

King of Swords

by shefa

It was only after Snape followed her into the neglected shop, moving furtively between the shafts of sunlight that pierced the gloom, that it occurred to him to wonder why, ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione Granger was running. And why, in a world with magic, *real* magic, she should be seeking the counsel of a Muggle Tarot reader.

Chapter 1: Significator

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If not for the glimpse of the shadow in her wake, he would have turned and walked away.

It grabbed him; it always had.

Its silky tendrils wound themselves around his legs; he felt them move, dragging him forward.

In her shadow, captured by her shade, he followed her.

And the Wheel turned.

The streets were dark, too. He might have lost her, had he not felt that elemental pull. Tethered to her by a common thread, he slipped through the dark corners of a hazy twilight and kept pace.

He knew she was afraid.

Not of him, no. He was fairly certain that she was oblivious to his presence. The fear was palpable, though, coming off her in sharp splinters, like ice...sending shivers

through passersby, despite the uncommon heat of the evening.

She was looking for something. Urgently.

Need.

Fear.

Despair.

Loathing.

The echoes of these impressions rang through him as he followed, blind to the twists and turns of her path, knowing only that he must...~~he~~must...stay close.

It was only after Snape followed her into the neglected shop, moving furtively between the shafts of sunlight that pierced the gloom, that it occurred to him to wonder why, ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione Granger was running. And why, in a world with magic, *real* magic, she should be seeking the counsel of a Muggle Tarot reader.

The smell of incense was nauseating. Wafts of frankincense and mistletoe saturated the place, adding an undertone of impatience to Snape's already taut nerves.

Why, in the name of Circe, do these women think that it helps to anaesthetise the Querent with fumes?

Wondering if she associated this place with the stifling enclave of the Divination classroom, Snape noted Granger's uncertain posture, an unsettling counterpoint to the sneer that flashed across her face as she surveyed the room. Silently, he slipped between the dusty folds of a tapestry hanging in a shadowy corner.

Why are you here, Granger?

"You have come out of desperate need." A gravelly voice emerged from the shapeless pile of scarves and beads, to be met with a contemptuous glare.

"Why would anyone come to a place like this? Looking for..." Granger stopped, pulled up short by the piercing gaze of the Muggle fortune-teller. She lowered her eyes quickly, a faint blush staining her skin. Snape watched, transfixed by the jumble of emotion spilling out from behind the bravado. Shame. Hope. Resentment. The witch hesitated, glancing towards the exit, and Snape thought for a moment that she would bolt from the room. At last, Granger turned to meet the eyes of the woman whose guidance she so grudgingly sought. Defiance radiated from her body, in the rigid set of her shoulders, in her tightly clenched fists.

It was a battle of epic proportions. The stubborn set of the witch's jaw warred with the hint of diffident hope lurking behind her flinty stare. The silence between the two women crackled with the tension of Granger's conflict until, finally, the Muggle woman inclined her head as if to punctuate a point well-made. And into that expectant silence, the younger woman spoke.

"I didn't ask for this," she began, voice tight. "And normally, I'd be able to take care of it myself..." She stopped abruptly, paralysed by the heat of the fortune-teller's unwavering gaze. Snape recognised the play of emotion in Granger's face, determination warring with humiliation; tenacity battling with desperation.

She lowered her eyes, dark lashes hiding their secrets, as she finally drew breath again to speak.

"Desperate need... Yes." And with that splinter of an admission, uttered in a voice wholly unlike her own, she turned away, shuddering breaths betraying layers of unspoken agony beneath a relentlessly eroding facade of tension and disdain.

Long moments passed. Hushed, weighty... faltering.... swelling with inchoate emotion...waves looming over a rocky shore. Silence broken only by the creaking of the aged floorboards and the distant echo of the Muggle world outside.

The world *inside* her was deafening, he realised. Snape held his breath, waiting for her to emerge from beneath the weight of her grief.

Her voice, when it surfaced again, was a surprise it was hardly more than a whisper.

"But you can, can't you?" Granger took another shuddering breath and turned to peer at her again. "You'll be able to..." The plea in her eyes sucked the air out of Snape's lungs. "I mean... they said you could...." She paused again, and her body slumped as if from a valiantly carried but ultimately unbearable weight. "Do you... do *you* know what to do?"

"Sit."

Granger sat.

Astonished, Snape noted that only extreme desperation could bring Granger, whose obstinacy in the classroom and in battle had brought him countless sleepless nights, to this level of compliance...especially away from the obvious displays of power typically wielded in the wizarding world...and settled himself more deeply into the crevices of the room to watch. And wait.

From his vantage point, he caught the echo of the girl who had occupied his classroom for six years, though he would not have recognised her, had her aura and her shadow not drawn him. He was surprised to find any such kinship between them. For that was what he felt, he was sure of it. It had been years, decades even, since he had felt even a glimmer of this sort of pull.

It was not the sort of connexion that put him at ease.

What happened to you, Granger? Eyes narrowed, he leaned forward to study her more closely.

Her hair seemed drained of its old exuberance, as though it had finally given up the fight. Pale skin stretched across her cheekbones, sickly grey in the flickering candle light. Dark eyes, shadowed and red-rimmed, dominated her features. It occurred to him that the girl he had once known would never have looked so insubstantial.

Haunted.

Wounded.

Exhausted.

The woman sitting across from the Muggle fortune-teller would have appeared defeated save for that single flash of anger he had seen flare.

But more than her physical appearance, or even the fact of her pilgrimage to this unlikely place, it was his *reaction* to her that sent his heart racing and tied his gut in knots.

The texture of her aura was disturbingly familiar. Riddled with fissures and crags, its formerly vibrant tones had faded to grey, like a swathe of silk abandoned to shrivel in the neglectful embrace of the elements. He knew it like he knew his own and wrestled the same conflicting urges that he could see Granger fighting. It paralysed him as it tore at him. He wanted to submerge himself in its darkness until he disappeared; he wanted to wrap himself around it and smooth the rough edges; he wanted to run from it until only a hint of its memory remained.

The signs were evident; he knew them intimately. He'd encountered the Shadow in all its disguises many times before, in the circles of both his Masters.

Yearning.

Fury.

Arrogance.

Pride.

And in himself. Always, ever, in himself.

Why, Miss Granger? Why have you, of all people, become a battleground for Darkness?

The cards carried an ethereal glow. Had the woman grasping them been a witch, that detail would have been irrelevant. But this woman, by all appearances, was not a witch, yet the well-worn cards resonated at her touch.

She senses their magic, he mused. *Now let us see if she can utilise it.*

The older woman shuffled the deck. Unhurriedly, her hands caressed the cards, each stroke deepening their hue. Silent. Deliberate. Granger watched her, entranced. After a moment, the old woman placed the deck at the centre of the table.

"You are right-handed?" she asked abruptly. The witch nodded, startled out of her reverie. "With your left hand, cut the deck into three piles." She watched as Granger followed her directions. "Shuffle each pile. Dwell on the struggle that brings you here today."

Her lips pursed. Snape imagined that the moments in which Granger was not dwelling on her struggle were few and far between.

Finally, the witch placed the deck at the centre of the table. The cards glowed with a steady radiance, now laced with tendrils of black and grey. She looked up again.

Pensive.

Waiting.

"The Conscious Issue." She placed a card at the centre of the table.

"The Point of Tension." Another, below the first.

"The Way to Resolution." Another.

"The Inner Determinant." And another.

"The Pivot of Change." Again.

"The Key to Harmony." Cards laid out to form a six-pointed star.

The fortune-teller's hand rested for a moment alongside the final card. It was almost a caress.

And then, she began to speak.

Granger's eyes followed those decisively moving hands, followed the movement of the cards as the fortune-teller placed them on the table. Visibly lost in the vibrancy of the images that seemed to rise from the pigments on the smooth cardboard, she swayed slightly, absorbing the sounds of the words accompanying them as nothing more than rhythms behind an unheard melody.

Snape, hidden between the folds of the dusty tapestry, captured each and every beat. Every solitary word...like inexorable footsteps approaching from behind.

No... no. I cannot.

He forced himself to pay attention to the reading. He knew he had to hear it...he didn't want to hear it. The sound of his heart beating pounded in his ears.

I cannot. I don't want...

Twisted uncomfortably in the tight space, trying to stay focussed on Granger's face, he held himself perfectly still. The effort, the ache of his back and the pounding of his heart kept him focussed.

Anything, *anything* to distract himself from the gnawing unease of listening to a Muggle fortune-teller read his soul.

Hugs and thanks to Fizzabella for the marvelous banner! Squee!

Prompt #16: Severus's knowledge of ancient druid magic is germane to solving someone's problem. Whose problem? Harry's, Hermione's, Dobby's? You choose. What kind of problem? Illness, danger, Voldemort himself? Whatever problem you like, serious or funny. The Druid magic can be something he learned from a mentor, or original character. Or from a relative or found in an ancient tome that has lain untouched for centuries or any other plausible way you can imagine. Druid Magic can be an entire style of magic he has learned, or as small as a single spell or potion, or even a mere mention of a spell or potion that he must work out from incomplete information. No student relationship please.

Chapter 2: Crossing Card

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"You cannot repair this alone."

"I can't find a way to repair this at all. I've already been to every major library on this side of the world, and half those on the other," Granger grumbled. The fortune-teller let out a bark-like laugh and Snape grimaced, aware that he, too, had long ago sought resolution to Dark dilemmas within his books.



Twisted uncomfortably in the tight space, trying to stay focused on Granger's face, he held himself perfectly still. The effort, the ache of his back and the pounding of his heart kept him focused.

Anything, anything to distract himself from the gnawing unease of listening to a Muggle fortune-teller read his soul.

The divinatory words washed over Snape. Whisper-soft and seductive, the lure of the images she wove tugged hard at a part of him that he had struggled for decades to eradicate. Promises of hope and wholeness beckoned, despite his conviction that they were not meant for him. By the look of her, he was not entirely sure that such things were meant for Granger, either.

Fool. I am a Fool.

The ache in the centre of his body was like a burning cinder. He had tamped it down for so long...he refused to allow it to ignite now. Snape could feel it, though, pushing its way through the vessels of his body, leaving a gleaming trail like fire under his skin. The heat of it burned, taunting him with the promise of purification and release. Just as his body began to shake from the effort of damping the growing warmth, the voice of the fortune-teller wafted towards him like a wisp of smoke.

"You're not invisible, you know," she muttered, eyes fixed on the cards in front of her.

Snape took a sharp breath. The urge to flee gripped him like an icy fist. He could Disapparate. He could Disillusion himself and slip from the room. He didn't need this...didn't need to get mixed up with whatever Granger had got herself into. Those ridiculous Tarot cards were wielded by a Muggle. They meant nothing to him; neither did Granger. Snape glared at the fortune-teller from behind the veil of shadow and dust, as if he could *will* her to withdraw from him, to withdraw her demand.

"Stop fleeing from the shadow. You must embrace it... and then step out from the dark." From the slight coaxing in her tone, it sounded like an invitation. For a man whose world had been perpetually shielded from the light, it felt like a challenge.

Or what? he thought defiantly, even as he cursed the impulse that led him to drop his gaze and kept him rooted in place like an errant ten-year-old. Even stronger yet was a conviction so familiar that he no longer questioned it...he belonged to the shadows and they owned him.

"You must come out from the dark," she spoke again. This time the command in her voice was potent, stirred by some foreign power.

I will not, he thought, and the wave of sorrow that engulfed him shook him with its intensity.

A radiant edge of light swept the corner of his eye. He turned his face from it. He always had; save for those moments long ago, preserved in memory like brittle pages in an ancient volume. Such fragile remembrance, he knew, must be shielded from the sun.

But the tendrils of light approached him still, wrapping long strands around him, coaxing, encouraging. He shook his head, tried in vain to shake free. He scowled; it was no use. And if he was to be caught, he would meet his challenger head-on.

Gathering his cloak around himself, Snape assumed his most intimidating stance and lifted his head, prepared to confront the fortune-teller's gaze.

But instead of hard, discerning eyes fixed on him...challenging him...he found only two women huddled at a creaky wooden table, by all appearances, oblivious to his presence. Slumped in her chair, Granger's limp hair hung forward, mimicking the dejected angle of her head and obscuring her face from his view. Snape blinked, disoriented. Before he could gather his thoughts again, the old woman swept her arm in a wide arc, as if she could encircle the room with the fluttering fabric of her scarves.

As the Muggle woman's hand passed over them, the Tarot cards...still laid out in their tale of innocence lost and hopes forsaken...took on an otherworldly glow. Not, Snape realised, the sickly colour put off by the Darkest potions, but of an inner purity contained in the images. Each card was bound one to another with gossamer threads; the figures within no longer static in their cages of fibre and pigment. The radiance lit the gloomy room and lent an ethereal tone to the mundane space.

Snape glanced sharply at Granger. Her sickly pallor looked even starker in the reflected light of the cards. He could see now how deeply shadowed her eyes were and how the lines of her face appeared to be etched in stone. Her eyelashes cast long shadows on her gaunt cheeks. He felt an unwilling ache in his gut as he looked at her.

"I do not carry a wand," the older woman's voice distracted him from the sensation and the unwelcome questions it aroused. "But I sense your magic... and I have the ability to..." She passed her hand over the array of cards at the centre of the table, "...nudge it a bit, here and there." As she spoke, Snape felt a surge of energy erupt from his solar plexus, as if the wind had been simultaneously knocked out of him and pumped into him. He heard Granger draw breath sharply as she reached back to rub the base of her spine, her brow furrowed with discomfort.

"What are you doing to my magic?" The edge to her voice was back, splintery and sharp. Had he been in a position to speak, he thought, his tone would have matched hers.

"Weaving."

Indeed, the tendrils of light and shadow which had been swirling around the cards were joined by a radiant nimbus emitting from the witch, interlocking and entwining with the fibres. It was as if the cards had come alive, their life-force radiating from them...searching and finding what they sought. Snape felt the pulling sensation again and realised that a shimmering nimbus was emanating from him as well, tugging and twisting inside of him as the fortune-teller wove it into the tangle of light over the table. Startled, afraid of being uncovered in his dusty hiding spot, he tried to pull away, to bury himself within the shadows. But neither the witch nor the Muggle woman had noticed the presence of the extra beam, focussed as they were on the fortune-teller's adept hands lacing together the wisps of light.

"You have been fighting for far too long," the older woman murmured with a shake of her head. And while it was clear to him now that she was speaking to Granger, he stiffened in recognition at her words. The fortune-teller gestured again to the array of cards. "So much conflict... should have ended... would have ended for you had it not left you in pieces." Granger took a rasping breath, and Snape saw her draw her shoulders forward and shake her head from side-to-side, as if she could dislodge the notion by physically ejecting it from her mind.

"Too much fire," continued the fortune-teller as she reverently touched three cards in tandem, each bearing flaming wands glowing with malevolent heat. "Traps you in an endless circle... you are convinced that you must find your way out alone." The older woman paused, and the curve of her back and angle of her shoulder as she leaned towards the trembling woman forcibly reminded Snape of a mother's embrace. He watched as the fortune-teller furrowed her brow, finally nodding, focussing on a card in the centre of the spread.

"He is here," muttered the old woman, gesturing to the card. Granger looked up sharply, alarmed, and Snape wondered again what had so flattened the woman who had once brazenly led Dolores Umbridge into the Forbidden Forest.

"There is nobody," Granger said, the edge in her voice almost hiding the melancholy beneath it.

Snape nodded his unconscious agreement. *There is nobody...*

"There is," said the old woman. "You cannot repair this alone."

"I can't find a way to repair this at all. I've already been to every major library on this side of the world, and half those on the other," Granger grumbled. The fortune-teller let out a bark-like laugh, and Snape grimaced, aware that he, too, had long ago sought resolution to Dark dilemmas within his books.

"Your books and intellect are useless to you in this endeavour. Leave them." The older woman appeared to be winding and tucking the remaining strands into a loose knot before lifting her gaze to meet Granger's sullen expression. "Leave them," the old woman repeated, "there are other tools that you must acquire for this journey."

"Are you going to give me the tools then, or are you going to carry on acting mysterious?" snapped Granger.

"I told you already," the card-reader continued, "he is already here." She lowered her hand to stroke one of the brightly coloured cards. Granger looked suspiciously at the image in question and snorted dismissively.

"What is that supposed to mean?" she asked as she rose to her feet. "I knew this was a waste of time!" Snape stiffened and shrank further yet into the shadows as he watched her turn to stalk away. "They told me that you would know," she sneered. "They said that you would be able to look at me and look at my cards and tell me what to do...help me figure out why this is still happening to me." Granger stopped short, and Snape recalled that bravado only took one so far.

"What is happening to you?" the old woman asked, her hands still stroking the card. Snape's eyes narrowed again as he saw the fortune-teller sweep her hand across the table, as if gathering together the disparate threads that were now woven into a most unusual fabric. Granger gasped, and Snape felt a pull and then release as the radiance dimmed.

"What do you mean, what is happening to me? Can't you see it?" Granger's face was a mask of rage and pain.

"I can see," the old woman replied, "I am not, however, convinced that you do."

"It's ripping me apart... and it's going to kill me." Her voice shook and she turned to leave. "And there is *nothing* that I can do to stop it..."

It was only when Granger moved from the reflected glow of the cards towards the dimly lit entry that Snape saw it again. The Shadow, slick and dark, lurking under her skin, seeping from her pores like poison. Where she moved, the Shadow followed, blotting out the reflected light from the cards, throwing a sickly grey cast over the air around her.

It was like a punch to the gut.

Damn, damn, damn...

He moved stealthily and as swiftly as he ever had during his tenure at Hogwarts. Releasing himself from the dimness and dust of his hiding place, he slipped out of the shadows to stand, at last, in the fading light of the room.

Hermione froze.

No, no, no... Impossible. That's impossible.

Hot blood pounded in her ears, and every cell in her body howled with the demand to recoil.

Get the hell out of here. Now! Outoutout...

She looked away from the spectre that took the form of *Snake*, of all cursed apparitions, and swiftly surveyed the small room, wondering how quickly she could reach the door. No matter the sort of creature, she thought frantically, she had to get away from him. All her energy was spent warding off the encroaching Darkness inside herself...whatever Darkness this being carried would burn through her fragile reserve.

There. She could reach the door and get out if she could get past him. A last glance in his direction sent a shudder through her.

Oh, Merlin, that really looks like Snake.

Snake. It couldn't be Snake. Snake was dead...she had watched him die on that terrifying night a decade ago. Lest she forget, she had her nightmares to remind her.

Maybe this is a nightmare... I'll wake up and I won't have to worry about how in Hades Snake got his miserable self back across the Veil... It's got to be a nightmare; it's not Snake...

"You're dead," Hermione announced, as if her pronouncement could make it so. "You... are dead. And I am not standing in a Muggle fortune-teller's shop of all godforsaken places, with you."

She paused, slipped her wand silently down from her sleeve and whispered, "*Riddikulus!*" The piercing crack split the room and she flinched. Shadowed in the faint light of

the room, Snape didn't move. He was still standing, still wrapped in black, still piercing her with those cold eyes. She caught her breath and quickly reversed her course.

Oh, Circe, I'm dead... it's over and I'm dead and I'm here... and Snape is here, and...

"That's it, I'm dead and I'm going to be stuck in this dreadful room forever with..." A torrent of words burst from her and she felt the panic rising again. If she wasn't already dead, she thought, these swings of emotion that kept swamping her might finish the job.

"Despite your undoubtedly fervent wish, Miss Granger," Snape interrupted, his words halfway between a whisper and a hiss, "I am not...nor have I ever been...dead." He moved towards her smoothly, seeming to mark the space between them as he tracked her retreat. She felt like prey, stalked by an expert hunter, his eyes watching. What was he...?

"No!" She wrenched her eyes away from his penetrating gaze and pushed past him, fury and fear breaking through her paralysis until she had put the rickety table between them.

"How *dare* you?" she hissed, her eyes narrowed as she glared at him.

She stood there, pounding heart gradually slowing...reminding her that she was, indeed, still alive. Snape waited, preternaturally still, and Hermione thought fleetingly of how different this was than the menacing stance that he used to don when he was her professor. She wondered how he might have carried himself while standing in the company of Death Eaters, straddling the line between exposure and survival.

Finally, he bowed his head slightly and raised his hands in what she thought was a barely passable imitation of surrender.

"Indeed. Miss Granger, I believe that I may have... overstepped." She continued to glower, watching him from beneath hooded eyes. His retreat fuelled her again, filling her with righteous anger that she knew would leave her wasted and empty once its deceptive power fled.

"Overstepped," she echoed. "Yes, you might say that you overstepped when you tried to enter my mind without permission..." She smiled darkly at his almost imperceptible flinch. "Which is odd, actually," she continued, a brutal edge to her voice, "considering that my condition should be painfully obvious to one such as... yourself."

"Your condition?" he repeated.

"Don't play dumb with me, Snape," Hermione snapped, struggling to hold on to the vigour that was already draining from her before it left her exhausted and despondent again. "You would have to be blind or an idiot not to see what's happening to me." She stopped short, one hand reflexively pressing against the side of her head in response to an all-too-familiar pain.

"It's obvious what is happening to you, Granger," Snape replied tersely. "What's not is how it happened and what in the name of Merlin you thought a Muggle fortune-teller could do to help you stop it."

They turned together to look at the old woman whose presence they had both momentarily forgotten.

"You wizards think that you are the only creatures to understand magic," said the fortune-teller with a small smile. It occurred to Hermione, foggily, that the woman had seemed not the least bit surprised when Snape had emerged from the shadows. "My people have been studying the elements since long before wizards walked the earth and started making rules for everybody who was different from them."

Hermione met the Muggle woman's satisfied expression blankly. The blinding headache that plagued her now on a nightly basis was already beginning to build, and she had barely enough energy to push past its foggy residue.

Snape, Hermione thought distractedly, had the look of a wizard eyeing a particularly volatile potion. When he spoke, his voice was laced with restrained power, and she wondered if the fortune-teller would have the wisdom to be afraid of this man.

"What elements do you mean?"

"You know the elemental process that I refer to, wizard," she muttered impatiently. "You sensed it. You followed it." She looked up and Hermione saw him blanch under her resolute stare. "You are as familiar with soul magic as I am..." The older woman paused. "...and as she is."

Soul magic... so that's why they sent me here. How does she know about soul magic?

"Soul magic," Snape whispered. His face was deathly pale, and Hermione thought, as she watched him struggle to control his reaction that he must be rather out of practice spying, as this degree of subterfuge practiced during wartime would have led him to an early grave.

The pressure in her head was building, and she knew that she wouldn't be able to carry on much longer.

Decide, Hermione. Tell him what he's missed out on all these years, or get out of here before you decorate the floor with your lunch. The anger was building again, colliding with the ever-present grief and helplessness. Why should he be innocent of the knowledge of what they had lost and what was yet to come?

"You recognise the signs." It was a statement rather than a question.

"I do," he paused.

"Of course you do," she snapped. "The poison that is eating me alive belonged to an old friend of yours." Now that she had opened the door, it was all she could do to discipline her words to come out one at a time.

"An old friend of mine?" He sounded startled.

"Your precious Dark Lord and his Horcruxes, Snape." Her voice was rising rapidly, but she couldn't bring herself to care. "Didn't you wonder what we were doing all those months in hiding? Camping?" She shuddered. "We hunted them; we had to destroy them before Harry could finish him off," she continued. "But nobody warned us that they bit back." Her voice was drenched with all the venom that she could not purge from her body.

"Horcruxes?" His voice was rough, the surprise on his face translated to sound.

"Yes, Horcruxes, Snape. Objects that housed fragmented parts of Lord Voldemort's cursed soul. That diary that nearly killed Ginny, the ring that made Dumbledore's arm black... Nagini, that horrible snake." His gasp stopped her tirade briefly, but the look of shock and disgust re-fuelled her desperate anger.

"Didn't you know that, Snape? Didn't you know that pieces of your precious Master were lying in wait to destroy anybody they touched? Did you know that the headmaster..." she sneered, "pardon me, Headmaster *Dumbledore*...couldn't be bothered to tell us what we were risking when we followed *his* directions and destroyed them?"

"My *Master*? Poisoned *Horcruxes*? What are you on about, Granger? What happened to those who came into contact with those... those Horcruxes?" Snape sounded unnerved, but it was the mounting alarm in his voice that grabbed her attention.

Oh, Merlin...

The panic in his tone, even camouflaged by irritation, sent her heart racing, as if it had solved a puzzle that her intellect had not yet unravelled. Somewhere in the back of her mind, understanding belatedly dawned that Gryffindors might not have been the only casualties of the war on Voldemort's Horcruxes. Her heart sped up even more at the thought, and she had to force herself to slow down long enough to look more closely at the man who, until moments before, she had believed dead.

He was thin, the severe cut of his cloak emphasizing the angles of his lean frame, black cloth framing the strained expression on his face. His eyes were as dark and penetrating as she remembered from her school days, though at the time she hadn't paid attention to the sensuous sweep of his eyelashes or the proud line of his jaw. A swathe of sooty hair shielded his neck from view, but she knew that there had to be some sort of mark on that pale skin from Nagini's vicious bite.

It hit her with the strength of a tidal wave.

Nagini. Oh, Circe... Nagini bit him, too.

It felt like all the air had been forcibly driven from her lungs. Dizzy, blindly groping for purchase, Hermione sank into the nearest chair and dropped her head between her knees until the room stopped spinning. She could feel him hovering nearby and wondered distantly if he was worried about her or concerned that she would lose consciousness before he got the answers to his questions.

"I'll be okay," she muttered from beneath a tangle of hair.

"I assume so, Miss Granger," Snape muttered.

*Nice, Snape... I see the stellar social skills haven't improved over a decade of being dead*She snorted softly and gingerly sat up. He hadn't moved. She recognized the posture of a condemned man awaiting his verdict.

"I'll spare you the blow-by-blow of the last ten years, but here's the bottom line," she began. "The pieces of Voldemort's soul were like acid." She paused, watching his face closely. "Anybody who spent time around one was contaminated and anybody who destroyed one..." Her voice wavered and she had to stop to steady herself. "Those of us who destroyed one have been gradually... falling apart. It's taken years to become obvious, but the problems have been accelerating for all of us... That's how I finally figured out the common element. But I can't work out why or how it happens. All I know is that anybody who came into contact with those bits of soul...they're dying, Snape." She looked him bleakly. "And there isn't a damned thing that anybody has been able to do about it."

The questions crowded his thoughts, but none had enough shape to find voice. He wanted to know who was falling apart. How...? He had not kept himself away from the wizarding population, hidden for years, only to find out that death and destruction had not ceased with victory over the Dark Lord.

"Who?" He looked surprised that he had spoken. "Who is dying?"

Her astonished expression hurt; had he done such a thorough job of convincing the wizarding population of his heartlessness? He turned to pull another wooden chair towards him, settling himself next to the witch. Waiting.

"It's different for each of us," she began. "Each of us who dealt with a Horcrux." She hesitated, and he wondered what she was so reluctant to share.

"Who?" he insisted. "Apart from yourself, who else is affected?"

"Harry," she sighed, "obviously. Ron. Ginny. Neville." She stopped, but he could see that there were more. "Most of the witches and wizards who came into direct contact with one of the Horcruxes are dead." She looked at him meaningfully, and he wondered if she thought he knew who she meant.

"Dumbledore," he whispered. She nodded shortly.

"Bellatrix Lestrange probably owed a great deal of her insanity to Horcrux exposure, on top of the damage wrought in Azkaban," she added, and Snape shuddered to think about the sort of entity that could top the horrors of the wizarding prison.

"There are more, aren't there?" he asked. She sighed again, and he felt his heart flutter against his chest.

"Arthur Weasley," she murmured, and he leapt from his seat and began to pace. He knew. He knew what she was going to say. He did not want her to say it. He did not want to hear. He didn't have to know; he had lived years without knowing.

"What Horcrux did Arthur Weasley handle?" The words burst from him of their own volition.

"He didn't handle a Horcrux, Snape." Granger's eyes were sad, and Snape refused to hold her gaze, pacing... pacing. "He was bitten by one." Pacing. Pacing... "Just like you."

A/N: Apologies for the lengthy interval between chapters. I hope that the next will come more quickly.

Thanks to the betas who shall not yet be named.

Thanks also to Tales of Snape for the fabulous banner!

Chapter 3: Crowning Card

Chapter 3 of 22

It was only after Snape followed her into the neglected shop, moving furtively between the shafts of sunlight that pierced the gloom, that it occurred to him to wonder why, ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione Granger was running.

And why, in a world with magic, *real* magic, she should be seeking the counsel of a Muggle Tarot reader.

He knew. He knew what she was going to say. He did not want her to say it. He did not want to hear. He didn't have to know; he had lived years without knowing.

"Which Horcrux did Arthur Weasley handle?" The words burst from him of their own volition.

"He didn't handle a Horcrux, Snape," Granger's eyes were sad and Snape refused to hold her gaze, pacing... pacing. "He was bitten by one." Pacing. Pacing... "Just like you."

Like a puddle of darkness, Hermione sat slumped in the hard brown chair and watched Snape pace. She knew he'd worked it out even before she'd said the words.

What irony. Ten years of confusion, terror and helplessness compressed into a rapid-fire interchange in a creaky, Muggle storefront. She'd had years to figure this out...or at least to try to make some sense of her erratic symptoms and encroaching sense of doom. If not for the relentless pounding in her head, she might have felt sorry for him, abruptly faced with the sharp edges of the truth, thrust at him in a jumbled heap. As it was, the rhythm of his stride as he moved back and forth across the floor was oddly hypnotic.

Soothing.

Her eyes fell shut, and she lost herself to the cadence of hard truths lapping against the brutal shores of avoidance and denial.

She felt more than saw when he stopped pacing, could sense his presence...tense and motionless now. He was ready, and so she took a moment to steady her breathing and clear what she could of her mind.

He would want to know what she knew.

He would probably argue with her. Challenge her conclusions and demand proof.

Even that would be a damned sight better than the way the others responded.

"Miss Granger."

Though prepared for it, his voice startled her. She looked up, set for a defiant stare, a sneer, something...anything that reeked of the Snape who had stalked the halls of Hogwarts in those dark years before the second war. Flashes of the man she knew radiated from the pale form before her, though she wondered if it was he who had changed.

He looks weary.

She regarded him silently and nodded as he dropped into the stiff wooden chair beside her.

I've only seen him frightened once... only once before.

"Miss Granger?" The timbre of his voice was bottomless, and the urgency of his rising fear and confusion and the rushing wind of *need to understand* whipped through her like wildfire.

She nodded again, eyes closed as the echo ripped through tender nerves. Breathing deeply, willing oxygen into her body, she shifted her gaze to look at him. "Sorry," she whispered. "My energy flags unexpectedly these days."

"So I see."

"I wasn't exactly expecting to withstand interrogation today on the state of our war survivors, Snape." Her eyes blazed again, energy flaring, reactive to his terseness.

"No," he smirked, "I don't suppose you were at that." But she could see that his stance relaxed a bit when she met him head on and wondered whether he'd always been more at ease in battle than at peace.

"What do you want to know?"

He let out a harsh laugh. "Everything. I want to know everything, Miss Granger." He met her eyes unwaveringly.

"Yes," she whispered, her voice low now, not from depletion, but from the intensity of his gaze and how it pulled hard at her to respond, to give him what he wanted. Oh, how she understood that need to devour the truth and be immersed in it, head to toe.

"Here?" She looked around, abruptly remembering where they were. "Do you want me to tell you everything... here?"

Snape, too, looked as if he had forgotten that they were in a dingy room occupied by a Muggle tarot reader inexplicably skilled in soul magic. His eyes raked the room until he found the old woman sitting calmly at her table, watching. Listening.

"May we?" he asked, more politely than Hermione would have predicted, and the old woman slipped from the room like a wisp of smoke.

Snape turned back to Hermione, the tension in his frame barely restrained, and she could see what it took for him to refrain from shaking the information from her by force.

"There isn't terribly much more to tell, Snape," she began.

"Just tell me what has gone on since..." He swallowed thickly, and the words seemed to stick in his throat.

"Since the Battle of Hogwarts." Her voice was flat.

"Yes."

"I will tell you... I'll tell you what I know, at least," she said quietly. "There's too much I haven't figured out, and I'm too tired to debate with you. So if you act like an arse, I'm leaving." Her eyes were defiant and she smirked at his raised eyebrow.

"I shall do my utmost, Miss Granger," he drawled, "to refrain from acting like... an arse."

She smiled darkly, and a frisson of warmth rushed through her at the answering quirk of his lip and appreciative glance from beneath those sooty lashes.

Focus, Hermione.

"I don't know what happened to you after Voldemort's defeat," she began. "When we went back to the Shrieking Shack to retrieve your... well, your body... it was obviously..." She gestured with one hand, "...gone."

His face was impassive, and she controlled the urge to apologise for not rushing back for him sooner, for not staying there to see to his care when blood was gushing from his body as he lay crumpled in a black heap in that awful room.

He shook his head as if he'd discerned her thoughts, and her stomach knotted in pain at the desolate expression that flashed across his face.

He never expected anybody to come for him. Never thought anyone would worry about him or think to help if he was in danger... Unbidden, tears filled her eyes, and she grunted in annoyance.

"One symptom of this...whatever you want to call it, is that there seems to be less of a barrier between emotion and...expressing emotion." She looked him dead in the eye, her own tears nearly spilling over. "It has become far, far harder to hide, Snape." He blanched. "Impulses, thoughts, feelings, urges... dark, painful...all of it. They all seep through like... a toxin. It's hardly bringing out the best in any of us." She paused. "Have you noticed?"

He sat for a moment, jaw clenched, and she wondered if the last decade had been appreciably darker for him than the ones preceding.

"It's been impossible to tell what's been the effect of the venom, and what is just..." He hesitated again before meeting her eyes. "I'd long become accustomed to my own darkness." His voice was bleak. "I've had no reason to consider any other source for the pain."

Hermione's stomach clenched again. "None of us knew... nobody knew how much pain you'd endured until Harry..." Her voice hitched.

"Oh, joy," he sneered. "Do tell. What did the illustrious Potter do to illuminate..." She cut him off with a sharp look, and it fleetingly occurred to her that his jousting drove back the sadness, at least for the moment.

"You're precariously close to acting like an arse, Snape." Her words were like a whip, and she felt a pang of remorse as he flinched. "Sorry," she whispered, and she held him in her gaze, absorbing the sting of her words, registering its minuscule impact compared to the enormity of a lifetime of blows and a decade of ever-encroaching darkness. They sat like that for a long moment, the harsh realities of the internal war they'd each been fighting alone unexpectedly acknowledged.

He cleared his throat and began again. "What did Mr. Potter do, Miss Granger?"

She smiled wryly. "He told Voldemort and everybody else witnessing the final confrontation who you really were and what you had done for all of us for years."

"What I'd done for you?" he hissed. "You have no idea, Miss Granger. No understanding at all, particularly that what I did had *nothing* to do with any of you."

"I don't understand. You're right." The lurking sadness flooded her again. "We certainly didn't realise in time to help you after Voldemort set his snake on you." Her voice was rough with the tears she was determined not to shed.

"I'm so sorry, Professor," she whispered. "I've been sorry for so long." She felt her face crumple into an expression of sorrow that had become all too familiar to her in recent years.

"You're distracted, Miss Granger," he snapped. "I've no interest in hearing your remorseful platitudes years after the fact. You were allegedly in the midst of telling me what has happened since..." His voice tightened, "...in the years that I have been away from the wizarding world."

As before, his harsh words braced her. Fleeting, she wondered why arguing with Ron or Harry, or even Ginny, didn't have the same steadying effect.

"Everyone was hurting after the war," she began. "Nobody escaped unscathed. So at first, it didn't seem odd to be having nightmares or outbursts of temper." She caught his eye, and he nodded. "But over time, other people, even those whose families had been torn apart, started to heal. They began to... feel better." She felt the pressure in her head begin to rise again and willed it to rein in its vengeance until she had finished.

"The wizarding world went about its business...lauded its heroes, repaired its broken buildings, and memorialised its dead. But it forgot that what made people heroes also made them wounded... survivors." Her voice broke, like the crack of a wave over jagged rocks, its echo, the whisper of a thousand unheard cries.

"The wizarding community fails to understand some of the simplest human magic."

His words washed over her like warm water, and the brittle grief crackling in the air between them softened with its touch.

"By the time it became obvious that something was wrong, most people had moved on." He nodded, and she remembered that he had survived the aftermath of war once before. "And besides, there are only a handful of us..." Her voice hitched again. "There are six of us..." She corrected herself as she caught his eye, "...seven... Seven witches and wizards whose symptoms not only did not get better, but have become progressively worse over time."

"Do all of you share the same symptoms?" Snape's voice was tight, his expression, inscrutable.

"In general, yes. But the difference is in the details," Hermione explained. "Each of us has had recurrent nightmares, but the contents of the recurring dreams differ among us. All of us have had trouble controlling our emotions, but some are prone to anger and others to sadness... or crippling fear." The memory of sleepless nights and endless days filled with dark shadows swept through her and she shivered.

"Why?" he asked sharply. "Why would exposure to a Horcrux leave the six of you with these symptoms?"

"Don't you have the same pattern of symptoms, Snape?" Her tone was biting, and despite the tightness in his jaw, he inclined his head in bare acknowledgement. She could see the battle he was waging, what it would cost to admit himself to their unfortunate group. He was not the first to resist, nor the first to rail against the injustice and its costs. Silence saturated the space between them until the rasp of his words sliced through the heavy air.

"I do." A whisper of an admission.

The acid drained from her expression, and she sat with him, an unexpected partner, silent understanding linking them as he bridged the gap. Hermione watched the first moments of acceptance wash over his face, saw his eyes close and his brow tighten with what...pain? Fear? Humiliation that he hadn't realised that something was terribly wrong? She wondered if he would ever trust her enough to say. It was only when he opened his eyes again, expectant glare reminding her that this was Snape, that she continued.

"We didn't really notice until after most other witches and wizards had recovered from whatever wounds the war inflicted on them. At first, we thought it coincidental that it was the six of us...we assumed that since we were closest to the fighting and to the horrors that it was just taking us longer to heal." Hermione paused as she remembered the months of discussion and argument as pain that should have been fading, instead intensified.

"How did you determine that this resulted from Horcrux exposure, Miss Granger? What do you believe the Horcruxes did to you..." He scowled. "To us?"

"It was awful after we found Slytherin's locket," she said in a small voice. "We'd have to take turns wearing it because it sank its claws into your soul and would shred it until you got it off you and..." Her words ran together, memories rushing to the surface.

"This locket... it was a Horcrux?"

Hermione nodded as she continued. "Each piece of Voldemort's soul was housed in something he considered important. We had to track the items down and destroy them...but it isn't easy to destroy a Horcrux." She hesitated, struggling with the enormity of the story. *It was like an octopus*, she thought, *with its tentacles moving independently, despite being connected to a common centre.*

"Each one of us could tell you more specifically how they remember it starting for them, but I'll tell you what I know from my own experience." He nodded, and she found his silent receptiveness surprising, especially for a man who was hearing a story that had great relevance to himself.

"Wearing the locket was awful, but when I could get it away from me, I'd feel better. Mostly." She closed her eyes as she recalled those long days in the tent. "It was after we broke into, and out of, Gringotts with the cup..." She looked at him as if to ask whether he knew about the cup.

"I heard Bellatrix ranting about her vault and the treasures that the Dark Lord had entrusted to her safekeeping," Snape replied. "I assume that this cup was a particularly volatile treasure?"

Hermione laughed sharply. "You could say that. It was the Horcrux that I destroyed. Lucky me." Snape's gaze on her narrowed, but she pressed on.

"Ron destroyed the locket with the sword of Gryffindor..." She gave him a piercing look. "After you left it for them...Harry and Ron retrieved it from the lake, and Harry told Ron to stab the locket. They wouldn't tell me what happened when he did, but from the look on Ron's face, it was awful. I couldn't imagine at the time what could have been so bad, but when I had to destroy that cup... then I understood..." Her voice faded in recollection.

"What happened when you destroyed the cup, Miss Granger?" The sound of his voice grew distant as the image of the chamber filled her vision.

"Ron got us into the Chamber of Secrets; there were Basilisk fangs all over down there." She spoke haltingly then, pain rushing through her. "We knew that would do it. Basilisk venom had soaked into Gryffindor's sword. The Horcrux books said..."

The sharp sound of Snape's voice interrupted.

"Miss Granger, I have no doubt that your reasoning skills were... relatively intact at the time, and obviously you were ultimately successful." His tone was nearly as acerbic as the classroom voice she still heard in her dreams, and his eyes flashed. "Focus. What happened when you destroyed the cup?"

It was playing in her mind as if it was happening again. The echoes of the chamber's high ceiling. Ron's voice urging her on and then, other voices. The cacophony made her head pound again, and she knew only that she had to make it stop. She brought her knees to her chest on the hard wooden chair and wrapped her arms around them tightly. Maybe if she made herself into a tiny ball of a witch she could squeeze herself into a smaller and smaller space until she disappeared. Then the pain would fade, and so would she.

"Miss Granger?"

She thought vaguely that the man with the velvet words ought to know better. He should realise that his classroom voice wouldn't help him here. Nor the desperate one that came next.

"Miss Granger, answer the question."

But it was no use. The hum of the man blended into the inky smudges of dreams, and nightmares, and lost remembrance of more hopeful times. And she... she was melting into the sticky tar of memory, buried in a swamp of emotion whose shores were too eroded to contain it.

He watched, powerless, as she slipped away like water between his fingers.

It was pure reflex, he thought, that set his voice to that classroom pitch after years of disuse. The sight of her, drifting, unable to sustain a train of thought without emotion and stray reactions pulling her off course...it chilled him. How many times had he worried, silent and alone, certain the venom that had taken years to clear from his body had damaged his mind?

Alone.

He looked over at the young woman folded around herself on the hard wooden chair. An unfamiliar ache rose in his chest as he noted the fine trembling of her arms as they clutched her bent legs. Her hair had fallen aside when she'd rested her head on her knees, and the tender nape of her neck lay bare.

He could see the lingering shadow around her, hovering underneath her skin, and he felt the darkness and pain inside him rise to greet it like an old friend. Quietly, he shifted from his seat to crouch beside her on the dusty wooden floor. Proximity only heightened the pull and stirred the roiling morass of feeling that he'd ruthlessly capped for most of his life.

I don't want to do this alone. The thought came unbidden, and he startled at its intensity. And its accompanying thought, *Nor should you have to, Miss Granger... Why are you? Why are you doing this alone?*

And there it was: the longing that he had never successfully extinguished. All the years of subterfuge, decades of hiding, and he wanted nothing more than to sit on a hard wooden floor and rest his head on her shoulder. He reached for her, then, without premeditation...the urge and long-denied need carrying him forward instinctively.

As the tips of his fingers brushed the bare nape of her neck, he felt the darkness fade from her skin and his, like mist burning away in the sunlight. He kept his hand there, tentative, as she lifted her tear-streaked face to his. Her look of confusion swiftly faded, soothed by the immediacy of his gesture.

Silent words passed between them, and he held his breath, sure that he could do nothing but ruin this crystalline moment if he so much as moved. But she shifted towards him and tumbled into his arms...a bundle of sharp limbs and wiry hair filling his lap and flooding his senses. He wrapped himself around her, a shield, and for the first time in living memory, he felt the shadow retreat.

"Miss Granger," he whispered, aware of the absurdity of speaking so formally while his face lay cushioned in her hair. "Miss... Hermione?" His voice shook with the word, and he wondered why it was that saying her name felt so much more intimate than holding her shaking body in his arms.

He felt her muscles relax at the sound of her name and relief shot through him that he had not violated her with his boldness.

"Hermione." He was rewarded by a soft exhalation that sounded like relief and felt her arms twine around his torso just as they had her own legs while she sat huddled on the chair.

She was no longer trembling.

"I will do this with you," he whispered into the warm air around them. The words flew from him as if they had their own will. "If you'll have me, I'll search with you until we figure out what to do... how to make the darkness stay away." His arms tightened around her, this young woman who had unknowingly pulled him from his hiding place and exposed his fear and loneliness. "No matter what happens," he murmured, "I will stay with you until the end."

She twisted in his lap then, and he felt a lurch in his gut. Fear...terror that he had gone too far and that she would leap from him in disgust. But before he could retreat, she wrapped her arms around him again more securely. Her body began to shake again, no longer the fine tremor of someone straining to maintain control, but great shudders of release.

"Hermione?"

