he'd done. The conclusion she came to was less than savoury.

"How can you know that?"

Silence was her only answer.