"Please..." Her voice was raspy, and despite the quaking of her body, her words were firm. "Please. Don't leave me alone."

He closed his eyes and let her need flow through him, winding itself around its twin in him.

"Yes," she whispered as he showed her with his breathing and the cradle of his body that he would do nothing less, "stay."

Chapter 4: Place of Promise

Chapter 4 of 22

It was only after Snape followed her into the neglected shop, moving furtively between the shafts of sunlight that pierced the gloom, that it occurred to him to wonder why, ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione Granger was running. And why, in a world with magic, *real* magic, she should be seeking the counsel of a Muggle Tarot reader.

It had been longer than he cared to remember since he'd lost himself to the heady sensation of a woman's body curled against his. Longer still since those moments had been more than a bridge to what were inevitably superficial...and brief...liaisons. Hazy memory notwithstanding, he was certain that he'd never felt the surreal tangle of dislocation and conviction he did here with *her* on the hard wooden floor.

The brittle posture of the woman he'd followed into the Tarot reader's rooms had softened, long limbs winding around him as if he were an anchor for her drifting spirit. She was positioned awkwardly on his lap, and he was sure he'd twisted something when they'd fallen to the floor. And yet...he wanted nothing more than to revel in the contented hum under his fingertips as he stroked the skin at the nape of her neck. She seemed in no hurry to pull away, and he relaxed into the unexpected peace that had blossomed in the intersection of two broken souls.

Awfully unexpected, actually. Brow furrowed, he glanced at the closed door to the fortune-teller's room; eyes swept over the shabby wooden table that had hosted the drama of her Tarot cards and their vibrant threads of light. *And ours, too.*

Perhaps this was all the old woman's doing. It would serve him right, he thought, stomach clenching, to grasp this transcendent feeling with both hands only to have it dissolve at his touch, an illusion, like a Patronus, woven in light.

Hermione stirred, her sigh an echo of the one he hadn't realised he'd loosed. For a moment, he was sure that his pounding heart would dislodge her, but if anything, her body grew more languid in his arms, warm breath puffing against the scarred skin of his neck. Her former weary vigilance had fled, faded like the last strains of the setting sun.

How odd, he thought, that pain, and need, and trust should be wrapped up in such an unlikely package.

It had been years since this rising warmth had sped through him, so long since the last time...and there had only been a handful...that he'd known he was honestly *needed*. Not in the ways children need their Head of House, their voices a cacophony of demand and expectation. *Children in need, needy children.* No, *real* need...for himself and no other, for *his* voice, *his* touch, *his* soul. His and no other. It had been so long he had nearly forgotten.

Dumbledore had made it his business to wrap his need for Severus around the ragged edges of guilt and memory, its every touch a reminder of the penance whose payment would forever be due.

But *this*... this was nigh on impossible, he thought. An hour ago he'd been stalking the streets of London, the excuses of errands to run and checks to make before returning home hardly convincing even to himself. Anything to delay going back to that empty house, where the echoes of every mistake he'd ever made pounded against the panelled walls.

And now...with the twilight sun long set, the idea of this woman moving out of the circle of his arms made him gasp for breath. He threaded his fingers gently through tangled curls and brushed his cheek against the top of her head. Her hold on him tightened almost imperceptibly.

She needed him, and he, her.

He always had been one to cling to the impossible.

~**~

The sinuous voice wrapped around her, smoothing sharp edges of pain as familiar as the hollows under her red-rimmed eyes. She'd had no comfort for so long. There'd been no salve for the blame and recrimination layered atop searing memory... *the cup... the Chamber... the Burrow...*

She hadn't meant to moan, but the voice just grew firmer until it morphed into arms, and hands, and a heartbeat, steady under her cheek. *Oh, thank god...* The heat of his body and steady stroke of his fingers across her skin swept through her like a *Lumos*. All thought chased away, she wrapped herself around *the voice... the heartbeat... the man* whose presence...whose *touch* had, for the first time in nearly a decade, beat back the shadow that threaded its way through the cracks in her soul.

How strange that after all this time it should be a dead man's touch that brought back the light. Absurd how quickly her universe had narrowed to the feel of his skin and cadence of his breathing...and the lightening of her heart it inexplicably brought. It all faded in the face of unavoidable truth.

He'd recognised her, seen the shadow, and not turned away. The touch of his hand and sound of his voice cut through the sticky tar of pain and gave her a moment's rest...and a thread of hope. There was light here, radiance where his skin touched hers and air where his breath beat a tattoo through the tangle of her hair. She wrapped her arms more firmly around him, reassured by the curve of his body around hers.

She'd be crazy to let him go...she was hanging on for dear life.

~**~

Shadows lengthened; darkness had fallen beyond the grimy window of the Tarot reader's room.

Snape didn't know how long they had been sitting there, but he reckoned the stiffness in his back would tell him soon. He shifted, wincing at the knots in his shoulders and neck.

"What time is it?" a sleepy voice asked from about the middle of his chest.

"I was just wondering that myself," he replied.

He felt her nod as she shifted off his lap, her arm still securely around him as if afraid she might sink into the floorboards, otherwise. She'd kept her eyes averted, and he saw there a hope that he might not notice how she'd adopted him as her personal anchor.

But decades of feeling small in the face of his own blinding need had laid the seeds of understanding. He moved slowly, bringing his hand to cup the curve of her jaw, thumb stroking the gaunt angle of her cheek.

"Miss Granger?" She flinched. "Miss... Hermione, look at me. Please." Her surprised expression would have irritated him in her student days, but today it only left a lump in his throat.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"You weren't afraid of me a moment ago. Why now?"

Her head jerked up. "I don't know," she answered. But the question brought her back to him, and she met his gaze at last.

"It's better when you're closer." It wasn't a question. She lowered her eyes again and he continued. "For me, too."

"For you?"

"It's not only you who felt better." He paused, his inquiry a tilt of the head. At her nod, he went on. "I can't remember the last time I felt... like that... peaceful..." His voice trailed off, suddenly uncomfortable with his own disclosure.

"Like light," she murmured.

"Light?" he whispered.

"Your touch makes the light come back. Or maybe it makes the dark go away...I don't know," she said, an echo of the anxious, swotty student in her words. "It's darker now, next to you..." She glanced at his empty lap. "It felt like the dark corners were lit up..." She paused. "When you... I mean, when I..."

"When I held you." His voice was rough, but he didn't care.

She nodded at the same time as he reached for her.

An experiment, he told himself as she scrambled onto his lap again.

Testing... hypothesis, he thought distantly as her lips left a trail of fire along the rough stubble of his jaw.

Gathering.... Data.... Mmmm Her breath was hot and sweet, and he was dizzy from the blood pounding through his body as she brought her mouth to his...

And in a blaze of light, blew the darkness away.

~**~

The row house at the end of the block was dark, and the scattered street lamps cast fractured shadows along the path. Hermione was grateful for the cool air on her skin and that side-along Apparition required close bodily contact. She was still shaky, knees wobbly, hours after falling apart in the fortune-teller's room.

Her companion glanced at her, not remarking on her unsteadiness, and drew her closer. Hermione shivered, and he just tucked her to his side more firmly still.

Soon enough, they were inside, the air barely warmer and far more stale than outside. But there were walls and a roof and a threadbare couch that looked serviceable enough. She didn't dare think about the inevitable plunge into darkness that would come when he unwound her from his body and retreated to his bed. Perhaps she could delay a few more moments...she could try to store up the feeling and maybe that would carry her...

"No need to look so frantic, Miss Granger." His sharp voice interrupted her, and her heart galloped in her chest as she wondered what she'd done wrong. "I assure you, you are perfectly safe here."

He'd schooled his expression into the one that had always chilled her when he was her professor...distant, indifferent. The cold, vacant one that, she remembered, used to make her wonder where he had gone. She hadn't realised her hands were shaking until she brought one to stroke the skin of his face; had she paused to think, she never would have presumed she had the right to try to bring him back from wherever the pain took him. Instinct drove her, anything to relieve the tightness in her chest and the edge in his voice.

"I've not felt this safe in a long time," she said. "Just now... I was distracted... thinking that your couch would be more comfortable than a lot of places I've slept lately."

"Where have you been sleeping?" he asked, and the softening of his voice gentled her racing heart.

"Here and there," she demurred. He didn't need to know about the lost jobs and flat, how she'd pinched her Galleons to stretch them as far as she could, keeping a room at the Leaky Cauldron in exchange for the odd magical job. But her magic had grown fractious at the same rate she had, and she couldn't rely on Hannah's compassion any longer...not when Neville...

"How long has this been going on?"

She shook her head, a knot in her throat. When she met his eyes again, the pain she saw there surprised her. "A long time." A glass of water would be nice, she thought absently. Her mouth was so dry. "Things have been falling apart for so long that I can't remember what it was like... before."

Side by side, they moved to the couch and sat, letting the spectre of *before* dissipate before he broke its silent thrall. "Perhaps tomorrow you can tell me more about what I have missed these ten years."

Hermione nodded. "I will. I'll tell you everything..." She paused. "Whatever I know, anyway."

"I have developed an appreciation for generosity in the sharing of information," he said. "We may discover that I have knowledge that will supplement yours...though until a few hours ago, I would not have recognised its relevance."

"Everything is harder when you're alone, isn't it?"

"It is, indeed."

"Thank you for not leaving me alone," she whispered into their shared silence.

"I believe that I could do nothing less," he answered. "And I find myself... not displeased with your company."

"Well, that's a relief, then," she murmured, grateful for the dim light that hid the blush staining her skin.

He'd not said a word since they'd left about what transpired between them amidst the cobwebs and dust on the fortune-teller's floor. Hadn't mocked the urgent kisses, or the way she'd moulded her body to his and pushed his layers of clothing aside to find the hot skin underneath. His hands, too, had roamed, finding the skin of her belly, tracing the outline of her spine, fingertips feathering long strokes along the curve of her back...his touch like water on parched earth.

Only the faint shuffle of the fortune-teller outside the door had pierced the bubble around them as, with a jolt, they recalled where they were. Disoriented, Hermione had watched him reassemble his armour of cloth and silence. But she'd had the oddest feeling that his barriers had shifted now to include her behind them...that these shields hadn't been erected to keep her away.

The cloud of pain that always hovered around her had burned away, gone for the moment but lurking still, as if biding its time until it would find her alone again. Snape seemed to understand, or maybe he felt it, too. Whatever his reasons, she was grateful for the touch of his hand at the small of her back and the press of his leg against hers, even as he rearranged his clothing. He'd kept contact with her as they bid farewell to the Tarot reader and had paused to brush his hand along her arm when the old woman bade them return. "Later," she'd said. "You will know when."

She'd been shameless when he'd offered his home as a place to rest for the night and hadn't even tried to hide her relief at his suggestion that he Apparate them both. Hours had fled in the fortune-teller's room and she felt the exhaustion heavy in her bones. Perhaps tonight would finally bring some sleep.

Threadbare or not, his couch was comfortable. She had no memory of drifting off to sleep, her head resting on his shoulder. Nor would she be able to say how it was that in the night they came to rest, spooned together on the narrow couch, her smaller body curled into the curve of his.

All Hermione knew was that she was here, in the deepest part of the night, that time when the shadow would always stalk her until every last tendril of light had been chased away. But now, for the first time since the Battle of Hogwarts, she felt safe enough to fall asleep in his arms.

~**~

He thought she might be awake from the shift in her breathing. Unsure what had woken him, he lay still, waiting.

The night had brought more than its quota of surprises, he thought. None were more stirring, though, than the moment she threaded her fingers through his and began to speak.

At first he thought she might be dreaming, her voice so low, words tumbling out one over the other, running together like so many drops of water. Soon enough, the rhythm of her words took shape for him.

"It wasn't his fault," she murmured. "Not really." She sighed. "He couldn't help it any more than I." He nodded into the familiar darkness of guilt and sadness, but this time, she was there. "None of us noticed until it got to be really bad." She gripped his hand more tightly. "Ron would get so angry at me...well, at everyone, but he'd direct it at me, usually. I mean, he'd always had that way about him when he'd be insulted or felt inept." She paused. "But it was nothing like how he was... after."

"I do recall some discussion in the staffroom involving Mr Weasley's proclivity for sulking," he murmured. Her soft laugh made him smile, and he pillowed his cheek on the cushion of her hair.

"I'd do anything to get back those days of innocent sulking," she said, and Severus had an unwelcome flashback to his own schooldays, the memory of unforgivable insults clashing with the searing memory of Unforgivable Curses.

"This was different," she added. "After a while, there was an edge to him I'd never seen. It took a while for me to realise that we'd each developed an edge, of sorts."

"What sort of edge?" he asked.

"The sort that makes being around other people intolerable," she whispered. "That makes you feel as if, no matter what you do, it's bound to be wrong...the sort of wrong that gets other people hurt or killed, or so angry at you that you can't even breathe anymore."

"Is that what happened? Was someone hurt, or killed?"

"Nearly." He held his breath.

"We were all together at the Burrow. Molly would have everybody over for dinner on Sundays whenever she could twist enough arms, but it was getting harder and harder to be in the same room. Whatever it is that's wrong with us all seemed to magnify exponentially whenever we'd get together as a group." He felt her shake her head.

"I guess it made it harder to deny that there was a real problem. I'd been begging them...Harry, Ron, Ginny, even Arthur...to come with me to St Mungo's, to *tell* them what was happening to us. They accused me of needing to create a new crisis." He felt her begin to shiver. "Ron said that I couldn't stand to not be the centre of attention...that I hated not having a new catastrophe to uncover."

"He hit you where it hurt, then?"

"Always," she murmured. "But that last time, I hit back. Not intentionally, but..." She turned towards him, then, and he could make out her silhouette in the moonlit room. "I hadn't had an episode of uncontrolled magic like that since I was a child," she confessed. "I'd forgotten how frightening it is." The fine tremor he felt under his hands was proof that it was terrifying even to remember.

"I know it is."

"I nearly killed him... Ron. They were all horrified.../was horrified." She paused and he felt her shiver as she cried. "They didn't have to throw me out. I ran." He could feel the tears as they fell, bathing the skin of their clasped hands. "By that time, I was in even worse shape than I'd realised."

"I can hardly imagine you acknowledging..." He stopped short.

"Something else you can relate to, then?"

"Indeed."

Silence enveloped them again, rich with shared understanding, leavened with their grief. Their grief, not his alone, he thought. *When has it ever been more than me alone, bearing my own burdens?*

"I'm afraid," she whispered. His heart began to pound; he hadn't realised how much he hoped she felt safe with him. He hadn't recognised that what he was feeling with her was safety, too.

But she cried out when he pulled away, tears turning to sobs again and he knew he'd missed something.

"Why are you afraid?"

"It's too late, I've already ruined it," she croaked.

"Ruined what?"

"This. You... me being here... it being ok to be here, like this.... I knew I would ruin it. I always ruin it."

"You have ruined nothing, Granger." He turned her to face him in the dark. "It was I who...I misunderstood." There, she would have to figure the rest out for herself.

"It's not supposed to be this important to me. I haven't seen you for years. I thought you were *dead* for Merlin's sake." She tried to pull away, but she didn't have room to shift on the narrow couch, and he didn't make any move to help her.

"You don't have to explain to yourself or to me why this matters, Granger." The words fell from him before he could stop himself by thinking. "It matters. That's all. To me, as well." He swallowed thickly, aware that here was a moment for him to capture or destroy. "I want you to know you are safe here, with me. I don't want you to be afraid... not because of me."

For a moment, he wasn't sure if the strangled sound that came from her throat was a laugh or a cry. But the way she wrapped her arms around his neck and her body shook meant it didn't matter.

"I'm not afraid because of you." She tilted her head to drop feather kisses along the line of his neck, over the scar he always wanted to hide from the world. "Afraid for you, maybe...afraid for both of us," she whispered. "Please, just don't go when you see all the ugliness inside of me. All the need." Her body had started to shake again and his hands knew what to do, how to knead the tension from her back, how to keep her flush against him...his heartbeat alongside hers.

"There is no ugliness in you that would ever make me go. None." He didn't know how he knew this; only that it was true.

And tonight of all nights, knowing the truth was the first step towards the light.

Thanks to Cecelle for this jaw dropping sketch of my favorite scene from the chapter. :) *hugs



Chapter 5: Place of Increase

Chapter 5 of 22

It was only after Snape followed her into the neglected shop, moving furtively between the shafts of sunlight that pierced the gloom, that it occurred to him to wonder why, ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione Granger was running.

And why, in a world with magic, *real* magic, she should be seeking the counsel of a Muggle Tarot reader.

A/N: Thanks to you all for your warm reception to the last chapter after such a long hiatus. The story is flowing, and I'm hoping for a regular rhythm to posting updates. Beta thanks to Annie Talbot and to Karelia for your sharp eyes and enthusiastic encouragement.

"I'm not afraid because of you." She tilted her head to drop feather kisses along the line of his neck, over the scar he always wanted to hide from the world. "Afraid for you, maybe—afraid for both of us," she whispered. "Please, just don't go when you see all the ugliness inside of me. All the need." Her body had started to shake again, and his hands knew what to do, how to knead the tension from her back, how to keep her flush against him—his heartbeat alongside hers.

"There is no ugliness in you that would ever make me go. None." He didn't know how he knew this, only that it was true.

And tonight of all nights, knowing the truth was the first step towards the light.

Even the morning light was muted as it stole through the grimy windows, its tentative touch winding around the witch and wizard huddled together on the worn sofa. Hermione felt it push against her closed eyelids, a silent request to open them and face the day. But she didn't want to open her eyes, didn't want to let the world outside rush back in. She preferred to stay right where she was, here where the world was made only of his scent, his heartbeat, and the warmth of his body sheltering hers.

Snape stirred in his sleep and sighed, arms pulling her more securely against him as he adjusted the angle of his head against the lumpy cushions. She'd never have imagined feeling so peaceful waking here, not in the arms of *this* man. Even years into her relationship with Ron, waking with him hadn't been tranquil. If they'd argued, as they so often had, her frustration at their perpetual bickering lingered, like smoke in a too-small room. Sometimes just the sound of his voice would make her blood boil. And, in the increasingly awful months before she'd fled, even the querulous tilt of his red-haired head could trigger blinding rage.

She ran her fingertips along the exposed skin of Snape's hand, the one she'd clung to in the middle of the night whilst the story of her exile tumbled out of her in an avalanche of words. It was always worst at night. Dread's icy fingers would clutch at her, and there was nothing that could drive the memories away. Last night had been

different, though. Last night, when the memories came, she'd let them flow out of her instead of holding them in to batter her.

Last night she'd *told* him. Had shared one of the worst of the memories with him, and he hadn't recoiled. He hadn't turned from her in disgust. She'd told him, and he'd borne it with her.

It really hadn't *ever* felt like this, she realised. Neither with Ron nor with any of the men she'd been with since. There hadn't been many. Only scattered liaisons drenched in self-hatred, leaving her with nothing but the bruises she herself had inflicted.

The light grew stronger, as if lack of formal protest gave it leave to flood the room with its soft glow. Snape stirred again, and this time, Hermione pivoted within the curve of his arm, resting her head on his shoulder. His free hand slipped beneath her shirt to rest possessively on her stomach, thumb absently stroking the contour of her waist. Still half-asleep, he brushed his lips against her forehead, and she nearly gasped at the tenderness of the unconscious gesture.

His eyes opened then, heavy with sleep and as unguarded as she'd ever seen them.

"Good morning," she whispered, sure her eyes were filled with sentiments she shouldn't voice even to herself. Waking like this, here, with him, she was as content and as *confused* as she'd ever felt.

"It may be, at that," he replied, the hand stroking her belly more deliberate now. His intense expression held her fast, and it occurred to her that no matter the utter insanity of their circumstances and the improbability of being here with this man, still, she'd willingly surrender herself to the velvet depth of those eyes.

The moment stretched between them until a growl from her stomach pierced the bubble, and she blushed. His expression changed, concern furrowing his brow. "When did you last have a real meal?"

"I'm fine," she said, uncomfortable with the shift in his scrutiny. "I am capable of taking care of myself."

"Undoubtedly," he said. "And yet, not relevant to my question."

For a moment, she saw the echo of the man she remembered. Uncompromising teacher, relentless taskmaster, demanding Head of House. For all that, he must have harboured protective feelings towards his Slytherins, she realised, had to have intervened on behalf of the children in his care.

I am no longer a child she thought. *If I ever was one in the magical world.* But the look on his face left no option to refuse.

"I don't remember what I ate yesterday," she admitted.

He nodded as he made to sit upright. "I haven't got much in the larder, but I've enough for a decent breakfast." She wished they didn't have to get up, but could hardly complain, as he seemed determined to feed her.

"Thank you."

"Not to worry, Granger. I'll extract payment in turn." Only the shadow of a smirk on his face quelled her pounding heart. "You've promised me an account of the last decade," he continued, and she felt only slightly relieved. "The one I missed holed away from the rest of you lot."

"I've kept a record of it," she said, her hands shaking as she reached for the jacket she didn't remember shedding the night before.

"Of course you did."

"Haven't you?" she challenged. He glared at her, and she laughed. The sound shocked her; it had been so long since she'd heard it, felt it rushing through her like clean water. It felt *wonderful* to laugh. "You did, didn't you?"

"If my memory of your... thoroughness serves, your records will be more exhaustive than mine," he said. "But yes, I did." He seemed reluctant to rise from the couch, and as she moved to join him, she sensed it too—the darkness edging around them again, its malevolent presence looking for cracks to slip through.

"Have you had no contact with others from the wizarding world, then?" she asked, deliberately sidling alongside him as they walked towards the kitchen.

"Virtually none." He didn't elaborate.

They made their way to the kitchen, Hermione following his lead as he unearthed supplies. He didn't comment on her proximity as they prepared their meal nor when they settled themselves together at the tiny table to eat. In fact, he seemed to make a point of brushing against her as they worked side by side in the tiny space. Once, when he'd crossed the room to search for a frying pan, she thought he was awfully pale by the time he sat back down again to join her, brushing his hand against hers on the tabletop while they ate.

The food was simple, but good, and Hermione felt stronger and more clear-headed with every bite. She'd noticed he didn't use magic to prepare their food, but the fierce expression on his face when she made to ask why he did things the Muggle way stopped her. Instead, she ate until she felt some energy return and then let her mind wander back to their conversation.

"Being surrounded by wizards didn't do me much good, anyway," she muttered between mouthfuls of eggs and toast. "You haven't missed much."

"You'll find," he said, "that being surrounded by members of the wizarding world *often* fails to meet expectations." His tone was deceptively light, but his grim expression reminded her again how long he'd shouldered the burden of his and others' failures alone.

"Has it been by design?" she asked. "I mean, did you stay away intentionally, or—"

"Or did I make an attempt and find myself unwelcome?" he interrupted.

"Yes. Or... I don't know. The Ministry told us that escaped Death Eaters had taken your body..." She smiled softly at his snort of derision. "They even held a memorial service for you." Sparsely attended, but Harry had insisted. "You haven't said how you survived, but... why didn't you let anybody know?" she asked.

He sat on the creaky kitchen chair, staring at a point over her shoulder for what felt like a long time, as if the answer might be hidden on the stained wall behind her.

"It honestly never occurred to me that I should," he said finally. "To be frank, I'd been isolated for long enough to stop considering others in my plans. And as Dumbledore had demonstrated no concern for my welfare, I realised that I had to decide for myself whether I wanted to live to see the other side of the war." His hand rose to stroke the ragged scars that circled his neck. "I couldn't tell you why—maybe to spite the old man," he glanced at her as if daring her to pity him, "but I decided that if I had any say about it, I would live."

She nodded, and he must have been satisfied with her rapt attention because he continued.

"I'd taken what precautions I could; thought I might be injured—or worse—at some point," he said, the hand that had been stroking his neck stilling, resting on the faded scars that stood out in the morning light. "The Dark Lord had been using Nagini as his executioner with remarkable recklessness. Prudence dictated that I prepare myself for such an eventuality," he said. "My own safety had always been precarious." He was growing paler again, and it sounded as if he were talking to himself, remembering out loud. "The Dark Lord was hardly known for his loyalty to those who had outlived their usefulness."

She gaped at him, at his bland recounting of a night that haunted her like a vengeful ghost. How could he talk about being discarded like so much garbage as if he were narrating someone else's story? Didn't those memories haunt *him*, too?

"I still dream about it," Hermione said, her voice choked. "When he just... to you... I mean... I felt... paralysed... Well, mostly." She trailed off, swamped by guilt at the contrast between her quick conjuring of a container to hold Snape's memories and her non-response to the blood pouring from Snape's neck.

"It's one thing to prepare oneself in theory for an attack. It's another to face one in the flesh," he said.

"But you were ready," she said. "Well, obviously. I mean..." She sighed. "I'm babbling again." But he didn't mock her, only looked contemplative.

"It was good enough," he murmured, and she saw the wince he tried to mask behind the shrug of his shoulders. "I had access to the snake and her venom. I had protected myself from the poison should she strike." This time, he couldn't hide his shudder and Hermione slipped her hand more firmly into his, and noticed his pallor improve.

"Anytime I was in the snake's presence, I cast a modified shield charm along the surface of my skin. It didn't protect me completely, but it ultimately prevented her from completely severing..." He paused for a deep breath, and only then did Hermione realise she'd been holding her own.

They sat in silence for a moment, memory filling the space between them. She gripped his hand tightly and resisted the urge to rest her other hand on top of it—to marvel at the miracle of his warm flesh, alive, and that the touch of their hands could somehow keep the darkness in both of them at bay.

Grateful. She was so grateful for his foresight and meticulous attention to detail. He had taken care of himself when nobody else would. Nobody had. Not even she; she who had campaigned on behalf of House Elves had left the man who had risked his life for them all to bleed out on the dirty floor of the Shrieking Shack. Why *hadn't* she attempted to stanch the bleeding? Couldn't she have Apparated him to St Mungo's for help? If only she had used that vaunted brain of hers. Thoughts racing, familiar shame and self-loathing ran like poison under her skin, but before she could speak, he did.

"Granger, you were meant to believe that there was nothing to be done." His voice cut through the storm brewing inside her. "I hadn't anticipated an audience, but I would have been rather put out had you spent time rescuing me when you obviously had more important tasks needing immediate attention."

"I just... stood there while you... bled. I thought I'd stood and watched you die." The darkness that had been lurking surged forward, flooding her until she was sure she'd drown in it again. She'd failed him; failed herself. Again.

"Yes, and then you rushed off to finish the job you had been set," he said. He brought his hand to her cheek, barely brushing against the skin, wet with newly fallen tears. "And helped Potter save the world from the most evil wizard alive."

"When you put it that way, it sounds noble," she said, bitterness lacing her words. "It didn't feel noble." She looked at him and saw her own bleak expression reflected in his. "And," she whispered, "it certainly doesn't feel noble now."

~**~

He hadn't intended to spill out the memory of his last moments in the wizarding world to her over breakfast. In point of fact, he hadn't given a moment's thought to how or when to recount that particular story. Perhaps ten year's freedom from the company of others made him appreciate conversation now he had it.

Or, perhaps it was *her*. There was something about her, or about them, together, that was inexplicable. To begin with, he'd never before experienced an urge this powerful to be *near* another person. Not even in his most desperate dreams of Lily had desire to be close to her been accompanied by such tangible physical and emotional reactions.

Whatever this was, whatever caused it lacked the taint of Dark magic, but its power was not to be denied.

The tears on her cheeks were cool, and his hand felt hot against her skin. Grief and guilt spilled from her, their venom too much for her to bear.

Nobility, he thought. "That's the trouble with you lot," he said.

"Just the one thing, then?" she muttered. He snorted.

"The trouble of the moment, then," he amended. "It doesn't have to be noble to be right, Granger," he continued, schooling her in what any first year Slytherin knew. "You did what you had to do. And so did I."

But instead of his words comforting her as he'd hoped, a sob escaped her, its harsh sound ripping through him. She thrust her head into her hands, fingers digging into the snarls of her hair.

"What is it? What?" he asked as he reached for her. She was sinking, but he couldn't let her, wouldn't let her fall into the abyss. "Tell me," he murmured as he leaned closer, his own hands closing over hers, untangling them carefully from her hair.

"How could I have walked away from you?" she whispered through the tears. "It's bad enough that they died... Remus and Tonks and little Colin. I wasn't there. I couldn't help... There were just so many of them..."

He'd managed to pull his chair closer to hers and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her against him while she spoke.

"You couldn't help it that they died," he said. "It wasn't your fault."

"I should have *done* something," she said. "I can't believe that I just left you there. Who cares what else we did?" she rasped. "What kind of person walks away when someone else is bleeding to death?"

And then he felt it again, like a hairline crack in the ether—sooty fingers reaching through, searching for her. Mining the wells of self-doubt and helplessness that had eroded the confidence of a witch once considered the brightest of her age.

No, he thought. *Enough*. And pulled her onto his lap, seeking bare skin and the relief experience had shown him touch would bring. She shuddered even as his hands stroked her back, soothing the taut muscles there until the tears stopped and she could speak again.

"Why is this happening to me?" she whispered. "Why can you talk about it and be fine, and the minute I do, I..."

"I don't know," he said. "But we know more than either one of us did yesterday."

She huffed. "I know nothing."

"You're very much mistaken, Granger," he said, willing the crispness in his voice to challenge rather than frighten her. "You know far more than you realise." He paused, hoping—counting on latent pride and ambition to drive her to *think*.

It took longer than he'd hoped, longer than she'd have needed in her school years, but in moments, she was there.

"Talk of the war makes... it flood me, but not you." She lifted her head from where it was resting on his chest to look him in the eye. "Is that right?"

"So it would appear." He nodded, holding her gaze, giving her his unwavering gaze—his faith in her burning steadily in his eyes—as an anchor for when her confidence wavered.

"Touch..." She paused to draw a deep breath. "Touching you, you touching me, it chases the dark away." He nodded. "That never happened with Ron," she continued. "But I don't know why."

"Indeed. And I have had little occasion to touch or be touched," he paused, surprising himself with the revelation. "Certainly not by someone magical."

She blushed, and he wondered if she'd had relationships with Muggle men after her relationship with Weasley soured or if she'd had the kind of infrequent dalliances he'd found with Muggle women. His breath caught in his throat, and he pushed away the image. The thought of her with any other man made his stomach lurch, for all that he knew he had no claim on her, himself.

"It feels, to me at least, like the longer we touch, and... the closer... the better. I mean to say," she stuttered, "the more the darkness recedes." She stopped talking, jaw clenched as if that would prevent her from saying something she might regret.

"I concur," he whispered, brushing his lips against her cheek. "Skin to skin appears to have the most powerful protective effect—for both of us." She let out a long breath, and he felt her relax into his caress. He, too, felt the dark weight recede, bringing overwhelming relief with the shadow's retreat. "I'm not certain how long the protection remains once we no longer maintain physical contact."

"It doesn't seem to last very long for me," she sighed. "After just a moment or two it all comes rushing back again." She shook her head. "How did I walk around like this for so long? After less than a day, I can hardly stand to be two feet away from you before falling to pieces."

"It's possible," he said, "that having stumbled upon this... palliative of sorts, our prior state feels practically intolerable."

She rested her head against his chest again for a moment and by the time she lifted it her breathing was easier and her cheeks slightly pinker.

"That makes sense," she said. "It's been so long since I felt normal... I guess I got used to the feeling. Even though it's *miserable*."

"It's remarkable what one can learn to endure," he murmured, wondering when he'd stopped noticing the pain of it.

"I don't want you to hurt anymore," she whispered. "You don't show it, but when we're like—this, I can *feel* it." He nodded, surprised.

"Under normal circumstances, I can hardly feel it myself," he murmured. "Our... contact intensifies my awareness—for myself as well as you." He brushed his lips against hers. "And then chases it away," he murmured between kisses. She was eager, but less desperate than the night before when it had seemed as if the intensity of the pain and its relief might devour them.

She threaded her fingers through his hair, and he nearly purred at the sensation. This time, her touch wasn't just for herself—didn't have the quality of a drowning woman grasping at anything to keep her afloat. Now, she was offering her hand to him, *for* him; this time, she knew that she was not alone in the pain.

Without words, she told him.

With the tender caress of her lips on his, with the sweep of her tongue and the way she yielded to his, she showed him.

He didn't know how much time went by until they reluctantly drew away from each other, only that with each deepening kiss, he wanted nothing in the world except to stay right there—no matter that the kitchen chair was rickety and hard, and distinctly uninviting. But at last, air became more than a passing necessity, and they rested, her head nestled under his chin, his cheek resting on the unlikely pillow of her tangle of hair as their heartbeats slowed again.

What now? he wondered.

"Well, I can hardly take up residence on your lap for the duration," she muttered as if she'd read his mind. "Of course, my ability to think improves when I do, but it's hardly practical." She hadn't yet paused for breath. "Not to mention that we still hardly know each other. The fact that you were once my teacher hardly counts, I'd say. Besides, at the time, you were rather a git, even if you're not—" His laugh stopped her short, and she seemed almost startled to remember that she wasn't talking only to herself.

"You are feeling better, I take it?"

"What?"

"If you can think about practicalities, and propriety, and our dubious shared history without concurrently believing me either a Boggart or dead, I'd say you were feeling quite a lot better."

"Oh." She looked stunned but, in fact, appeared to be feeling significantly healthier than he'd seen her. Her skin had regained a rosier lustre, and her eyes had lost most of their flatness. There was energy crackling about her, and he smiled to himself as he imagined the girl he'd known overlaid by the woman in front of him. He'd barely appreciated it at the time, preoccupied as he'd been, but at her best, this woman would be a force to be reckoned with.

He was quite looking forward to it.

~~***~~

The sitting room was warm, but she was always so cold these days.

The wand in her hand shook, or rather, her hand did. She rarely used it anymore, rarely used magic if she had another option. It wasn't just that her magical energy in recent years had grown erratic and in recent months, frighteningly low. It was that the taste and texture of her magic had changed.

The first time she'd cast a spell and seen the crackle of gray running through the flash of what should have been pure, white light, she had thought there was something wrong with her wand. The second time, she'd mentioned it to Ron and Harry, who had shrugged it off.

"*Happens in Auror training all the time,*" Harry had assured her. "*They say it comes with experience and maturity.*"

Still uneasy, she'd pushed for clearer answers. "But why? Why should the colour of the spell look... dirtier? Have yours changed, too?"

"Course they have, Hermione," Ron interrupted, discomfort with her questions giving his tone an even sharper edge than usual. "Stop looking for trouble, would you?"

But it didn't feel to her as if she were looking for trouble, but rather that something troubling had found her. She'd ignored it for a while longer, but when an *Evanescio* resulted in a grey-black light and a smoking after-image, she made her way directly to Diagon Alley to find Mr Ollivander. He'd examined her wand, the one she'd bought in his store before starting Hogwarts, in the days when magic still felt magical.

"*There is nothing wrong with this wand, Miss Granger,*" he had said, interrupting her ruminations. "*It's as functional as the day you bought it.*" He'd regarded her closely with those large, gray eyes. "*The changes in your magic originate with you,*" he'd added.

"What do you mean? Do I need a different wand now?"

"You will achieve the same results no matter the wand, Miss Granger. The changes to you—to your magic—will not be remedied with a change of instrument."

She'd stood there and waited. Waited for him to elaborate, to tell her what was wrong with her. Her eyes had begged him, but when she opened her mouth to ask, he'd turned abruptly away, leaving her alone with her broken magic and her dread.

It had deteriorated bit by bit after that. At first, the worst symptom had been the colour of the spell as it was cast. Like a polluted river, the tint of her magic had grown bleak. Worse, she'd noticed that it had gradually taken more concentration to perform simple spells and that more complex ones had been nearly impossible unless she was at her best and concentrating fiercely.

Like an untrained witch, wandless and afraid, her magic had grown unpredictable, but unlike those years, it had felt as if it were draining out of her, not building with her growing strength. Lately, only the most concentrated effort at spellwork succeeded.

But she was *cold* and didn't want to ask Snape to light a fire; she wasn't ready to tell him this... not yet.

"*Incendio!*" She whipped her wand towards the hearth, hoping against hope that her first attempt would be successful.

The flames that exploded in the fireplace as if to greet Snape as he entered the room tossed her to the floor.

"What in Merlin's name are you doing, woman?" His actions, rushing to her, belied his scolding.

"I just wanted a fire," she said. "It's a bit cold."

"*Incendio* does not generally detonate an explosion, Granger."

"I know," she said. "Lately... um..." She fiddled with her wand.

Could it be?

A whisper, and a ball of blue flame ignited in her hands. Not the pastel blue of her days at Hogwarts when she'd conjure her trademark bluebell flames to warm herself and the boys while they prowled in forbidden places. No, this fire was cobalt blue, as deep and resonant as the Hogwarts' lake on the hottest of summer days. But more surprisingly, it had barely taken any energy to conjure them.

She gasped.

"Out with it, Granger," he drawled.

"I don't understand."

"What don't you understand?"

"I haven't been able to—" She sighed. "My magic, it's not been..."

"It's not been what, Granger?"

"My magic has been weakening, Snape, all right?" she snapped. "Half the time, I can barely perform simple spells. Even when I'm successful, the result is never strong. Not like this."

He was silent.

"What is it?"

"Tell me more about your magic weakening," he said. "Is that the only change you've noticed?"

"No, it's not the only change," she said. "It's been weakening for years, but the last few months have been the worst. I've started to avoid magic, mostly." He nodded, and it was only the compassion in his eyes that stopped her from railing at him, venting her grief and frustration at the only available target.

"What is the other change?" His voice was quiet, and she had the feeling that he knew what she would say.

"Its colour," she said. "The colours are no longer clear. They're dirty looking, like they've been muddied." He nodded to the bluebell flames still burning in her cupped hands. "They used to burn with a blue—" She swallowed thickly. "Like the colour of Ron's eyes." She blushed.

"Show me."

"No."

His jaw was tight, and they stared each other down for a moment until he let out a long sigh with a quirk of his lip. "Apologies. I appear to have slipped inadvertently into acting like an arse again." He inclined his head towards her as if awaiting her permission to continue.

She nodded reluctantly, but with the release of breath, felt her resentment wane. "I, too, am experiencing some of what you describe," he said. "I merely wish to see, to compare."

Instead of waiting for her, he drew his wand. Weathered wood, long and austere.

"*Accio!*" The flash of light was brownish, a trickle rather than a stream of magic. The object from the shelf behind her struggled to obey, finally soaring into his outstretched hand.

He nodded at her as if to say, "You see?" and she gritted her teeth. Concentrating, she pointed her wand at the item in his hand and, before he could object, spoke the incantation.

"*Accio!*"

The object soared from his hand to hers, and the last thing she remembered before losing consciousness was its searing heat when it touched her skin.

Chapter 6: Fate and Spirit Combined

Chapter 6 of 22

It was only after Snape followed her into the neglected shop, moving furtively between the shafts of sunlight that pierced the gloom, that it occurred to him to wonder why, ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione Granger was running. And why, in a world with magic, *real* magic, she should be seeking the counsel of a Muggle Tarot reader.

Accio! The flash of light was brownish, a trickle rather than a stream of magic. The object from the shelf behind her struggled to obey, finally soaring into his outstretched hand.

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Accio!

The object soared from his hand to hers, and the last thing she remembered before losing consciousness was its searing heat when it touched her skin.

Her head was pounding worse than it had the morning after being hexed in the Department of Mysteries, and her skin tingled as if there was a current running underneath. Something rough scratched her cheek, and for a split second, she couldn't remember where she'd seen that familiar water splotch on the wood floor below.

She gritted her teeth and turned her head just a little bit, and...

One glance at the grim set of his jaw framed by twin swathes of black hair brought it back to her in a rush.

...Last night... the couch... but this morning... breakfast and then... what...?

The fabric of the sofa they'd slept on together rubbed against her skin. Last night, she must have been pillowed *on him* instead. But he wasn't there now for her to lean her head against. He was on the...

"What are you doing on the *floor*, Snape?" Her voice was as rough as the cushions.

"I'm doing," he hissed, "what I had believed, however foolishly, relegated to the annals of history." He snorted at her quizzical look. "What I spent hundreds, no...thousands of hours doing during your tenure at Hogwarts, Granger."

Now she was really confused. "Sitting?" she murmured. Now that she thought about it, she could hardly remember him just *sitting*... He had been known to loom, of course, but usually he paced, or stalked or...

"Watching over *you*." She almost didn't hear him because he'd dropped his voice and the words sneaked out like a secret.

"Oh." *Oh*.

"Thank you." Her whispered thanks wafted between them, and she reached her hand to rest on his arm, breathing a sigh of relief at the contact.

He must have felt it too, as his colour improved a notch, though he still refused to meet her eyes.

A penchant for sulking did make one more vulnerable to observation, she realised as she eyed him, lost in thought. She supposed that *had* done an awful lot of watching during her six years at Hogwarts and a great deal more after she and the boys had gone on the run. It hadn't occurred to her until now that the looming and swooping had served any purpose other than to intimidate, but she added this to the pile of notions about Snape she'd have to revise.

Whatever he was thinking about had him scowling at something, and she resisted the urge to stroke his brow and tuck the strands of hair obscuring his face back behind his ears. But the furrow between his eyes had never invited sympathy, and she knew better than to venture there now. *Be pragmatic, Hermione.*

"What happened?"

His eyes sparked with irritation, but at least he was *back*. His eyes were on her again, expression so familiar that she had to struggle to suppress a smirk.

"You Summoned an item that you should never have touched." He set his lips in a firm line. Angry with her as if she'd ventured into the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts Library without a pass.

All because of that object. That small, innocuous-looking object.

"But, you'd *just* Summoned it yourself. *You* touched it and it was fine. I *assumed* it was safe," she stammered. "I didn't think about it. And besides," she said hotly, "I haven't successfully Summoned an object twice in a row for more than a year. I had no way to know that a spell that had been behaving so erratically for me would have spontaneously *repaired* itself."

"You didn't *think* about it at all, Granger. Some things...clearly...never change," he snapped. "I left you alone for five minutes, and you managed to blow up the hearth and then nearly..."

It was fear, she realised in a flash. Not anger. Fear.

"I'm okay," she interrupted, and she slipped her hand down his arm until she found his hand. It was cold. And shaking even more than her own.

"Through sheer luck. As always," he muttered. *With some grief thrown in for good measure.*

"Luck that you were here," she agreed.

"Yes."

"Well maybe," she said softly, "it's a sign that our luck is changing."

Only the tremor that rippled through him told her that he'd heard her at all.

~**~

The expression on her face when the deck had touched her skin would, with his luck, haunt his dreams.

Assuming he ever slept again.

It was enough that her touch relieved the ache he'd forgotten resided between his shoulder blades. But ~~to~~ care about her welfare beyond its influence on his own was startling, but as honest as his own self-interest.

The memory played over and over again as if it stuck in a loop. Pain rushing across her face as the cards seared her skin, and the instant when he could see from the look in her eyes that she thought she would die from the surge of power running through her.

The same moment he'd thought so, too.

When she collapsed, he'd prepared himself to find no pulse, no sign of life. She was already so fragile, balanced on a tightrope, the slightest gust of wind enough to send her plummeting...

He was grateful that she was unconscious so she couldn't see him sob into his hands when he'd felt the flutter of her heart beneath paper-thin skin.

The anger came on the heels of the terror.

Stupid, stupid... insufferable girl! Where had her survival instincts gone? She should know that no matter how innocuous an item appeared, you could never ~~ever~~ assume. Never assume that you are safe until you've verified it three different ways. And even then...

She stirred on the couch, where he'd carried her once he regained control.

Once she woke, ignorant of what she'd nearly done, he held on to his anger with both hands and walked her through the tale. Until she grasped one of those hands and spoke of luck.

And left him...again, with hope.

Damn her.

~**~

"What was it?" She'd dozed off for a moment and opened her eyes to find him pretending not to be watching her. If he preferred to stay on the floor like a crouching guardian angel, who was she to argue?

"What was what?"

"Stop being coy, Snape." She was already feeling better, but she hadn't the energy for pretend sparring.

He sat, wrapping his silence around himself for so long that she thought he might refuse to answer her at all.

"My mother's Ogham deck," he muttered at last.

"Her what?"

"What's this?" He came alive again, mocking her. "The know-it-all consulted an *Oracle*..." He paused to roll his eyes. "... without first establishing a nauseating expertise with all things *Divine*?"

"You'll recall that my Divination education was sorely lacking. To say the least," she muttered. "And I researched Tarot, not whatever *those* are supposed to do."

"Hmm." He regarded her a long moment from beneath his long lashes. "Ogham cards are an ancient Druidic form of Divination," he said, as if this were a more than sufficient explanation for why a benign-looking deck of cards should have burned and stunned her on contact.

"Why did touching them hurt me, Snape? Do you have other booby-traps in this house that I should know about?" She knew that she was being unreasonably tetchy, but the throbbing in her head hadn't stopped, and she was miffed that he persisted in blaming her.

"Did Trelawney neglect to teach you that divination cards are unreasonably protective of their yielders?" He raised an eyebrow, and she couldn't help but laugh...unsure which was funnier: the idea of a deck of cards protecting Snape, or the suggestion that Trelawney might have taught her anything at all.

Wait. Yielders?

"You mean to say that you... Erm." She looked at the deck on the table behind him and raised an eyebrow.

"My mother was of Celtic... well, Druidic ancestry. Her mother and her mother before her were schooled in the art of reading fortunes. Specifically Ogham sticks and cards." He stopped there, daring her with the rigid set of his shoulders to mock him for his ancestors' proclivities.

"Do you *read* them, then?" Hoping she kept the incredulity she felt out of her voice. Trying not to imagine Snape in place of the Muggle card reader, vibrant images rising beneath his hands. Her eyes lingered on his hands, imagined them labouring over the symbols etched in ink and bringing them to life.

"I can." His voice startled her, and he paused until he had her full attention again. "I have."

"For yourself, or..."

"Yes, myself. And I am, of course, capable of reading for another."

Her heart began to pound, unreasonably, really, considering that she'd just had her cards read...Tarot, but still. It didn't really follow that she'd be this stirred up at the thought of another reading.

But a reading from Snape?

That would be something else entirely.

~**~

The cards were old, worn at the edges so that they lay comfortably in the palm of his hand. He supposed that his great-great grandmother must have used Ogham sticks rather than cards, but somewhere down the line an ancestress must have experimented with cards instead, wrapped them in a square of silk, and that was that.

His mother used to read the cards regularly, obsessively when things got bad with his father. It was as if she sought the answer to her troubles in the symbols inscribed

there, though she made it clear over and over to him as he'd watch her that this wasn't *real* divination. Which was a good thing, she'd add, because she didn't truck with that rubbish.

This was something different. Something better.

This was like having a mirror that gave you a sort of map to *youguts*, she'd say, and to the path you'd been on until now. It was a mirror that would, if you coaxed the cards *just so*, also show you a map of the roads you might yet take. Or more likely, if you were a Snape or a Prince, if you glared and grumbled until they showed you what you wanted to see.

It was, she would say, a magic mirror with a hundred thousand facets, all of them showing you truth.

His mother hadn't lived to read his cards during those last months at Hogwarts before he had to decide once and for all whether or not to take the mark.

Not that it mattered. He knew what they would show, and he wasn't sure that he was prepared to look any one of those hundred thousand truths in the eye.

He didn't have a deck of his own, though he'd already done readings with his mother's cards even before entering Hogwarts. But there were no Divination lessons during his years there, and everybody said that only odd witches and wizards trucked in such things. So he never mentioned what he knew of card reading and fortune telling; he felt like enough of a freak, already, thank you very much.

Years passed, and he didn't give the cards a moment's thought until the night after his mother's funeral seventh year while he lay alone in his narrow bed, chasing sleep. Lack of rest and grief were playing tricks on him, he thought. Tossing and turning on his childhood bed, he was sure those battered cards were calling him, luring him to the front room as if to keep an appointment made long before he was born. He had no sisters. He supposed the Ogham would take the next best thing.

It was odd to think of himself that way. Next in line. Inheritor of a legacy he only partly understood.

He wondered if there was some innate talent that got passed down along with the cards.

He'd gone downstairs that night and taken the legacy that he'd never asked for and tucked it away behind the fate he had chosen. It had been years since he'd touched them, decades since he'd thought about them despite their prominent position on his shelves.

The deck was warm in his hand, and he wondered if he were imagining it quivering with excitement at the prospect of being utilised again.

"What do I need to do?" Her whisper roused him, and he realised with a lurch in his stomach that he didn't know.

"I've never done a reading like... like the one I intend to do," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Typically, a querent comes to a reader with a specific question or dilemma," he began. "And while readings are holistic by nature, they are still meant to address that sort of well-defined question." He paused, waiting for the questions to burst from her and send him off track. But she kept her silence, just listening to him with an occasional nod or thoughtful look.

"I'm not interested in doing a reading like that," he continued, satisfied that she wouldn't interrupt him. "I would prefer to do a reading of our overall situation rather than one for you and one for me and one where I take a wild guess about the fate of the others." He hesitated. "But this is uncharted magic. I don't know precisely what question to ask. I don't know if having just two of us here will give us *enough*...or anything, really."

He hated to admit it, but honesty was all they had and he was too tired to dissemble. "I want to do a reading that will draw us a map of what has gone on up until now, show us where we are today, and tell us how in Merlin's name to *resolve* this." He hesitated. "If we *can* resolve this."

"Can it be done?" Her voice was eager, and he bristled at the raw hope there.

"It's *magic* Granger. In theory, *anything* can be done."

On a wing and a prayer.

~**~

She joined him on the floor, the scarred and pitted surface an oddly fitting host to tired bodies and battered hopes. A thin square of blue fabric lay between them. Silk, probably, and still creased from the folds it had held for decades. The cards sat on the fabric arranged in a grid face down. Waiting.

He, too, seemed to have reverted to a long-held pose, his face masklike, immobile, eyes looking somewhere distant. Despite the touch of his hand on hers, he seemed so far away, and she shivered.

She closed her eyes and willed herself to remember the liquid sound of his voice in the dark, the warmth of his hands against her skin, the way his heartbeat lulled her to sleep.

Fear, not anger. Fear.

When he finally began to speak, she had to concentrate to hear the words beneath the brittle edge of his instructions.

"I will be casting three separate spreads as part of one larger reading. Five cards each time, each card's position meaningful to our dilemma." He looked up shortly and she nodded. "Then each of the five positions in the circles will be grouped with its corresponding cards in each circle and read in sets of three." She nodded. "We begin with the first spread, for history and the state of the current dilemma."

"Similar to Tarot, then?"

"Similar," his voice was tight.

"Were you the querent and I the reader, I would have you lay out the cards and choose them from a random array." She nodded again, looking at the grid already laid out on the slip of fabric on the floor. "Instead, I believe we should both exert an influence on them," his voice caught.

"Whatever you want me...whatever you want us to do, I will do it, Severus," she said.

"We must use our magic. Together. I believe that in order for this to be meaningful, we must link our magic together and direct the spell itself to choose the cards on our behalf." Her stomach lurched at the thought of spell casting, and especially at the prospect of joining her erratic, potentially dangerous magic with his.

"Why can't we just pick them by hand like I did with the Muggle reader?" Her heart was pounding, and she felt a buzzing in her ears. "I don't want to..."

"While I can appreciate your reluctance to join your magic with mine, I would prefer some cooperation..."

The edge of his voice cut through the fog. He was doing it again. Twisting her words, or at least her intent, to some old agenda.

"You do persist in assuming that it's *you* who are the most tainted, the most broken," she snapped. "While you may have been He Who... been Voldemort's lackey and Dumbledore's whipping boy, I'd venture to guess that you no longer hold the top spot on the list of most wounded by the experience."

His lip curled, and for a moment she wondered if he would strike out at her. Instead, he met her gaze squarely and held it until she thought the silence stretched taut between them might snap. And then he held out his hand.

An offering.

An invitation.

She slipped her hand into his, trying to distract herself from the thrum of awareness his touch stirred in her and focus on her magic and his, intertwining.

His felt like water. A steady flow, choppy, but unafraid of the parched, cracked earth that had once been fertile soil at the foundation of her soul.

And she was so thirsty.

It was only once the flow of magic between them...his to her, quenching; hers to him, supplying, she hoped, something he needed...that she remembered the cards on the ground in front of them.

He must have felt it, too, because he reached out his other hand for her to grasp so that their arms formed a canopy over the cards. His whispered incantation *Rector Nos*, shed sepia-coloured light that spread like ink over the array and then, with a whoosh, sank into the cards. She envied them as they drank in the magic.

Snape's hands started to tremble as soon as the energy began to flow from them. She was contributing what she could, but he knew what he needed the cards to do; all she could offer was her meagre power and her heartfelt wish for some help.

Oh.

"*Rector Nos*," she whispered. And Snape let out a long breath of air just as the colour of the spell shifted from sepia to indigo. He released his hold on her hands as the first card moved from where it lay to hover above the array. The border of parchment melted away, leaving only the image suspended in front of them.

A Rowan tree rose into the air, roots burrowing into the translucent ground beneath. Hermione shivered...there was danger radiating around the image, or maybe from behind it. Not from the tree itself. No, the tree felt like a safe place to hide; its long, luxurious branches provided cover and shelter.

It was the unmistakable *need* to hide emanating from the image that left her with a knot in her stomach. The swirling mists behind the rowan both contained and obscured the danger, reminding Hermione of how hard it had been to distinguish friend from foe in this protracted battle *after* the battle they had so optimistically called, 'final'.

"Terra," he murmured. "Our foundational card."

"Danger." Her voice caught in her throat.

"Yes, an enchantment that has put us in danger."

Hermione shuddered. It didn't matter that she already *knew*. It didn't matter that she'd spent years trying to convince her fellow survivors that it was *true*, that damage was still being done; still, it was chilling to see the Horcrux poison in symbolic form floating before her eyes.

"It's like mist," she said. "No wonder I couldn't..." Tears choked her.

"Varied, mutating, and eternal," he murmured, gazing at the card, the thickening mists a barrier between them and the shelter of the tree.

"You tried to tell us," she said and he tilted his head quizzically.

"In class, teaching Defence, you tried to tell us," she repeated. "Harry got so angry that you spoke about Dark magic with such reverence, but even then, I..." She shut her mouth firmly. Better late than never. Perhaps.

"Even then what, Granger?" His voice was dangerous and a thrill ran through her. He wouldn't hurt her now, would he? Not for the reactions of what amounted to a child in his care? Pushing memories of his treatment of Harry firmly from her mind, she spoke.

"Even then I was entranced," she said. "Not by Dark magic, precisely, but at the idea of being so enthralled by something, so *seduced*, that you forget all reason." He looked intent but not murderous, so she continued. "There's something about that intensity that makes you want to get closer, you see."

He looked for all she could tell as if he didn't see at all.

"To be swept away," she said. "Have you never wished..." But now the look on his face was bordering on murderous, and she stopped.

"Such experiences rarely measure up to their promise, Granger," he said, and she wondered whether anything other than Dark magic and the lies it promised had ever seduced him. "And as such," he continued, "it is imperative that we remain focused."

"How?" It wasn't as if she were a disorganised student, after all.

"Just so," he said. "*Ignis*," A second card rose to hover below the first. "With the help of this, our focus."

A Beech tree. Ancient. Regal.

"So old," she said as the tree sidled up to the Rowan but was swallowed by the mist each time it got too close.

"Yes," he agreed. "You mentioned that you'd been to every major library over the last ten years in search of answers." She nodded. "It's hardly surprising to see that we both tend to rely overmuch on ancient knowledge to guide us." He paused. "It is unclear whether, in this instance, we will find any help there."

"Like the Tarot reader said."

"Precisely."

Still, the solid trunk and hardy branches of the beech tree were so tempting. She wanted to climb into the branches and examine the markings time left in the wood. Snape, too, seemed lost in thought, brow wrinkled.

"There may yet be something ancient that we will ultimately need," he said after long moments of silence. "I might know more as more cards are read." He looked down again at the array.

"Yes," she agreed, and she knew he would leave the beech for now no matter how the comfort of the old wood beckoned.

"Aeris," he said. "The Ogham's view of what has been spoken until now."

This time the card that rose contained not a tree image, but slender reeds, gathered together like a broom. And indeed, as it settled into position alongside the two prior images, the broom began to spin in a wide arc, scuttling unseen contaminants with zeal.

"What does that mean?" Hermione asked.

"I believe," he said with a smirk, "it refers to the clearing of the air and the sweeping away of negativity...the discussions that you and I have had over the last twenty-four hours to that end." He gestured to the industrious movement of the broom. "And undoubtedly to our search for healing as well," he added more quietly.

But before Hermione could ask another question, he continued.

"There are no surprises here. Now we merely have an illustrated guide to our activities. What is happening beneath the surface, however, has yet to be revealed."

He reached for her hand again as if this aspect of the circle required additional energy from them both and dropped the whispered word onto the array.

"Aqua." He paused. "Now we shall see."

"Now we shall see what?"

Instead of answering, his eyes followed the path of the card as it moved parallel to the still spinning besom.

Heather.

Hermione gasped.

Like a scene observed through a veil of water, two shadowed forms lay cushioned on a bed of heather. It wasn't the overt passion between the two that made Hermione blush, but the almost painful tenderness. She could see it as he ran his lips along the line of her neck, drawing a shiver from her, and in the reverent way she traced the contour of his mouth with her fingertip, coaxing another kiss.

One look at Snape's face and she knew he felt it too.

"What... does that? What do they...?" She swallowed thickly.

"Dreams, Granger." His voice was rough. "That which lies beneath."

"I don't understand," she breathed.

"It is our joint longing," he said, and she could hear the tremor he was trying to hide. "A symbol of the ultimate healing journey. Redemption. Complete acceptance. Consummate love." He huffed. "Fantasy and hogwash. Nothing more than dreams and archaic symbols."

"Is it?" she asked. "Just a dream? Or does its appearance here mean something more... I mean, for us..." She stumbled and willed the blush she knew was staining her cheeks to go away. "What I mean to say is, does it *direct* us in some way?"

He was shaking his head, absorbed in the couple in front of him as if they might speak if only he waited long enough. She was torn between watching them too and drinking in the sight of him, engrossed in thought, his expression almost unguarded. But the choice was made for her; she couldn't tear her eyes away from him for even a moment. He couldn't seem to turn away from the pair on the bed of heather, the naked longing on his face almost too much to bear. For him, too, she thought, for after another moment he turned away.

"It's too soon to say." His voice was soft and its edge was ragged. *Ethereos!*

And the final card rose to join its four companions.

Honeysuckle. Wild like her hair, tendrils twisting everywhere. Touching the edges of the other images, revealing the underlying thread binding them to one another.

He snorted.

"What? What is it?"

"This is the binding card. The one that holds the other four together, links them. It's telling us to get focused and get to work." He smirked. "It reminds us that there is no lack of distractions." He pointed to each of the images in turn. "The fear generated by the danger we've each been in, preoccupation with finding the solution via research, and puerile fantasies of happily ever after..."

"And fighting with one another. Mustn't forget that," she interrupted, hurt at his dismissal of the potential for love to help any situation.

He sniffed and waved his hand at the hovering images. "Serves only to distract from the core issues."

"Doesn't honeysuckle signify finding the truth amidst obfuscation?" she asked. Somewhere in her reading, she was sure she'd seen that.

"Like I said, distractions everywhere," he insisted.

Yes, she thought. Especially those two figures bathed in light, neither seeming the least bit concerned about whether they were distracting at all.

Author's notes: Beta thanks to JunoMagic and Annie Talbot for their invaluable input.

Also. The Ogham spread described beginning in this chapter is authentic (as is the Tarot one alluded to in earlier chapters and which will be revealed in more detail later in the story.) Questions were posed, cards were thrown and interpreted on behalf of Severus and Hermione and the five other witches and wizards still suffering as a result of their exposure to (and destruction of) the Horcruxes. I did not stack the deck. Honest.

Chapter 7: Face to Face

Chapter 7 of 22

It was only after Snape followed her into the neglected shop, moving furtively between the shafts of sunlight that pierced the gloom, that it occurred to him to wonder why, ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione Granger was running. And why, in a world with magic, *real* magic, she should be seeking the counsel of a Muggle Tarot reader.

"Doesn't honeysuckle signify finding the truth amidst obfuscation?" she asked. Somewhere in her reading, she was sure she'd seen that.

"Like I said, distractions everywhere," he insisted.

Yes, she thought. Especially those two figures bathed in light, neither seeming the least bit concerned about whether they were distracting at all.

The cards lay at rest again on the floor, the images imprinted on the air above them.

"Do you need a rest?" he asked. "Or are you ready to proceed?"

"What gave it away?" she asked, risking a half smile. "My drooping eyelids or the sickly pallor?"

He snorted. "The stream of questions slowing to a trickle was a hint," he said. "And to be fair, my energy is waning as well."

Fair. That was a surprise, but from his appearance, baldly true. He looked drawn and pale and just slightly translucent, like the images he'd all but Conjured. They both could use a break. Even accustomed as she was to her stamina flagging easily, the magical endurance required to augment his Ogham reading was daunting. She could only imagine what it took out of him.

"Can we stop in the midst of the reading, or do we have to see it through to the end?"

He paused, examining the cards on the floor and the images imprinted on thin air.

"We've completed the first circle. We could not have interrupted that process, but—" He hesitated again. "—I believe that we can break here and resume when we're rested."

"Good," she said. "I'd prefer to be fully alert for when we continue."

"Indeed," he agreed.

She looked around the room. The morning sun had gone, and afternoon light flooded the room. Her stomach growled, and she blushed.

"Time to eat," Severus said.

"Are you hungry?" she asked, uncomfortable with his solicitousness.

"I am," he said.

But the thought of staying inside felt suddenly suffocating, and Hermione had a thought, a terrible, frightening thought.

"Let's go out," she said.

"Out?" he echoed. "Where, precisely, do you suggest we go?"

"Anywhere," she said, just as she realised that she meant it. Anywhere. Out. Just out *there*. Not hiding, not running. Despite the danger she'd been living with, was still facing—she glanced at the Rowan and the menacing swirl of mist around it—she felt safer than she had in years. She was tired of ducking between shadows. She wanted to get a drink, she wanted to walk outside and see the sun. She wanted, she realised, to be somewhere magical.

"Somewhere magical," she said, just as it popped into her head. "Hogsmeade."

"Hogsmeade," he said as if it were a bad taste in his mouth. "*Hogsmeade*?"

She laughed. "Yes, Hogsmeade."

"Whatever for?" He looked vaguely horrified.

"I don't know," she said. "I'm just thirsty, I guess."

She didn't know why she felt light, but it had been so long since her limbs and heart had felt anything but leaden. Besides, intellect had clearly failed her. She ought to try following her impulses and see where they took her.

He was, of course, invited to come along.

~*~*~

Hogsmeade village looked nearly the same on first glance as it had during Snape's year as headmaster. Quiet streets were lined with well-kept storefronts, showing the signs of war only around the edges. There wasn't much activity there on a Tuesday afternoon, and it was just as well, he thought. He'd nearly persuaded Granger that strolling into The Three Broomsticks in his company was tantamount to throwing a Blast-Ended Skrewt into the Great Hall. Nearly.

"What do you plan to do about the fact that I'm *dead*?" he'd said when she kept on about still having good memories of The Three Broomsticks and their Butterbeer despite the handful of sour evenings she'd spent there with Ron after the war.

"It may have escaped your notice," she replied, "that you're not *actually* dead."

"For all intents and purposes I am. And have every intention to keep it that way."

"Forever?"

"Indefinitely."

"So you don't want anything to get better, then? You're just doing this—" She'd gestured to the cards. "—What? For *entertainment*?"

He bristled. "I never said I didn't want things to improve. I simply pointed out that as a wizard presumed dead for eleven years, it would be the ultimate hubris to simply stroll into the Three Broomsticks and order a Firewhisky."

"Butterbeer.

"You can order whatever disgusting beverage you like, Granger. I'm getting myself Firewhisky. I need it."

As it turned out, it didn't matter. Neither of them had considered that the most likely place to encounter other witches and wizards was on the street *outside*. So when they literally ploughed into Ginny Potter on the sidewalk in front of Scrivenshaft's Quill shop, it would have been impossible to say which of them was more shocked.

~**~

The Hog's Head had not, in the years since the war, ceased to provide nooks and crannies and shadows into which a witch or wizard could slip when the bright light of day burned the soul.

The corner booth was a particularly good spot, and Hermione was grateful that Snape hadn't said a word when she'd turned her back, eyes blind with tears, on Ginny and the section of Hogsmeade that catered to *cheerful* witches. Not that Ginny was cheerful, she thought resentfully. Just... acceptable.

"What are *you* doing here?" Ginny had asked, as if the sidewalk belonged only to members of the magical community who passed muster. Not to her.

"Getting something to drink," she'd muttered, just as the auburn haired witch did a double-take and gasped at the sight of Snape at her side, his hand resting at the nape of Hermione's neck, steadying her after their Apparition and just—steadying her.

"With... with *that*... *him*? Who *is* that?" she screeched. "Looks like Snape, but Snape is *dead*, so who is *that*?"

"The tales of my death have been wildly exaggerated," he drawled, and Hermione was grateful for his composure. She supposed that twenty years of spying must count for something when confronting the unexpected. Before she realised it, he'd shifted position so that his body was *between* hers and Ginny's.

If body language were magic, his would be a *Protego*.

"It just figures that if anybody were to be keeping company with a wizard better off dead, it would be *you*." She ran her eyes up and down slowly, lingering on the long-fingered hand resting on the nape of her neck.

"You disgusting—" Her heart was pounding, and she could hardly think for the rushing noise in her head. "*This* wizard saved all of us—even your precious *Harry*, and we left him for *dead*. And I found him completely by chance—*alive*, and all you can do is—"

"Let it go, Granger," he said in a tone she'd never heard him use, even with Harry. Words directed at her; warning aimed squarely at Ginny.

She didn't remember walking away, only that she was sure she could feel Ginny's eyes at her back, recrimination and disgust crawling over her like rot that nothing could ever eradicate.

It had been months since she'd seen any of them, any of the others who were suffering the effects of the Horcruxes. Not since that night when hurt and rage had flung Ron through the plate glass front window at the Burrow, impaling him on shards that would have shredded him had Harry not interceded with a spell that wrapped Ron in a blanket of air and cushioned him from the glass. Interceded with a spell that kept Ron safe from the poison that had rooted itself in so deeply that she couldn't distinguish it from her *self* anymore.

*Hell. How can I trust my instincts when my instincts did **that**?*

She shivered, and he slipped his hand under her tunic, stroking the skin at the curve of her back. Nobody else was in the pub, but she still scooted closer to him, his body still shielding her from whatever hostility might find her. He was lost in thought, their lunch eaten and his Firewhisky—the second one—sitting untouched on the table in front of him. Without a word, she slipped her arm beneath his cloak and laid her head on his chest.

He tightened his arms around her and, with a final glance at the Galleons he'd left on the table, squeezed them through the magical tunnels of space that were safe for the walking wounded, back home.

~**~

Home.

It hadn't ever felt like much of a home. Not when he lived there as a child and never during the years when vermin and sycophants could come and go as they pleased. Years alone hadn't made it feel more welcoming, but it was like anything well-worn and familiar—without a compelling reason to turn it in, it would do.

The outing had been a bad idea, he thought. As soon as she'd suggested it, he knew there was no good to come from it, but there was no swaying her. He'd grown used to hiding. Hell, in all honesty, he'd been hiding for the majority of his adult life. But for her, for a woman whose identity was rooted in *showing* others what she knew, what she could do, who she was, hiding chafed at her, and he wished that the outside didn't hurt her so much.

He was accustomed to hostile glares and the death wishes aimed at him by passersby. Being putatively dead had, he realised, given him a buffer against such things. Barely, but more than the ragged defences she wore.

"That wasn't the Ginevra Weasley that I remember," he said, interrupting the silence. Her body shuddered with what might have been a sob, and he just held her closer.

The couch, for all its scratchiness, had shown itself a satisfactory location for the sort of contact that kept them both away from the ragged edge of the ever-present ache. She was curled into his body, arms wrapped around him, and a long leg clad only in the loose skirt he'd pulled from his mother's closet draped over his.

He'd had to forcibly stop himself from looking back at the translucent couple reclining on their bed of heather and was grateful that the cards did not come accompanied by sound effects. It had been hard enough not to slip his hand beneath the thin skirt and run his hand along the skin behind her knee, tracing it up, up, up to the delicate skin between her thighs. Her sighs from the movement of his hand along the line of her back, and a noise that sounded suspiciously like a purr when he slipped his hands under her shirt to touch the hot skin there, had his heart racing enough already.

"Are you tired?" he asked. The weight of the day was wearing on him, and the sun had long gone, leaving pale moonlight streaming through the window.

"I am." Her voice was tentative, and she lifted her head to glance at the couch that had been their bed the night before.

"I don't know if I can handle another night on the couch," he said and, before she could slip out of his arms, continued. "There is a bed upstairs – a bed that might comfortably accommodate both of us." He paused only briefly. "Of course, if you prefer, I can put a mattress on the floor for myself, and when one of us needs to, we can —"

"No, please," she interrupted. "The bed sounds wonderful." She brought her lips to his cheek. "Thank you."

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He could do this; he could lay in bed with her, and it would be fine. It would. The hunger rising in him was just that – hunger from deprivation and the erosion of the barrier that he'd habitually worn since adolescence. He could do this. He owed it to her, would provide a good night's sleep for her if for no other reason than her heated defence of him on the street in front of Scrivenshaft's.

The hunger would have to wait.

~**~

Hermione didn't stop to wonder how it was that Snape still had his mother's old clothing, but she was grateful that he had simply directed her to the cabinet where she could find a thin nightdress and left her to change. Even the moments apart that were necessary to attend to basic bodily functions left her sweaty and tired, and it was only the knowledge that he also benefited from her touch that kept her from feeling completely humiliated each time she slipped back into his embrace.

But this would be different.

This would be lying next to him, no bulky cloaks to hide the heat rising inside her at his every touch. This would be letting go, falling into sleep, and hoping that she didn't ravish him in her dreams.

He was already under the covers when she came back from the loo, her nightshirt a thin slip of cotton surprisingly soft against her skin. She climbed into bed, pulling the quilt over her and clutching the pillow closest to him. He was lying on his back and looked, for all she could see, extremely uncomfortable.

"If you'd rather I slept on the floor, I will," she stammered. "This is your bed, and I don't want to deprive you of your sleep." He didn't turn to look at her. "If me being here, sharing the bed, means that you won't sleep, I don't want—"

But he wasn't lying on his back anymore; he was over her and his mouth was hot and—

Oh, Merlin. Thank you.

She was struggling with his nightshirt, wanted it off, had to get rid of the fabric that lay between her and his skin. Ah, off. He groaned as her lips followed the path of her hands down his chest, to his flat belly, but then strong hands grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her back up.

Her face was flushed, she knew, and not just with embarrassment at trying to ravish him even while awake. But he was flushed, too, and he just looked at her for the longest time before lowering his mouth to taste hers again.

Slowly, so slowly. He drew her nightgown up over her head and cried out as he traced a pattern down her chest.

Three strokes across and a long stroke down.

Three strokes across and a long, sensuous stroke down.

And what sounded like an incantation.

"*OoRah*," he whispered. Three long strokes across and, "*OoRah*," before he drew his tongue from her sternum to her navel.

She didn't know what it meant, but it didn't matter because it was true. "*OoRah*," she echoed.

And in the dark, book-lined room downstairs, the translucent image of two figures reclining against the heather grew solid for a moment as the reed broom took one final circuit and came to rest alongside the beech tree that sheltered it.

~**~

A/N: Beta thanks, as always, to the divine Annie Talbot.

Chapter 8: What Lies Beneath

Chapter 8 of 22

It was only after Snape followed her into the neglected shop, moving furtively between the shafts of sunlight that pierced the gloom, that it occurred to him to wonder why, ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione Granger was running.

And why, in a world with magic, *real* magic, she should be seeking the counsel of a Muggle Tarot reader.

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And in the dark, book-lined room downstairs, the translucent image of two figures reclining against the heather grew solid for a moment as the reed broom took one final circuit and came to rest alongside the beech tree that sheltered it.

Night's echo sang in her blood even hours after they woke, limbs tangled together, the scent of his skin a balm to her bruised soul. Silence cradled them there in the cool morning air more surely than words. She knew this in her bones and kept her peace.

There were no words for what had passed between them. No words to follow the waves of raw sensation wrapped in the certainty that there was something right about being here with him that reached far beyond relief at his touch and surcease for her loneliness.

She lay like a rag doll, spent from the force of her need and the release that the press of his body on her...in her...wrought. Her skin tingled, still remembering the play of his fingertips along the planes of her body, drawing out her desire and deepening it...deepening it until she thought she would scream from the wanting.

Every time she reached for him, he'd move her hands or mouth away from skin that she could feel crying for her touch. He'd murmur, "Not now," and distract her with his clever tongue and nimble hands until her keening cries shook them both.

Only when the moon had set and darkness cloaked the room did he finally join with her, slipping into her body silently, moving with the urgency of a prisoner's reprieve until his body shuddered its release and he cried out, bringing her with him so that she dissolved into tears against his still shaking body. He held her there with him for what seemed like hours but must have only been moments held still in time. Held her while the silence of the room pressed against her as she emptied herself of toxins built of fear and brokenness carried for a decade...or longer.

She didn't speak of it, but she couldn't have stopped if she'd tried. He didn't recoil or push her from him, and so she accepted the shelter of his body and his steady breathing and the unrelenting beating of his heart beneath her as she bathed him in tears too long withheld.

And they slept.

~**~

He woke with the sensation of velvet and heat against his body, and a nest of hair in his face.

Ah, Granger.

Oh, Granger.

Oh, Merlin.

The way she clung to him in sleep, he could hardly believe that she had sobbed in his arms after...

After.

After hours tracing the angles and grooves of her body, inscribing the taste and texture of her skin into memory. He knew the need drove her as it drove him, but the closer they got, the fewer barriers stood between them, the stronger the feeling that he was meant to be there, his hands and his mouth and his self in synchrony with hers.

So long as she didn't touch him with those curious hands and push him beyond his limits.

He couldn't...wouldn't let her see the force of his need. But with her first touch, fingertips tracing swirls on his skin, he knew. There was no way he could hide from her if she touched him, and if he let her kiss... let her whisper tender words and send soft breath and lips where...Oh, Merlin. No. No, no, no.

So he did what he knew how to do.

He poured himself into her from behind translucent shields until it was safe to join her on the other side. With the darkness cloaking him, he came to her at last and knew that she was too far beyond reason to hear the hope cloaked in the cries of a man too long denied.

*

Morning's light was kind and they dressed in silence, side by side. The night wound like a thread of glass around them, between them...too fragile to withstand even the whisper of words on its delicate surface.

And so they moved side by side from the bedroom to the kitchen, unspoken understanding keeping them a hand's reach apart, and shared breakfast in tranquil companionship. He found himself deeply grateful that she didn't fill the quiet with chatter.

Soon enough, they made their way into the front room, the translucent images from the day before hovering right where they'd left them. He had a moment when he was sure they'd been watching, but shook the thought from his head. If anything, the cards had been waiting for them to return...suspended in time, a map of the past awaiting continuation and resolution.

"Do you feel up to doing the next bit?" he asked. His voice was rough, and he realised that he'd not spoken in more than monosyllables since they'd woken.

"I do," she said. "Do you?"

He nodded. "I feel well enough."

Flustered at the blush that rose to stain her cheeks, he turned to the cards stacked on the side table and busied himself with laying them in their array on the silk. Looking up at the imprint of the first circle, he motioned with his hand and, translucent figures still in gentle motion, wafted it to the side as if on a current of air, making room for the new cards.

"Next, we will cast the circle that illuminates the current dilemma," he began. He would approach this clinically. There was no reason for this knot in his stomach. The cards would show them what they needed to know as if they were an enchanted mirror, and he would simply interpret them with the sharp eye that had served him well when approaching any integrative form of magic. "This will illuminate the balance of factors necessary to tackle the problem."

"The present, yes," she echoed. But her eyes still lingered on the circle from yesterday, the rowan's branches hanging low, the reed resting in its shade, and the lovers oblivious to the swirl of menacing spirits behind them. How he wished he could feel such safety.

He shook himself again. Concentrate, Snape.

She was sitting, waiting, hands folded and he knew she had forgotten what they needed to do. The moment he lifted his hands, her expression changed and her cheeks again grew pink, but she lifted her hands and threaded her fingers with his.

The rush of wellbeing that ran through him when their skin touched made him stop to catch his breath.

Concentrate, Snape.

"Rector Nos," he murmured, and he vaguely heard her voice right behind, echoing him like harmony to his melody. Sepia light turned indigo flooded the cards for the second time and sank beneath their surface. His hands lingered, reluctant to release hers, and then...

"Terra." The first card rose to its position in the air.

"Ivy," she whispered.

And it was. Not a lone sprig, but a garden of ivy, tendrils climbing, squeezing between the cracks in the walls it scaled.

Ivy.

Virtually indestructible and ruthless in its quest to move forward.

Searching.

"Oh," she breathed.

"Tenacious," he observed. "We will need tenacity, to be sure." He felt a sharp stab of regret, remembering the fierce persistence with which she'd habitually approached tasks while she had been his student. Trauma and untended grief had worn that edge dull, and he wished he knew how to put the spark back in her eyes.

"Yes," she agreed, and the wistfulness in her voice said she remembered, too. "Mustn't give up," she murmured.

Startled, he paused. "No, I suppose not." He held her there with him for a long moment, and it felt almost as if she had touched his bare skin. And then she smiled. A small smile, but it nearly reached her eyes.

"What's next?" she asked, and he saw a glint of the steely determination that he remembered.

"Ignis," he said, in response. And the second card rose to join its brother.

"Blackthorne."

Thorny, insistent, blackthorne.

"There is no choice here, none at all," he spoke as if to himself, and the bleakness in his voice surprised him. The task felt so daunting; that must be it. And they had no option but to face this, to take it apart piece by piece in order to...hopefully...put it back together.

"There is always a choice," she said. He wondered if she were referring to herself.

When had he ever been free?

"No," he murmured. "Not always."

She was quiet but he could see from the stiff set of her shoulders that she was holding herself back from arguing with him.

"Just look," he said, gesturing to the image's imprint. It was suddenly important that she understand what he saw there. "There is enormous conflict there." He eyed her. "Division, disagreement, but alongside it the strong hand of fate that we must obey."

"The choice is in how to go about it," she said. "If there is a difficult path to walk, you decide how to walk it. Whether to get dragged by the scruff of your neck or..."

"Thank you, Granger," he interrupted, feeling unaccountably defensive, "for the lecture on attitude in the face of adversity." She flinched. "I have had more than enough experience facing myself in the mirror every day and hating what I see; far more experience than you choosing a path that others find abhorrent but which is the only one that has the potential to bring a victory."

"If you feel so trapped, then I should just leave..." Her voice sounded choked, and panic rose to flood him.

"I never said I felt trapped, just that I am once again facing...devastation and by all indications..." he waved his hand towards the card, "...I am fated to battle it and the poison fuelling it."

"I know the feeling," she murmured. "I do."

For the first time that morning, he looked at her. Really looked.

Her face was less lined than it had been the previous day, but the dark circles under her eyes and the slightly grey colour of her skin showed how far she had to go to regain her vitality. Despite her proud carriage, her eyes held all the grief of a woman thrust into a war too soon. The hand of fate had pushed her into a society torn about the fact of her existence and into making a choice that no child should have to make. That world had nearly torn her to pieces, and yet, she had survived, only to die by inches from the echoes of a poison they had already nearly given their lives to eradicate.

"I know you do," he said finally. "I see that you do." Wordlessly, he reached for her hand and threaded his fingers with hers.

He pretended not to notice the tears that sprang to her eyes.

~**~

His hand in hers drove back the darkness that had arrived with the appearance of the blackthorne. Spiny and painful and twisting into places no sharp things should go, the image lingered even when she closed her eyes.

"What's next?" she whispered, afraid to ask but determined. Like the ivy, she thought.

She was grateful that he didn't dislodge her hand from his, only spoke to raise the third card. She was even more thankful that she already had his hand in hers when she saw it rising.

"Aeris."

She felt it before she saw it.

Heather.

It wasn't anonymous shadowed figures, moving within the boundaries of the card, but mirror images of themselves.

She didn't know who moved first, but all at once, her body was flush against his...strong and safe and sure.

"Oh!" She looked to him, eyes wide. Sensations from the night before...his lips, his voice, the taste of his skin...swept through her, an echo and a mirror and a beacon, and all she could think was, Yes.

Yes to holding on to each other despite the obstacles. Yes to pushing forward together and not alone. Yes to nights overflowing with loving whispers and to days filled with light.

They sat with their arms around each other until the rush of possibilities settled like a pond of clear water. His sigh felt like a river washing through her, and she shivered just as he lowered his mouth to hers. Tentative for an instant and then like being plunged into the ocean, his kiss enveloped her. Deeper, deeper she dove and brought him with her, hands burrowing beneath layers of fabric to find hot skin and pounding heart.

And as if Conjured by waves of hope revealed and need unmasked, up rose The Sea.

At first, she thought the rushing noise was coming from inside of her. But when she raised her head for a moment's breath, she saw it. And then, so did he.

Unbidden, the thought came to her, That one is mine.

As if he were in her thoughts, he said, "You."

And all at once it felt so simple.

"It's me." She gazed at the undulating water, rapt. "What does it mean?"

"It means..." His voice was rough. "The heart, the soul... the essence of the self."

"How is that me?"

He shook his head, speechless for a moment.

"You... you are the heart..." he said haltingly, "...of whatever it is that we are meant to do." He held her tight through the waves of her hope and fear and uncertainty. "I don't know how... I just..." He gestured to the cards but his eyes were on her. "I just know."

"Show me," she whispered and his only response was to bow his head until he'd buried his face in her hair. He might have whispered something that sounded like, "Not alone." But she couldn't hear him. It didn't matter, though. His actions said far more than any words.

"Not alone," she echoed. And in the centre of the circle, a doorway opened.

Oblivious to everything but one another, they didn't see it rise to join its companions. Engrossed in eliciting gasps and sighs from one another, they didn't see its branches reach out to embrace the other cards, nor the way all the figures relaxed in its shade.

Oak.

The sea foamed beneath the translucent figures reclining on the bed of heather, and the sounds of the waves crashing were counterpoint to the soft swish of fabric as clothing of flesh and blood lovers slipped away. Ivy wound itself around the trees, avoiding blackthorne's burrs and strengthening its hold on the strong tree beneath.

When night fell, only the melody of the sea and the harmony of the treasure hidden in its depths were there to meet it.

A/N: Endless thanks to Annie Talbot for putting up with four million drafts and buckets full of wibbling, and for her incisive eye and full heart. Thanks also to Ariadne who channeled Dr. Jung for me (with me?) and whose insightful eye help me see. We all have JunoMagic to thank that what would have been two chapters are now four, and are far deeper and more nuanced than they might have been.

A reminder that the Ogham spread is a genuine one, cast by me on behalf of Severus, Hermione and the others suffering post Horcrux-exposure. I can't explain why it works. Ask Jung.

Chapter 9: Speak

Chapter 9 of 22

It was only after Snape followed her into the neglected shop, moving furtively between the shafts of sunlight that pierced the gloom, that it occurred to him to wonder why, ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione Granger was running.

And why, in a world with magic, *real* magic, she should be seeking the counsel of a Muggle Tarot reader.

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"Must we do the last bit?" she murmured, sated and sleepy, lying more on him than on the hard wood floor. His fingers wound absently around tangled curls, and she sank into the luxury of half-sleep and hazy thinking.

"Hmmm?"

"Wasn't there a third part?" She ran her tongue over stubble-roughened skin, goose flesh erupting at his appreciative moan. "Severus? Can we skip it?" She looked over at the transparent images still hovering on the other side of the room. The two spheres looked like glowing nimbuses, encircling truths no longer hidden and needs no longer denied. What could the third sphere possibly add?

"No, we can't *skip* it," he huffed, though she noticed he made no effort to move from where he lay. There was something vaguely reassuring about his insistence that they had to complete the reading juxtaposed with the lazy path his hand took down her back, along the curve of her bum and to the tender skin of her thighs, lingering there. It was as if they might burst the bubble around *this*, whatever *this* was...other than patently necessary...if they resumed the reading and saw the future that beckoned.

"Well, is clothing optional, then?" She really didn't want to lose the heat of his body and sheen of his skin against hers, and the clothes she'd worn earlier weren't really in any shape to put on again without some repair. Besides, she thought that she might actually die if she had to put back the layers between them. If she did, he might never let her so close again.

"No, not optional," he murmured as he traced maddening circles across her skin. "In fact, they are strictly forbidden."

It took her a moment to digest what he'd said, but the relieved smile that lit his face when she burst out laughing went further than any words of reassurance to settle the butterflies in her belly.

~**~

After the tumult of the first two circles, the almost ethereal nature of the last one felt like a whoosh of air rather than rocks tumbling into their path.

Yew, Rowan, Hazel and Beech hung before them. Rebirth and protection, intuition and knowledge more ancient than even libraries could catalogue. All of it part of the knot to untangle, and yet her eyes were fixed on the centre image. He couldn't blame her, really.

It was the Vine that held her. Vine, whose tendrils snaked out and around; Vine, whose grip linked the four symbols surrounding it until it seemed to him as if they were really one integrated image.

"Vine?" Her voice was quiet.

"Vine. Signifying divine inspiration and success. Triumph in work completed..." He paused. "And ecstasy." Indeed.

"Ah." His chest warmed at the fierce blush that stained her cheeks and the way she smiled, as if to herself, like she was secreting a precious object she wanted to savour.

Precious. Him?

Them?

He caught her eye, her shy smile growing larger until she was fairly bursting with it.

"Triumph," she said softly. "Triumph by way of ecstasy?"

Now his cheeks were red and he fumbled. "We must consider all of the cards, Hermione," he said. "But I think that this combination of cards indicates that we will ultimately succeed if we permit ourselves to take this path."

"There's a path?"

"Of a sort. However, we are in uncharted territory..."

"What sort of uncharted territory?"

"The sort where intellect is set aside for intuition and emotion," he said.

"Oh. The terrifying sort, then."

He couldn't help himself. He laughed.

~**~

They sat together in the current of his laughter. Absurdity and certainty had collided, and what was left, inexplicably, shone.

The three rings of symbols hovered where they'd left them, each its own universe of truth, bound to each other and to those whose fate they described.

The story they told still had soft edges. If it were a book, she thought, the words would be melting off the page, untethered to their ultimate truth. Instead, the future...indeed, even the present...felt mutable. Like they could feel their way through it and nudge it here or there and in doing so, transform it.

Catalytic power. That's what the vine signified; she could feel it surging through her veins and wondered if he felt it, too.

She knew about vine. It was her first wand's wood, after all.

Of *course* she'd looked up the composition of her wand when it chose her right before her twelfth birthday, so long ago. Learning everything she could about every magical object that crossed her path was a mission and a passion, especially in the early days after Professor McGonagall came to her home with a letter from paradise.

Catalytic.

Transformative.

Wasn't that her role alongside Harry and Ron?

Rarely the initiator, but still essential to the movement of the three of them, to their ultimate *success*. It had taken years to appreciate the value of that job, especially when Ron implied that she craved *more*.

He shifted position and she looked up.

"One more task and we will be finished," he said as if they hadn't been staring in the face of an inchoate task for the last twenty minutes.

"All right," she agreed.

He waved his hand, and the circles broke apart. She gasped, but they were just shuffling position. From three circles of five, they moved into five sets of three.

"First," he gestured, "foundational cards. Terra. Earth."

"Yes." She followed his gesture with her eyes. Three cards: Rowan, Ivy, and Yew.

"Would you like to attempt an interpretation?" he asked.

Surprised, she nodded. Of course.

"Foundational symbols," she began. "Rowan for the danger and protection from it; Ivy for tenacity; Yew for rebirth." She snorted. "I suppose it's clear that the danger is real, that we mustn't lose our determination to succeed, and," she paused, "that success means renewal."

"Survival," he murmured.

"Life," she added. *Love?*

She wrapped her arms around herself and leaned into the cradle of his body as she continued.

"The second set represents the focus?" she asked.

He nodded. "Ignis."

"Beech, for the old knowledge that is necessary, but which we need not get too caught up in." She looked to him quizzically, and he inclined his head in agreement.

"Blackthorn for the difficult path that we have no choice but to walk. And Rowan again for protection?"

"I think so," he answered. "And for the enchantment that has caused all the damage."

"It will be difficult," she murmured. "Frightening." Panic swam around the edges of her vision but found no purchase this time. "Have to remember the Rowan," she said.

"Shelter," he said. "Yes. To succeed in such a quest, there must be a home base of sorts."

"Home," she echoed. She hadn't had a home since...well, since long before she threw Ron through a plate glass window with the magical force of her rage. She'd known even then that home was much less a place than...

A tear splashed on the long-fingered hand she'd been clutching. He didn't say a word, only turned her face to his and drank her sorrow until she could bear it again.

~**~

Her sorrow filled him and found its mate in his own weeping soul.

Odd how light he felt when her tears finally dried, and she'd whispered her hope between his lips.

Speak.

Aeris.

Reed, and heather and hazel, as if to emphasise that the woman with whom he'd shared more intimacy in the last twenty-four hours than he had with anyone in twenty years was to be...was...the organising principal of his existence. No logic or argument could contradict it, and nothing could negate the reality.

He rather thought he had better things to do than to try.

~**~

"Is there more?" she asked, feeling almost steady again.

"Aeris and Aqua seem closely linked," he said, and she wondered why he looked so uneasy.

"They are?" She stirred and looked to the clusters, curious.

"See." He gestured with his hand, and the images shifted position just slightly, but enough to appear to tell a story. Their story.

"Oh!" she gasped and leaned in to see the figures more closely. "It's like some ancient illuminated text."

"Showing us."

"I like what it's showing us," she said and winced that she'd said it out loud.

"As do I." He'd said it low enough that she thought he might deny it if pressed.

"Please tell it to me," she begged. "I want you to tell me." She thought for a moment he might refuse, but as if a cloak had slipped off his back, he began to speak.

"It is us, our longing," he said, and she thought of the movement of his body, the sweep of his tongue, the eager grasp of his hands. Longing. Wanting. Wishing for endless nights like the one just past, and more...wanting to touch and taste him as he had her, wanting to share; wishing he would and pour himself into her like a vessel.

"The pathway is built on a deep partnership...an abiding love." He stopped as if needing to digest that for himself. "It also alludes to the need to be conscious..." He winced. "It alludes to a requirement that we be conscious of ourselves... inside. You understand?" He looked vaguely nauseous at the prospect and she could hardly fault him for it.

"We have to be conscious of *ourselves*? Internally?" Wasn't it enough that she had to deal with hostility from her former friends and the insidious venom of the Horcrux?

"It's unclear to me, but I believe that there is some link between the mechanism of the Horcrux poison and some vague, internal state," he said.

"Oh."

"The sea confirms this," he added. "The depths of the water..."

"The soul. The heart. The self," she whispered. Hadn't she often felt like the toxins were eating away at everything that made her *herself*?

"Yes," he murmured absently. He looked lost in thought or perhaps feeling.

"What about the Beech," she asked. "Old knowledge in the sea?"

Old knowledge. The Sea. Heather. Oh.

The panic was rising in her again. Maybe they were wrong. Maybe the poison had burned too deep and too long for any hope of repair. Love, passionate or not, seemed such an outlandish cure for an illness they had yet to properly define.

This was ridiculous. Either the cards would tell them what to do, or they wouldn't. Time to finish this.

"The last set?" she asked.

"The Etheric link... that which joins them all."

"Honeysuckle, Oak and Vine."

Intuition lighting the labyrinthine path to the self, bringing them ultimately out of the shadows.

Wasn't Oak the tree most struck by lightning? Oh, Merlin.

She couldn't speak.

What was there, really, to say?

~**~

They sat like that, just looking at the images patiently floating in their clusters, as if the shadowy shapes hadn't been as disruptive as any assault, as confusing as the most

tangled quest Dumbledore had ever set.

She looked so tired, he thought. Worn to the bone and on the edge of hopeless.

He was worn, too, and he realised with a start that they'd drifted away from one another during the last part of the reading. Without a word, he reached for her, and she looked up at him with tears in her eyes.

"I don't know how to do this," she said. "I can't."

"You can," he said, unsure where his confidence came from.

"If it were a set task, I would *do* it. I would!" she insisted. "If I knew what I had to do, I would do whatever it took. For myself, for them..." She looked at him with wary eyes. "For you."

He grasped her hand more tightly and tugged to bring her closer.

"I know you would," he murmured.

"I can't do it when I don't know what it is, and it means that everything will just get worse and worse, and I don't think I can stand it."

He'd pulled her close and she was shivering. What was it about her vulnerability that made him want to shield her from harm...to ward off the evil spirits poised to strike? More accustomed to the contempt he'd forever felt for those who were weak, the rush of protectiveness he felt around her was inexplicable.

"Stop that," he murmured, his tone softer than his words. He had no comfort to offer, only admonitions not to slip into the despair that he, himself, knew so well.

"The only thing I *want* to do is..."

But he shooed away her fears with the sweep of hot lips and the sounds of wanting and welcomed their echo in return.

Want. He knew what she would say, because he felt it too. Wishing they could just stay here, hidden from the world but open to each other. They'd each had enough of the pain that comes from trying to share the truths other people refuse to see.

That was the worst part, he realised. That they *had* to do it. Had no choice but to step outside and go back to exactly what they'd escaped. No, not escaped. He had to be honest. They'd each fled. Different times, for different reasons. But they were both refugees, and it was time now, the cards insisted. It was time to open the door again and let in the light. The time had come to walk back across thresholds they'd each believed would never be darkened again by their shadows.

"We have to talk to them," he murmured, reclining again against cushions that one of them had pulled from the couch. The sun had set, and twilight shadows softened the ragged edges of the room.

"I don't want to."

"Neither do I." Since when did that matter?

"They hate me." She paused. "They might actually hate you less than they hate me. They think you're dead."

For the first time in eleven years, Snape realised that he was grateful that he wasn't.

"Arthur was always very reasonable."

"Recall that I nearly killed his son on a bed of glass shards."

"Right." He could barely imagine Arthur Weasley unreasonable, even after seeing his son injured by Hermione's rage. And yet, he'd seen...he'd felt...what Nagini's bite left in the blood.

"Neville probably wouldn't hex me on sight."

"Oh, glorious."

She laughed. "He'll be sure he's seen a ghost," she added.

"Longbottom, then?"

"Yes," she said. "But Severus?"

"Hmmm?"

"What will we tell him? We don't even really know what's wrong, and we haven't got the faintest idea how to fix it. Why don't we just stay here for a while and look through your library..."

He shushed her and shook his head.

"No, Hermione. We go. No more hiding."

"And tell him what? 'Oh, look, Neville, look who I found? Your favourite professor isn't dead after all.' And then what? After we've roused him from a dead faint, that is."

"So nice to see you regaining a sense of humour," he said. "No. I don't know." He paused. "We tell him that there's some reason for hope." He pushed a curl from her forehead. "That's more than either of us had yesterday."

She sighed and laid her head more firmly on his chest. "Hope?"

"Hope." It would have to be enough for now.

Silvery light from the cards grew gold in the fading sunlight, and he felt the stiff muscles of her neck relax. "Hope."

A/N: Beta thanks to Annie Talbot, and to Ariadne and Juno who continue to guide and inspire.

Yes, this spread is real. These are the cards that fell. I solemnly swear.

Chapter 10: Seedlings

Chapter 10 of 22

It was only after Snape followed her into the neglected shop, moving furtively between the shafts of sunlight that pierced the gloom, that it occurred to him to wonder why, ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione Granger was running. And why, in a world with magic, *real* magic, she should be seeking the counsel of a Muggle Tarot reader.

"Longbottom, then?"

"Yes," she said. "But Severus?"

"Hmmm?"

"What will we tell him? We don't even really know what's wrong, and we haven't got the faintest idea how to fix it. Why don't we just stay here for a while and look through your library..." He shushed her and shook his head.

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They lingered in bed long past dawn. Exhausted, they'd slept deeply until dreams grabbed him around the neck, just as they had all those nights he'd spent in the shadow of an uncertain future long ago. He hadn't meant to wake her, didn't know he had until she wrapped her soft body around his, chasing the darkness away with her touch and a whispered melody of sound.

Grateful she hadn't asked what filled his dreams, he realised he didn't know himself. Though familiar, their texture was different from the usual haunting nightmares. It was enough that the age-old dread still found him on tendrils of mist and shadow and that she possessed the magic that could burn it away. In its place had risen the most astonishing feeling, crowding his chest with warmth and an inexplicable desire to strip himself bare before her...body and soul. So instead, under cover of night, he hid behind the heat of their bodies and the power of his clever fingers and mouth to draw her to the edge of reason. And catapult her...*them*...over its precipice and beyond.

**

"I'm done hiding," she'd said to the question he didn't ask, as they lay curled together, tucked under the covers long after the sun had begun its journey across the sky. All he could muster was a raised eyebrow; she'd woken him from a second deep sleep with ravenous lips and tongue, and an insistent *presence* that swept him away until his hoarse cries of desire and completion drowned hers. "For that matter, you've got no good reason to hide, either."

Her arms had snaked around his waist as she rested her head against his bare chest. Possessive and bossy all at once, it was as if the gesture itself eradicated the need for further discussion. It was fortunate, he thought, since the play of her body against his robbed him of the capacity for coherent speech.

It was afternoon before they ventured out.

If he'd been less preoccupied...and occupied...before setting out for Hogwarts, he might not have been surprised at what happened later. But after a decade's avoidance of the wizarding world, the first time he'd been anywhere near Hogsmeade was his trip to the Hog's Head with Hermione. So, it had been years since he'd seen the rickety building that had haunted him since his school days. It never occurred to him to consider how he might feel that overcast afternoon, winding their way through the wizarding town on their way to Hogwarts castle. As it happened, only a transient clenching in his throat and a lurch in his stomach as they passed the Shack marked it as anything more than ordinary.

So when the sight of Hogwarts castle rising like a valkyrie from the craggy rocks sent him reeling...the Darkness slipping under his skin to burn his blood and flooding him with the echoes of traumas neglected for a lifetime...he was not even the slightest bit prepared.

It made a depressing sort of sense, he thought later, after Hermione had slipped her hands beneath his robes, wrapped her arms around him and crooned nonsense into his ear until he'd stopped shaking and the thunderstorm that had appeared along with the flooding pain had abated. The Shrieking Shack might have been witness to act after act of terror and betrayal, but he'd never once entered that building expecting anything better. At least there had never been any artifice there, no effort to pretend that those walls held anything other than horrors.

Even a decade after Dumbledore's death and Voldemort's defeat, the recurring nightmare that still threw him into wakefulness in a cold sweat was of himself wandering, endlessly lost, Hogwarts' corridors transformed into a treacherous maze, its age-darkened stones absorbing his terror and isolation like pools of black ice.

He would gladly watch the Shrieking Shack burn to the ground without lifting wand or hand to help, but the epicentre of both home and hell had been...since the age of 11...Hogwarts castle.

He had never thought he'd pass through its gates again, especially not alongside a woman who had, over the course of a handful of days, led him to peer out from behind the armour he had worn for a lifetime.

For today, at least, he'd need every bit of it.

~*~*~

She might not have recognised him if he hadn't been precisely where Professor McGonagall had said they would find him...working alongside Greenhouse five, just beyond the end of the rocky path she and the boys had clambered down three times a week for six years.

It wasn't that she'd forgotten how he looked; she'd seen him frequently enough over the years that the changes in his physique didn't surprise her. But the Neville she used to know handled his plants with a devotion bordering on slavish. The Neville who had crowed with pleasure at the offer to apprentice with Professor Sprout treated each plant...magical or not...with a tender reverence, as if he were the blessed recipient of its secrets through the rustle of leaves or the aroma of blossoms in the air.

The man attacking a vine of Japanese honeysuckle with something that looked awfully like a machete didn't resemble *that* Neville Longbottom one bit.

"He seems a bit... angrier than the last time I saw him," Snape muttered.

"That's saying something," Hermione said, "considering the resistance he mounted against you as headmaster."

Snape nodded, his eyes fixed on the smooth movement of the blade as it swung in its wide arc, over and over again. "He seemed almost satisfied that year, actually," Snape said. "Grim, but rather pleased with himself, overall." He gestured to the scene below. "That isn't the stance of a wizard fighting the good fight. *That* is a man with an axe to grind."

Indeed.

So when Neville finally drove his blade into the roots of the vine, whose trailing leaves seemed to grow rather than diminish with each attempt to cut them, and paused long enough to look up at the witch and wizard lingering at the bottom of the rocky staircase as if he'd known they'd been there all along, Hermione thought she'd pass out from the force of her heart pounding in her throat.

When he did nothing more than fix them both with a cold stare before picking up his machete to resume his assault on the honeysuckle vine, she froze, shivering in the indeterminate space between laughter and tears.

~**~

"Sit," he said, relieved that she obeyed him without question. The ice in the boy's eyes had shocked him despite the fact that there'd never been any reason for Longbottom to look at *him* with any sort of warmth. Hermione, though...Longbottom had been her friend. She'd been a good friend to him, as well, he recalled. So much so that she'd regularly risked detention and the Potions master's wrath helping the boy with his lab work.

Severus knew how it felt to have a once-friendly face turn cold. Knew the agonizing loss of camaraderie and trust its absence wrought.

"When was the last time you saw him?" He sat alongside her, letting his hand rest on the small of her back.

"Maybe a year ago. Year and a half," she said. "Not long before..." Her voice caught. "Before Ron. You know." His soft murmur must have been enough to show that he did. "He and Hannah had been having trouble. Afterwards, she told me that his explosions had been getting progressively worse, but he flat out refused to do anything about them."

"I never knew Longbottom to have explosions of any kind. His potions, however..."

"It's not funny, Severus. Hannah said that the outbursts were almost a relief from his withdrawal." They both looked at the wizard who continued to ignore their presence with a force nearly as frightening as the edge of the blade he swung.

"Did you tell him your suspicions?"

"I thought Harry had, but I found out later that he'd never said a word. He'd been shouting at me that night. That was unusual, actually. Usually Ron did the shouting. Said all my theorizing upset people for no good reason, and he wasn't going to do that to Neville, especially not when he and Hannah were having so much trouble."

"So, it's likely he has no idea what has been happening to him these past ten years."

She looked startled.

"I suppose not." She paused to think. "The last time I saw him, he was irritable, getting angry at small things. I was so worn out from arguing with Ron...with all of them, actually. I just assumed Neville was dismissing it just like the others had."

"Maybe not," he said.

"Look at you, assuming the best of *Neville Longbottom*."

"If you think that's astonishing," he said, moving to stand, "watch."

He didn't look back as he made his way down the last few yards to the bottom of the incline. Didn't turn to glance at her as he stood, arms folded, just outside the arc of the machete. Instead, his eyes bored into Longbottom's back until the next swing of the blade left it embedded in the pliant earth.

"Longbottom." He'd stopped himself...only just...from filling the word with authority long since relinquished. For a long moment, he thought the boy...no, the wizard swinging that knife, the wizard whose rage fuelled its velocity, was a grown man...would continue to ignore him. Only when his breathing slowed and he lifted his hand from where it rested on the hilt of the knife did Severus realise he'd been braced for the younger man to use it as a weapon.

"Snape." He didn't sound like the Neville Longbottom he remembered, either. His voice was deeper, and there wasn't a hint of a waver there. Even in the midst of his deepest defiance, Longbottom had always been just the slightest bit afraid. Now, the weathered look of his skin suggested that he spent a good deal of time outside, but the bags beneath his eyes belied the good health that sunshine and exercise promised.

"You don't seem surprised to see me."

"The headmistress sent her Patronus ahead to warn me."

"Warn you?" Admittedly, McGonagall had been visibly shocked when he'd followed Hermione into the head's office for their appointed meeting...though he couldn't say whether she'd been more stunned to see him alive or to see him in Hermione's obviously welcome company. The meeting had, he thought, gone well, all things considered.

"She knows I don't take well to surprises these days."

And that's when he saw it. Seeping from under sweat-slicked skin, Shadow wrapped itself like a veil around the younger man, its muddy sheen an illusory shield.

"I'm not here to harm you, boy," Severus said, and his stomach clenched at the glint of hatred that flashed in Longbottom's eyes. "Though I take it you'd not pass up the opportunity to swing that blade in my direction."

"Why shouldn't I, Snape?" he snarled. "You show up here...risen from the *dead*...without a by your leave. Then again, I never did have the chance to thank you for your stellar performance as headmaster."

"I'm gratified you realise it was *all performance*, Longbottom." His voice carried a whisper of its old command, and he winced. "My best wasn't much."

"No, it wasn't."

Snape nodded. It was no more than he deserved, this condemnation. He'd failed the boy and all the others like him whose blood status meant they'd had no cause to run, but whose loyalties made it too dangerous to stay. That razor's edge left cuts that refused to heal.

Silence brimming with malevolence wafted through the air like ash from a fire out of control...choking him and setting his thoughts racing. It had been a mistake to come out here. He had no right, not to speak to this wizard about loyalty and joining with his compatriots to rally against a common enemy...no matter the enemy was eating them all alive from within. How had he let that woman persuade him? It was pure insanity, and if he had a shred of sense, he'd...

"You have it, too?" Longbottom's panicked voice roused him, but it was Hermione's hand stroking his brow that bought him a pocket of air.

"It's not just us, Neville," she said. She sounded far away from him, and weary, he thought. "I thought you knew, that Harry told you. I'm so sorry." Her voice broke, and Snape lifted his head to meet her eyes lest the Dark take her again, too.

"Of course nobody told me. Nobody *ever* told me anything. I had to wait for you lot to be away before..." He stopped short, taking rapid breaths. "What is it, then?" Longbottom sounded almost like the young man he remembered. "Am I going *mad*? Hermione... who else...?"

Snape took a long breath and turned to the boy. The boy had dropped to a crouch, hands trembling like butterflies in front of his face.

"None of us is going mad, Longbottom," he said. "We're suffering the effects of Horcrux exposure."

"Exposure? *What*?" There it was, the face of the child whose cauldrons inevitably exploded, no matter how hard he tried, the boy who long ago had learned that he would be betrayed by the natural magical laws that inexplicably worked for everybody *except* for him.

"Neville, could we go sit down somewhere? Please?" Hermione asked. "I can't..." Snape wrapped his arm around her just as her knees buckled.

"The office in Greenhouse ten, Longbottom," Snape said. "Now."

It was a testament to the power of old reflexes coupled with desperation, Snape thought, that Longbottom stumbled to his feet and led the way without another word.

~**~

How ironic, Hermione thought, that all the time she'd spent battering her friends with her worries didn't prepare her for the heartbreak when one of them actually *listened*.

She'd imagined it couldn't feel any worse than it had when there'd been nowhere to go, nobody to tell her that the Darkness flowing beneath her skin like poison was real, was not her *fault*, was not hers to bear alone. Watching Neville's face as she put words to the waking nightmare she knew he'd been living, she knew she'd barely scratched the surface of pain.

"None of them believed you?" he asked.

"No, and they only got angrier when I pushed."

Neville snickered. "Well, Harry and Ron had plenty of practice ignoring you when it was convenient for them. Can't imagine this was much different."

Hermione ignored Severus' smirk.

"It *is* different this time. It's not just Harry and Ron. Ginny is worse than both of them, actually. Angrier. Meaner."

"And Mr Weasley?" Neville asked.

"He's not angry, exactly," Hermione said. "He's got a short temper, but mostly he's just become so *odd*." Severus raised an eyebrow. "Okay, more odd. He used to get as wound up as the twins when something excited him." She paused. "By the time I... left, he was spending nearly all his time in that shed filled with Muggle spark plugs and other junk. Molly refused to discuss it, and everyone kept acting like nothing strange was going on. But he's on the verge of getting sacked because he's so preoccupied, and everybody avoids him unless they have no choice. He *did* notice when I put Ron through their front window, though." She sighed. "Really, they should thank me. It was the first time I'd seen him act normally in months."

Severus snorted, and Neville looked so surprised...at the warmth of a man not known for his humour, and quite possibly at the fact that under cover of the tabletop, he had his fingers laced with hers...that Hermione mustered a smile.

"Go ahead and ask, Neville. You're obviously dying to." Neville blushed a deep red. Was this the same man who had been doing mortal damage to a climbing vine of rare magical Japanese honeysuckle only an hour ago?

"Am I limited to just one question?"

Severus made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a snort of laughter, though his austere expression gave nothing away. "Mr Longbottom," he said, "I would consider it poetic justice if you would ask numerous questions. In fact, as a favour to *me*, ask as many as you possibly can."

Neville looked from Hermione to Snape and back again, shook his head and leaned back in his chair. "The world *has* gone mad, hasn't it?"

Hermione looked at Snape and down at their clasped hands. She closed her eyes and felt the edges of the lurking Darkness kept at bay only by the force of a connection she still didn't understand. Memories of the last few days welled up in her, and she smiled in a way both men would certainly recognize, but didn't care. *I'm done hiding*.

"Completely mad," she agreed.

Neville nodded. "You and Snape?"

"Not as mad as it might first appear, actually." She glanced at Severus and squeezed his hand, pretending not to notice the way his shoulders relaxed at her reassurance. "He found me, Neville. I don't know how, but I was falling apart. Fast."

"You look okay," he said. "I admit, you seem a bit worn and all, but not like...well..."

"Not like the deranged woman you heard about from the Weasleys and Potters?"

"Right." He looked pained. "Not like her."

"Miss Granger has been suffering...each of us who had intimate contact with a Horcrux has been suffering," Severus said.

"You keep using that word... Hor...?"

"Horcrux," Hermione interjected. "An object that was used to house a piece of Voldemort's torn-up soul."

If it were possible to look even more flummoxed whilst simultaneously being horrified, Neville accomplished it. His eyes lost their focus, and the unhealthy flush returned to his cheeks. "An object that did *what?*"

Before Hermione could do anything about the knot of panic in her stomach, Snape leaned forward.

"When I encouraged you to ask questions, Mr Longbottom," Snape drawled, "I had hoped that time would have honed your intellect sufficiently that they would be comprised of more than incredulous facial expressions and the word, '*What?*'" Hermione flinched, but the steady pressure of his hand in hers stilled her. "You are, I believe, capable of incisive thought and discerning questioning." He caught Neville's eyes and held him fast. "Use them."

Before her eyes, she saw what she'd been unable to observe in herself, or even in Severus. It was as if invisible hands choking him had released him, oxygen flowing again. Neville's cheeks lost their shiny, flushed sheen, and his eyes grew clear and focused. He breathed...in and out as if he'd needed reminding how it was done and gazed at his hands lying on the table in front of him. With each breath, they grew less unsteady. With each passing moment and several dumbfounded glances at Severus...whose respectful, expectant expression hadn't wavered...it seemed to her as if Neville's soul began to once again fully inhabit his body.

That man, the wizard who had, as a young man, stood up to a cadre of Death Eaters and who had fearlessly beheaded the familiar of the most evil wizard alive, finally sat before them.

"Good to see you back, Mr Longbottom," Severus said.

"How did you...?"

"Soon," Severus said. "First, the other questions you need to ask."

Hermione held her breath as the two men sat, eye to eye.

"You've told me what happened to you and the others." Neville paused. "And to me." He took a long breath. "You've explained the common element linking all of us." Snape nodded. "What's missing is *how*. What is the seed? What makes it grow? And what can we use to eradicate it?"

~***~

"Excellent, Mr Longbottom," Snape said. "Question the source. Well done." It had been a hunch...meeting the boy head-on like that, reaching for his competence...and it had paid off. "However, in order to discern the source, I believe that we need to approach this in reverse order. Rather like disassembly of a poisonous potion into its component parts." Longbottom blanched. Snape narrowed his eyes. He'd forgotten. "You did not take Advanced Potions with Professor Slughorn, Longbottom, is that correct?"

"That's right," Longbottom answered. "You'll have to depend on Hermione for help with that approach."

"Incorrect, Longbottom," Snape said. "You will merely use the model you are most familiar with to accomplish the same goals." The younger wizard's forehead wrinkled for a moment and then relaxed. Good.

"Well," he said slowly. "A diseased plant presents the same challenges, I suppose. If a plant isn't thriving, my job is to discover the pathogen and then the environmental factors that will support recovery."

Snape nodded. "Indeed. Now then, as information is far preferable to ignorance, let us compare notes, shall we?"

"Compare what notes, though? I have no information for you."

"Of course you do, Neville," Hermione interrupted. "Your symptoms, and how they developed...when they started, when they are worst...all of that might tell us something we don't know yet." She paused as if unsure how to continue. "And we have our own histories to share as well. Plus..." She hesitated again, her glance at Snape the cue he needed.

"What Miss Granger is trying to articulate, Mr Longbottom, is that we...she and I...have made some progress regarding the mechanisms of symptom relief."

"What?"

"He means that we've stumbled on some things that make both of us feel better, Neville," Hermione said. "I don't think the same things will be effective for each one of us...what works between me and Severus didn't work with Ron..." She stopped short, waiting as her former classmate swallowed hard at the image that she imagined must have come to mind. Then she soldiered on, ignoring the wide-eyed look Longbottom was giving her. "It also seems as if something Severus did earlier helped you. Severus, do you know what it was you did?"

"I do," he said, watching for Longbottom's breathing to steady again, but the boy's eyes were slightly glazed. "Mr Longbottom, you are not required to imagine what, *precisely*, Miss Granger is alluding to." He tilted his head for emphasis. "Suffice it to say that between us, the simplest touch..." He brought his hand to stroke the skin of Hermione's cheek. "...pushes back the encroaching Darkness that I, myself, refer to as the Shadow. You may call it what you will."

"Shadow," he whispered, his eyes flickering back and forth between Snape's hand, which now rested on Hermione's arm, and his face. "Feels like it, yes. I never gave it a name. It's just familiar, you know? It felt just like this in school, just not as *big*."

"It did?" Hermione asked, leaning towards him. "I didn't know. Neville, I'm sor..."

"Quit apologising, Hermione," Neville snapped. "It's not about you. I dealt with plenty all on my own, remember? Got teased. Pushed aside. Judged. And not just in school. I'm not looking for pity, but I have plenty of experience dealing with hurt. And fear. It did go away for a short while. The year you were headmaster." He gestured towards Snape. "My purpose was clear, then, and I didn't have time to be lonely. After a while, I was dying for some peace and quiet, actually." He smirked, but it was clear he enjoyed that particular memory. "It was after. After the war and the cleanup. After I started my apprenticeship. The old feelings would come back, but worse. Much worse."

"Which old feelings, precisely, Mr Longbottom?"

"The indecision. The conflict. Wanting to be liked, but hating feeling so desperate. I thought I'd got past all that my seventh year, thought I'd come into my own. I was a *hero*, you know...felt like one, at least. But then it all came back bigger than before, and I don't know why." He shook his head, remembering. "At first, I thought I could control it well enough. Enough that Hannah didn't notice, at least, and then enough that she thought she *understood* me."

"Hannah told me that you became withdrawn and then a few years ago started to get... you know... explosive," Hermione said.

"At the time, it didn't seem like anything serious, some post-war bumps in the road. She sometimes got upset about it, but if she pushed too hard, I'd just get angry..." He drew in a sharp breath as if realising what he'd just described. "Oh. I guess I have more in common with Harry and Ron than I thought." He looked apologetic.

"It's just, I couldn't *think*. Mostly, if I'm working with the plants and the soil, it stays away. But lately, even when I'm working myself to exhaustion, it seeps back in. It feels like... I don't know. It's like oil. Dark and slick. Impossible to grab a hold of." He looked at them both, pleading.

"An apt description, Mr Longbottom. That's precisely how I experience it, as well." Snape looked at Hermione. Her eyes were closed. He shifted his hand so it enveloped hers, and she took a long breath.

"For me, too, Neville. It feels like I can't ever get *clean*. Felt. It felt like that, until a few days ago." Her eyes flew open and she met Snape's eyes. Gratitude and fear shone there, and in that instant he knew. He knew despite the way his stomach clenched that he wouldn't rest until her fear and gratitude had been replaced with nothing more agonising than love.

~**~

Beta kudos to Annie Talbot. :)

Chapter 11: Shatter

Chapter 11 of 22

It was only after Snape followed her into the neglected shop, moving furtively between the shafts of sunlight that pierced the gloom, that it occurred to him to wonder why, ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione Granger was running.

And why, in a world with magic, *real* magic, she should be seeking the counsel of a Muggle Tarot reader.

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The table was cluttered with parchments, each one a mess of lists and charts, timelines, and even the odd doodle.

Vine, and Honeysuckle, and Hawthorne.

Odd which plants Neville sketched in the corners of his pages.

He looked exhausted. White and pasty, as if he'd had all his vital energy drained out of him from the effort of recounting the last ten years. She recognised his pallor from the fleeting glimpses of her own reflection in the dusty windows she always hurried past. It occurred to her that she'd started avoiding the mirror of late, but who could blame her?

"So," Severus said, straightening a pile of parchment, "if we are correct in our recollections, symptoms begin gradually, escalating over time. Those who were exposed later..." he looked at Neville, "have relatively less severe symptoms currently, though it would be expectable that the course of each individual deterioration would ultimately reflect the overall pattern."

"Are we really the only ones who were exposed to those things?" Neville asked.

"We appear to be the only ones *left*," Hermione said. "Dolores Umbridge wore that vile locket for a while, but I'd heard..." She trailed off, a question in her voice.

"She's dead," Neville said. "Big secret, apparently, what happened to her. But there was a big funeral, Ministry shindig, the works." They were silent. Remembering, thinking about the woman who had made each of their lives hell for what had felt like forever.

"I wonder why she's dead and not the rest of us," Hermione said in a soft voice. It wasn't as if she didn't *know* that whatever was wrong was likely to destroy her, destroy all of them. She'd felt Death's cold fingers creep around her heart during the worst episodes and knew that it was a race she was unlikely to win but one she had to attempt.

"She had a head start," said Neville.

"A head start," Hermione echoed. "At what? Darkness?"

"Indeed," said Severus.

They were silent.

"What about Mr Malfoy, then?" Hermione asked. "He had the diary for a long time before he dumped it in Ginny's cauldron. Do you think he might be suffering...?"

"Lucius would never keep a known Dark object closer to him than was strictly necessary," Snape replied. "While he did not, apparently, know precisely what he had in his possession, he was most certainly aware that it was Dark. And dangerous. I doubt that he suffered enough exposure to the object for its effects to have made much impact."

"Not enough exposure that anyone would notice," Neville echoed. "And time doesn't seem to lessen the toxic effect, does it?" he asked.

"It doesn't appear to," said Hermione. She rubbed her eyes and rested her head in her hands. "We don't even know if more extreme symptoms occur as a result of longer exposure or for some other reason. I was exposed to multiple Horcruxes. So were Ron and Harry," she said. "Arthur, you and Severus were all exposed..." She sat up abruptly. "Severus, were you exposed to any other Horcruxes during your time near Voldemort... as far as you know, I mean?"

"I don't believe so," he said. "They were hidden, were they not?"

"Right," she said. "I have no idea whether it makes any difference, but you are the only three who were exposed *only* to the snake."

"Were we also the only ones exposed to the snake at all?" Neville asked.

"No," Hermione said. "Harry was bitten by her at Christmas."

"He was *what*?" Hermione flinched at the look of disgust on Severus' face.

"We went to Godric's Hollow," she said quickly. "Harry wanted to go, he had for the longest time. And then we got there and saw... Well, Nagini had... It's a long story, but she was disguised and managed to trick us...trap us. Harry, mostly. But we got away."

Severus was still staring at her with cold eyes. Why was he so angry? They had obviously survived the experience. "I had Dittany with me, Severus. I took care of him. We were *fine*." She crossed her arms. It was a long time ago. Ancient history.

"You were fine? You were fine," Severus said. But his face was twisted and flushed, and Hermione felt her heartbeat accelerate along with her racing thoughts. "Idiotic children."

"It was ten years ago, Severus. Get over it." She'd spoken without thinking and the moment the words left her mouth, would have done anything at all to take them back. He looked as if she had struck him. She was flustered; he wasn't supposed to get angry like this, not at *her*.

But he had risen from the table, already beyond the reach of her hand, maybe from her voice. "Severus?" Her heart beat in her throat and she couldn't find her breath. "Severus, don't. Please, don't." He was slipping away from her. She'd done it now...made him angry, even though it was about something ridiculous from what might as well have been another lifetime. He was walking away, and she couldn't find him anymore.

It was inevitable, only a matter of time, really. In her most secret heart, she'd hoped it would have taken him longer to realise that, really, there wasn't a thing about her that was worth loving.

In fact, nothing about being with Hermione Granger was anything resembling a Good Idea.

~**~

His head was filled with noise.

The hiss of the snake right before she struck.

The snicker the Dark Lord made when his victims attempted to escape him.

The sound of his own blood rushing from his body, the gurgling of his breath, and the mad beating of his heart as it attempted to keep his failing body alive.

That stupid boy had risked his life, risked *her* life, and nearly lost. He didn't care that it was a decade past, didn't care that she'd obviously survived. All he knew was noise and pain and loss.

The windows of the greenhouse reflected his image against the backdrop of darkness outside. Pacing, head down, searching for something he knew he'd never find. He'd felt peace, hadn't he? Felt the earth beneath him and the air around and not felt as if he would burn away from the inside. When had he felt it? He thought it might not have been long ago, but maybe that had been just a dream.

Someone was crying.

He used to always make them cry, didn't he? That must be his legacy. Bringer of tears. Bringer of pain, bringer of Darkness.

Yes, that was it. Bringer of Darkness. Even Dumbledore had known that. Knew to choose him to deal the mortal blow. Knew that he would sacrifice and could be the sacrifice. He wasn't supposed to have escaped; he should have died on that dirty floor.

He lifted his head and saw his own eyes in the glass. Behind him, a figure stirred. And stood.

And when she caught his eye in their shared reflection, every last pane of glass in Greenhouse ten shattered.

~**~

The wind blew through the greenhouse, disturbing the Job's tears seedlings and causing their nascent shoots to mewl in protest. The glass shards had hung in the air for an age before falling silently to the ground alongside the walls. Not one had flown beyond the perimeter; none had drawn blood. It was as if the glass simply could not tolerate the force of the eyes reflected there and had fled.

He wondered if the two who stood frozen had seen his gaze reflected there, too. They were so engrossed in one another, but this time, rather than pull one another from the Darkness, they'd fed each other's horrors. Like wounded animals, they watched one another for the slightest sign of defeat or attack. Like sickly plants, they struggled to hold themselves erect 'til the end, no matter the cost.

Water, they need water. And light.

"I have that," Neville muttered to himself as he stood.

Neither moved as he approached. Slowly, he picked up a plant from the table behind them, cradling it to his chest as he stepped between them.

"This is the flower I work with on the worst days," he said. "I have all different strains here, but I keep them shielded so that the students don't disturb them."

He wasn't sure if it was his words or the scent of the blooms, but Snape turned to look at him.

"*Nelumbo nucifera*," he said, entranced. He reached his hand as if to stroke its blossom, and the colour began to return to his face.

"Yes," Neville said, relieved. "Lotus." Beautiful. Pure, for all that it grew out of the muddiest earth.

"I shouldn't touch it." He pulled his hand back, and Neville knew he thought himself dirty, unsuitable to touch the light-filled bloom.

"On the contrary, sir. You should. In fact..." He pushed the plant into Snape's arms. "You must."

Snape took a sharp intake of breath as Neville left the plant in its bowl of mud in his grasp. "Oh." He brought his head closer to the blossoms and inhaled their scent. From behind them, Hermione cried out, and silently, Neville reached for her and brought her closer.

"I'll ruin it," she said.

"You won't." Snape's voice was deep and soft, and Hermione whimpered.

"You *can't*. Watch," said Neville. He took a bit of mud from the basin and let it drip onto the wide, white petal. Hermione gasped, but he just shook his head and said, "Wait."

As if in slow motion, the glob of mud congealed as if it were wrapping around itself and then gracefully rolled off the end of the petal back to the damp earth beneath.

"The flower doesn't let it stain it," Hermione said.

"The petal's integrity is unbroken," explained Neville. "And its natural defence mechanism pushes aside the stain."

"Is it magic?" she asked.

"No," said Snape, his eyes bright. "That is what it looks like when an organism is healthy, when it has no cracks in its foundation."

Oh. The three looked at one another, stunned.

The cacophonous sound of them all beginning to speak at once wafted through the smashed windows and into the night.

~**~

Neville's quarters were sparse, as if he'd come for a visit but not to stay. Ten years along, Hermione imagined the rooms might have belonged to anyone. Or no one.

Their trek up the rocky slope to the castle had gone in bits and spurts, the three a motley group with uneven stamina and unreliable steadiness. If there was one predictable characteristic in all the confusion, Hermione thought, it was that just when you thought you'd found your feet, they'd be pushed out from under you again.

She preferred to sit.

And at least Hogwarts had provided a comfortable couch and scattered chairs as a matter of routine for its resident staff. It looked rather like the elves had searched old storage cupboards for castoffs, but it beat the rickety chairs of Greenhouse ten by a long shot.

Tea and scones and the warm fire went a long way towards easing the chill that had crept into her bones. Despite the fact that Severus had resolutely put his arm around her as they climbed the hill, the shadow that had darkened the brightness of the prior days still lingered. It disturbed her just how quickly the certainty and safety she'd felt could be brushed aside as if it were nothing but a wall of fog against a tidal wave.

The colour had barely returned to Severus' face, and he stole furtive glances at her over the rim of his teacup. Perhaps one day she would believe that he was as uncertain as she, and as hopeful. Her stomach twisted. Would there even be a *one day* for them in the future... time to learn each other's moods, to argue without terror and reconcile with tenderness, to play, to love?

She shivered, and Severus moved from the chair opposite to join her on the sofa. Relief and gratitude must have shone from her face; she didn't even try to contain it, didn't want to. His arms were strong and sure, and even through her shuddering sobs, she dimly wondered when their reconciliations might involve something other than her melting into a puddle of tears.

"Why is this so hard?" she whispered.

"Because it matters," he said.

Her only response, to wrap herself more firmly around him, said more than words ever could.

~**~

She'd fallen asleep in his lap, his fingers carded through thick curls, the warmth of her scalp and the weight of her hair like a talisman in the midst of a storm.

Longbottom sat opposite, staring into the fire. Severus was grateful that he felt no need to fill the room with chatter. Maturity, or perhaps Horcrux illness, had apparently inured him to the need to posture, and Severus appreciated his silent presence. The Lotus blossom sat on the table between them like a beacon of light.

"So that's it, then?" Longbottom said.

"Hmm?"

"What's happened to us. We might have found it, right?"

Severus nodded, distracted by the dancing flames in the hearth. Light. Heat. Yes.

"In its most theoretical form. Yes, I believe so." He nodded to the flames. "The fire is useful to us, pleasant to us, only in its controlled form. Left unchecked..."

"It destroys everything it touches."

"Indeed." Severus hesitated. The concepts were still vague, but the force of their resonance, that feeling of *rightness*, propelled him forward. "Anything elemental, that is to say, all powerful forces that are essential to us, have what simpler minds might call a Dark side and a Light side." He lifted an eyebrow and smirked when a flash of tension raced across Longbottom's face. *Must stop that*, he thought. *He is an ally. And, apparently, no longer a dunderhead.*

"A Dark side and a Light side, yes," Neville echoed. "Which is why intention matters so much in spell casting."

"Precisely," Severus said, surprised. An ally, and most definitely no longer a dunderhead. On the whole, he thought, a satisfactory turn of events. "What does not generally get addressed until Master's level study is the question of how the Dark and the Light are bound, and the nature of what occurs when those boundaries are breached."

So much time was spent learning Defence, Severus thought. Necessary time. Essential teaching during wartime. Sacrificed was the *nuanced* understanding of the nature of Light and Dark and their inevitable polarity...and the unavoidable reality that neither exists without the other.

"What is your theory, Professor?"

Here, within the walls of Hogwarts Castle, he supposed he could be nothing less than Professor again. So much of his identity had grown within these walls. Boy to wizard. Wizard to...well, to man. To puppet. And in the penultimate days of his masquerade, to man again. Only in flight and in hiding had he inadvertently become a puppet again, this time to the Darkness creeping through, breaching barriers he hadn't known were broken.

Professor, indeed. He put down his teacup, the better gesture with the one hand not holding him steady.

"If I am correct, it is in the nature of the Horcrux itself that we may find its remedy." Longbottom nodded, and Hermione stirred at the shift in his tone, the stronger cadence a cue to *pay attention*. Her eyes opened a bit, but she only settled in more firmly on his lap. He relaxed. "A Horcrux can be created only in the presence of the most terrible sort of destruction...to another, and then to oneself." Both were listening now, he was sure of it.

"I believe that certain types of exposure to these objects...namely, prolonged contact or..." He flinched. "...lethal exposure, such as a snake bite, or destruction of the Horcrux itself, brings about a sort of mirroring of the Horcrux's nature."

"In other words," Hermione's sleepy voice interrupted, "that slimy bastard managed to not only destroy his own soul, but ripped holes in ours as well."

"That's one way of looking at it," Severus said. "Though I'm uncertain whether it's the soul itself that is damaged in us. I suspect that, in fact, it is the barrier between Light and Dark that has been breached."

"What do you mean?" Longbottom asked. "What barrier?"

"The one that keeps us from acting on every angry impulse, or reacting to every moment of fear, or hurt, or..." Hermione said, then swallowed and turned her head to catch Severus' eye. "That's it, isn't it?" He nodded and stroked her matted hair. "The mess that everybody keeps under glass, most of the time at least, is seeping through...flooding, really."

"Yes. The Shadow," he said. "Each of us has one, no matter how noble, or brave, or pure." No matter how favoured by the headmaster, or admired by readers of the *Daily Prophet*. "Just as even Voldemort had, theoretically, a side that was Light."

"Theoretically," said Longbottom.

"There comes a point of no return," said Snape.

They fell silent.

"How do we fix it?" said Neville. "I don't suppose there's magical sealant for a cracked border between Light and Dark."

Hermione sat up with a start.

"Not sealant, maybe," she said. "But, Severus, why do you think that we can drive the Dark away in one another? How did you drive it away in Neville earlier?"

He furrowed his brow, thinking. "If the Horcruxes created cracks in the barrier between Light and Shadow," he began, "it would stand to reason that the symptoms we each experience are unique to our specific... struggles, shall we say?"

Hermione nodded. "It might be in what triggers us...each one of us. And also in what pulls us back." She looked to Severus for affirmation, confirmation that she was speculating in a way that was *right*. It was her vulnerability, he realised, just as he knew it when she was his student, though he'd have had no idea its ultimate cost. Too much need to be right, to know, to be the one who could fix whatever was broken or know the perfect, shining answer to any query.

"It seems to me that it has taken less and less to set me off," Neville observed. "As if that barrier is breaking down more over time."

"That's probably why none of us noticed at first," said Hermione. "It was subtle. Everybody was stressed, adjusting after the war. We thought it would just go away." She looked at Severus, and his chest tightened at the look of despair in her eyes.

"It is hardly an unusual folly," he said, "to believe...to hope...that fear and desolation will melt away if we only wait long enough."

"It's not going to go away, though. If we don't do something to stop it, it's going to destroy us one by one." Neville's words hung in the air, and dissipated as if they had sunk into the dense wood walls...the castle absorbing their truth.

~**~

The gossamer edges of her scarves trailed after her even after she'd ambled around the corner and out of sight. Hermione hadn't laid eyes on her since the last battle, and even then, only for a fleeting moment. Really, Professor Trelawney had become invisible to her long before that horrible day.

Today, though, she couldn't take her eyes from that wisp of silk calling to her to follow.

"Professor?" She ran to catch up.

Trelawney stopped but didn't turn around. Hermione thought she heard her muttering to herself but couldn't be sure.

"Professor, do you have a moment? I don't know if you remember me, but..."

The muttering grew louder, and the older woman began to shake.

"Professor?"

"Keep away from the broken mirrors... Shadow in the glass, shadow in the glass."

"What are you saying? Professor Trelawney?" Hermione stepped closer and reached out her hand to the other witch. "Prof..."

Trelawney turned to face her with a hiss. "Don't touch me." She looked at Hermione, then beyond her to Snape and Neville. "All broken. Mirrors all cracked." She shook her head, and Hermione thought she looked like a bereft bug, all big eyes and wild hair and sorrowful expression.

"Which mirrors are cracked, Professor?" she asked. "Where?"

Trelawney looked dumbfounded. "I always said you had no inner eye, Miss Granger," she said. Hermione blinked, disoriented by her former teacher's sudden lucidity. "Can't you *feel* it?"

But it was the combination of lucidity and battiness that did it, really, she thought later...that line between mad and sane that Trelawney walked in the odd moments when she wasn't pretending to be real. Her piercing eyes, not the least big buggy now, and impatient insistence that surely even *she* could feel it made her realise that she could.

She closed her eyes for a moment, focusing instead on the flow inside her body. Blood pumping, air moving, thoughts racing, emotions tumbling over one another until they crashed into a heap at her feet. But there, right *there*, between her fear of failure and the ache of empty arms, she found it.

"There's a crack," she whispered. Her eyes flew open. "Not just a *metaphorical* crack, Severus. A real crack." She closed her eyes again. It was harder to see it with them open. "Close your eyes, both of you. I can't tell you where to find it. I can't exactly tell you where mine is. But it's there. I can see the Shadow trying to squeeze through. It looks like..." She snorted.

"What is it, Hermione?" Neville. Anxious again. And Severus...silent.

"Looks like red ink."

Severus snorted, and Hermione breathed again. "Looks nothing like red ink when I see it wrapping its slimy hands around you," he said. "It's far less civilised than that."

"Feels like my nightmares of Nagini," Neville said, soft voice carried by the silent stones. "Like she's wrapped around me and everything goes black." He shivered. "It's a tiny crack, it's right here." He reached back to rub the base of his spine.

Hermione opened her eyes. Trelawney stood watching the three of them. Severus, his eyes closed and brow furrowed, and Neville, eyes wide with fear.

"I told you that if you'd only look you would see," she said with a last glance at Hermione.

"Wait, Professor. Please," Hermione said. "Do you know?" Her voice cracked. "Professor, do you know how to *fix* broken mirrors?"

For the first time, Trelawney's expression looked compassionate. Almost sad.

"Child," she said, and Hermione shivered at the unaccustomed clarity in her voice, "even you must know that the only way to repair a broken mirror is from the other side."

Beta kudos to Annie Talbot. :)

Chapter 12: Mirrors in the Dark

Chapter 12 of 22

It was only after Snape followed her into the neglected shop, moving furtively between the shafts of sunlight that pierced the gloom, that it occurred to him to wonder why, ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione Granger was running.

And why, in a world with magic, *real* magic, she should be seeking the counsel of a Muggle Tarot reader.

"I told you that if you'd only look you would see," she said with a last glance at Hermione.

"Wait, Professor. Please," Hermione said. "Do you know?" her voice cracked. "Professor, do you know how to fix broken mirrors?"

For the first time, Trelawney's expression looked compassionate. Almost sad.

"Child," she said, and Hermione shivered at the unaccustomed clarity in her voice, "even you must know that the only way to repair a broken mirror is from the other side."

His first thought was that his former colleague had finally lost the last of a rapidly diminishing set of marbles.

The next was the certainty that she most certainly had *not*.

He wasn't sure which he preferred...the incoherent Trelawney or the one who spouted truths simultaneously incomprehensible and unavoidable. He supposed that at least Trelawney the truth-teller might be providing a map or, at the very least, a clue. But years of decoding cloaked communication had done nothing for his nerves, and all in all, he'd just as soon she'd sent him an owl. Really, he'd even give it scraps of his breakfast.

Instead, her words hung like smoke choking the air of the dark hallway. Nobody moved, frozen by the image of encroaching darkness slipping through cracks in the walls that could no longer contain it.

"Mirrors," Hermione said. "The other side?" She looked dazed and more than a little defeated. Again.

"What's this about mirrors, Miss Granger?" Hermione jumped. "As I recall, you were here to speak with Professor Longbottom. At the greenhouses." The headmistress's heels clacked on the stone floor as she approached from around a sharp corner.

Hermione looked over to Severus, hesitant, her unease like a cloud of fog around them both. He dimly heard Trelawney mutter something about her inner eye needing quiet as she slipped away in a cloud of silk and patchouli.

"It's quite a long story, Headmistress," Longbottom said before Severus could say a word. He caught Severus's eye...confident and steady and not the least bit anxious. And then Severus realised, Longbottom wasn't seeking permission to include the headmistress but was drawing Snape into his circle as a gesture of respect.

Partnership.

Through the buzz of Hermione's anxiety that still rang under his skin, Severus nodded. Not giving permission, precisely, but rather, assent.

Neville turned back to McGonagall. "Perhaps over tea?"

Minerva McGonagall looked from one to the other, lingering one at a time on their haggard faces, their desperate eyes. She pursed her lips until they formed the thin line Severus knew from student and faculty days alike. "Tea. My quarters." Her quarters. The head's quarters. She glanced at Severus. "I do believe you know the way from here."

He winced. He did indeed.

~**~

Hermione had never been inside the head's private rooms. As a student, it wouldn't have been proper, and after Voldemort's defeat, she'd had little reason to return to the school for social visits. She wondered if her absence over the years accounted for the palpable air of injury around her former Head of House. It seemed to her that she had personally failed to uphold a standard the headmistress assumed implicit.

Hermione *hated* being disappointing.

But the fire was warm and so was the tea, and she closed her eyes for a moment, letting her body sink into the soft cushions of the couch she remembered from her student days, late nights meeting with her Head of House to discuss such life-altering issues as how to keep the first years from falling off the moving staircases. Severus had settled himself next to her, and she was both surprised and grateful for his proximity.

He'd been distracted earlier when they'd entered McGonagall's office to request permission to visit Neville, and she could hardly fault him for it. That office was saturated with decades of memories, not to mention the portrait of one Albus Dumbledore.

Here, in his former colleague's quarters...the rooms that had been *his* during those horrible months as headmaster...he seemed less tense, though a bit melancholy. Mostly, though, she was relieved that he didn't hesitate to stay physically close to her. She wasn't sure that she could have hidden her need for him from Neville and the headmistress but was pretty sure how it would have felt to have him act as if *she* were irrelevant to *him*.

Hiding took so much energy. No wonder Severus had been worn out for so long.

"Which one of you is going to tell me what's going on?" McGonagall asked. "I'm not one to pry, but it's clear that this has not been merely a social call."

Severus snorted and McGonagall narrowed her eyes. Hermione knew that look and reckoned Severus did, too.

"And you. Don't think for a minute, young man, that you are off the hook for allowing me to believe that you've been *dead* for all these years." McGonagall crossed her arms. "I'm over my regrets for having thought you a loyal Death Eater, so I hope you have a mighty good explanation for disappearing just when the truth came out."

Torn between savouring Severus's chastened expression and defending him, Hermione wavered for a moment before stepping between them.

"It's not so simple, Headmistress," Hermione said. "Things didn't go quite as expected after the war. You might have noticed."

Neville nodded, and he and McGonagall exchanged a glance. They'd obviously discussed this.

"I had noticed," McGonagall agreed, "and am at a loss. Our war heroes have not fared well, have they?"

They had not. Not a single one of them. Cataloguing it for the headmistress was more depressing, oddly, than reviewing it with Neville. Maybe it was the shock on her face, or the small sounds of grief in her throat as she listened to the story of the pain and deterioration of seven of the people central to the defeat of Voldemort. It might have been how baffled she looked; she had no easy answers for them...no answers at all, actually, and Hermione realised that she'd secretly hoped her former mentor might pull the solution from a bag. Or transfigure them one from nothing but hope.

"You've made some remarkable progress from the sound of it," McGonagall said. "Knowing what you do gives you somewhere to start. Even if it is knowing that something about prolonged or intense exposure to a Horcrux..." She shuddered as she uttered the word. "...created some sort of breach in the natural defences we all carry against the Darkness."

"The erosion of the barrier creates increasingly difficult symptoms and is itself an impediment to finding a cure," Severus added.

"What do mirrors have to do with any of this?" asked McGonagall.

"That," Hermione said, "is an excellent question." She sighed and put her teacup on the table. "Professor Trelawney was just... there when we were leaving. She was muttering about broken mirrors and shadows. She's rather terrifying, actually."

McGonagall choked on the last bite of biscuit.

"Albus insisted," she said. "And she apparently does have her moments of lucidity...if one considers 'seeing' a lucid moment."

"Let's assume for a wildly improbable moment that she's spoken about something true," Severus said. "How might mirrors...broken or not...be relevant to our situation?"

"What do we know about mirrors?" Hermione muttered to herself.

"Not just any mirrors, Hermione. *Magical* mirrors," Neville said.

Hermione flushed. Muggle-born, right. *Magical* mirrors. Did she know *anything* about magical mirrors? Was the Mirror of Erised in the same class as the enchanted mirrors that taunted her about her mop of hair? What about the two-way mirror that Sirius gave Harry? "Are they all the same?" she asked. "Being Muggle-born puts me at a significant disadvantage here. I never thought much about mirrors. Actually, I try not to look, these days."

"Why not?" Severus asked. She heard the catch in his throat and wondered what was upsetting about a woman not looking at her own reflection.

"Don't like what I see," she muttered. "It's easier to turn away. What's the difference?"

"Because you're describing avoidance, not indifference, Hermione. And avoidance, particularly when it refers to something magical, is important." He paused. "You must be able to *see* it," he murmured, almost to himself.

"See what? I told you already, I don't like what I see in the mirror, so I don't look."

"The Darkness. It sort of pours out and wraps around you." She shuddered, and he rushed to continue. "Not all the time. Only when something triggers it." He reached his hand to stroke her cheek, and she nearly whimpered at the relief the contact brought. "Like now."

They sat like that a long moment, she leaning her cheek into his hand, warmth returning to her limbs with each pass of his thumb along her cheekbone. Distantly, she heard Neville fidgeting in his chair and then a soft cough from her former Head. She nodded and Severus moved his hand to circle her shoulders, and she threaded her arms around his waist. *Safe now.*

"Well then..." McGonagall seemed determined to continue without reference to the exchange she'd just witnessed. "What does the mirror reveal that isn't evident otherwise?" Her eyes flickered to Severus and Hermione and to Severus's hand gently stroking her arm. "I see the exhaustion...and pain...in all three of you, and regrettably, I've seen the rage erupt in you, Longbottom," she said. "But the rest of what I know is rumour."

"Have none of the others been in touch with you?" Hermione asked.

"No. None of them." She paused. "Regardless, I do have my ways of keeping track, you know."

She nodded. "I would imagine that not much gets by you even from here, Headmistress." She swallowed thickly. "I'm sorry that I never came back." McGonagall inclined her head and Hermione recognised grief at opportunities lost in her pensive expression. "Things got tense pretty soon after the war. It was confusing. Overwhelming." She thought for a moment. "Disorganising, too. Of all of us, I suppose I had been the one considered most likely to return to Hogwarts. Either to visit or to stay."

"You were." The headmistress's voice was tight, but Hermione heard the sadness beneath its edge. There was nothing for it. No words to describe the depth of the ache she'd carried these last ten years and how coming to Hogwarts had seemed worse than irrelevant, odd though that sounded to her now, here, sitting in the castle after so many years.

Why *hadn't* she come back? It wouldn't have been for the library...she'd already had all the school's books regarding Horcruxes, or at least that's what she told herself when she travelled to every other library she could think of but never to Hogwarts. She could have come back for more than books; she could have come back for support, for the wisdom of her teachers, for the deep magic that resided in this place. Strange that she hadn't. Wondering if the reasons were part and parcel of the whole mystery, she turned to her former classmate.

"Neville, what is different about magical mirrors? Apart from the fact that they do odd things like talk to you or reflect your deepest desire."

"Mirrors in the wizarding world aren't made only of glass, Hermione," he said.

"What else are they made from?"

Neville looked to the headmistress, and it occurred to Hermione that it would never have occurred to Neville that this sort of phenomenon required an explanation.

"Severus?"

He looked at the others and gestured to the headmistress. "Minerva, if you would."

She nodded. "Mirrors, Hermione, take any number of forms in our world. Enchanted glass is the simplest and the closest to what Muggles understand." Hermione sat up straighter, listening while her mentor went on. "It is also the type that is most commonly discussed with students."

"What other objects are considered mirrors in the wizarding world? I've never heard of such a thing. How is it that I never came across..."

Severus drew her closer. "Relax, Hermione. It's not something that generally comes up in conversation. It's more implicit, and certainly it would not have been addressed at your level of study, though it's possible that either Professors Vector or Babbling alluded to it obliquely."

Wait, Runes? Arithmancy? But the headmistress had continued on. Unsatisfying, but it would have to do. For now.

"Any object which, in its true form, reflects something of the user is considered a mirror," the headmistress was saying. "It may reflect wishes, or dreams. Or it could reflect an aspect of even the most hidden parts of, well..." She looked vaguely uncomfortable.

"Their soul," Hermione said.

"Indeed."

"Severus, you said that the cards we used were like a mirror."

"I did," he said. "They reflect a truth inside each of us, and in the rather unusual way we used the cards, they reflect something about the relationship between us."

"What else?" Her heart was pounding now. Excitement, intellectual interest, fear. She didn't know which of these set her pulse racing, but she had to know more about the mirrors. Their answer was here, it had to be.

"Portraits are a sort of mirror, though a partial one," said Neville. "As is the Room of Requirement." He paused to think. "And the Sorting Hat."

"They're all mirrors?" Hermione asked. "I'd never thought of it that way." But now that she had, it seemed so obvious. Each of those objects reflected an aspect of the person engaged with it.

"These are all examples of external objects that mirror the self," said the headmistress. "But there is something more essential that is also a type of mirror."

All three looked at her, blank faced.

"Oh, honestly. You should be able to figure this out. I demonstrated it on the first day of classes third year. Even *your* third year, Severus."

Severus crossed his arms and was silent. Hermione wondered what he didn't want to...

"Oh! The Animagus transformation?" Hermione asked. "The Animagus transformation! Of course."

"What does the Animagus transformation have to do with mirrors?" asked Neville.

"Headmistress, may I?" McGonagall smiled, and Hermione felt a flicker of the old energy at solving an intellectual problem and the joy at her mentor's pride.

"The Animagus form reflects a person's essence, Neville. Don't you remember how when we were training for the D.A. all of our Patronus forms were so fun to discover because they were a surprise, but not *really*? They all made sense, remember?"

"Patronus forms are not Animagus forms, though, are they? Headmistress?" Neville looked confused.

"Evidence gathered over thousands of years has never disproved the notion that one's Patronus is identical to one's Animagus form."

Hermione glanced at Severus, but his face was immobile. Everybody in the room knew the form Severus's Patronus took. Nobody said a word. Hermione took a breath. She had to ask.

"Then why does the Patronus sometimes change? I'd heard it could change in response to an overwhelming emotional event or a strong feeling," Hermione said.

"It can be altered in the face of deep love, yes," said the headmistress. "This makes good sense, actually, if you consider what it means to truly love someone."

"Not everybody's Patronus form changes when they fall in love, though," said Neville. "Are you implying that in the case of true love, that one's Patronus should change?"

"I am not," she said. "I am merely suggesting that there are times, there are loves, which change us profoundly. Other loves are deep and beautiful, but may not create the sort of transformation that catalyses change to a person's soul...and then to the mirror of that soul."

Severus's expression shifted. His face was no longer stony. Instead, she thought, he looked contemplative.

"Animagus and Patronus forms, then. Those are two more mirrors," Hermione said. "If I had to wager, I'd bet that the broken mirrors Professor Trelawney... *saw* are more likely to be inside of us than outside."

"Agreed," said Severus. Hermione was relieved to hear his voice. "And I cannot think of another magical phenomenon that compares to either of those as a pure reflection of soul. Can any of you?"

The witches and wizards paused. One by one, they shook their heads.

"So we need to investigate mirrors, specifically Patronus and Animagus forms?" Neville asked.

"Seems as good a place as any to start," Hermione said. She looked at Severus. "How does that sound?"

"Acceptable," he said.

"It's settled, then," said the headmistress. "I'll find rooms for the two of you here at once."

~**~

Severus froze. "That won't be necessary, Minerva. We thank you, but..."

"Nonsense, Severus," said Minerva. "Hogwarts has the best library in this part of the world..."

"I've been to all the great libraries, headmistress," Hermione said. "It didn't help. And the...Well, we've been advised that book knowledge won't get us very far in this case."

"No matter," said Minerva. "Hogwarts' library is the least of her resources, Miss Granger."

"She has a point, Hermione," said Severus. He didn't know why he was agreeing with anything Minerva suggested. He hardly wanted to leave his home and take up residence *here* of all places. He'd waited decades to get out of the castle; he wasn't coming back in without a fight.

And yet.

Hogwarts did have more resources than any magical location he had access to, not the least of which were his former colleagues. This might not be an advantage, he realised, as the last time he'd seen them, they had been shooting hexes his way, chasing him out of the castle via one of its windows.

They had heard his full story since then, though. If Minerva's attitude was any indication, they might not attempt to hex him on sight. Perhaps. And the students in residence wouldn't know him either. By reputation, yes, but even that had undergone a sea change, it seemed.

Though they all did think he was dead.

A live Severus Snape was, in point of fact, entirely different than a dead, martyred Severus Snape.

"Severus?" Hermione's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Hmm?"

"I will go wherever you do," she whispered.

He looked at her then, and his heart lurched at the fear in her eyes.

"And I with you," he said. She sighed and sank back into the circle of his arm and the softness of the couch. "What would you like to do?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I wish I knew. I just want to be with people who can help; I want to be somewhere where we have a shot at figuring this out." She snorted. "I suppose I know more than I thought. Being here wouldn't be so bad. Would it?"

He paused. "The worst part was walking up to the castle, I think," he said, and she reached up to brush an errant strand of hair from his eyes. The gesture brought a flush to his cheeks, and he remembered that they were not alone. Without turning away from Hermione, he spoke. "Minerva, we would require only one set of rooms. Is this acceptable?"

"Well," she said, "it's highly unusual. An unmarried couple sharing quarters..."

"I won't..."

"We won't be separated," Severus interrupted. "If you cannot see your way clear to lodge us together, we shall have to make our way back and forth from my home in Spinner's End." He hesitated. And in a softer voice. "Our home."

"Our home," Hermione whispered. Her lower lip quivered, but this time, she held back her tears.

Severus didn't care that Longbottom was in the room. He didn't care that Minerva was watching them both through narrowed eyes. She'd just spoken of love, of a bond that transformed.

This time, he hoped, she'd recognise what was staring her in the face without the benefit of narration.

It shone so bright, how could she mistake it?

~**~

After Hogwarts, Spinner's End felt tiny, even a bit confining. How hard it must have been to return here each holiday, Hermione thought. From the magical majesty of the castle to the provincial Muggle home that held its own brand of sadness and loss.

The headmistress had been a bit flustered but agreed to find chambers for Hermione and Severus to share, and they didn't speak of it again, only to say that they'd return to Spinner's End for the night and to gather their belongings.

Tomorrow, they would make their way back. Tomorrow, they would join Neville and any faculty who would help them.

Tomorrow, Hermione thought...the day she might begin to trust in the sunrise again.

But tonight was theirs, and despite knowing that they would have their own rooms in the castle, there was something precious about these last hours in this house, this room, this bed.

Tomorrow would bring others into their circle. Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow would ultimately mean inviting the others back again, and Hermione shuddered at the thought.

"What is it?" he whispered in the dark, his breath warm against her skin.

"Just thinking."

"Rarely advisable," he murmured.

"Especially not when I have you here, like this." She ran her hands up and down his bare skin, enjoying the angular lines and his sharp intake of breath at her touch.

"You have me like this for as long as you want it so."

Her skin burned with the heat of his words.

"Promise me."

"Promise?"

The words came from nowhere, urgent. She shifted so they lay side by side, face to face, reached her hands to caress his jaw and brought her lips to his. Lingering.

A whisper.

"Promise me, Severus." *That you'll always want me. That you'll love me. That you'll never leave me, no matter what you see in your mirror, and in mine.*

She never knew if he heard the words she hadn't spoken, but when he brought his hands to frame her face and met her eyes, she knew to the depths of her soul he would tell her the truth.

Without words, he showed her. His truth, wrapped in flushed skin and warm breath, and shared with the most sensuous touch she'd ever known. Her body sang when he was near, and the sweep of his tongue and caress of his hand transported her. He wanted her; he desired her; she could make this taciturn man moan, could send him over pleasure's edge. The threads of passion would bind them for a time, she thought.

But it was the unexpected warmth of the tears raining on her skin when she cried out his name that gave her pause. And hope. And let her drift, at last, into sleep, their bodies warm, and sated, and still entwined.

~**~

The moon was rising, but he hardly noticed because his feet were so cold.

It must be because of the ice.

Downdown... he peered through the thick layer of ice into the depths of the lake beneath.

Usually darker down there.

Tonight, it was as if the bottom of the lake was filled with pinpricks of light.

I almost can see to the very bottom.

So cold. He shivered.

He shouldn't be here. It's not his job to walk up above.

Besides, the headmaster always said never to journey on the surface of the lake alone.

Have to go, have to go.

And the thunderous noise of ice cracking tore him from sleep into the bright light of day and Hermione's body anchoring him to the earth.

Beta kudos to Annie Talbot.

Chapter 13: Stone and Glass

Chapter 13 of 22

It was only after Snape followed her into the neglected shop, moving furtively between the shafts of sunlight that pierced the gloom, that it occurred to him to wonder why, ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione Granger was running. And why, in a world with magic, *real* magic, she should be seeking the counsel of a Muggle Tarot reader.

I almost can see to the very bottom.

So cold. He shivered.

He shouldn't be here. It's not his job to walk up above.

Besides, the headmaster always said never to journey on the surface of the lake alone.

Have to go, have to go.

And the thunderous noise of ice cracking tore him from sleep into the bright light of day and Hermione's body anchoring him to the earth.

Of all the details of Hogwarts castle she'd carried with her, the warm depths of the stones and their patches of smooth and rough had fallen away from her right along with her sense of safety.

But when the headmistress led them to their chambers late in the afternoon, her eyes were riveted to the rough-hewn walls. The ones not covered in thousand-year-old tapestries looked as if they'd been carved straight from the side of the mountain, and she couldn't keep her fingers from tracing the troughs and furrows of the stones surrounding the window frame, as if they might map where she'd been and where she now must go.

While Severus stowed their bags and arranged with the headmistress to meet in the staffroom in an hour, Hermione gravitated to the uncovered wall alongside the windows. She listened to the murmured voices behind her with half an ear and lay her hands flat against the rough stone. She fancied it pulsed beneath her hands, like a living entity.

It felt like a welcome from the bones of the earth from which Hogwarts had emerged fully formed a thousand years prior.

And an apology.

Or perhaps it was only the echo of the unspoken apology that her former Head of House conveyed by way of the eagerness of her welcome and through the simple beauty of the suite of rooms she'd chosen for them to occupy.

The door closed, leaving her alone with Severus in the late afternoon sunlight. She couldn't bear to unpack her meagre possessions quite yet, so she slid to the floor and leaned her head against the wall while she watched Severus pace the perimeter like a caged animal.

"The windows are over here."

"I am aware," he said. Despite the bite in his voice, he turned to look through the glass and across the expanse of stone and water beyond. The view was astonishing, she thought, and for once Severus seemed as lost in the world outside as in his internal one.

"There are so many things I'd forgotten about this place," Hermione said. He glanced at her.

"It's been a good many years," said Severus. "And you did not live in the castle terribly long."

"Not like you."

"No, not like me," he murmured. He turned back to the windows.

"We don't have to stay." She held her breath. She did. They did.

"Yes, we do."

Relief flooded her, but the faraway look in his eyes left a knot in her belly. She stood, moving toward the windows. Towards him.

His back was stiff when she first wrapped her arms around him, but when she lay her forehead against his chest, she felt soft puffs of breath on her scalp as his breathing grew less shallow.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"This isn't happening because of you, Hermione. Besides, I've faced far more difficult challenges in my lifetime."

"Have you?" she murmured.

~**~

He tightened his arms around her. Hadn't he faced countless obstacles more difficult than this? He'd have thought so, but now, from his new chambers in the tower overlooking the expanse of grounds...stone, wood, water...he was no longer sure.

"This is one of the few times I've found myself in a bind not of my own devising." He felt her sigh.

"It's the helplessness. I didn't know this would happen, and I can't fix it...that's the worst part for me," she said. "Apart from the unpredictable floods of misery."

"It used to be that I'd tell myself to buck up and that if I hadn't been the worst of dunderheads to begin with, I would never have been stuck in the bind at all."

"Why am I not surprised that the exemplary compassion you showed for your students was extended first to yourself?"

He huffed and buried his face in her hair. His students had, for the most part, deserved his disdain, if not his contempt. Even so, he'd always reserved the worst of the vitriol for himself.

"This castle is a complicated place for me, Hermione."

"I know. But for me, it still feels like magic. You know, the *good* kind of magic."

He laughed. "The magical kind?"

"Exactly," she said and lifted her head from where it rested against him. Her eyes were bright, and he realised for the first time that just as the darkness sometimes spilled from her...no, he corrected himself, slipped through those cursed *cracks*...light poured from her, too. Light he hadn't recognised during her years as his student. Light that he'd mistaken for arrogance or over-eagerness to please. But nothing was simple with this woman, neither the labyrinth of her Darkness nor the vibrancy of her Light.

"I would like to see the castle through your eyes, someday," he said.

She reached up to trace the lines around his eyes. "I should like to see it through yours as well."

"It won't be pretty," he said after a pause.

"I didn't imagine it would be," she said.

"Perhaps after," he said.

After

"After, yes," she echoed. "We will have an *after*, Severus, won't we?"

"If we succeed." He brushed his lips against hers. "If we survive, hopes for *after* will be largely responsible, I'm sure."

She smiled and deepened the kiss.

A hope, and promise.

~**~

The circle of witches and wizards around the table was largely familiar if the room they occupied was not. At some point, she imagined, they'd revisit her old familiar places, but for now, she resigned herself to being introduced to the teachers' haunts...places even the prefects had not been permitted to go.

Severus sat alongside her, his hand in hers. Discussion had gone on for hours, long past curfew, the ghosts periodically wafting in to report on the state of the students in the library and common rooms.

Every professor had chimed in with possible solutions, each from their area of specialty. Arithmancy and Runes had seemed the most likely pathways, and so her two most favourite teachers had huddled together, attempting to find one.

"I can attempt another Arithmantic solution, but I'm not optimistic," said Professor Vector. She'd been scribbling on a long parchment for the last hour, looking increasingly vexed. "There aren't enough solid variables for me to enter anything resembling a workable formulae."

"Didn't the Ogham images help?" asked Hermione.

"They don't, unfortunately," she said. "Nor do the symbols derived from Neville's description of his symptoms." She looked at Neville, deep in conversation with a junior staff member Hermione didn't recognize. It had occurred to her as they shared details with the Hogwarts faculty that they'd all witnessed Neville's deterioration firsthand. A wave of respect and appreciation for Neville swept through her.

Professor Vector was still shaking her head at the parchment. "They seem to either spin us in circles or point us in the same direction you already determined. They've given me nothing new. Nothing that points us to a remedy."

Us. Hermione wanted to hug her. Her former professors had, to a one, embraced the problem they all faced as if it affected each of them personally. She looked over at Neville. This time he caught her eye and smiled, and she nearly beamed at him.

Why had it taken her so long to return here? Why...? She felt Dark fingers reach for her but held Severus's hand and took a deep breath. It was no use berating herself. She'd had enough years of doing that, and it was obvious only in retrospect that she could have turned to these witches and wizards for help. At the time, mired in the rising Darkness, she hadn't been able to see a thing, certainly not anything resembling hope.

Professor Babbling was leaning over the parchment, hair dishevelled, as vexed as her colleague, and Hermione focused her attention on them again. "You mean to tell me that none of the runic sources are clearing up that bottleneck?" Professor Babbling asked.

"If they had, you'd be the first to know, Bathsheba," said Vector.

Hermione looked at Severus and smiled. He looked far more relaxed than he had when they'd first come into the room, the collected faculty silent only for a moment before exploding into motion and sound, surrounding them, drawing them into conversation and demanding explanations of all sorts from them both. Hermione had been overwhelmed with their welcome. Severus had gone still, visibly stunned. Neville had stood off to the side, his face flushed, pleased.

Severus smirked at his former colleagues, and Hermione wondered how many similar skirmishes he'd witnessed over the years.

"I tried all that," Hermione said. "I told you already."

"Forgive us, Miss Granger," said Vector, "but I imagine we do have a bit more experience in solving complex equations than you." She inclined her head and smiled, taking the sting from her words. "Though our lack of success doesn't much support that notion, does it?"

"I'm sorry, Professors. I didn't mean to imply that my level of skill compares to yours. It's just that none of the usual routes to solve problems...the usual things I might try...have helped in the least."

"In fact," Neville interrupted, "the esoteric seems to have been more helpful. Isn't that right?"

Severus grunted and folded his arms. She thought he might have muttered, "Stupid airheaded bint." But she couldn't be sure.

"Helpful might be stretching it, Neville," Hermione said. "But in all honesty, it's the only thing that hasn't sent us in circles." She turned to the group around the table. "I've been told that intellect will not help me in this quest." She smiled as her former professors chuckled at the notion of Hermione Granger setting aside her intellect in favour of... what? Divination? "Which brings me to a question."

"How novel," Severus muttered. She nudged him under the table and tried not to smile.

"Is there anywhere in the castle, any magical site here, or anywhere, actually, where something other than intellect and focused intention can elicit a magical response?"

"Someplace where the witch or wizard need not *know* from the outset what it is they seek?" asked Professor Flitwick.

"Precisely," said Severus.

"Why not try the Room of Requirement?"

"I thought it was destroyed in the battle," said Hermione. "Fiendfyre." She shuddered.

"Has anyone here had need of the Room since the battle?" asked McGonagall. She looked around the table and nobody moved. "None of you?" They shook their heads.

"None of you has attempted to enter the room since the last day of the war?" Severus asked.

They looked at one another again, heads shaking.

"So then nobody knows the current state of the room. Is that right?" Hermione asked.

"So it would seem," said Professor Flitwick. "And as I am the only Charms master in the castle, I believe it is my responsibility to investigate this and to assess the condition of the room."

"May we accompany you, Professor?" asked Hermione.

"Let me think for a moment first," he said. He rose from his seat at the table and moved to the hearth.

From the back, it looked as if he were speaking to the fire, and Hermione made to stand and join him, but Severus leaned down and whispered in her ear. "It's what he does when he's figuring something out. Leave him be; he'll talk it through to himself and come back with a perfectly reasonable approach. Just watch."

So they sat, Vector continuing to scribble on her parchment and mutter to herself and the others talking in soft whispers around the table. Hermione was content to settle into the soft chair, her hand safely in Severus's. Finally, her former Charms instructor made a noise that sounded like a cheer and slipped through the Floo and disappeared.

Hermione gasped, but Severus just shook his head. "Wait."

It felt like forever, but in fact couldn't have been longer than a quarter hour when Flitwick returned, beaming in triumph.

"I know what needs to be done."

~**~

They'd insisted on providing an escort.

Moving through the castle en-masse, Severus thought they must have looked ridiculous. Fortunately, the students were long asleep...or should be, he thought. Thankfully such issues were no longer his concern.

The seventh-floor corridor was empty; the tapestry opposite the putative entrance to the Room looked untouched by time or battle. The house-elves had been consulted and had reported that, as far as they knew...and they knew, it must be acknowledged, quite a lot...the room had been accessed by neither student nor staff these last ten years. It was, Flitwick said, enough.

"Remember," he said, "each of you must clear your minds and walk past the wall three times in tandem. When the door appears, walk through together. It would be best..." He hesitated. "...if you were to link hands when you did so." He waited for their terse nods of agreement and continued. They'd been around and around on this point. Severus was equally unhappy with the idea of touching Longbottom and with the idea of Hermione touching him in his stead. Best he do it, he'd decided, and neither had argued when he placed himself between them.

"The Room, I believe, will reconstitute itself in tune with the need you three share," Flitwick continued. "This should include the information we need to move forward with a cure for what ails you."

There it was again. *We.*

Severus had hardly expected to be received with anything less than disgust and barely concealed pity when he'd crossed the staffroom threshold. Instead, after a moment of hesitation, the camaraderie and concern that greeted him...them...had at first set him on edge. Suspicion came naturally...hadn't ever left, actually, particularly given the history he had with this place, with these people. He supposed they'd had ten years to come to terms with the Snape they thought they'd known and to adapt to the idea of a Snape whose redemptive secrets outweighed his obvious faults.

It would take some getting used to.

"Professor," Hermione asked. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but you're *sure* we don't need to wait until we have the others here to enter the room? What if the cure is incomplete because only three out of the seven of us walked through the doors?"

Damn. She had a point.

"An admirable question, Miss Granger," said her former Professor, fairly bouncing with excitement. "And one I considered."

He was gearing up for a lecture; Severus knew that look.

"I believe," Flitwick said, "that given the level of destruction the room experienced during its last known use, a strong and focused need coupled with a powerful magical energy behind that need is our best hope for reviving it, if the Room is indeed injured. As the three of you are the only ones affected who have thus far accepted the reality of *your* injury and are eager for a resolution, I believe the Room may respond in kind, as it were. In fact," he added, "I would worry that even if we could entice the others to join us here, their resistance would subvert the purpose of the Room. At worst, it could prevent the Room from awakening, and at best, it would provide us with a muddled solution."

Ah. Well, at least that made some sense.

"Hermione?" Severus asked. "Does that explanation satisfy or do you have further concerns?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, that makes sense to me. Thank you, Professor. Now I suppose we have to just see if the Room works at all."

"Indeed," he said. "Let us see."

He turned to the others and motioned for them to take several steps back, leaving Snape, Longbottom, and Hermione standing across from the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy.

Oddly appropriate, Severus thought.

One behind the other, they walked the length of the wall. Severus focused only on his breathing, the movement of air in and out, mind as blank as he could make it, chasing out the persistent thoughts, doubts, fears, and hopes alike as if they were persistent nifflers in search of gold.

The only thought he couldn't banish shone behind his eyes.

Help us. Please help us.

~**~

The expanse of stone wall shimmered, the memory of searing heat alive still in its magical bones.

Heat.

Destruction.

Desperation.

Need.

Such need as this hadn't crossed its doorway since the day Fiendfyre had swept through its Hall of Memory and reduced it to ash. No need of witch or wizard could compete with its own need to heal, to replenish, to restore itself to wholeness.

No need, that is, until today.

Tonight it felt the longing of the wizards and witch as an extension of itself. Their injury, in terrible harmony with its own.

Tonight, for the first time in over a decade, it felt the grinding of its joints and tendons, the breath of hopes forsaken, and the blood and tears of the dead and the dying. Tonight, it prepared itself to welcome kinsmen once more.

The wizards and the witch paced, and the Room wept for their pain.

The wounded opened themselves in their need, and the Room awoke.

Three openings appeared in the wall made of stone. And when the tall wizard linked his hands with the two on either side of him, the three archways joined together, and they walked through as one.

**

Huge beta thanks to Annie Talbot who makes my story better each time she touches it.

Chapter 14: Ashes to Ashes

Chapter 14 of 22

It was only after Snape followed her into the neglected shop, moving furtively between the shafts of sunlight that pierced the gloom, that it occurred to him to wonder why, ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione Granger was running. And why, in a world with magic, *real* magic, she should be seeking the counsel of a Muggle Tarot reader.

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Three openings appeared in the wall made of stone. And when the tall wizard linked his hands with the two on either side of him, the three archways joined together, and they walked through as one.

The scent of the barrier between hallway and Room reminded him of Hyssop.

Sharp, evergreen, with a tangible edge of flame.

The room had burned; seems fitting it should smell of dragons, Severus thought. Even so, the barrier felt to him more liquid than fire.

Shimmering as if constructed of droplets of water, it hung between the corridor and the chamber within, less a door than a threshold between worlds.

Aware of Hermione's hand in his and Longbottom's elbow in his grasp, he walked through the translucent barrier with his eyes inexplicably shut.

Spy instincts have gone entirely.

But it felt right to do it this way, right to welcome the coolness of the mist on his face without the distraction of his eyes scanning to see what lay on the other side.

Once through the barrier, the spray of droplets clinging to his hair, he more felt than heard Hermione gasp and Longbottom hiss long and low.

He opened his eyes. Slowly.

Mirrors.

The Room was vast, cave-like and lit as if from within its towering stone walls. The floor was littered with ash and shards of glass, broken chunks from the mirrors that ringed the room, each rising from the ground to meet the ceiling high above.

Each mirror nestled within the rock...stone and glass woven together as if they'd emerged from the earth whole.

The expanse of rock was unbroken, but the mirrors...every single sheet of mirrored glass...were broken.

The witch and wizards drifted apart, each gravitating to a different corner of the room. Despite their shattered state, large sections of the glass had remained intact.

Reflecting.

Severus hesitated, watching Hermione and Longbottom as they peered into those shards of glass. He wanted to call out, to tell them to wait, but the words stuck in his throat. So instead, he edged up to the mirror opposite the entryway until he could finally see a reflection in its face.

He flinched.

It was his own image, but not.

Shrunken, twisted and grey, his features were distorted by a thousand nightmares and scores of losses. It was a version of himself as it might be if carved from its own brittle rock, wrought by a hand guided by hatred and vengeance. The image in the mirror sneered at him and turned away; Severus wondered what the wizard in the mirror thought of him and shuddered.

On the other side of the chamber, Hermione knelt in the broken glass, her head bent, her shoulders heaving. He could only imagine what her reflection had revealed to her, huddled there in the ruins. What horrors lay beyond the glass for any of them whose Shadow had burned away the Light?

"This Room used to provide what *weneeded*." Longbottom's voice cut through the silence. Severus turned and saw him standing before his own mirror, arms crossed, chin thrust out.

Defiant.

Furious.

"If this is the Room of *Requirement*, someone needs to explain to me how *this* is what we require. I certainly don't *require* a vision of myself at my most foul...I've seen that in the mirror plenty over the last ten years."

"Maybe it's just preparing us for the worst," Hermione said, her voice gravelly. "It's telling us that this is the best we can hope for, and we need to get used to it."

Hopelessness and despair swirled around her. Severus couldn't see it, but he could feel it like smoke choking the air. Longbottom was right. What sort of need did this

satisfy?

"What do you see?" Severus asked, though he thought he knew. She looked at him, then back at her reflection. The hands resting in her lap were shaking, and he could see how hard it was for her to find words.

"Come look for yourself," she managed to say at last.

He threaded his way between the shards to where Hermione crouched. As he came close, he saw her reflected face, wild-eyed and withered looking. But standing behind her in the glass, the image of himself looked nothing like the one in the mirror he'd chosen. Instead, it was a version of himself he didn't recognize.

Tall, distinguished-looking, if a bit severe, with just the slightest bit of gentleness around his eyes, the reflected image of himself looked at the Hermione in the mirror and stroked her hair.

"Odd," he muttered.

"What's odd?" she asked and lifted her face to the mirror. "It's just *us*."

"That's not what you look like, and that's certainly not me there, either."

"That looks precisely like you, Severus. Haven't you looked in a mirror, lately?" Hermione asked. "And I looked just like that last time I saw my reflection. I'm sure I looked the same when you found me, don't you remember?"

"You looked afraid. Worn out. But not like *that*, Hermione," Snape said.

"That's not me, either," Longbottom said. "My reflection looks entirely different than it did in that other mirror."

Severus looked back at the glass. Longbottom had joined them, and Severus saw that he was right. The image wasn't the same as the wizard standing alongside him. It looked like a combination of the boy he remembered from his year as headmaster and the fierce wizard they'd encountered outside the greenhouses.

"Don't you see the same thing in the mirrors you looked into?" she asked.

The wizards looked at each other, and then at the reflection in front of Hermione.

"No," Longbottom said. "Yours is far kinder. To wizards, at least."

Hermione turned away from the mirror. "What do you mean?"

"Come, see," said Severus. He took her hand and helped her to her feet. They made their way slowly across to the mirror he already thought of as *his*. He stood before it with Hermione at one side and Longbottom on the other. "There."

Indeed, the figure reflected before him was as horrifying and twisted as it had been the first time. Hermione's was no longer the shrunken, wild-eyed creature, and Longbottom...well, Longbottom looked somewhat older and more worn than the version in Hermione's mirror.

Oh.

"These aren't mirrors," Severus said, a pit in his stomach. "Not precisely."

"What are they?" Hermione asked.

He looked at her. At her frightened expression and trembling limbs. He didn't know any better than any of them what this meant, what this was. He only had more years experience guessing and reaching into the breach for answers. But she was waiting, depending on him for *something*. And so he said the only thing he could...

"They are, I think..." He hesitated. "...eyes."

~*~*~*~

"Eyes?" Hermione whispered.

"What do you mean by that?" Neville barked. "It's glass, Snape. Glass. Broken, splintered glass. Mirrors."

Hermione was shocked at Neville's tone. So angry. Again.

"Neville, wait," she said. "Severus, what do you mean, these are eyes?"

He pressed his fingertips against the bridge of his nose, and in an instant, she felt the room shift. Just behind them, a sort of oasis appeared in the midst of the burnt and broken room, and in the centre, a collection of chairs and a couch appeared.

"Finally, something useful," Severus muttered. The Room rumbled just a bit. "Sorry," he mumbled.

Settled on the cushions, Hermione asked again. "Eyes?"

Severus nodded. "I don't mean literally," he said. "I'm not certain, but I think that the mirrors' reflections parallel our views of ourselves. Fears, primarily." He looked at Hermione. "The aspects of ourselves we most fear, perhaps."

Hermione shuddered. She'd watched herself deteriorate over months and years. Watched her vitality drain away and the parts of herself she hated most rise to the surface.

"Then why do you look different in my mirror than in your own?" she asked.

Neville laughed...short and sharp. "I know why," he said. "It's all perception, isn't it?"

"Whose perception?" Severus asked.

"I suppose it depends which mirror you're looking into," Neville said. "In my own, I looked..." He paused. "You can imagine how I looked. But in yours, Hermione, and even in yours, Professor, I looked different. Better." They nodded. "And it seems the same thing happened to each of you, right?"

"I didn't look scary in Severus's mirror," Hermione said.

"You saw yourself as / see you when you looked in my glass," Severus said. "And in your mirror, I saw myself through your eyes."

She sat, absorbing what he'd said. Trying to understand. Why would the room provide them with, of all things, *this*? "How is this what we require? I don't understand."

"Perhaps the Room is showing us that we need to see ourselves..." He hesitated. "...and perhaps one another through a different lens. Different eyes." He looked around at the scene of destruction from the island of comfort the Room had provided. "We must look at everything through different lenses...through one another's eyes?" He looked irritated.

"It reminds me of what the cards showed us, Severus," Hermione said. "When they said that we must walk a different path, an intuitive path. Maybe this is what they meant."

"What's with all the broken glass, then?" Neville asked. "Are our eyes broken?"

Hermione sat up straighter. "They are broken, that's it, Neville!" Her heart was pounding in her chest. "It's just like what happens when you're fighting with someone, right? When everybody has stopped listening." She flashed back to the worst of the arguments with the others, to the nights she'd spent crying because she couldn't make them see. "We've stopped being able to see things through one another's eyes."

They were silent, each remembering their own isolation and frustration with others who would not or could not understand them. Hermione let her eyes wander along the contours of the room until they rested on the debris laden floor. Glass and ash.

Ash. *Oh, no.*

"Severus," she said. "I think we forgot about one victim of the Horcruxes."

"Who?" asked Neville.

But Severus had fallen to the floor, his hands stroking the dunes of ash littered with bits of broken mirror as if they contained remnants of a lost world.

"The Room," Hermione whispered. "The Room was hurt badly by the Fiendfyre." She stood next to where Severus crouched, staring at a pile of burnt remnants in his hands. "It is as injured as we all are." She stroked the soft layer of ash that bordered their oasis. "And if it is itself a mirror, I suppose we need to figure out how a mirror injured by a Horcrux would act."

Severus looked at her and let the debris fall to the floor. "It's showing us itself at its most ruined," he said. "Just as it showed us our brokenness in our reflections."

"But it's the truth," Neville said. "It is injured, as are we."

The air felt colder, and Hermione longed for the safety of Severus's embrace, even if it couldn't chase the darkness away forever.

"So this is it," Severus said. "The reality we must resign ourselves to enduring."

She reached for him then and whimpered when he wrapped his arms around her. Together on the couch, she felt fragile, but set apart from the destruction inside and around her. Neville sat across from them, like a lone survivor of a wreck perched on incongruously plush cushions.

"Neville," she said. "Come here. There's room for you on the couch."

He looked up, surprised.

"She's right, Longbottom," Severus said. "Haven't we all had enough of being alone?"

Neville nodded and sat next to Hermione. Neither he nor Severus protested when she pulled him towards her, his head on her shoulder while she pretended not to notice the wetness against her cheek.

~**~

When he finally lifted his head from Hermione's shoulder, he felt wrung out. It was as if the grief had been squeezed out of him, leaving him feeling oddly empty, but lighter...and curious and hopeful in a way he'd long ago forgot.

Hermione's arm slipped from around his shoulders, and she made to gather him close again.

"Shh, it's ok," he whispered and left her in Snape's embrace, the older man murmuring in her ear. Something soothing by all appearances. It was just as well, then, he thought. He looked up again, the mirrors across from them catching light from nowhere but sparkling nonetheless.

What is that?

He patted Hermione's arm and rose from the couch, the mirror calling him with images flitting just beyond his grasp.

It was slow going, what with the glass shards protruding from the debris on the floor and the ash wafting everywhere, obscuring his vision. As he approached the mirror, Neville's step grew lighter. There was something there meant for him to see, he just didn't know what it was. Not yet.

This corner of the room was a bit dim, but not in the way of a neglected corridor. More like a forgotten alcove where treasure might be found. Indeed, the closer he came to the shadowed glass, the more excited he became. He had a feeling...he thought perhaps he knew what he would find in its reflection.

And so, when he came face to face with the mirror, he stifled the cry that rose to his lips. He didn't want Hermione and Snape rushing over. Not yet. This was for him and him alone, at least for the moment.

It was no wonder he'd been so angry when he came into the Room earlier. He *knew* this Room, and it knew him. They had been in perfect harmony during the war when it had responded to the needs of students in hiding...stalwart soldiers in student robes. Entering the Room as it was now and seeing its destruction tore his heart.

But right here was what he'd sought. Within the intricate stone frame, this glass reflected the Room he knew, the Room he loved. He sat, brushing away the glass shards and piles of ash to settle himself on the floor. Cross-legged, he gazed into the mirror, watching. Remembering.

It looked just as it had ten years prior. Vibrant and bustling and alive, the Room in the mirror...and the Neville in the mirror...were busy creating a useful space... for whom? He leant forward, looking more closely.

The Neville in the mirror turned to face him and, as if he could see him there, waved. Neville narrowed his eyes, but the figure in the mirror just smiled and waved again. The Neville sitting in a sea of ash and glass lifted his hand just a little and the other smiled more broadly as if pleased with his student's progress.

Neville smirked and reached his hand over to touch the cool glass. At the contact, a feeling of well-being flowed through him, and he sighed. He leaned his forehead against the glass, and at once, the Room came alive as if animated in his own mind.

Like a ghost floating from above, he watched as the Room transformed beneath him. From bright and vibrant, it shifted to the Hall of Memory...the same Room they were in now...before it had died in a blaze of Fiendfyre.

The Hall of Memory, filled with generations of secrets from Hogwarts students and its staff alike.

The Hall of Memory, repository of the heart of Hogwarts.

The Room shifted again, frantic noise and motion until suddenly the Room was ablaze. Cries of fear and screams of rage ricocheted off the walls and chilled Neville to the bone.

They were so young, he realised. They'd been *students*, barely of age; children, fighting a war far beyond their reach.

It was only when Crabbe's cries of agony reached him that he felt Hermione and Snape behind him. As Harry's screams and Crabbe's wails shook the Room, their hands rested on his shoulders; their bodies, too, shook with the weight of innocence lost, potential squandered, and so much... far too much pain.

~**~

They sat huddled together before the mirror, dusty and tear-streaked. He'd ignored his own waves of emotion in favour of theirs, slipping back into the role of Headmaster, Head of House, Professor.

Adult in charge of vulnerable children.

Adult in charge of children he had, by all accounts, failed.

They had been his responsibility. All of them, really, but mostly his Slytherins.

Draco.

Gregory.

And Vincent.

Poor Vincent.

It had been impossible to protect them and himself at the same time. Impossible to nudge them just enough to stay out of harm's way whilst maintaining his position and attempting to keep the remainder of wizarding society safe.

None of it lessened the searing pain of hearing Vincent Crabbe's death cries.

That boy should have lived to finish his schooling, such as it was, and enter the wizarding world as a mediocre but productive member of their society. He'd had that right, deserved it. And he, Severus Snape, had failed him, and the boy had died as a result.

The mirror shone with the reflected flame of the Fiendfyre. The creatures' tongues licked the walls of the chamber, reducing its contents to cinders and the cinders to ash.

Severus wondered how long the inferno had burned before it consumed itself, leaving only this...this Hall of Memory...forever altered. Like him, annealed in the searing heat of losses and failures alike, leaving him changed in ways he'd only recently begun to appreciate.

"I used to have nightmares about him," said Hermione. "About this room. It usually got all mixed up with the end of the battle, and I just... forgot."

Severus reached out to stroke the glass, surprised that it was still cool despite the fire burning within it. "He was easy to forget." He looked sternly at Hermione and Longbottom, at their flinching in the face of reality. "Unfortunate, but true," he continued, his voice rough. "It makes his death no less tragic."

Hermione hiccupped a small sob, and he linked his hand with hers whilst still watching the fire burn itself out. He owed it to the boy. Owed it to all of them who were lost to bear witness.

So they sat, three careworn survivors, memorialising for the first time the death of one they had not ever really known and had never been given the opportunity to treasure.

And from behind the mirror, as the Fiendfyre completed its deadly circuit, a gust of wind blew through the Hall of Memory, blowing away the flames. Ash swirled through the room until another gust of air whipped it around and around...faster and faster until the stones shone with the sheen of mirrors encircling the perimeter. One last burst of Fiendfyre and the mirrors shattered, throwing shards of glass into the swirling ash.

Hatred did that, thought Severus. *I'm so sorry*. He closed his eyes, and pressed his cheek against the cool expanse of glass.

And opened them to a room filled with light.

~**~

As always, my beta thanks goes to Annie Talbot, who can break open a stubborn chapter or idea with a well-placed idea and who always makes my writing so much better. And to Ariadne who helps me to shine the light in those dark corners.

Chapter 15: Amber and Innocence

Chapter 15 of 22

It was only after Snape followed her into the neglected shop, moving furtively between the shafts of sunlight that pierced the gloom, that it occurred to him to wonder why, ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione Granger was running.

And why, in a world with magic, *real* magic, she should be seeking the counsel of a Muggle Tarot reader.

So they sat, three careworn survivors, memorialising for the first time the death of one they had not ever really known and had never been given the opportunity to treasure.

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Hatred did that, thought Severus. I'm so sorry. He closed his eyes and pressed his cheek against the cool expanse of glass.

And opened them to a room filled with light.

They buried him in a patch of sun alongside the Yew near Greenhouse nine.

They knew it wasn't *him*, not really, though Severus felt a sharp jolt of approval when Hermione conjured a crystal urn to hold what would pass for his remains. Together, they scooped some ash...carefully, reverently...into the belly of the container and closed the hinged top with a *clink*.

The Room reflected in the mirror behind them had flooded with colour and light, the touch of Severus's hand and heart its catalyst. The Room around them had followed suit as if *it* were the mirror of the one behind the glass.

Severus opened his eyes and shook his head, disoriented for a moment by the changes that had occurred in the interval whilst his heart and soul had slipped behind the mirror. Shards of glass still littered the ashy floor around them, less like ruins and more like gems glinting in the warm light.

Hermione reached down to retrieve one particularly well-formed piece and cradled it in her hands.

"This, too, I think," she murmured, and Severus drew a long finger to stroke its contour, smoothing the ragged edges with wandless magic and grief. A bead of blood rose to the surface and through a tiny break in his skin. He let it drop onto the glass with a whispered enchantment that wove his blood into its surface like a private memorial. Only then did he let Hermione fuss over him with lips and wand to heal the cut.

In the hush that comes after a great release, the Room shifted again, giving them hearth and Floo powder; they need not, it seemed to say, do this alone. Nobody had suggested it, but when Hermione said she thought she would ask the headmistress to join them, the two wizards had nodded as if they'd already all agreed.

Minerva climbed out of the hearth, making no mention of the wafts of ash and splinters of glass she landed in. They greeted her with subdued murmurs and tired nods. But the Room had no such reserve, welcoming her with a large wooden door pushing its way through the iridescent stone between two mirrors. Spots of moss dotted its surface, and it looked to Severus as if it had weathered a good many Northern winters.

"That'll be to the greenhouses, I imagine," Neville had said. "Follow me."

So they did. Through the heavy oak door and into a sunset brilliant with riotous colour.

There they lay Vincent Crabbe to rest...two fellow classmates who had not known him in life in any way that mattered and two teachers who grieved for him and for what his death meant to them all.

Severus could hardly recall the Prayers for the Dead his mother had taught him along with the Ogham. But he remembered their spirit, and this, at least, he could give the boy as they shepherded him to the next plane of existence.

So as they gathered around the tiny grave, Severus leaned down to scoop up a handful of earth, the smooth soil littered with pebbles and stray feathers from the creatures nearby, and lifted his face to the setting sun. He knelt there, his face uplifted and then bent his head as he let the earth fall from his fingers, leaving a layer of life over the ash and crystal.

Minerva's arms encircled both of her former charges. They stood, silent, respectful, waiting for him...to speak, to act, perhaps simply to release the breath they'd all been holding.

"Be at peace," he murmured at last. "May the spirits grant you, and us, the protection and peace I was unable to..." His voice broke.

"Severus," whispered Minerva.

He couldn't lift his head; shame a heavy weight on the back of his neck.

Later, he wondered how Hermione knew that *this* time, the hand he needed on his shoulder was Minerva's. But in that moment, he only knew gratitude for his older colleague's esteem and for her compassion. And that Hermione knew this...that even without her hand on his or her voice in his ear, even without any of that...he felt her constant presence like the whisper of silk on skin.

**

They made their way back to the castle by way of the meandering stone paths that dotted the landscape. The door they'd come through had melted back into the rock, but Longbottom only shrugged.

"The Room," he said, "will be there for us tomorrow."

The sun had set and the students were already in their dormitories. Days were slipping through his fingers like sand, Severus thought. He'd be worried, but the nights no longer reeked of despair, despite still having only the tiniest glimmering thread to guide them.

For now, it was enough.

"Come have a drink in my chambers," Minerva said when they reached the entry doors. "All three of you. I know I could certainly use one."

Severus could feel Hermione's fatigue and it only emphasised his own. And yet...

"Perhaps we could have a housewarming of sorts in our rooms instead," Severus said. "I believe I may have managed to smuggle some drink into the castle."

"Oh, do, Headmistress, Neville." Hermione brightened a bit. "That would be a lovely end to a very... intense day."

And so it was that the four of them spent the evening in front of the fireplace in Severus and Hermione's chambers. Perhaps it was the crackling fire, or maybe the plush wool rug that Hermione had found rolled up in the wardrobe, but it felt so *warm* there together.

Sitting with Hermione's feet in his lap, the second Firewhisky of the night in his hand, he leaned back into the plush cushions and smirked at Minerva's cackle whilst he regaled them with tales of Slytherin exploits and plots from a lifetime ago. Longbottom looked relaxed as he refilled their drinks and laughed along, and Severus realised that he had come to appreciate the young man's steady presence. Longbottom caught his eye and nodded, and Severus rewarded him with a small smile.

And later, when he and Hermione had seen their guests to the door and he lifted her into his arms to carry her into their bedchamber for the first time, his smile was of another sort entirely.

~**~

The autumn light of early morning filtered through the crack in the curtains.

Severus's arm was wrapped around her, and his fingers had threaded through hers sometime in the night. It was as if he were holding on tight through the uncertain

darkness to be sure she'd be there when he woke.

Not going away, she thought.

She squeezed his hand and dropped a kiss on his sleep-warmed skin before curling herself around their clasped hands and falling back into sleep.

**

Neville was waiting for them outside the Great Hall before breakfast. She hadn't remembered agreeing to meet, but Severus seemed to think it had been the plan, and if anyone had a right to be apprehensive about walking in *there*, it was he.

The room was loud with clinking cutlery and chattering children. Hundreds of faces looked up when the doors opened to admit them, the noise rising to match their surprise.

It might have been ten years since either one of them had crossed this particular threshold, but most of the students...the wizard-born ones at least...knew exactly who was walking down the centre aisle with Professor Longbottom towards the High Table.

Whispers flew through the air, confused, excited, anxious.

Silly. That can't be him. He's dead, remember?

The Quibbler has been saying for years that he's alive. But I'm certain it said that she was dead.

My Mum told me that she was actually the one who killed Voldemort.

My father told me that he was the one who did it.

Hermione smirked at the bits of conversation wafting around them. It had been such a long time since she'd picked up a newspaper...even before the serious Horcrux deterioration set in...that she'd forgotten how ludicrous rumours could become. It would seem the years hadn't dimmed the public's fascination for fiction about its war survivors.

The walk to the front of the room seemed endless, but finally they reached the High Table to find what looked to be a seventh-year Hufflepuff boy waiting there to greet them. The boy looked nervous and waited until they caught his eye to nod, shifting his weight slightly from side to side.

"Hufflepuff House would like to welcome you to Hogwarts, Professor Snape," he said, reaching out his hand to Severus and inclining his head towards Hermione. "Miss Granger. Welcome. And..." He stood up straighter and blushed. "Thank you."

Tears sprang to Hermione's eyes, and she willed herself not to fall apart in front of Hufflepuff House and all of Hogwarts. Severus clasped the boy's hand.

"It is an unexpected... pleasure to be back at Hogwarts Mr..." He hesitated.

"Diggory," the boy said. "Cormac Diggory. Cedric was my older brother."

Hermione felt her chest tighten. Life did, indeed, go on. "Cedric was a wonderful boy," she said. "I am honoured to have known him."

Cormac nodded, his face pale.

"Thank you for your warm welcome." She glanced at Neville who stepped forward.

"I informed my students that you and the Professor would be in residence. I also took the liberty of reminding those who might have forgot what your roles were in the war." Neville didn't back down under Severus's pointed stare. "They need to know, Professor," he said. "They need to remember."

Severus nodded, lost in his thoughts. Hermione wondered what *he* was remembering, wondered what he would want these students who he'd never met and never taught to know. What must they never forget?

"Severus?" she asked. He nodded shortly and they joined the staff for breakfast. The headmistress motioned them to sit near her, and the smiles of the other professors reassured her that they were, indeed, welcome.

How novel, Hermione thought.

She and Severus were soon swept into conversation with the others, and before they knew it, students and staff alike were rushing off to class.

"I've no Herbology lessons today," Neville said. "Shall we return to the Room, then?"

Hermione shivered. She knew they had to; she even wanted to. Mostly.

But for the first time in as long as she could remember, she felt hopeful. Over the last week, she'd experienced more moments of pleasure and happiness than anytime over the last ten years. Hope, joy, the freedom to wish for more than the grey existence she'd been living since Voldemort's destruction.

She was terrified of what might come along to extinguish that flickering light; if it died, she feared she just might go with it.

**

The Room, it seemed, had been waiting. At their approach, the translucent opening appeared, beckoning. A greeting just for them.

Inside, the space felt more open than it had the night before. The light shining from within the stone had more vibrancy, and the mirrors seemed less ragged. The ash choking the air had settled some, and Hermione itched to Vanish it, though the thought itself felt irreverent. So she settled onto the couch and watched Severus and Neville circle the room. Restless.

"What are you looking for?" she asked.

"No idea," muttered Severus, but he smiled a bit at her bemused expression. "This Room is nothing if not unexpected. So I shall allow myself to be surprised."

"Professor Snape, I never would have thought you the type," said Neville with a smirk. "Professor Trelawney would be proud." He grinned. "I, on the other hand, am looking for another door to the outside. I wonder if there's anywhere else we're meant to go."

"Oh, that's a great idea, Neville," said Hermione, rising to join them. "As is yours, Severus," she added. "It's been so long since I explored somewhere without having a plan."

Each of them continued making their own circuits around the room: Neville peered closely at the carvings in the stone, looking, apparently, for exit doors, Severus studiously avoided looking directly into any of the mirrors, but intently studied the shards on the floor, and Hermione just wandered...waiting for something, anything in the

Room to call to her.

When it happened, still, it took them aback. But really, considering that they were standing in the ruins of the Hall of Memory, coming face to face with the images of their fellow survivors frozen as if in panes of ice shouldn't have come as any sort of surprise at all.

~**~

For a split second he thought the Room was showing them a collection of Muggle portraits...giant but unmoving in frames of glass and stone so like the ones that housed their own mirrors. But who would have commissioned a Muggle portrait of Arthur Weasley, his red hair whipping in the breeze as he tried to fly a kite, or one of his son Ron, joyful and carefree on his broom, blocking Quaffles without a twinge of anxiety to be seen?

These couldn't be portraits, Severus realised, not of the four other survivors...the same four who had pushed Hermione from their midst and sent her wandering, terrified and without hope.

Rage flooded him and he struggled to take a deep breath.

None of them were at fault, he reminded himself. Their only crimes were stubbornness and isolation, and even that was as much a Horcrux effect as any personal choice. They were all victims, each one of them, shackled by the poison that had turned them inside out and left them to wither away alone.

"What is it? Severus, what did you find?" Hermione asked. Before he could answer, he heard her gasp. She reached her hand towards the glass, and he managed...just...to grab it before she made contact with the smooth surface.

"Stop," he shouted, heart pounding in his throat. "Might you *possibly* remember to refrain from touching a magical object you don't recognise?" She cringed, and he willed himself to stifle the tirade rising to his lips and to slow his racing pulse.

"Don't touch what?" Neville asked.

"They're in the glass," Hermione whispered, and Severus cringed at how small her voice sounded. He reached his hand to brush against her cheek, and his stomach clenched at the relief and gratitude in her eyes.

They're in the glass.

Severus knew it couldn't be, but it felt to him, too, as if he could reach over and touch the toddler Harry as he played on his toy broom or hear Ginny's ten-year-old laugh...uninhibited...at a practical joke George had played on Percy.

Each frozen in a moment of joy, caught as if in amber and innocence.

"Not in the glass, Hermione," Severus said. "It's not them." But what they *were* he couldn't say.

"Why can't I touch one?" she asked, petulant. "Maybe I can communicate with them this way. Every other way has failed miserably." Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes had grown glassy. Severus stepped back from the row of figures captured in the mirrors and tugged at Hermione's arm, pulling her with him.

"Look at me," he said, and she responded to the cadence of his voice more than to his words. "Come sit down; we don't know what they are, so let's not touch them until we do."

"He's right, Hermione," Neville said, approaching the mirrors. Severus looked at the young man walking towards them. He wondered when they'd become allies but realised he didn't much mind.

"I know, I know. I'm sorry," she said. She was shaking her head as if trying to clear it.

"It's a natural impulse," Severus said, stroking her arm. "But Hermione..." She looked at him and nodded, and he breathed again. "Let me see if I can determine whether these are Dark in nature, and we will decide what to do after."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Longbottom asked.

Severus paused. The boy surprised him. Again.

"Sit with Hermione," he said. "It will help me concentrate."

Longbottom nodded and sat alongside her on the couch, taking her hands in his. Severus paused, for a moment readying himself to confront the boy, but realised with a jolt that it was *all right* for Hermione's friend...*his friend, too*...to steady her this way; it took nothing away from what he and Hermione shared between them. Light-headed with relief and the unexpected pleasure of certainty, he turned back to the frozen figures.

It had been years since he'd approached an object he'd suspected harboured Darkness, but the wand movements and incantations came to him without a moment's pause. His magic flowed smoothly...*Merlin, I've missed this*...the feeling of power rushing through him, his magic rising and falling with the steady movement of his wand and the murmured spells washing over the glass.

What are you? he silently asked them. *Why are you here?*

The figures under the glass were silent.

He hadn't really expected them to answer.

~**~

"They're not Dark. I'm certain of it," said Severus. He rubbed his eyes and sat back on the couch. "I do not, however, know *what* they are. I was able to learn something of their properties, so perhaps..." He opened his hands and looked at Neville and Hermione, inviting them to discuss what the frozen images under glass might be if not Dark.

"What properties *were* you able to establish?" Hermione asked.

"Not many," he said. "They do appear to share some qualities of Pensieve memories and are not tangible objects in and of themselves. However..." He paused and murmured his thanks when Neville handed him a cup of hot tea. "However, they do not appear to have been removed from their subjects' minds and are not, technically, memories."

"They look like portraits," said Neville. "Not wizarding ones, though. More like those creepy Muggle ones that don't move."

"It's not creepy if it's what you're used to seeing, Neville," said Hermione. "Still photographs and paintings are the norm where I come from."

Neville flushed. "Sorry," he murmured.

Hermione shrugged; it didn't bother her like it used to. Wizards often forgot that the entire world wasn't comprised of revealed magic, and it no longer felt like an insult when they dismissed Muggle artefacts as if they were the playthings of children.

"Professor, do they resemble portraits in any magical sense?" Neville asked.

"Only to the degree that they seem to contain some elements of their subjects," said Severus. "And they do indeed appear to share some magical... something... with the figures they reflect."

Hermione looked over at the row of mirrors, each holding a frozen aspect of four people she had cared about for many years. Even loved.

Neville was right, she thought. They did look creepy. But not because they didn't move. She rose to take a closer look.

"Don't worry," she murmured when Severus made to block her way. "I'm not going to touch them."

She didn't *want* to touch the mirrors, truth be told. For all that they depicted moments of incandescent joy, the figures suspended in the glass made her stomach ache. Maybe it was because they looked like orphaned fragments of her friends.

Former friends.

No, *friends*, she told herself. They *were* her friends. Just, they were impaired at the moment.

She had been too. But she felt better now, so much better. In fact, being here at Hogwarts with both Neville and Severus had been more healing than she could have ever hoped. Now that she thought of it, even Neville seemed less angry than he had been when they'd first seen him hacking away at a trailing vine. And just this morning *she'd* used some of her own sophisticated magic to decorate their chambers, her magic flowing and lighter than it had felt in ages. It felt almost like *hers* again. Nearly.

Something was changing for her...for all three of them...and she knew that if the others would listen, would join them, that they'd feel it, too.

"They look so happy," Neville said. His voice trembled. "It's been such a long time since I saw any of them *happy*."

They did look as if they had each been captured in a moment of transcendent joy, and Hermione realised that the last few days had given her glimpses of incandescence that might look just so if they'd been captured in a mirror. She tried not to wonder when...if...Severus ever had felt the same.

"Severus?" He was looking at the mirrors as if his glare alone would force them to reveal their mysteries.

"Hmm?" murmured Severus, distracted. But she knew he wasn't listening. "It couldn't be," he muttered, as if in answer to a question only he heard.

He leapt to his feet and moved closer to the mirrors. "I wonder," he muttered. Without warning, he swept his arm in a wide arc across the width of the curved glass and grunted with satisfaction when streams of gossamer light flew from his wand.

"What?" Hermione asked.

"Just watch," he said. "I'm not sure..." But then he nodded, and his breath quickened as the light began to move. To dance. "See?"

She did. The threads of light from his wand plunged into the glass, wrapping around the figures inside. In an instant, light exploded within the frames, and twisted strands of light streamed back out, swirling around the perimeter of the mirrors as if pausing to consider...

...and then twisted, and knotted, and wound one around the other until the fibres had woven themselves into a radiant, multi-coloured tapestry.

"She always said that we are creatures of light," Severus murmured.

"Who did?" Hermione asked. Her heart was hammering in her chest. The twisting light reminded her of something but she couldn't remember what...and Severus looked lost in their luminous glow. "Who told you that?" she asked again.

"She told me that consorting with the Dark would obscure the light. I always wondered where it went." The last, a whisper.

"You wondered...?" Hermione murmured.

"My light," he said softly. "Mine."

"Oh, Severus," she whispered. But she didn't know what to say. She'd feared her own spirit had been drained away long ago, Darkness devouring it whole and her along with it. Only recent days had given her hope that it was still there, somewhere.

"Is it their life force?" Neville asked, looking slightly sick.

"It can't be," she said, feeling frantic. Hadn't Severus said they weren't Dark?

"No, no. Not their life force." Severus looked alarmed. "What my..." He paused and swallowed thickly. "What my grandmother meant, I think, is that everything we do has a cost and is itself a creation," he said. "The balance between Dark and Light is not merely metaphor." He gestured to the glowing tapestry.

They sat, silently watching the threads undulate, light spilling from the weaving as if it couldn't contain it all.

"So what are they?" Neville asked. He reached his hand towards the tapestry but even before his fingers could make contact, he cried out.

Not pain, Hermione thought.

Joy?

"Neville?" she asked. His expression was rapturous as he stood in the glow of the tangles of light. "Neville?"

"It's wonderful," he whispered.

"What do you feel?" Severus asked.

"I feel brilliant!" Neville said.

Hermione laughed. "Obviously," she said. "But *why* do you feel brilliant?"

"It's just... joy," he said. "I can't explain it, you have to experience it. Come." He motioned for them to come closer.

Severus looked hesitant, and Hermione was reluctant to move forward without him.

"Severus?"

He looked at her, and she saw the desire there, his burning need..*wish...hope...fear* spilling over.

"A little joy couldn't hurt, could it?"

He shook his head. She reached for his hand and pretended not to notice that it was shaking. They stepped forward and leaned in towards the tapestry.

There was a brush of warm air and the tinkling sound of laughter. Innocence, and the anticipation of a sunny day with nothing but green grass and time to play stretching out ahead. It felt like the essence of hope and joy, made luminous.

Severus had closed his eyes, his face turned towards the weaving as if it were the sun shining down on his skin. He looked like a parched man, finally sated.

"What are they?" Hermione asked. "Being near them... it's astonishing."

"I'm not sure," Severus murmured. "Perhaps containers of some sort, holding an aspect of their..." He paused.

"Spirit?" she asked. "Light?"

"Light," he echoed.

"Where are ours, then?" Neville asked.

Severus looked startled. "Good question." He glanced over at their own mirrors. "I wonder," he said, "if our mirrors looked like this before we entered the Room."

"But ours are broken," said Neville.

"Indeed," said Severus. "Which leads me to wonder which is the preferred state."

Oh!

"The breaks in the glass might not be a sign of destruction, but a sign of..." Neville's eyes were wide.

"Healing," Hermione murmured.

"Possibly," said Severus. "Perhaps contact with the mirrors breaks them and reactivates a natural process that has been frozen. The natural antidote to the Dark," he continued, "is Light."

"Where do we find it, then?" asked Neville. "I haven't seen much laying around lately."

Severus snorted. "Indeed." He paused, considering. "Increasing the Light in each of the afflicted is likely to be the only way to succeed," he said, and Hermione wondered how he could talk about such a thing so calmly...clinically, as if it were about a potion that needed brewing and would be readied in a fortnight. "If my experience is any indication," he was saying, "there is no banishing of the Dark. The best we can do is counterbalance it."

It felt to her as if he'd extinguished all the torches in the room. Counterbalance the Dark? Hadn't that been what she tried to do every time she crusaded on behalf of someone in need? Hadn't it been behind every effort she'd made to convince the others something was terribly wrong?

"I can't, Severus," she said, panicked. "Every time I've tried it's been a disaster."

There had been a time long ago where she might have seen herself as someone whose presence was nourishing, who could bring light into a dismal situation, but not anymore. Severus and Neville could go ahead, they could approach the others. She would stay away. She felt herself floating, as if she were sinking back into the hopelessness that had brought her to the Muggle card reader a scant few days ago.

Through the encroaching Darkness, she heard Neville's voice saying something that seemed important, but it sounded too far away. Severus was talking, too, but his words were swept beneath the roaring waves pounding in her head. She looked up and saw Neville's mouth moving and thought she might have heard the word, *friend* floating through the air and pushing against the edge of the fog.

But it was Severus who cut through the buzzing at last with his voice and the warmth of his hands on her skin.

He'd inched closer and brought his hand up the length of her arm, tracing the line of her shoulder, finally resting at the nape of her neck. Her breathing deepened at his touch, and she felt the Darkness recede.

His mouth was close to hers now, hot breath on her face, and she felt the blood rushing through her. Neville was right there, but she didn't care, she only wanted...

"Your spirit, your light, it's *right here*, Hermione," Severus was saying. "It's this feeling, right here. You *know* how to bring it; you create it in me every time you look at me."

And then he was kissing her, and she knew just exactly what he meant because all at once, every cell of her body was filled with light.

~**~

My heartfelt thanks to Annie Talbot and Mia Madwyn whose input prevented this chapter from being a pile of gibberish. This was a particularly tricky interval, and their input (and time spent going over and over elements of the chapter) has been absolutely invaluable.

Chapter 16: Lost and Found

Chapter 16 of 22

It was only after Snape followed her into the neglected shop, moving furtively between the shafts of sunlight that pierced the gloom, that it occurred to him to wonder why, ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione Granger was running.

And why, in a world with magic, *real* magic, she should be seeking the counsel of a Muggle Tarot reader.

His mouth was close to hers now, hot breath on her face, and she felt the blood rushing through her. Neville was right there, but she didn't care, she only wanted...

"Your spirit, your light, it's right here, Hermione," Severus was saying. "It's this feeling, right here. You know how to bring it; you create it in me every time you look at me."

And then he was kissing her, and she knew just exactly what he meant because all at once, every cell of her body was filled with light.

The air in the Room felt clearer when she lifted her head again, as if Severus's kiss had seared through a layer of fog that she hadn't realised was there. His eyes were bright, and she thought she'd never seen anything more antithetical to Darkness in her life.

"I'm better now," she whispered. Severus's fingers lingered for a moment against her cheek before he drew them away.

"Indeed," he murmured, and she blushed even as she leaned into his touch.

They sat, the three of them, as the tea on the table grew cold.

"It never helped with Hannah." Neville's voice broke the silence; his eyes were fixed on Severus and Hermione's clasped hands.

"What didn't?" she asked.

"Her touch. Mine. None of it," he said. "Talking didn't help either. Usually just made it worse." Irritation saturated the air around him, and Hermione leaned forward to catch his eye.

"Neville," she said, relieved when he looked up. "It didn't help with Ron, either. Actually, the harder we tried, the worse it got."

She looked at Severus, and her eyes grew soft at the look of cloaked pride on his face. So it did mean something to him that his touch pulled her from the abyss. She smiled.

"What Severus and I have... it was a surprise."

Still is, she thought. Every time.

"How did you figure it out?" Neville asked.

"We didn't," said Severus. "It was... unexpected."

Hermione blushed at the gleam in his eye, remembering the night they met, the dusty wooden floor, and kisses that chased away the Darkness with their searing heat. With their Light.

It sat between them, this feeling...the knowledge that there was a way out, or through, though none of them knew precisely how. All they knew was that each of them had felt its blessed relief at some point and that Hermione and Severus could reach for it by reaching for one another.

"We have to tell the others," Neville said. "Soon, I think."

Hermione felt Severus flinch and was grateful she wasn't the only one who wanted to avoid the Burrow and its extended family forever.

"I don't want to go," she said. "They hate me," she said, grateful for Severus's hand in hers. "They have good reason to hate me."

"Yeah, Hannah told me how angry they were," Neville said. He fidgeted with his teacup. "Back when she was still speaking to me."

Hermione nodded. "I didn't mean to." She fought back her tears. "Ron. You know."

"Well, no," Neville said. "Doesn't change the fact, though, does it?"

He was right, Hermione thought. The fact remained that her rage had nearly killed a man she had cared for since they had both been children. No, they would not be pleased to see her.

"You two go on without me," she said. "My being there will just make it harder for everyone."

"Absolutely not," Severus said. "I don't imagine that the residents of the Burrow will be any more pleased at my appearance than yours. Recall Mrs Potter's..." He paused, scowling. "...welcome upon seeing me in Hogsmeade."

"Seeing *us*, Severus," Hermione said. "You were, you'll forgive me, beside the point. She hates *me*. You were a bonus."

Severus huffed, but Neville burst out laughing.

Hermione flinched, but Severus just folded his arms and eyed Neville as if he were a particularly unpredictable batch of bobotubers.

"We go together," Neville said. "Being alone hasn't done any of us a whit of good, and the three of us together will pack quite a wallop, I'd say."

"Fine." Hermione swallowed hard. "But I'm not doing *any* of the talking."

This time it was Severus who laughed.

~**~

She was restless; it radiated from every pore, and it was making him jumpy.

"Hermione," he said, "come to bed."

At least she stopped pacing.

The window coverings were pulled back, the grounds lit by distant starlight. Winter was falling fast, and the air outside was as clear as the windowpane. Hermione's hands pressed against the glass as if she might melt through it and into the night.

"I'm afraid," she whispered, so softly he almost didn't hear.

He came up from behind and wrapped his arms around her.

"When was the last time you were not afraid?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Before?" she asked. "Before you found me, I don't know," she said, thinking. "There was a bit of relief after the war, I guess, but that didn't last long. Before that? Maybe... maybe fifth year." She paused. "I was too angry to be afraid fifth year. Mostly." Severus could see her grim smile reflected in the glass.

Severus nodded. "It's been too long," he said. Her body shook, and he recognised the mix of desperate hope and blinding fear that he had carried with him for decades.

"I know what it is to live in constant fear, Hermione." He met her eyes in the glass and knew that she was listening. "It's like a serpent in the belly, writhing inside you, waiting for its time to strike. Every breath you take hinges on its whim."

Hermione turned to face him, and he drew her in closer still. Her fingers rose to stroke his lips as if she could capture the words in her hands.

"Is it like this for other people?" she asked. "Does everyone walk around waiting for the sky to fall?"

He grasped her hands in his and kissed her fingers. He'd lived his life in fear. Certainly he faced it, channelled it, ruthlessly repressed it. There had, he knew, been no other choice. He had no regrets: only for the lost innocence that he could still taste on Hermione's skin.

"Hermione, it's over for the rest of the wizarding world. *We* are the ones in danger now. From ourselves and one another." He stroked her hair. "Inner demons are far worse," he whispered, almost to himself.

She nodded, leaning into his embrace, her body moulding to his, and he thrilled at the sight of her eyes fluttering shut.

He swept his fingertips across her skin. Her cheeks were flushed, her breathing shallow.

"I won't let them harm you." Her skin was hot as he breathed the words into the shell of her ear.

She hummed her agreement, and her body shook with each stroke of his lips against the curve of her jaw, her ear, her cheekbone. "I'll be safe," she whispered. "I'll be with you."

His hands were trembling as he brought them to frame her face, his thumbs tracing the line of her cheekbones, tracing a path to the fullness of her lower lip before he kissed her.

Her lips were hot, and her hands were trembling as she led him to their bed. There, under cover of darkness and feather blankets, with every whisper of skin on skin, with each sigh and murmured endearment, they wove the armour behind which they would keep one another safe tomorrow.

~**~

They lingered over breakfast long after the students had vacated the Great Hall.

"It's Sunday," Hermione said. "They'll all be there for supper. I say we stay here until then. What's the hurry?"

"I think we should approach Mr Weasley alone first," said Longbottom. "He always seemed like a reasonable wizard."

Hermione muttered something inaudible, and Severus smirked.

"Hermione is undoubtedly concerned that Mr Weasley will hex first and ask questions later," he said.

"But we'll be together," said Longbottom. "Won't that help?"

Severus leaned back in his chair, brow furrowed. The boy had a point. Each of them had, alone, spun into deepening spirals of despair. Together, though...the connection to each injured soul had brought a measure of healing.

"We've experienced the benefits of finding one another," Severus said. "Hermione, you said that you didn't observe the same improvements during the time you were in contact with the Weasleys and Potters, correct?"

She shook her head, and Severus wanted to reach over and smooth the wrinkles between her brows...to soothe the pain of remembrance.

"It was the opposite," she said. "We'd be together and every vile thought or feeling burst out. It was horrible." She shuddered.

"Hmm." It was right there, the inkling of an idea. But each time he came close, it slipped away.

"We should bring them back here, I think," said Neville.

"Bring whom back, Mr Longbottom?"

Severus looked up.

"Good morning, Minerva," he said before Longbottom could respond. "We missed you at breakfast, when it is customary for attendees to mingle and make conversation. It is, unfortunately, no longer breakfast." His glare was half hearted, and he knew it. "The scones were particularly flaky this morning. Shame you missed them." He turned away from the headmistress.

Hermione and Longbottom were barely breathing, and Severus stifled a snicker. They'd never seen him at ease with his former colleagues like this, never seen him banter with the others behind the scenes. It had been years since he and Minerva had interacted thus; he wondered if the intervening years had shattered the camaraderie that he had once treasured.

He held his breath and swore he could hear his heart beating. He glanced at his former colleague; Minerva's eyes narrowed for an instant.

"I am perfectly capable of ordering up my own scones, Severus," she said crisply, but the crinkling around the corners of her eyes belied her tone. "But I thank you for your heartfelt concern on my behalf." She smirked, and Severus inclined his head.

He wasn't using Legilimency...wouldn't, not without explicit permission...but he was sure that he heard her voice...*It's good to have you back, Severus...* He was sure of it.

~**~

The headmistress insisted they return to her office for another round of tea and managed to corral half the senior staff along the way. By the time they reached the gargoyles standing sentry at the door, she'd gathered an entourage of brainpower and magical strength Hermione imagined might only be rivalled by the Wizengamot, though given her experiences with the Ministry, she rather doubted it.

The circular room was flooded with sunlight, throwing shadows along the nooks and crannies of the crowded space. Piles of papers teetered atop the headmistress's desk, a quill laid precisely atop the shortest as if to mark her place.

Hermione's hands gripped the back of the leather chair in front of the desk. She stood, unable to look away from the portrait hanging behind it...the image of the man whose secrecy and need for control had saved them and damned them. He looked smaller rendered in paint and oddly vulnerable with his eyes closed.

"Still asleep, Headmaster?" Hermione murmured. But the portrait continued its soft snoring. Hermione spared only a moment to wish that she, too, could pretend the outside world didn't exist...didn't need her...before turning her attention to the conversation happening around the table by the hearth.

"Marvellous!" said Flitwick, his arms waving. "The crystallisation of joy and innocence...what a wondrous thing."

"It would be far more wondrous if it resided at its source, Filius," said Severus.

"Well, of course, of course," said the diminutive professor. "But then I cannot *imagine* the force it would take to splinter..."

Hermione winced and glanced at the portrait again. She was frozen there, halfway between the vigorous argument brewing by the fire and the soft sounds of portrait sleep.

The headmaster's eyes opened a crack.

"Yes, well, we all know now," Minerva was saying. "And the splintering didn't end with Riddle. Obviously."

The portrait of Dumbledore let out a sigh, and Hermione thought she might have seen a flash of pain and compassion cross his painted face.

"You knew?" she murmured, not expecting the portrait to hear.

He lifted his head and looked directly at her. His eyes were as blue as they had been in life, but filled with fear and pain that she'd never been privy to.

"Did you know?" A terrible certainty was rising inside of her.

"Not while it was happening to me," the portrait said softly. "I couldn't see it. It was only later, when I realised what I'd done." He stroked his beard with a shaky hand.

"How could you not see?" Hermione asked, oblivious to the startled silence behind her.

"The same way your friends Harry and Ron cannot see, Miss Granger," he said. "The fear of the thing is often more daunting than the thing itself."

"You were afraid?" she asked. How could he have been afraid? How had he *dared* to be afraid? They had needed him, had counted on him. He was supposed to be thinking clearly, not impaired by...

"I always understood Severus far better than he knew, Miss Granger," he said. "And now, you."

"What does that mean? I have been nothing but honest and forthright..."

Dumbledore's hands were raised as if to ward off her words.

"No, no, I never meant to imply that you were deceitful or manipulative," he said quickly. "I speak of the wish to undo the pain by sheer force of will. And, if I may, a tendency towards avoidance when anger is involved."

Oh. That.

"Oh." She looked at the portrait again, but this time, she saw him. An old man, a brilliant wizard, but frightened. Flawed. Flawed in part *because* of his brilliance.

"I was always able to fix things. Before," she whispered.

"As was I, Miss Granger. As was I."

He had survived more than a hundred years after the tragedies that had changed his life. Survived and did the best he could to keep the wizarding world safe from those who would harm it. It occurred to her that perhaps the feeling of forgiveness belonged with the liberated shards of glass on the floor of the Room of Requirement.

She stood straighter. "What do we do?" she asked.

"The only thing you can do," he said. "Show them what they've lost."

For a split second Hermione thought the sound exploding in her ears was her heart thundering. In actuality, it was the cacophony made by no less than seven witches and wizards who had quite a bit to say...once the shouting was done...to the painted wizard on the wall, and who were about to focus their considerable energies crafting a plan.

~**~

The light was already fading by the time they Apparated from outside Hogwarts' gates to the outskirts of Ottery St Catchpole. Hermione had insisted that they walk the final leg of the journey, a combination of anxiety and procrastination fuelling her. Still, the others *had* conceded that Apparating at the doorstep would likely be a bad move.

From the distance, they could see light glimmering in the windows and the blur of movement from inside the ramshackle house.

"Let's go," said Neville. "It's cold out here."

Hermione nodded absently. Her eyes were on Severus as he marched them forward, his gaze fixed on the house, wand held high as he kept the box and its contents aloft. The glow seeping out through the seams of the container called to her, and the urge to lay her hands on the box as if to warm them was nearly irresistible.

"The door is that way," said Hermione, pointing to the path leading to the front of the house.

Severus nodded and led the way. Only stubborn refusal to abandon him kept her by his side; her stomach was churning.

But all Hermione's fretting about facing that closed door was for naught; before they reached the entry, the wooden door opened as if the wind had blown it wide. Molly Weasley stood framed in the doorway, firelight flickering behind her.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" she said impatiently. "Hurry up and come inside already. It's about time you lot got here."

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The Burrow was as warm as she remembered from Hogwarts days...more recent memory containing far more chill. Molly had served up tea before any of them could protest, and they sat by the fire, silence blanketing them.

"Where are the others, Molly?" Hermione asked. "Isn't Sunday usually..." She stopped at the look of pain on Molly's face.

"There is no more *usually*, Hermione," she said. "It's all fallen apart now." The older woman looked at her. "After what you did...what happened with Ron..." Molly held up her hand as Hermione made to interrupt. "Let me finish," she said. "You ran off so fast that by the time I had things calmed down here, I couldn't find you. I know you thought I didn't notice what was going on all those months... years," she whispered. "I'm not as blind as you think."

Hermione felt Severus's arm around her shoulders; she hadn't noticed that she'd begun to shiver. Molly raised her eyebrows only briefly, and it was all Hermione could do to stay focused on what the other woman was saying.

"They've been terribly erratic, more so since you left." Molly leaned forward and placed a hand on Hermione's arm. "Please tell me that you're here because you've figured

out what to do."

Hermione recognised the look of desperation on her face. It mirrored the agony she'd been carrying around for what felt like forever.

Before she could answer, Severus did.

"I wish I could tell you that we knew the answers," he said. His voice was so sad, Hermione thought, as if the weight of all of their suffering was on his shoulders alone. "We have made some progress, and we came tonight in the hope that we could convince the others to come back with us to Hogwarts." He looked at Neville and back to Hermione. "We believe that if all of us come together in one place...every injured survivor...there is a possibility that the solution will become clear."

"Maybe it will provide us with the missing ingredient, as it were." Neville's voice surprised her, and she was grateful that she'd still not needed to speak. She didn't know if she could, not with her heart in her throat.

Molly nodded, looking from one wizard to the other. "I still expect them to show up tonight, you know," she said. "They refuse to commit, but it seems they can't stay away." She shook her head. "It's usually miserable when they get here, but I won't turn any of them out."

"How did you know we were coming, Molly?" Hermione asked. She was surprised by the sound of her own voice; she'd felt frozen even in the warm room.

Molly glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. Hermione had forgotten that she, too, was represented there, had forgotten that her comings and goings...the ups and downs of hearth and heart...were tracked by Molly's magical clock.

"For a long time, yours just said, *Lost*," she said softly. "Sometimes it would wander like it was looking for a place to land."

Hermione felt her eyes fill and wished away the tears, to no avail.

"About a week ago, it said, *Desperate* and then..." Molly stopped with a squeak.

Hermione looked up, heart clenching at the mingled hope and sadness on the older woman's face. "Then, what?" she whispered.

"It just settled on, *Home*. None of your hands...any of the five of you...had been on *Home* for the longest time. I still can't understand it..." She looked distracted for a moment before her eyes focused again. "Anyway, that's when I knew that maybe you'd found it. The solution. I thought maybe you'd... well, maybe you'd come here and let us know."

Hermione didn't plan to, she just flung herself at the older woman...the witch whose esteem she'd never been sure of, but whose heartfelt hopes penetrated her own fear and defensiveness in one fell swoop. Molly gathered her close, soft arms welcoming her back, and Hermione sobbed her relief.

When they separated at last, Hermione gave a last watery smile to Molly and sat back down next to Severus. He looked relieved, she thought, and she was grateful that he seemed to accept her need for the other woman.

"Mrs Weasley," Neville said, looking speculatively at the clock on the mantle across from him. "What do you mean that the hands hadn't been set on *Home* for a long time?"

Molly lifted her wand to summon her clock.

"Each hand is keyed to its signifier," she said, pointing to each hand as it moved from spot to spot. "As you can see, the hands don't stay still. Usually they are steady when a person is in one spot...Home, School, Work, or they move temporarily, for example if someone is in transit." She paused. "I didn't notice for a long time, only after Hermione... well, after she left. But the hands are never at rest these days. Only Hermione's, now."

"May I see?" Hermione asked, and Molly placed the clock in her hands.

She'd never touched it, not in all the years she'd spent practically living there. Each of the hands holding the image of a family member...by fate or choice...quivered with energy. She traced the line of her own clock hand and relaxed as warmth and safety flooded her. *Home*. It still pointed there despite her presence at the Burrow. Molly said that it had been set there since earlier in the week.

She rubbed her fingertip against the glass above her image and sighed. It felt like an anchor had been driven deep into the earth, keeping her grounded and steady. No wonder her clock hand had finally stilled. She'd found her home.

Hermione squeezed Severus's hand and caught his eye, hoping Molly wouldn't notice the blush staining her cheeks. Severus tilted his head, puzzled, but she shook her head and squeezed his hand again.

Turning her hand back to the clock, she eyed the clock hands of her estranged friends: Ron, red-faced and sullen; Harry, eyes downcast, brow furrowed; Ginny, eyes narrowed suspiciously, darting back and forth as if searching for something; and Arthur, looking vacant but irritable. She drew her finger along their outlines and drew a sharp breath. She could *feel* them there, each one distinct but linked by gnawing pain and restless anger. Restless in their quest to run from it, Hermione realised in a rush. Unable to stop lest the Darkness finally catch them.

They didn't know, she thought. They didn't know they were carrying it inside themselves like a cancer. All they could do was run.

The sound of Molly sniffing roused her from her thoughts. The older witch looked at the clock and her face fell. "They are lost, Hermione, aren't they? They're all lost."

Hermione knelt at Molly's feet and reached for her hands. "No, they're not lost anymore, Molly. We've found them. We just have to let them know and persuade them to listen."

Severus snorted, and Molly shot him a wry glance.

"Not the best trait of any one of them, is it, Severus?" she asked. "You've had enough years' experience attempting to get them to *listen* to know."

"Well, it helps when what you're supposed to listen to is *explicit*," interrupted Neville, sounding miffed. "The professor spent our school years giving us the instructions we could hear, and then the ones we were supposed to *intuit*."

"If you'd even complied with the instructions written on the *blackboard*, Longbottom, that would have sent me into paroxysms of joy," Severus drawled.

Hermione giggled, her relief like a current of warm air. They were *bantering*, *playing* with one another...like friends. Like allies. Molly was smiling, and the fire was popping, and just for a moment, it felt as if everything might be all right after all.

Until a whoosh of air announced the shifting of all four hands in question simultaneously.

They were back.

Alpha and Beta reading thanks to Annie Talbot and Mia Madwyn.

Chapter 17: Reunions

Chapter 17 of 22

It was only after Snape followed her into the neglected shop, moving furtively between the shafts of sunlight that pierced the gloom, that it occurred to him to wonder why, ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione Granger was running. And why, in a world with magic, *real* magic, she should be seeking the counsel of a Muggle Tarot reader.

Hermione giggled, her relief like a current of warm air. They were bantering, playing with one another...like friends. Like allies. Molly was smiling, and the fire was popping, and just for a moment, it felt as if everything might be all right after all.

Until a whoosh of air announced the shifting of all four hands in question simultaneously.

They were back.

It *would* be Ron who came through the door first, Hermione thought, his hair as red as his face as he barrelled in from the dark outside. She'd barely had time to draw breath before he saw them and stopped cold...and even then, he was immobile only for an instant.

"What in the bloody hell is *she* doing here?" Ron bellowed, moving into the room with a speed usually reserved for playing Quidditch.

Molly leapt to her feet, a swirl of fierce protectiveness.

"I asked her here, Ron," she said. She set her jaw firmly. "In fact, all three of them are invited guests."

Ron looked startled; he hadn't noticed Neville and Severus there at all.

"Him," he said, fixing his gaze on Severus, his voice hard.

Hermione held her breath.

"Somebody had better tell me what the *hell* is going on," Ron growled, his eyes darting between her and Severus.

Hermione felt Severus shift as if to stand. She didn't know whether to encourage him or to try to keep him away from the storm of rage and pain that, in this case, had nothing to do with him. For as much as Ron's explosiveness was fuelled by Horcrux damage, his grudge was still with *her*.

"What are you bellowing about in there, you stupid git?" Ginny's voice interrupted, and Hermione flinched at the sneer that crossed the younger woman's face. "Ah, carry on, then," she said. "Finding *vermin* in the house demands its fair share of bellowing."

"Stop it this instant, young lady," Molly snapped. "You will not speak that way about guests in my house."

Ginny's eyes narrowed, and Hermione's stomach roiled at the look of pure venom Ginny shot at her mother. Into the poisonous silence, Arthur and Harry appeared, their own murmured conversation cut short at the sight of Molly standing toe to toe with two of her children. Ron still wore a scowl but took a step back at the sight of his father. For an instant Ginny might have looked hopeful before she, too, regained her footing.

Molly, her children forgotten for the moment, took a step closer to her husband. Hermione wrapped her arms around herself, feeling like a voyeur as she watched the older witch reach a shaky hand towards Arthur. His eyes were glazed, and his gaze slipped past her; Molly's outstretched hand dropped to her side, restless as if searching for something to do...some way to soothe. She looked so weary, Hermione thought.

"Molly?" Arthur asked, looking everywhere but at his wife. He caught sight of Hermione and stiffened. "What's happening here?" He looked confused, Hermione thought. And beneath the irritability, afraid.

"Arthur, it's like I've been telling you. I knew she'd come back," Molly said.

"Why?" He turned to face his wife. "Why did you let her come here?"

Molly's face fell. Hermione saw her resignation and her exhaustion. They had, she realised, been over this topic before.

"We need her, Arthur," Molly said, but it sounded to Hermione like she was talking to herself. "We need *them*."

"Need whom? Molly?"

Severus stood before Hermione could stop him, and Arthur took a step back, startled.

"Ginny said she'd seen you, but I hardly believed it," he said, sounding focused for the first time since he'd arrived.

Ginny muttered something under her breath, and Arthur's eyes lost focus again.

"Mr Weasley... Arthur," Severus said. His voice was commanding, Hermione thought, and it seemed to pull Arthur from the haze that had swallowed him. The older man nodded and took a deep breath.

"Severus." He looked him in the eye and stood straighter. "Why are you here?" He glanced at Hermione and back again at Severus. "Why is *she* here?" His voice was angry, and Hermione's heart fell. She hadn't realised how much she'd hoped that time had softened his rage or that it might have simply dissipated like drops of water in the fog that engulfed him.

She must have moved or made a sound because Severus gestured for her to wait, and she did, no matter how much she wanted to pour out the story of the last week...seeking vindication, perhaps, for her prior efforts to convince them, efforts they'd roundly ignored. Instead, she stayed still, a glance at Neville helping her to feel less like a helpless bystander. He, too, had kept his peace, and she wondered what it was like for him to watch this drama unfold.

"We three are here," Severus began, his eyes resting on each of them in turn, "because we have all suffered a grievous injury, and we believe the only way to fix it is by working together."

"I'm fine," Harry interrupted. He moved to stand next to Ginny, his jaw set and his eyes flashing. "We're *all* fine. Hermione badgered us for years. Tried to convince us something *else* had gone wrong. Tried to tell us that it wasn't over yet...as if killing the great snake hadn't finished the job," he said. "I see she's taken you in, and *you*, Neville." He snorted. "If you ask me, it's all just an excuse for bad behaviour."

Hermione drew a sharp breath but kept silent. Years of arguments and efforts to persuade them with logic had got her nowhere. There was no reason to think tonight would be any different.

"Whose bad behaviour, Harry, yours?" Neville asked. Hermione looked up, surprised. He'd leapt to his feet, eyes flashing, but his voice was soft.

"You're one to talk, aren't you, Neville?" said Ron. "Hannah told us how you'd row, how many times you trashed the pub in a temper."

"True," Neville said. "Funny, isn't it, though, that none of us wondered how I'd suddenly developed a terrible temper?"

The room fell silent, and it felt to Hermione like a wire had been pulled taut between them, all of them holding their collective breaths to see when it would snap.

"None of you wondered?" Severus's words were like ice, Hermione thought, but his implicit support warmed her.

"We're not children anymore, Snape," Ginny snapped. "Quit condescending."

Severus turned to her and inclined his head in apology. "Mrs Potter, my intention was not to condescend, only to inquire."

Ginny huffed but otherwise remained silent. Severus held her gaze, respectful, waiting for her to continue, and it seemed to Hermione that the younger witch grew a touch less agitated.

"She..." Ginny glared at Hermione. "Hermione kept at us. Especially in the last year or two before she..." She clenched her jaw.

"Just say it, Ginny," Hermione said. "Before I lost it completely. Before I went off on Ron and put him through the plate glass window." She looked Ginny in the eye, but the other witch stared at her, cold eyes burrowing into her until she shuddered, looking disgusted, and turned to Severus.

"I supposed you're accustomed to consorting with thugs, aren't you Snape? You seemed right cosy with the Carrows. Birds of a feather, eh?" She sneered at Hermione.

Hermione's head began to pound. This had been a mistake, she thought. There was too much hatred here and not even an iota of trust. But Severus just stood, considering. Ginny seemed put off by his calm, and even a little bit afraid.

"It is the worst agony to know that you must act in a way you abhor, that you have no choice; even worse to find you've done something horrifying and to know that it's entirely outside of your control," Severus said softly.

Ginny swung around to look at him; the lines of her body were taut, muscles and ligaments poised to strike. But Severus held her gaze, his hands held out in front of him as if in supplication.

Ginny muttered something Hermione couldn't hear, but Severus just nodded.

"I am genuinely sorry for the pain I caused you whilst acting as headmaster, Mrs Potter," he said. "I've long regretted never having had the chance to say that to you. You were a worthy adversary."

Ginny's stance relaxed slightly, still wary, but calmer. She kept her eyes on Severus, the two of them taking one another's measure.

"You had *choices*." Her cheeks were flushed, and Hermione wondered if she appreciated the irony of her words after her actions in recent years.

"Very few that would have left you and your friends alive and intact," he said.

Ginny paused, and Hermione saw her grimace at the memory. "It was horrible," she said.

"It was," he agreed. "All the more since it was not by choice." Severus paused.

Ginny looked dazed, but nodded. Severus inclined his head, satisfied.

"What is it you're saying, then, Snape?" Harry asked. "You're implying there is something outside our control now?"

"Why are you even listening to that wanker?" Ron interrupted before Severus could respond. "When did he ever tell us the truth?"

"Now, Ron," Molly said, but he was on a roll.

"Don't 'Ron' me, Mother. I'll say it like it is. Ginny's right, we're not children...quit trying to shush me. He's a liar. He's always been a liar..."

"I was a spy, Mr Weasley," Severus interrupted. He stepped forward so that he was face to face with Ron. "Of all people, I would expect *you* to appreciate the subtlety required of a spy."

"Who, Ron?" Harry snickered. "Ron has all the subtlety of a bludger, Snape."

Ron looked torn, and Hermione almost felt sorry for him. Severus smiled, which only intensified Ron's confused expression.

Ignoring Harry, Severus continued. "Were the rumours incorrect, then?" he asked.

"Wh... which rumours do you mean?"

"That your success against McGonagall's giant chess set your first year was no fluke."

Ron blinked.

"That despite your abysmal performance in the classroom, you have the mind of a strategist."

He blinked again, but his eyes were clear.

"Well. I mean, yes. I play chess."

Severus nodded and swept his arm in a wide arc, encompassing the room and all its occupants.

"Your chessboard, Mr Weasley." Severus folded his arms and waited.

Hermione looked between the two men, astonished. In all her years with Ron, not once had her admonishments to use his skill or intelligence triggered anything more than defensiveness and arguments. But now, Ron had stopped shouting and was blinking rapidly whilst looking around the room at witches and wizards he'd known virtually all his life.

Neville had crouched near where Ginny sat on the floor, while Hermione stayed huddled on the couch. Harry kept throwing anxious glances towards his wife but didn't move. Arthur had drifted towards the hearth; Hermione wondered if he was drawn to the warmth of the fire or the lure of the Floo.

"It's all wrong," Ron muttered. "Nobody is where they're supposed to be."

"Indeed not. Say more, Mr Weasley," said Severus.

Ron looked at him sharply, but Severus just raised his eyebrow.

"I can't describe it. Don't know why I didn't see it," he said. His eyes roamed around the room, finally settling on his father. "Dad never let things get so out of hand... before..." His voice was small, and Hermione thought of the young boy who was always confident that his father could sort out any trouble.

"No, he didn't," whispered Ginny. "What happened to him?" She looked over at the hearth where Arthur stood, apparently oblivious to the conversation.

"Arthur?" Molly walked over to him and put a tentative hand on his shoulder.

"I've failed them, haven't I?" he mumbled. "Molly, have I failed them after all?"

"No, Arthur, you haven't failed them," she murmured. "It's not your fault."

He turned to his wife; his shoulders were bowed as if they carried the weight of the world. Hermione whimpered.

"Whose fault should it be, Molly, if not mine? Aren't they mine to protect?"

"And mine, Arthur," said Severus. The older man looked beaten, but he was attentive as Severus stepped towards him. "We couldn't protect them from this. We had no idea it was a threat."

"So what is it, Snape?" Harry asked, voice sharp. "What is the bogeyman *this time* that you've failed to protect us from?"

"Harry!" Molly glared at him, but he brushed past her to stand next to Ron.

"Horcruxes, Mr Potter," Severus said. "Perhaps you've heard of them?"

~**~

Potter's face froze.

"I *knew* it!" Potter bellowed. "Why am I not surprised *you* knew about those vile... those abominations?"

Severus felt as if he'd been punched. It shouldn't have surprised him that Potter would assume that he'd played a part in handicapping them during the war. Never an ally, always an enemy.

"Ah, but I have nothing on you, Potter," said Severus. "After all, you walked around with one inside you for nearly seventeen years, did you not?"

Potter looked as if he might strike him, Severus thought, but he stood his ground, waiting for the words to sink in.

"What are you on about, Snape?"

"I already told you, Mr Potter. Horcruxes. Which, as we've established, I do know something about. Though you are incorrect in your assumption that I knew of them during the war. It's only recently that I learned of their existence in relation to your quest."

"What about them, then?"

"I understand you had intimate contact with several during the war."

"What's it to you?"

"It wouldn't be much of anything to me had I not been *bitten* by one myself. Not unlike Mr Weasley, here."

Molly gasped, and he briefly regretted the tactic. He'd watched from a distance after Arthur had been bitten by the snake; he'd watched the family rally around him and tried not to envy their closeness. None of them could have predicted how that snakebite would come back to haunt them.

"You apparently aren't any worse for the wear," Potter muttered.

"Ah, but that's where you're wrong, Mr Potter," said Severus. "Neither I nor any of you who were also exposed to a Horcrux have escaped unscathed." He looked around the room. "Look at yourselves. Is this how any of you imagined your lives ten years after the Dark Lord's defeat?" He looked into those green eyes and swallowed hard. "Is *this* what Dumbledore led you to expect, Mr Potter?"

The boy looked stricken. Boy. Yes, in that moment, he looked as he had the day Severus had found him standing over Draco, covered in blood. Shocked. Terrified by a truth he'd never considered.

"Dumbledore told us..." His cheeks bore an unhealthy flush.

Severus felt a twinge. One day, he thought, he would no longer have the job of shattering perceptions. But not today.

"The headmaster did not always tell the full story even to those whose help he enlisted," Severus said, and he saw Potter grow pale.

"Did he... did he *know*?"

"I don't think so, Harry." Hermione's voice was soft. "I, erm... I hadn't planned to, but I talked with his portrait earlier today. He told me that he didn't realise what happened...what they *did* when you got close to them...until it was too late."

Potter looked from her back to Severus. "He didn't know?" He looked stunned, but the flush had returned to his cheeks, and Severus recognised the frantic expression on his face. "But he was also exposed, then, wasn't he?" Potter looked at him, the fire in his eyes no longer diffuse anger, but determination to understand. At last. "What did the Horcruxes do to him? To us?"

Potter's question seemed to release the last thread of hesitation from the group. They turned to face him, looking for the first time at Hermione and Longbottom without

hostility.

"Come, sit," Severus said, looking to Molly for permission. She nodded and gently took Arthur by the hand.

"We'll tell you everything we know," said Hermione.

One by one, they came close to the fire. Slightly wary still, but the sharp edges softened. There, over the bottomless kettle of tea that Molly supplied, the seven survivors of Voldemort's Horcruxes showed one another their truths.

**

They were staring at the box as if it might contain a Blast-Ended Skrewt. The light pouring out from between the cracks had done nothing to reassure the younger Mr Weasley, who looked as if he might bolt if anything untoward were to happen.

"No reason to look so nervous, Ron," Longbottom said. "We already told you what's inside."

"Yeah, you told us," Weasley said. "But it seems to me that you've been hit with some surprises, and I'm not sure I'm up for one myself."

Hermione moved a bit closer to her former classmate. Her former friend.

"Ron," she said, addressing him directly for the first time, "we would never bring anything here that could hurt you." She looked around the room. "Not any of you."

Weasley nodded and cleared his throat.

Awkward, Severus thought, but honest.

"We don't know what will happen," Severus said. "But we do not anticipate anything *negative*."

There was a wordless shuffling of feet. None of this had been *anticipated*, and they were still absorbing the idea that the Horcruxes had eroded their internal barriers against the Dark.

Arthur stepped forward. "Let me go first. If there is any risk, I should be the first exposed."

"Arthur?" Molly's voice was anguished. Arthur looked at her and gently brushed his hand against her cheek nodding wordlessly.

Severus felt an unaccustomed pang and a pull toward the couple. Such intense love. Steady and mature, he thought. Underneath it all, it was there between them, and from that well, they cared for their family. It felt familiar to him now, he thought. As if he could see today what he'd not recognised all those nights around the table together during Order meetings.

"It will be all right, Molly." Hermione reached out her hand to the older woman as Arthur moved towards the box. "Watch."

Severus waved his wand, and the box opened, light bursting from its contents. Another wave and the tapestry rose, hovering in the centre of the circle they'd formed around it.

He'd forgotten the glorious feeling of that light on his skin, the way the strands seemed to reach for one another as they shimmered. Severus reached his hand to touch the weaving. "See," he said. "It's safe."

His words were unnecessary. The four of them could hardly resist what amounted to their own lost hopes and crystallised joy.

Severus, Hermione, and Longbottom stepped back as not only Arthur, but the others, too, drank in their lost Light. Severus couldn't tear his eyes away for all that it felt almost indecent to watch.

Ginevra Potter gasped, her face reflecting the horror of what had been missing all these years, then peace as the light washed over her, softening her features and relaxing the sharp angles all along her body...

Arthur's wariness turned to welcome; the joy on Molly's face when *helaughed*, his arms flung open... reaching for her...

Weasley, wary and eager at the same time, like a colt unsure of its footing, reaching first one finger, then both his hands into the tangled, blazing strands. He looked surprised, Severus thought, as if there might have been a trap imbedded in the centre of paradise...

And Potter. Harry Potter, who had more reason than most to deny that the horror he had defeated had left another layer of pain for him to repair. His eyes brimmed with tears until they spilled over. He looked at his wife, his friend, his surrogate father...face beaming with hope...and Severus felt a pang of longing.

And then, Harry Potter looked right at him and nodded, his hand on his chest as if he had to keep his heart from leaping from where it was beating. Severus inclined his head in response and pulled Hermione closer. Longbottom stood on her other side and smiled. For the first time in hours, Severus took a deep breath. He let the reflection of others' joy seep beneath his skin and realised that he could revel in it, too.

Time must have passed, though it felt like only moments. Twilight gave way to sunset and the rising of the moon, and gradually, the luminous tapestry dimmed until it melted away like snowflakes in the sunlight.

~**~

The room was silent but for the sounds of an uncertain peace.

The Potters had their arms wrapped around one another, and Hermione looked away from the sight of Ginny's shoulders heaving...Harry stroking her back, looking bewildered, still. Arthur had hold of his wife's hands, the expression on his face heartbreaking for the story it told about years lost to the insidious Dark and the knowledge that the doorway still stood open for it to return.

It was Ron, though, Ron who stood alone with nobody to cling to. Ron who asked the question nobody else wanted to voice.

"Now what?" He looked to Severus. The others looked up, too.

Severus seemed surprised, Hermione thought. Hadn't he noticed that it had been he who'd broken through to each of them earlier? Of course they turned to him. She felt a twist in her gut, not because they weren't turning to her...she didn't think so, at least. Something nagged at her, and she couldn't pin it down. Even so, it sat like a rock in her belly.

"Now, if you all are willing, we go to Hogwarts," he said, looking to Neville. The other wizard seemed to understand the unspoken request.

"We all need to go to the Room of Requirement," he said. "Ginny, you remember how the Room and I understood each other during the war."

She nodded and gifted him with a small smile. "Do you think it can tell us what we require?" she asked.

Neville smiled. "I do," he said. "And it was hurt by a Horcrux, too, so I believe it requires whatever we do."

Harry was nodding. "The tiara. Fiendfyre," he said, looking at Ron and then, finally, to Hermione. He paused, catching her eye. They stood like that for a long moment, old friends remembering who they'd been to one another, and why.

"Fiendfyre," she said. If there'd been an image that had come to mind over the years that captured what had happened to her life, her friendships, her future, Fiendfyre had been it. Harry's face paled for a moment and he bowed his head, nodding slowly.

"It moves too fast," he said. "Everything is gone before you know what's happened."

"I know," she said. "All you can do is try to save yourself and whoever you can reach." She looked at Ron. "Whoever is closest."

Ron blushed.

"We should have..." He stumbled on his words, but Hermione understood.

"You did your best, Ron. We all did. But this thing, the Shadow, it eats us up alive." She looked around. "And we've found some defences against it, but we have to do more or else it's likely to swamp us all again."

Arthur nodded. "We should go."

"I'm coming with you," said Molly. "That's all right, isn't it, Severus?" She looked to him, anxious.

"It seems to me that having loved ones near is more than all right," he said. "It's a necessity." He looked at Hermione, and she blushed.

Ron looked as if he might say something and then thought better of it. It was too soon, she thought. Far too soon to put words to what she and Severus had, especially to describe it to Ron. They'd already told him...told all of them...the most important parts: that contact between them chased away the Dark and...

She gasped, and Severus looked at her, concerned.

Not here. No, not here. She shook her head and tried to keep breathing.

Severus hesitated, but she shook her head again. She looked away, and then he was talking again, his voice smooth and low. Above the whooshing in her ears, she heard them agree to meet outside the Hogwarts gates. Someone sent an owl to Headmistress McGonagall, and there was a flurry of activity as they prepared to leave.

Hermione was numb, frozen amidst the activity around her. She'd have to tell him; she knew it. Just not here. Not now.

For now, she'd pretend...for a little while longer, she'd hold on to the belief that what she and Severus shared belonged to *them*, that it was real. Because if she stopped pretending, the truth would crush her, and she didn't think she could bear it.

Not yet.

~**~

It was long past midnight, and everybody was finally settled in their respective rooms in the castle. He gave silent thanks to Minerva for her efficiency and her welcome.

Hermione had gravitated to the windows again, her forehead pressed against the cool glass.

"Are you going to tell me, or are you going to make me guess?" he asked. His voice carried across the room, and he wished he had the courage to follow it. Her withdrawal this time felt different than it would whenever the Darkness flooded her and was more chilling for it.

She lifted her head and turned to face him. Her eyes looked nearly as dead as they had on the night he'd found her. Not filled with Darkness, but with bottomless grief.

"I didn't intend to keep it from you," she said, her voice rough. "It just wasn't something... It hit me all of the sudden, and... I couldn't say anything at the Burrow. Not with everybody there. I just..."

His stomach twisted. "Couldn't say *what*?" He knew that his expression was blank. It always was when pain had seared him to the bone.

Hermione closed her eyes and raised a shaky hand to the window to steady herself. When her eyes opened again, he saw a flash of the woman he'd come to know...and then she was gone behind shields he hadn't known she had.

"I thought it was *us*," she said, gesturing between them. "I thought that it was something special between us that made the Darkness go away." She was shaking her head. "But I was wrong."

She motioned for him to wait when he started towards her.

"It's *you*," she said. "Didn't you notice? With each of them, it was *you* who got through. You're the common denominator. It's you. There's nothing special about *us*." She was speaking so quickly he could barely follow. "I don't want you to be with me under false pretences. This isn't *magic* between us. If you'd come across Ginny first, *she* would have been the one you'd have..."

"Stop." He might have been shouting; he wasn't sure. "Stop right there." He could move now, and he did. He was at her side in a heartbeat, his hands on her shoulders. He had to see her; she had to *see*. She closed her eyes, hot tears spilling down her cheeks. "Breathe, Hermione. Please. Just breathe."

She drew a deep breath, but it was more of a sob, followed by a wail of grief so deep that he thought it would go on forever. He pulled her against his chest and made soothing noises, nonsense that he hoped soothed her panic and did nothing for his own.

"Hermione," he whispered. "Oh, Hermione. You don't understand this at all."

That was enough to rouse her, and he stifled a smile.

"I understand this perfectly well, Severus," she said. "There is something about *you* that is the catalyst. I don't know why, and I suppose we'll have to figure it out. But it means..."

"I don't give a bloody damn what you think it *means* Hermione." His voice was rough, his heart pounding. "I'm not here with you...opening myself to you, sharing my bed with you, *trusting* you...because I think that something *magical* bound us together. Despite what you say, I'm not convinced there isn't something unique about how the Dark reacts to our contact with one another. But it doesn't matter. I don't care if my touch alone could eradicate the Shadow in any of the others...I wouldn't want any of *them*. I don't *want* anybody else."

Her tears had slowed. He brought his thumbs to her cheeks and brushed away the ones that had lingered.

"You don't care?" She looked confused.

"I don't care what it is that links us, if there is anything tying us together other than what we feel for each other. I need no explanation for *this*." He brought his lips to her forehead, resting there, breathing in her scent, feeling the cadence of her pulse through her skin.

"It doesn't matter?" she echoed.

"Hermione," he whispered. "It's not the magic. It's never been the magic."

He cupped her face in his hands and looked her in the eye. The grief had ebbed, and he saw a spark of light there again. "Hermione, it's *you*. I love *you*."

She didn't need to speak. The tears that poured from her now were like crystal. Joy and love and hope spilled from her, and he caught every drop in his outstretched hands.

Endless thanks to Annie Talbot for her always magnificent alpha and beta reading, and to Drinking Cocoa for her incisive and insightful alpha read. They made this chapter better than it would have been without them.

Chapter 18: The Luminance of Memory

Chapter 18 of 22

It was only after Snape followed her into the neglected shop, moving furtively between the shafts of sunlight that pierced the gloom, that it occurred to him to wonder why, ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione Granger was running. And why, in a world with magic, *real* magic, she should be seeking the counsel of a Muggle Tarot reader.

"I don't care what it is that links us, if there is anything tying us together other than what we feel for each other. I need no explanation for this." He brought his lips to her forehead, resting there, breathing in her scent, feeling the cadence of her pulse through her skin. "It doesn't matter?" she echoed. "Hermione," he whispered. "It's not the magic. It's never been the magic." He cupped her face in his hands and looked her in the eye. The grief had ebbed, and he saw a spark of light there again. "Hermione, it's you. I love you." She didn't need to speak. The tears that poured from her now were like crystal. Joy and love and hope spilled from her, and he caught every drop in his outstretched hands.

The night held her as she slipped into sleep, sated and spent.

From the deepest place of slumber, the starlight drew her up, up, up and out over the grounds. She could see everything from here. Each leaf on every tree, the crags in the worn paths that trailed down from the castle like ragged ribbons. Rocks and trees and stones alike, alive with possibility.

And when the wind huffed its challenge across the sky, sending her tumbling down, down, down, towards the unyielding ground, she raised her arms and let it carry her instead back into the safety of his embrace.

~**~

It was dark when she opened her eyes, and the steady cadence of his breathing anchored her nearly as much as the warm weight of his hand on her hip.

Here, wrapped in the silent weight of the night, they are ageless, and their time together far more substantial than five, now six cycles of sun and moon might otherwise imply. She was his as surely as the sun would rise on the morrow. His words from the night before, magnified by the cosmic tableau streaming through the window, had flowed through the cracks and crevices like water. Like ink from the depths of the sea.

"Awake?" he murmured.

"Just now," she said. "Odd dream."

His eyes flew open, and it occurred to her that dreams were nothing to be trifled with.

"Nothing bad," she added. And to the quirk of his eyebrow, continued. "Felt like being one with the night, except the night was filled with starlight and air." She paused. "And falling."

"Falling?"

She could hear the tension in his voice.

"Not scary. Not like that. The kind of falling like when you jump from a diving platform into warm water. It's joyful, you know? You're sure you're safe."

His eyes were narrowed as if he had never had the experience of jumping into open air or into water, for that matter, and known he was safe.

"Joyful falling?" He couldn't quite keep the sneer out of his voice.

She laughed. "Sounds silly, doesn't it? But that's what it was."

He blinked and shook his head just a little with a gesture she recognised as his way of covering confusion, especially the emotional variety.

"Where did you land?"

She smiled and leaned in to kiss him, snuggling just so against the curve of his arm.

"Right here."

In the instant before his body turned to cover hers, that split second before she was flooded with heat and a force of need she'd already come to associate solely with him,

she saw surprise cross his face, followed by the look of rapture seen exclusively on the face of a man who loves.

**

They were already nearly done with breakfast when the Great Hall grew curiously silent, then abruptly much, much louder. Hermione looked up, and there he was. Harry Potter and what must have looked like his entourage were walking through the giant doors and making their way to the High Table, not one of them sparing a glance to their left or to their right.

From a distance, and with the benefit of six days of healing magic, Hermione could see the strain in the lines around Harry's eyes and the slump of his shoulders. They all looked tired, she thought. Frayed around the edges. It was no wonder, really, that none of them had returned to Hogwarts all these years save Neville, for whom the magical energy of soil and magical plants must have provided a small but meaningful shield.

Being here at Hogwarts had always been undoubtedly magical, but unarguably painful.

"Good morning, Mr Potter."

"Hullo, Professor McGonagall."

For a moment, Hermione thought, he looked just like a seventh year crashing the High Table. But ten years had gone. Ten long years whose toll reached far deeper than the simple passage of time or even the disappointments wrought naturally by life's capriciousness. Ten years had passed, the other side of which brought them here once more. Full circle, back where they had begun.

The students were finally filing out, headed to the first classes of the day. Despite their hurry, their eyes strayed again and again to the table overflowing with characters from the bedtime stories their parents must have told them since infancy. Witches and wizards whose images had graced the covers of books and wizarding magazines and whose exploits had fuelled most every wizarding student's imagination at some point in childhood.

But now, with the room nearly empty, they transmuted as if by magic back into nothing more than a group of survivors hanging onto one another by the barest thread.

Though the students had gone, some of the staff still remained, and Hermione wondered with a surge of gratitude how much shuffling had gone into accommodating the unexpected visitors over the last few days.

"Don't you all have to teach today?" she asked to the staff at large. The headmistress leaned back in the seat once occupied by Dumbledore, looking as if she planned to stay a while. Flitwick and Vector had also remained, as had Neville, she realised. He must have classes to teach as well.

"We have made alternate arrangements for those on staff whose expertise might prove useful to you, Miss Granger," said the headmistress. Her eye lingered on the younger witch, her discerning expression all too familiar to Hermione. She only hoped she satisfied.

"Thank you," Hermione said, pitching her voice for only her former mentor's ears.

McGonagall's eyes softened, and Hermione pretended not to notice how watery they became before the older woman blinked away any sign of sentimentality.

"You should expect more of the same, Miss Granger," the headmistress said. "I only regret you didn't approach us sooner."

Hermione could feel the flush staining her cheeks and schooled herself to breathe. Regrets were so easy to find, and she didn't have enough of a foothold on solid ground to risk drowning in them.

"I know," she said. "I wish things had been different." She looked around at the others who had grown quiet, leaning in to hear the two witches' murmured conversation. "I think that we all did the best we could do under the circumstances."

McGonagall nodded, her eyes shifting to look at Severus.

"I would imagine so. For longer than anybody could possibly have known."

Severus looked at his former colleague and nodded. So many layers, Hermione thought. So many knots to unravel. How could they possibly hope to untangle them all?

"Thank you, Minnie," said Arthur, his voice gruff. "We didn't even realise. Hermione, she tried to tell us, but, well." He looked uncomfortable, shifting in his chair. "I suppose the illness itself makes it hard to listen. Isn't that it, Hermione?"

She looked at him, grateful. So thankful for the words that so resembled forgiveness.

"That's it, Arthur. You've got it exactly right."

He reached for her hand across the table. Leaned forward, reaching past Harry and Ginny until his fingers had clasped hers. She burst into tears, and all of the sudden, she was surrounded. Arthur's arms around her, but Harry's too. Ginny's hand stroked her shoulder, and Ron's hand had grabbed her free one, and there was Neville's voice, his laugh directly to her left. She held on to all of it with both arms, so relieved, bursting with the joy of it.

"Severus?" she whispered.

"I'm right here." His voice behind her. And so she leaned into him, her friends all around her, the man she loved at her back.

~**~

The room opened as if it had been waiting.

The seven of them plus Molly, followed by McGonagall, Flitwick and Vector approached the smooth stone wall. They held their breath collectively until the wide arches...seven of them merged into one...appeared in the grey rock.

"We'll wait for you here," said McGonagall.

But Hermione wouldn't have it.

"You should come in," she said. "Don't you think they should join us, Severus?"

He did, actually. And his chest was tight with the unspoken knowing they shared.

"I agree. Isolation has done none of us any good. Hiding from one another hurts us all. Even those of us not poisoned by Horcrux exposure." He caught Minerva's eye and raised an eyebrow in query. "Join us. Please."

Vector and Flitwick looked to McGonagall, and then they looked at him.

"All of you," he said. "We need you. Please."

"Indeed." The headmistress' crisp response drew a chuckle from Arthur, and Severus allowed a small smile.

"Indeed." He caught Minerva's eye. "Thank you."

And so it was that the eleven of them walked through the portal to the Room of Requirement, Longbottom taking the lead. The Room looked almost the way it had when they left it, save for marginally fewer shards on the floor and a vague, irrational sense that somebody had been in to sweep up.

"Dark in here," the younger Weasley muttered, shivering as he settled himself on one of the couches the Room had provided.

"You'll get used to it," said Longbottom. "Besides, it might change. You never know. You weren't here during the war, Ron, but the Room shifted all day long. Seemed to respond to the changing needs of the people in here at any given time."

Weasley nodded whilst looking around. "You brought them to the right place, mate, you really did."

He nodded. "I did what I could. You lot were off doing..."

Severus watched Weasley's face fall.

"Hermione and Harry did way more than I did," he said. He paused to fidget. "I guess the problem must have already started then. For me, at least," he continued, speaking as if to himself.

"What do you mean?" asked Longbottom.

"Didn't they tell you? I left them. Harry and Hermione. I went and left them alone; they were on the run and scared and I left them alone because... Hell, I don't know, I guess I was angry."

"But you came back, mate," Potter said. "You came back."

"That's because I figured you'd let me," said Weasley, looking over at Hermione.

"You left, Ron, but you hadn't injured either one of us," she said. "That locket made all of us crazy, and I'm not surprised you left. But you never did anything to harm me or Harry. Nothing like what I did to you." She paused for breath. "I'm so sorry."

"It was pretty bad, wasn't it?" Weasley said. "Even after I came back."

Hermione just nodded, and Severus watched her closely to be sure she didn't slip back into shadow.

"You stayed after that. And you even stayed with me when I destroyed the cup," she said.

Severus sat up straighter. Damn and blast. He'd forgotten entirely about the cup. The last time she mentioned it, she had disintegrated right before his eyes.

Weasley cleared his throat. "I did. I probably should have paid closer attention to what the cup said, though. I mean, what the Horcrux..."

"I know what you mean, Ron," she said, smiling softly. "It didn't go without a fight, did it?"

"Hardly," he said, snorted.

He wanted to ask; he was afraid to say a word. This was an experience she'd shared with Weasley. He'd forgot that bit. Given what he'd learned about Horcruxes over the last week, he wondered what manner of evil that one had exuded in the throes of death.

"It might be useful to examine what Horcruxes do when they..." He hesitated. "When they die. Or are destroyed; whichever way one prefers to think about it."

He had an ulterior motive. Of course he did. But come to think of it, if they were to repair the damage done, perhaps understanding the weapons the disembodied pieces of soul had at their disposal would help them piece together what they needed to do next.

Hermione looked at him, her eyes clouded, and he regretted his words. Who knew what manner of horror had risen before her in the Horcrux's futile effort to avoid destruction. His own insecurity drove him. It was for him, not for the greater good. But Hermione seemed eager to talk, despite the tension radiating from her in waves.

"They die. Definitely," she said, looking him in the eye. "They die."

Weasley sighed. "That cup almost didn't," he said.

Hermione took the younger wizard's hand in her own, and the redhead nodded as if she'd said something only he could hear, but Severus was sure she'd said nothing.

"At first I thought it was a Dementor," she said, eyes fixed on the mirrored wall behind Weasley. "As soon as I brought the Basilisk fang near it, this big whoosh of *black* came out of it, like smoke. And so cold." She shivered.

"I was sure it was a Dementor, too. It's why I stepped back. I meant to pull my wand, cast a Patronus, you know?"

She nodded. "I don't blame you for moving back, Ron. Truth be told, I was jealous of your reflexes. I just *stood* there."

"Well, it started talking to you, didn't it?"

"Yes, but it didn't look like a Dementor anymore by then." She shuddered and fell silent.

Severus waited as long as he could, but she kept on staring at the wall of broken mirrors across from her, lost in memory.

"Hermione?" he finally asked, his hand reaching for hers. "What did it say?" He kept his voice pitched low, willing his eyes to say what his words did not.

Tell us what it said so that it doesn't keep burning a hole inside of you. Tell us what that abomination convinced you to believe so that we can tell you the truth.

She nodded and her eyes grew focussed again. Squeezing his hand, she drew a long, deep breath and spoke as if only to him, his gaze her anchor.

"It kept changing shape. I realise that now, but it was happening so fast."

Leave it to Hermione, he thought, to berate herself for not instantly assessing the behaviour of a Dark object as it was acting on her. But he just crinkled his eyes, encouraging her to continue.

"First it looked just like Dumbledore. It told me that my teachers had tried to hold me back. Said it would teach me everything I'd ever wanted to know...everything my professors had kept from me from jealousy and competitiveness." She bowed her head. "I believed it. Only for a minute, but that's the truth. I believed that my teachers..." She glanced out of the corner of her eye to McGonagall. "...that they kept me from the books and knowledge that would have allowed me to surpass them."

Her cheeks were bright red, and Severus wanted to stop her, to keep her from baring her soul and exposing the shame of the nineteen-year-old she had been.

"I must have hesitated, because all of the sudden it wasn't Dumbledore anymore. It was my mother telling me that she hated me, that I shouldn't bother to come back for them because they never wanted to see me again." Even now, ten years later, her voice broke. "And then it turned into Ron and told me that he didn't love me and didn't want me and that nobody ever would..."

"And that's when I started screaming at it and at you. Don't you remember, Hermione?"

She looked up at him. "I do. I remember. It pulled me out of the trance, I think. I could see the difference between the Horcrux pretending to be you and you."

"I should have picked up a Basilisk fang and done away with it myself. I should never have let it go on as long as it did, and I shouldn't have let you kill it."

Hermione winced. "It's not your fault. You didn't know what it would do..."

"Didn't it just scream like the locket did when you stabbed it?" Potter's voice surprised him. He'd forgot for a moment that it had been the two wizards who had done away with the locket. Hadn't known, in point of fact, until Hermione had told him the story she, herself, had been told.

"I wish it had," said Weasley.

"It lunged for me," said Hermione. "It looked like *her*. Bellatrix. That was so awful, and I forgot that it wasn't real. I mean, it felt real enough. I tripped over a pile of fangs when I backed away from it, and then it loomed overhead like it was going to grab me and..."

"Until I shoved a fang into her hand and she waved it around until it backed off again."

"And then I stabbed it and stabbed it until Ron took it away."

"So you battled Bellatrix Lestrange twice that night, Hermione," said Molly, her eyes bright.

Hermione looked up, startled, and let out a sigh. "I suppose I did."

"Thank you, Miss Granger, Mr Weasley," Professor Flitwick said in a voice even squeakier than normal. "You did a great service for all of us. For the whole wizarding world."

"The whole world, you mean," said Harry. "And for me, too. I don't know that I ever thanked you for helping me get rid of it. I wouldn't have had time that night. I couldn't do it by myself, and if it hadn't been for the two of you, I don't know..."

He'd come to sit on the floor by the sofa whilst he spoke. Weasley still perched on the chair right alongside. Without a word, Potter scooted closer and took the hand Severus had been holding before she freed it to illustrate the stabbing of the Horcrux, leaving the other for Weasley to grasp again.

Potter looked around the room. Slowly, as if he hadn't really taken it in before now.

"I've often wondered what this place looked like after the Fiendfyre was done with it," he said.

"So did we," said Hermione. "Professor Flitwick did an assessment and determined that it might be responsive to us, and it has been."

"Place looks pretty beat up, though," said Weasley.

"It was injured by a Horcrux, too, wasn't it?" Hermione's voice was soft, almost wistful, as if she were speaking of a living creature.

She slipped from the couch onto the floor next to Potter, and Weasley did the same from his chair. The three sat there, knee to knee, in an odd sort of triangle, hand in hand.

Severus watched, fists clenched in the folds of his robes. He felt the Shadow rise in him, around him, but he breathed deeply and looked at the others...his colleagues, Hermione's friends who might one day be his friends, too...and how they leaned in towards the trio where they sat. They honoured the bond these three shared, and he could too, he realised. It didn't diminish what he had with Hermione. There was nothing on earth that could do that.

Longbottom seemed particularly intrigued, Severus thought, and so he wasn't surprised when the younger wizard left his seat, too, to sit just outside the triangle, palms pressed firmly against the floor.

"The Room always gave us what we needed," he said, reverent, and the three others nodded. "And it was always there to hide us. Kept us safe."

"We don't have to hide anymore, though, do we?" asked Arthur, and Severus shared a look of relief with the other wizard. He could appreciate the awkward surprise that came with the realisation that it was safe to step out into the light.

"There were centuries worth of memories in here," Potter said. "Lost things. Hidden things. All of them up in flames."

"The memories weren't in the things, I don't think," said Hermione, glancing up at the fractured mirrors still ringing the walls. "They're all still here somewhere." She glanced at Severus and he smiled, remembering the snippets of memory captured under glass, then transmuted into white light.

"Just have to not hide," said Ginevra, her voice shaking.

"What do you mean, dear?" asked her mother, more gently than Severus had ever heard her speak.

"Memories will die if nobody voices them. Secrets are a guarantee that a story will stop being told...or at least be told accurately." She paused for breath. "If nobody asks to hear, then the story stays silent until it's gone. My story has been silent," she continued, her voice raspy, "but I don't want it to die. Feels like it might take me with it." She looked over at her parents, tears spilling from her eyes.

"We never really asked, did we?" asked Arthur.

Severus closed his eyes against the pain in her parents' faces. How well he understood the burden of carrying pain so big all alone. That night he'd shown Dumbledore his Patronus, the look on the old man's face had seared his soul. Had he never wondered? How is it that he never asked?

"I'll chronicle them," Hermione said. "I promise, Ginny. I'll listen, and I'll keep them safe."

The younger woman nodded, tears still streaming down her cheeks.

"Ginny," said her husband. He reached out his hand and she took it, joining the four already on the floor. "Come. Please."

"I for one would like to hear your story firsthand, Severus," said Flitwick.

Severus inclined his head in agreement.

"What's lost is lost," said Arthur. "But we'll save what we can."

"We will," said Severus.

And with that, the Room began to shift. He'd only ever observed it providing entryways and exits. But this, this was something else entirely.

The ash seemed to melt into the ground, leaving the stone darker, more textured, but glowing with depth. The walls seemed to draw light from outside because they began to glow, throwing puddles of light all around. But it was the glass...the mirrors both on the walls and in pieces on the floor that made him gasp and sent Hermione back onto the couch and his anchoring embrace.

The glass was flowing.

Like lava. No, not hot, but cool. Like water, it ran together, fluid and graceful, shards joining fragments, fragments merging to form chunks of glass until...

"Severus," Hermione gasped.

He'd never seen water flow *up*. It was quite lovely, really.

And when all the ash had melted into the stone, and every bit of glass had found its sibling in the shards scattered far and wide, the room glowed with the luminance of memory and the walls flowed with waterfalls of light.

~**~

A/N: Beta thanks to Annie Talbot, and to LadyintheCloak. You each make the story better with your eye and your magic touch.

Thanks to all of my readers for your patience while I finished my Snuna Exchange and SSHG Exchange stories over these last... erm... three months.

There shouldn't be any more enormous lags in posting (hopefully), though I will be spending a bit of time working on my Infinitus conference talks before returning to the story. Infinitus is soon, though, so it shouldn't be long.

Chapter 19: A Cacophony of Sound

Chapter 19 of 22

It was only after Snape followed her into the neglected shop, moving furtively between the shafts of sunlight that pierced the gloom, that it occurred to him to wonder why, ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione Granger was running. And why, in a world with magic, *real* magic, she should be seeking the counsel of a Muggle Tarot reader.

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The room was quiet again.

At last.

The eleven of them had scattered across the cavernous space. Ginny curled into the curve of her mother's body, the professors hovering nearby as if unsure where to perch. Arthur paced, stopping now and again to reassure Molly with a pat on her shoulder and a half-smile. Ron slumped against the stone, boneless, his eyes closed, peering through his lashes only to assess the stand-off at the centre of the room.

Neville had grown agitated when the debate first erupted, flitting from spot to spot until finally settling on a lavishly upholstered ottoman, his head in his hands. Hermione could empathise. There had certainly been enough shouting to give anyone a pounding headache.

If Severus had been capable of slouching, Hermione thought, sidling up to him, he'd be hunched in one of the red upholstered chairs instead of sitting there with his ramrod posture and his tired eyes.

Harry had his back to them all, arms folded, staring blankly into one of the flowing mirrors.

Hermione wondered if she ought to find it heartening or discouraging that her old friend hadn't lost any of his bloody-mindedness despite blatant evidence of his own frailties. It wasn't altogether different from how he'd behaved during the war, she allowed, only with the added weight of maturity and a knife-edged certainty he'd not

mastered until facing Voldemort for the last time.

She sighed.

It probably *had* been unrealistic to expect the seven of them to fall into lockstep just because they'd managed being in the same room together without shedding blood.

"Potter," Severus was saying to Harry's back. "Stating your opinion over and over again does not, to my knowledge, qualify as an *incantation*."

"And of *course* we should just take your word for it that I'm wrong," Harry muttered, still refusing to turn around. "I'm still waiting for you to explain why you're so bloody sure that what just happened isn't a sign that everything is fixed so we can just get on with it." He folded his arms more tightly across his chest. "Oh, I forgot," he spat out. "You've got enough experience with Dark magic to make up for what's lacking in the rest of us."

Severus paused to take in a long, deep breath, and Hermione marvelled at his restraint. She moved closer and slipped her hand into his.

"You are undoubtedly accustomed to others hanging on your every instinct when on a quest, Potter," he said. "When you're not going it alone, that is." Before Harry could respond, he went on. "Admittedly, I cannot argue with your prior success."

Harry's stance softened just slightly as he pivoted to face them, and Hermione released the breath she'd been holding.

"However," Severus continued, "there is still a great deal you do not know..."

Hermione stepped forward just as Harry's eyes flashed.

"This is different, Harry," she said. "It's not a secret. Not something we're keeping from you."

He pursed his lips for a moment, eyebrows furrowed.

"No more secrets."

"None," Severus said. "Just pieces to a puzzle we cannot yet assemble."

Harry glanced at the luminous walls. His shoulders slumped as he watched the light dance beneath the mirrors.

"I'd just hoped..." His words trailed off, but she knew what'd he meant to say.

"I did, too, Harry." Hermione stepped closer to him and laid a hand on his shoulder. "I wish it meant it was all over now that we're working together. The broken glass fixed. The Room repaired. I can't tell you how much I wish we could all walk away and never have to worry about this again."

"And that," said Professor McGonagall, her sensible heels clacking against the stone floor as she approached, "is precisely how this got to be such a mess to begin with." She looked especially stern, her sharp eyes sweeping the room.

"It never does to pretend," she said, and Hermione was so grateful that it was their former Head saying so. "You have each done your duty, and it cost more than anyone had a right to ask from you. Any of you. But at some point, you stopped trusting one another," she added, and Hermione nearly missed the glint of tears in her eyes. Her heart ached for her former Head of house...for her losses and her mistakes. For the helplessness she must have felt as much during the war as in the years following.

McGonagall met her gaze, and Hermione felt a rush of gratitude for her steadfast presence, for her unflinching willingness to join with them in what felt like an impossible task. The headmistress's eyes lingered on her, softening, and she wanted nothing more than to lay her head on the older woman's shoulder and leave her burdens aside just for a moment. It was as if McGonagall knew what she needed, Hermione thought, as she watched her square her shoulders and raise her wand, executing a neat flick towards the edge of the cluster of chairs.

A blackboard, the size and shape of the ones hanging in the classrooms, appeared, and the headmistress stood alongside as if about to begin a lesson. She looked again at Hermione and inclined her head in invitation. It was time to get to work.

"What do we know?" McGonagall asked. "It's long past time to pool our resources, so gather around."

One by one, they clustered around the headmistress, her familiar voice and posture like a calming draught for them all. She could help them organise themselves, unaffected by Horcrux poisoning as she was...another advantage to seeking outside help...Hermione realised. It was a relief, too, to imagine what felt like a river of memories and theories pouring out of her, lining up in neat columns, obedient, organised in well-defined categories. She'd carried them alone for too long, along with a mountain of useless speculation and unlikely possibility. What a relief to leave go of the burdens she'd clung to so tightly, lest she forget a morsel that might prove valuable later.

Arm wrapped around Severus, once she'd managed to pry him from the chair and onto the couch, she sat back and watched the others fill in the empty spaces of speculation. Symptoms and signs. Observations they hadn't let themselves acknowledge but had catalogued, nonetheless. The board filled with neat lists in their crisp rows until finally, Professor McGonagall turned to the two of them.

"Tell us about the cards, Severus, would you please?"

~**~

If his mother had ever suggested that one day he would be standing before colleagues and former students alike, explaining the intricacies of Ogham cards, of all things, he would never have picked up her deck that first day. Shades of Trelawney and her improbable brand of magic flashed before his eyes until rapt expressions and astute questions brought him out of his own insecurity and back to his circle of compatriots. *Friends*, he reminded himself. *Friends*.

Friends listening intently to the story of the Ogham spreads he had read *for them*, Severus realised with a start. Grateful glances and tentative queries grew more confident as they discussed the symbols illuminating their journey: Rowan, representing both the poison and its cure, protective branches beckoning them to take shelter beneath; insistent blackthorn, piercing and unyielding; ivy, tenacious and resilient, strongest when rooted in the earth; and the vine, its catalytic power shining behind the high stone walls, and inside each one of them, alike.

The room swam with the power of the images...the symbols...for all that they were conjured only in imagination. Symbols, though, that comprised the world, interlocking cogs moving below the surface and hovering beneath only the most translucent disguise.

Severus looked around. Arthur still stood, his back straight and his eyes clear. An anchor again, at least for the moment. Weasley, calmer with each passing hour, but still as prickly as his friend, whose green eyes even now were clouded with defensiveness. Ginevra's hand lay on her husband's arm, and Severus remembered that too-young witch whose own Horcrux exposure had disrupted her life at a time when her power was still developing. The brittleness had softened over the last day or two, and she sat tall, her features looking younger...softer...again and more vulnerable, ready to face the journey ahead.

Longbottom. Neville. Looking thoughtful as if he might decode yet another layer of interpretation in the Druid tree symbols...as well he might. He could only imagine what depths of meaning Neville might glean from the delicate contour of roots reaching for water beneath bedrock, or the angle of wand wood branches reaching for the sky.

At last, he let his gaze rest on the woman next to him. Her hair had escaped its confines and was steadily creating a tangled cloud around her head. He wondered how

many of the symbols he could find twined in her hair alone and allowed himself the ghost of a smirk just before she turned her face up to him. Her eyes shone, or maybe it was the way she looked at him, angling her body towards his as if pulled by an inexorable tide. He let himself be pulled, too, winding his other arm around her and feeling the flow of energy through him. Her face lit up, and he knew that she felt it, too. She smiled the sort of smile he'd only ever expected to see in the privacy of their chambers...brimming with hope and promise. His heart lurched, and not for the first time, he wondered how something as simple as her smile could set his heart racing, sweeping him along like rushing waters, cleansing him and setting him free.

He couldn't possibly look away...she held the depths of the sea in her eyes.

**

"So, what about the Tarot spread, Hermione?" asked Neville. "Didn't you say that Severus found you outside a Muggle Tarot reader's place?"

Severus suppressed a smile at her blush.

"Well, yes. He found me outside, but I didn't see him until after we were both inside." She flushed more deeply and turned to Neville. "Honestly, I can't remember much about that reading. Do you, Severus?"

He shook his head. "I remember more what the old woman..." *What she did.*

He felt more than heard Hermione's sharp intake of breath.

"What is it?" Weasley the younger.

"She did something." Hermione hesitated, thinking. "Something with threads of light that she pulled from inside *us*."

Eleven heads turned as one from Severus and Hermione to the luminous walls. And the room exploded...again...in a cacophony of sound.

~**~

"She did say that we would know when it was time to come back," Severus said later that night when they were alone in their rooms. He had changed into nightclothes and was drawing the curtains and extinguishing the lights before joining her in bed. "I didn't pay much attention at the time, granted, but it presupposes she knew she'd taken something from us that we would ultimately need."

Hermione burrowed beneath the blankets, watching him. The scene was, she thought sleepily, surprisingly domestic. She hadn't considered how many times they had fallen into bed or into sleep over the last week without preamble, like diving into deep water...quickly...before anything could interfere. Severus was a meticulous man, and seeing him relax, slipping into what must be his usual night-time routine, flooded her with heat as if he'd trailed his fingertips...slowly...across her skin. Nearly.

"I just hope she can tell us what to do once she gives it back," said Hermione, making room for him under the duvet. "What does one do with a woven ball of light, anyway?"

Severus snorted. "How have we managed to become dependent on the advice of Seers and fortune tellers?" he asked.

Good question, she thought, through the growing haze of sleep. And so many of them, at that: Trelawney's bizarre observation about repairing mirrors from the other side, Severus's own legacy of Ogham Divination, and of course, the Muggle Tarot reader's inscrutable words.

"*Stop fleeing from the shadow*," the fortune teller had instructed her that night. "*You must embrace it... and then step out from the dark.*"

Hadn't she done? Compared to her state a week ago, she thought, relaxing into Severus's embrace, she was positively bathed in light.

"Has t'do with trust," she murmured as her eyelids grew too heavy to lift.

"Trust?"

"Umhm," she agreed. "Like with magic. Y'know."

The shock of cold bedclothes roused her, and she opened her eyes. Severus had loosened his hold, shifting her away from his warm body.

"What'd you do that for?" she complained.

"What do you mean, 'Like with magic'?"

The urgency in his tone woke her further, and she scrambled to hold onto the thread of clarity that the twilight space between sleep and wakefulness had given her.

"I don't know," she said, shaking off sleep. "I guess it's like the leap of faith you take the first time you go into Ollivander's shop. Trusting that the pieces of wood he gives you aren't an enormous practical joke. That you really can change things around you with the wave of a wand and a bunch of Latin words." She paused, remembering that rush of power the first time she had held her wand. *Hers*. Limitless possibilities opening up before her, governed only by her ability to find the perfect combination of word and motion to make it so.

"But it isn't ever really so simple, is it? It's sort of the wand and it's sort of the words, but it's always really the intention behind it all and that we *believe* it. In magic." She wrinkled her brow. "We have to trust all that or else it doesn't work."

He nodded, his brow furrowed in thought.

"The relationship between a wizard and his magic is both delicate and powerful," he said. "Classical magical theorists believed there was a synergy between them. They argued that harnessing the natural flow of magical power using benign intent allows for its development." He raised his eyebrows. "I'd imagine you noticed this during even your foreshortened time at Hogwarts."

She paused to remember.

"I suppose I did, though I assumed it was just the usual outcome of practice and study. Work harder, and you get better. What you're saying assumes that magic gets stronger based on *how* you use it, not just because you're older and learn how to channel it more effectively."

He nodded. "Intent matters. How a witch or wizard engages their power affects the magic and, in turn, the wielder."

"So, the way Voldemort related to his magic changed him, and that, in turn, led him to..." She hesitated.

"To twist it," Severus finished for her. "He took something that for most of us is natural and distorted it into something horrifying." He shuddered. "It's a vicious cycle and once started, is nearly impossible to stop."

Hermione nodded, wondering what it took for *him* to stop. Wondering about the cost of still having to stay in such close proximity to evil year after year.

"It takes courage and determination, doesn't it?" she asked softly.

His eyes narrowed. "You have it backwards. Evil is cowardly. It requires no self-discipline at all."

"I don't imagine it would," she said. "It does tend to run amuck." She paused. "But I meant *stopping*. You made a choice to turn away. Intentionally."

"Yes," he allowed.

And still, it followed him, still haunted him a decade beyond Voldemort's death.

"So, what do you think this has to do with fortune telling and Horcrux poisoning?" Severus asked.

Whereas a week ago, his question would have roused a virtual menagerie of fears and insecurities, tonight she could simply hear the question...honest, vital...and see the glittering interest in his eyes, thrilled at the respect it implied.

"Well," she began, thinking aloud, "we don't really know what *broke* inside us because of exposure to the Horcruxes...to evil...right? Neville said that he would look for a pathogen if a plant was sick, and then he could look for a way to eradicate it."

Severus nodded.

"So, what's the pathogen?"

~~**~~

Severus hesitated.

Talking of evil and intent and twisted magic was all well and good, but to make a Horcrux required a profound distortion of one's humanity, demanding the cruellest type of death. Murder with the intention of harvesting the consequent rip in the fabric of the soul.

What did it take to kill another human being in cold blood?

Eyes, burning red, flashed in his mind's eye.

Isolation. Contempt.

Utter denigration of others. Yes, he thought. But what could drive a wizard to sacrifice the integrity of his own self...his soul...for the fantasy of everlasting life?

A voice, cold as ice, hissing, whilst he held his breath.

What could fuel the pursuit of immortality...power for its own sake and at any cost?

What had the power to reach beyond the grave, plunging its long fingers into the hearts and souls of those who'd had the misfortune to touch it? Shredding, ripping, ultimately severing each of its victims' attachments to one another and to their own belief in themselves.

"Malevolence."

The sound of the word...poisonous, piercing...echoed against the stone walls as if looking for a foothold before finally melting into silence.

Hermione shivered, and he clasped her hands in his.

"What's the remedy?" she whispered.

I wish I knew, he thought. But then he felt the blood rushing beneath her skin, warm, and vibrant; her body alert but relaxed, brown eyes wide and shining with life. Warmth rushed into his chest until he could hardly breathe for its abundance.

Of course.

"Trust."

He could practically feel her body humming with the pleasure of the word, and he brought his hand to cup her cheek. She leaned her face into his caress and closed her eyes.

"I do," she whispered and opened her eyes. She brought her hand to his face, to trace the line of his jaw, a feather touch along the fullness of his lips.

Could she know what her trust meant to him? He, who had touched evil, who believed himself forever tainted...twisted...by it. To be trusted was so rare a gift, and so treasured.

He turned so that he could kiss the palm of her hand, holding it to his mouth as if it were water and he, a man, parched. It had to be that she understood, he reasoned through the fog of feeling that rose to envelop him, else she wouldn't have known not to speak, only to curl herself around him and let him hold her close like a talisman until his body stopped trembling.

~~**~~

"Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm coming along," said Ron. "I want to meet this fortune teller. I want to hear what she and her Divination cards have to say."

Hermione winced. She couldn't imagine Ron and the others stuffed into that tiny room with its incense and diaphanous scarves without flashing back to Trelawney's claustrophobic classroom and the utter chaos that reigned there.

This was different. It had to be different.

"Why don't we all go together, then?" asked Ginny, with an anxious glance at Severus. "Best to stick together, isn't it?"

So that was it, thought Hermione. She *could* appreciate their fear of being separated, especially given her own experience with the power of her proximity to Severus. It was interesting, too, how quickly everything had changed. For so many years, when they'd get together at the Burrow, all their symptoms would worsen and now, to a one, they seemed calmer together. More grounded.

She looked to Severus and raised her eyebrows. She supposed it was all right with her if they came along. It might be a bit crowded in the tiny shop, but if that was the worst of it, she'd count herself fortunate.

He inclined his head, and she smiled.

"It's Muggle London, Ron," Hermione warned him. "She might remind you of Trelawney, though she's not quite as odd. But Ron, she *can* do something like magic, even though she's Muggle."

Ron bristled. "Doesn't matter to me if she's Muggle, Hermione. She sounds important, and I want to be part of it." Part of the *solution*, she understood, though he didn't say it out loud.

"Thank you, Ron."

He flushed, and Hermione smiled, relieved. It had been ages since she'd been able to read Ron accurately, even sporadically. It had been so long she'd forgot how good it felt not to constantly misunderstand and be misunderstood by him in turn.

"I believe that seven witches and wizards are quite enough to be storming that poor woman's shop," said the headmistress. "We'll stay back here. I imagine we can find enough to occupy ourselves while you're away. Be sure to report back just as soon as you return." Her expression was fierce, as if she wouldn't tolerate noncompliance, and Hermione grinned as Severus assured her that they would.

"Ready?" Severus asked, his hand at the small of her back as the others lined up for side-along Apparition.

"As ready as I'll ever be," she murmured.

~**~

In a cosy storefront on a back street of Muggle London, a woman sits at a round, rickety table. Light shines from the cards laying before her, far stronger than the weak sun streaming through the room's shuttered windows.

An elegant finger traces the outline of the image in one of the cards, a blindfolded figure holding two swords, crossed at chest level. Tapping the card, she nods as she moves it further away from the array. She trails her fingertips along the spread until they rest on the central card. "Temperance," she murmurs, rubbing it against the card laying beneath it, then moves her hand to the one directly opposite. "Eight of wands," she says. "At last."

She smiles and looks towards the door as if waiting for guests to arrive.

"Well done."

~**~

A/N: Beta thanks to Annie Talbot and Lady in the Cloak, and to Drinking_Cocoa for incisive and thought provoking alpha-reading questions. Each of you make the story better each time you touch it.

Chapter 20: Acknowledging that which is in ourselves...

Chapter 20 of 22

It was only after Snape followed her into the neglected shop, moving furtively between the shafts of sunlight that pierced the gloom, that it occurred to him to wonder why, ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione Granger was running.

And why, in a world with magic, *real* magic, she should be seeking the counsel of a Muggle Tarot reader.

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"Well done."

The room was crowded, thought Hermione. Between the wafting scarves and dusty tapestries, there was hardly enough space for the table and chairs, wobbling on their spindly legs, in the centre of the room. Adding seven full-grown adults stretched the space nearly beyond its capacity.

The old woman seated there, swathed in layers of diaphanous fabric, scarcely looked up when they came barrelling through the door. She only smiled and went back to fiddling with the cards lying on the tabletop, their colours brilliant even in the muted light. It was, Hermione thought for one irrational moment, as if she'd known they were coming.

"We're sorry to barge in on you like this," she stammered, "but..."

"It's hardly an intrusion when you come through the *door* like civilised people," the old woman said. "Most wizards just *pop* right in without a by-your-leave." She shook her head as if about to scold those inconsiderate wizards. "Doesn't matter anyway." She waved her hand vaguely. "I've been expecting you."

Severus raised an eyebrow.

"You instructed us to come back. Of course you were *expecting* us."

The old woman's lip curled just a bit and she huffed.

"You've brought the others. Good," she said. "They need to hear, too."

"What do we need to hear?" asked Harry, angling towards the front of the group.

"Where's the other one?" she asked, tapping a card.

"The other what?" Harry looked alarmed.

She narrowed her eyes, peering at the cluster of people huddled by the door.

"Him," she said, pointing a long finger at Ron.

Ron stood up straighter and ran his fingers through his hair.

"What do you need with me?" he asked, glancing anxiously at Harry.

The old woman snickered. "Don't need a thing with you, young man," she said. "It's you who needs." She turned her attention back to the cards.

Hermione cleared her throat, and the woman looked up again.

"Sorry to be a bother," she said. "But you have something of ours."

"I do, indeed," she said. "I expect you'll be wanting to know how to use it, hmm?"

"Well, yes," said Hermione.

"Then sit."

For a disorienting moment, Hermione felt just as she had that afternoon a scant week ago. Exhaustion etched into every plane of her body, despair saturating every cell.

Sit, the old woman had said, and she had. It had been the first bit of letting go, the first time she'd stopped struggling to understand or control that which had long since exceeded her grasp.

Sit.

The old woman might as well have said, *Surrender* that night.

Surrender.

Sweet, but only when it was safe, and safety had been a long time coming.

She breathed deeply in the dusty air and felt Severus's hand squeeze hers just before she released it.

Hermione sat.

~~~~~

For a split second, Severus hovered there, feeling adrift...the five others crowded behind him, Hermione perched in the only available chair. It felt like forever, hesitating there, unsure where he belonged. Was he to again be invisible in the crowd? Alone, neither here nor there? Or...

He stepped forward, conjured a chair, and settled in next to Hermione. She slipped her hand into his again and sighed.

The old woman smiled.

"Good," she said, eying Snape. "I thought so."

"Thought what?" Hermione asked.

The other woman didn't answer, only leaned back in the chair and let her eyes sweep the room.

"It is much better now," she said finally, "but unless you take the final steps, the poison will finish its job. You cannot hope to outrun it."

Severus leaned forward, glancing at the array of cards, but more focussed on catching the tarot reader's eye. "We have no intention of trying to outrun it," he said. "We want to repair it but don't know how." Severus felt his heart pounding. "Do you?"

The old woman reached a long-fingered hand across the table and lay it atop his.

"Card-wielder," she said, "you already have the answers from your own reading. All you need from me is the anchor."

"Anchor for what?" asked Hermione.

The old woman looked at her, exasperated.

"You wouldn't go below without something to anchor you, would you?"

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Hermione's head hurt.

"Must you lot always interrupt each other?" she muttered. Severus was stroking the nape of her neck, but still, she wanted to cry. "Please," she said more loudly, "let the woman talk."

The fortune-teller seemed unperturbed by the chaotic response of the witches and wizards crowding her room. They seemed unable to contain themselves, each new bit of information like fuel to flame, sending them spinning, peppering one another with anxious questions they had no hope of answering.

"Madam" asked Severus, "may I enlarge your table and bring in some additional seating for the rest of the group? It may facilitate discussion if..."

"If they're not all standing around like a bunch of chattering budgies?"

"Indeed."

The old woman had no sooner nodded than Severus had conjured chairs set around the magically enlarged table. There, Hermione thought. Now, perhaps, they'd find out what lay before them.

The fortune-teller seemed to agree, because she was looking at the cards with more purpose than she had done.

"Did you know that I'd thrown a spread for you before you ever came through my door?" she asked.

Hermione shook her head, startled. "No, I didn't."

"Your aura was in the air, and I wanted to know what was coming."

She could only imagine what the woman had felt that day. No matter how accustomed she'd grown to the shadow, its talons ripping into her until they drew blood, its echo...like the ricochet of debris from a malicious spell...on those around her had always been undeniable.

"What did you see?" Hermione asked, her voice soft. She wasn't entirely sure she wanted to know.

The fortune-teller looked directly at her, deep blue eyes shadowed with sadness.

"I saw a passionate woman who had nearly given up on herself," she said. "Out of balance, poisoned from within. Tortured with unremitting conflict. Stalemate." She looked at Harry and then at Ron. "You had to let go your struggle for control...learn your way bit by bit." She reached out a gnarled finger to touch a card, and Hermione realised that the spread she was referencing was lying before them on the scarred wooden table. "You had to learn that you weren't powerless...no matter how it appeared." She looked at Severus. "And that there was someone you could trust."

Hermione's chest was tight. "Yes," she said, looking at Severus. "There was. There is." Her voice was rough, and she threaded her fingers through his.

"Then what did you see in the cards you laid down when Hermione got here?" he asked.

"When you were skulking in the shadows?" she asked with a smirk. "I'll show you."

In a flash, the cards were back in their pile and she was laying down new ones.

"I saw the remnants of her passion, her determination to repair the injury. What it had taken out of her to stand up to all of you." She looked at the others, and Hermione wanted to reach out to each of them, to tell them that it was okay. That they hadn't been able to help themselves any more than she could have when in the grips of shadow. "The cards told me that if you could break free of intellect alone and reconcile with the others, that you might heal. All of you might."

"How did you know that Severus was here that day?" Hermione asked.

The old woman pointed to a card: a priestly figure on a throne, and then to another, a jester, his pack on his back, embarking on a journey, and finally to a kingly figure holding a sword. "The cards told me he was already here. The bearer of the light."

Severus snorted. "Hardly."

The fortune-teller raised her eyebrows.

"You argue with *me*?" she asked.

Hermione thought she heard Harry and Ron stifle a laugh. She shot them a look, and they lowered their eyes to the table, so reminiscent of their schooldays that she nearly laughed herself.

Severus shifted in his chair, his lips pursed. "If you knew me, you would know that I can hardly be considered the bearer of light."

The old woman huffed again. "I know all I need to know about you, young man," she said. "Now, where is it?"

"Where is what?" he asked.

"The rest of it."

He looked puzzled until she reached into the folds of her cloak and drew out the ball of gossamer light she'd woven that day and tucked away for safekeeping. "This belongs to you," she said, "but we'll be needing the rest of it before I can send you on your way. So, where is it?"

~**~

It hadn't occurred to any of them to bring it along, safely tucked away as it was in the Room of Requirement. That night at the Burrow, huddled around the luminous tangle of threads, they'd soaked in the light as if it were water, the strands fading away like snowflakes in the sun, leaving only the dimly glowing threads that they'd taken back with them to Hogwarts.

"Can we send a message to Minnie, then?" asked Arthur.

"That should suffice," said Severus. "Will you do the honours?"

Arthur looked uneasy. "I don't know that I have the..." He cleared his throat. "I don't know if I *can*."

Severus nodded. He understood Arthur's hesitation. Conjuring a Patronus took an unusual amount of *positive* magical energy.

Would the others expect *him* to call for the headmistress. Could he do it? Conjure a Patronus? And even if he could, did he *want* to expose himself, thus?

"I'll do it, Severus," said Neville. "I'm feeling a good deal better, and I suspect that my injury has been mitigated by working the ground as much as I have these past few years."

Relieved, he gestured to Neville to go ahead. In a moment, a silvery mist issued from his wand, and Neville shook his head, discouraged. Severus stood and walked around to where the younger man sat and silently placed his hand on his shoulder.

I have confidence in you. He didn't say it aloud, but he didn't need to.

He felt Neville take another breath and lift his wand.

"Expecto Patronum!" he shouted, as if volume might help. Whatever it was, something had, indeed, changed, as a tortoise emerged from his wand and, in a move far more swift than its flesh and blood counterpart, sped off towards Hogwarts.

"She will come," Severus said, and the fortune-teller nodded.

"Good," she said. "I expect she will bring back more than you expect."

"Always with the mysterious," muttered Hermione, and Severus squeezed her hand again.

"You've gained more than a passing acquaintance with the mysterious this past week, haven't you?" he whispered so that only she could hear. He smiled at the dawning brightness in her eyes and the hint of a smile that told him she agreed.

And so they sat, the eight of them, resting there with the cards still spread out before them until they heard a sharp pop outside the door followed by a firm knock.

The door creaked open and Minerva McGonagall strode in, box in her arms. The energy in the room shifted, like a sigh of relief.

"Thank you, Headmistress," said Hermione, rising to greet her. She took the box and turned to the fortune-teller.

"Join us," said the old woman. "Please. You have something else we need."

~~**~~

Looking at the two tangles of light side by side, Hermione couldn't believe she hadn't recognised the threads when she saw them for the first time in the Room of Requirement.

As if responding to the presence of their hosts, the formerly dim strands grew brighter and brighter. Luminous and intricately looped and knotted, each was like flowing fabric, every strand both gossamer and strong.

The fortune-teller cupped one in each hand, drew them together, and blew. The tendrils of light shimmied as if attempting to move, but fell helplessly again in the palms of her hand.

"One is missing," she said. "Which one?"

The looked at each other, confused.

"All of you are here." She lifted her hands. "Except for one of you. We need essence from each one of you or else the repair won't hold."

"All or nothing," muttered Ron.

"Wasn't there an image for each one of us in the Room, Hermione?" asked Ginny.

There had been, she thought. So, who...?

"Neville!" she said.

Neville looked vaguely nervous, as if he'd just been called out for not doing a project he hadn't remembered being assigned.

"Severus and I were here when you..." She gestured with her hands. "And the Room had frozen images for the rest of you, but not Neville. Maybe because he came in with us. I don't know. We need one for Neville. Can you?" She looked at the old woman, an ache in her chest. What if she couldn't do it? What if all would be lost because they couldn't access Neville's...what had she called it? Essence?

"Breathe, Hermione," Severus murmured, running his hand up and down her back. "She took them from us, she can find Neville's." He looked at the fortune-teller. "You can?"

"Of course I can," she said impatiently, turning to Neville and tucking the cards away and shuffling the pack. "Pick one," she said.

Now he looked alarmed.

"It's okay," Hermione reassured him. "It won't hurt you."

Neville nodded and reached out and pulled a card from the deck, placing it face up on the table. A young man on horseback, wielding a sword.

"Brave," she muttered.

It radiated light, as if the figure within was just behind a window with daylight at his back. The old woman reached out her hand and cupped her hand around the light streaming from the card, and Neville gasped. The light brightened, and Hermione knew that it had been joined with his own. With a grunt, the fortune-teller pulled the strands sharply and nodded, satisfied.

"Now," she muttered, gathering the other two knots together with the third and blowing until it seemed to Hermione as if she were holding a flame in her cupped hands. "Now, you," she said, looking up, and Hermione understood that they, too, needed to do the same. Awkwardly, gently, and with fierce concentration, they did. One by one, they stood and walked over to where the old woman held a sliver of their essence in the palms of her hands and added the breath of life to the flame until it flared bright, then faded to a gentle glow.

Cradled in her weathered hands was a smoothly woven nimbus of light.

"It is done."

~~**~~

It was almost anticlimactic, Severus thought. The two...no, three...tangles joined together. And so what?

"Now what?" he murmured.

"Now," said the fortune-teller as if he'd expected an answer, "we ask your elder where to find the place behind the mirror."

All eyes turned to the headmistress.

"How should I know?" she asked, startled.

"I expect you know the lore better than most," she said. "Is there no place, no legendary site, where secrets dwell behind the glass?"

The headmistress fidgeted and dropped her eyes to her hands, folded on her lap.

"Minerva?" Severus had never seen her looking quite so uncomfortable.

"There is a place, but it's not to be spoken of," she said. "Besides, it's apocryphal. Nobody knows whether such a site actually exists, and if it did, where to find it."

"What if it's the spot we need, Professor?" asked Ginevra. "If it's the only way, would you keep it from us?"

The headmistress bristled.

"I never said I would keep it from you, lass," she said. "Only that I don't know whether it exists, nor where it might be, assuming it's real."

"What is this place, Minerva?" asked Severus. "Real or not, what are we talking about?"

The headmistress hesitated only for a moment. "There is an inscription in the Head's office. It's engraved into one of the oldest stones of the castle. They say that the founders themselves left it there."

"What does it say?" asked Potter.

"Sub terra, a inlecebra glaciata, post atrocem speculum, fons artis magicae fluit."

They looked blank.

"It means: Beneath the earth, behind the black mirror. Frozen by enchantment, magic's wellspring flows."

"What the bloody hell does that mean?" said the Weasley boy.

The headmistress turned to look at him with an expression even Severus couldn't approximate, and the young man shrank back into his seat.

"It's like a puzzle, Ron," said Hermione, already busy transcribing the words on a slip of parchment she had pulled from her pocket.

Severus shook his head, but couldn't help but warm to her keenness when faced with an intellectual challenge. As much as her unflagging enthusiasm for her subjects and guidance of her classmates had irritated him whilst she was his student, he thrilled to see it now. It presaged a healing he was eager to witness in her even more than in himself.

"Beneath the earth, behind the black mirror," she muttered.

"Like a cave?" asked Potter. "Dumbledore took me to a cave..." He stopped short, glancing at Severus.

"The night of his death, Potter?" No use tiptoeing around the matter, and besides, it might prove useful.

"Yeah. That night. But there wasn't anything frozen or black, I don't think. There was a lake, though, and it was black. It was dark in there, though." He trailed off.

"Minerva," said Severus, looking at the parchment Hermione had handed to him. "Is the inscription punctuated the way you said it, or do the words run together?"

"I suppose they might be said to run together, Severus." She wrinkled her brow. "I haven't given that inscription much thought in years, but now that you mention it, there aren't any markings for starts and stops."

"So, it might say, 'Behind the black mirror, frozen by enchantment'? Meaning that it might be the black mirror that is frozen rather than the wellspring."

"Yes. I believe it could. Oh!" The headmistress paled.

"What is it, Minnie?" asked Arthur.

"There is a place, deep in the mountains behind the castle. My great-grandfather told me of it and once, when I was a child, we went hiking near there. He said it was sacred ground and we couldn't come near. But the sun was high, and it reflected off the surface. You could see it for miles around, though I expect most people didn't know what caused it." McGonagall grew silent, staring off into the distance.

"What was it, Headmistress?" Hermione asked, speaking into the hush that had fallen around them.

"It was a cave," she said, glancing at Potter. "Its mouth was covered by a raging waterfall. No matter the season, my great-grandfather said, it would always be there. A shield, he said."

"What does it protect?" Neville asked, leaning forward in his chair.

"Nobody knows for sure," she said. "But legend has it that inside that cave lives one of the sources of all magic." Her eyes grew wide. "But no one can go in there. It is said that nobody has ever made it past the waterfall to access the cave inside."

~**~

Hermione froze. Slick shadow rose up, triumphant, and wrapped its long fingers around her. She felt as if *she* were falling down the raging waterfall to the rocks below. A fool for believing she'd made it to the summit for good.

This was it, then. The end of the road. They had no special magic that would allow them past. And even if they did, they couldn't take the chance of contaminating a place so sacred when it might jeopardise the magic of so many. Not for the benefit of so few.

She looked at Severus and as her heart swelled, the shadow receded. They would stay close to one another, she thought, for as long as they could. Huddled together until the poison ate through the reserve they had built from each tender look, every loving touch, and from an abiding trust that had sprung up like heather amidst the brambles.

"It's okay, Headmistress." Hermione's voice trembled. "We'll just..." She shook her head.

"You can't mean that you'll let things continue as they are, Hermione," said McGonagall. The headmistress looked horrified.

"You just said it yourself. We can't get inside," Hermione said, anxiety rising to choke her. "And even if we could, how could we be sure that we won't just contaminate it?"

The headmistress shook her head. "Old legends and apocryphal tales are far less important than the fate of the seven of you," she said. "It is unthinkable that we should stand by and allow this illness...this poison...to ravage you when there is something that might reverse its course." Her jaw was set in the way Hermione remembered from the days when they'd silently battled Dolores Umbridge and a corrupt Ministry.

"It's such a big risk," Hermione whispered, her throat tight.

The tarot reader glanced at the headmistress in silent communication, and then reached out, covering Hermione's hand with her own. "Nobody promised you certainty. You will not *know*. You will just do. Trust in yourself and in each other." She looked around to the others. "It is what you all must do. I see no way around it. There is no other choice."

~**~

No choice.

Severus paced the length of the Room again, ignoring the others sitting together around the table in the centre of the space.

"Severus, would you sit down? Please," begged Minerva, her eyes tracking his course back and forth, back and forth across the room. "You're making *me* nervous, and I don't have to plumb the depths of some unmapped cave."

No choice. Again. Was that to be the story of his sorry existence? Forced once again down a road not of his own choosing.

"I don't want to do it," he said again. "There has to be another way."

"Severus," said Hermione, standing right in his way, "it's the answer we've been hoping for. Why are you so against the plan?"

"If there were a plan," he said, "I might be opposed to it. Or not. But as it stands, we wander through the forest until we stumble upon a mythical cave guarded by a waterfall. At which time we...unlike all others throughout history...manage to enter it to find... what? We don't even know what we're looking for."

"Doesn't that sound familiar?" muttered Ron.

Harry looked murderous for a moment, but Hermione interrupted.

"He's right, isn't he? We didn't know what we were looking for during the war, did we? We had to forget about having a plan. Besides, our plans had a tendency to go pear shaped, anyway."

Severus scowled.

"We did all right at school, though, didn't we, Neville?" asked Ginevra. "We didn't have a plan, exactly, but we knew how we wanted things to go, and we pushed where we could, and retreated when we had no other option."

Neville nodded, distracted by the lotus flower that he'd brought into the Room. To tend, he'd said. It had been too long without his attention and needed some care.

"We're trying too hard," he said, stroking a silky white petal with his fingertip. "The old woman was right. There's no way to know going in. We'll have to trust that magic naturally wants to repair itself, yes?" He looked up into a sea of incredulous faces.

"I'd say that's a fine plan, indeed," said Filius.

"Says the man who will stay safely in the castle," muttered Severus.

"Would you like me to come along?" he snapped. "Because I will. I will stand by you until this is resolved...one way or another. So don't you dare..." His eyes blazed.

Severus put up his hands as if to ward off sparks. "I'm sorry, Filius. I'm sorry. I'm just..." He sighed and shook his head.

Filius clasped him by the arm, and Severus closed his eyes. "Do not doubt for one moment that I stand by you, Severus. All of you." And the fierceness of his expression said what he could not say aloud. That he regretted what had not known, what he had not been given leave to do when Severus had been hidden in the shadows.

Severus's chest was tight, and he finally stopped pacing.

"Thank you, Professor," said Hermione. The others echoed her as Severus settled himself on the couch next to her.

"Professor Sinistra," said Harry. "Have you determined when we should set out?"

"Best I can determine is that a full moon is most auspicious. Other than that, I don't think it much matters," she said.

"That's tomorrow night," said Ginevra, her voice shaking. Harry gathered her close, and she laid her head on his chest.

"Sooner is good," said Ron. "This waiting is killing me." He huffed at the astonished expressions around him. "What? What did I say?"

"Never mind, Ronald," said his mother. "Soon it won't matter." She reached out to clasp her husband's hand. "Hopefully."

Hope. Yes, indeed, thought Severus. It would have to be their guiding light.

~**~

They set out at midmorning, fortified by the best breakfast the Hogwarts house-elves had to offer and carrying more for the road. It had been like a leaving feast, Hermione thought. As if the elves were sending them on a long journey.

There must have been something in the air. The students fairly bristled with tension, and the staff hovered around the seven of them as if they might crack at the slightest disturbance. Hermione thought they might all be on to something; everyone was on edge, eager to get on with it.

"It's not much of a map, but it'll have to do," said the headmistress, handing Severus a roll of parchment at the front gates. "At least it shows you the general direction."

Severus nodded, tucking the scroll into his robes right next to the pouch holding the still glowing nimbus. "Thank you, Minerva. I'm sure we will find it helpful. Your efforts tend to be."

They looked at one another for a moment, and Hermione wondered how many times before they had put their heads together over a dilemma...out of sight of the students, of course.

The headmistress sniffed and then put both her hands on Severus's shoulders. Hermione thought she might have hugged him had she not feared being flung halfway across the forest for her trouble.

"Be safe, Severus," she said, her cheeks ruddy with emotion. "Be well."

He opened his mouth, then closed it. Cleared his throat and nodded. The nod of his head seemed the signal for the others to crowd around, claiming the embraces Severus could not.

"We'll be back soon," said Harry.

"We always come back, don't we?" said Ron. "Eventually." More softly.

"Don't worry about us, Headmistress," said Neville. "We'll be okay." He sounded to Hermione as if he was trying to convince himself as much as his former Head.

And yet, his back was straight, and Harry's eyes were bright. Ron looked restless, ready to set off, and Molly had given Arthur one last lingering kiss and Ginny one last hug.

The sun was high in the sky, and it was time to go.

~**~

A/N: Alpha and beta reading thanks to Annie Talbot and DrinkingCocoa, whose words of guidance and incisive observations always make the story better. Thanks also to Scoffy for the outstanding Latin translation. *hugs

Thanks also to Lady Karelia for beta reading at the speed of light, and to JunoMagic and Kittylefish for words of support and encouragement in the final hours.

"What final hours?" you may ask.

Well...

The final two chapters of the story are complete. Chapter 21 will post Monday afternoon, and Chapter 22, the final chapter, sometime on Tuesday.

Thanks to all of you who have read, reviewed, and been so enthusiastic about this story. I hope you enjoy the final two installments.

*hugs you all

Chapter 21: That which is peace, that which is joy...

Chapter 21 of 22

It was only after Snape followed her into the neglected shop, moving furtively between the shafts of sunlight that pierced the gloom, that it occurred to him to wonder why, ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione Granger was running.

And why, in a world with magic, *real* magic, she should be seeking the counsel of a Muggle Tarot reader.

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The sun was high in the sky, and it was time to go.

The sun was low in the sky, and they were no further than when they'd begun. Oh, they'd hiked for miles, no doubt, but the elusive cave with its towering waterfall was nowhere in sight.

"I can't walk another step," said Ginevra as she sank down to sit on a stone alongside the path. Severus couldn't say he blamed her.

"Let's take a break," he shouted to those lagging behind. "Water and a rest."

A collective sigh rose up from the group, and they settled into a circle beneath a particularly shady tree.

"Can we see the map, then, Snape?" asked Harry.

Severus withdrew the scroll and unrolled it on the sandy soil, anchoring it on all four corners with rocks he'd found scattered on the ground nearby.

"I reckon we're about here," he said, pointing to a spot northeast of the Forbidden Forest, deep in the hills behind Hogwarts.

"Helpful, that," said Ron, peering closely at the map. "Did she say where she thought the cave might be?"

Severus tamped down his exasperation. At his best the boy had been annoying...impatient and eager for shortcuts...but in fairness, he couldn't blame him for his edginess today. He shared it, with or without the shadow's influence.

"The headmistress thought it might be beyond this ridge here," Hermione said, pointing to a spot perhaps a mile further into the hills. "When everybody's ready, I suggest we push in that direction."

"Food first," declared Ron, already rifling through the bags he'd been carrying.

Severus rolled his eyes, but he was hungry, too. The others seemed to agree, and silence fell as everyone drank and ate their fill. They were weary, and Severus wouldn't allow himself to consider what would happen if they didn't find the cave by nightfall.

He needn't have worried.

The setting sun, like a beacon, painted its crimson ribbons along the cascade hurling itself over the cliff's edge before thundering into the basin below. Like a hundred thousand shards of glass, it glistened. An impassable sheet of armoured water.

Behind the falls, they glimpsed it...the mouth of a cave.

It might just as well have been a thousand miles away for all the good it did them.

"How are we supposed to get past *that*?" whispered Ginevra.

"First we need to get closer," said Harry. "We'll figure it out when we can see it better." He looked to Severus. "Does that sound all right with you, sir?"

Severus hesitated, startled. *Sir?* "Call me Severus, Potter. And yes, that sounds reasonable to me."

"It's Harry." His chin was angled almost defiantly, as if requesting that his former professor...former adversary...call him by his first name was an act of utter defiance.

"Harry, yes." Severus looked him squarely in the eyes. "Let's proceed, shall we?"

The boy looked inordinately pleased, and Severus wondered whether the world had finally gone entirely askew. Here they were, on the precipice of possible death and despair, not necessarily in that order, and Potter...Harry...was interested in a truce.

Hermione, though, was beaming, and as far as Severus was concerned, that was all the affirmation he needed.

~**~

The water pounding its way onto the rocks was every bit as loud as she'd imagined, though she hadn't anticipated the sensation of the earth moving in a constant hum of thunderous motion.

"That's some waterfall," said Arthur, almost admiringly.

"Which would be splendid, Dad," said Ginny with a sigh, "if all we had to do was appreciate nature's beauty."

"Well, maybe we should at that," said Neville. He sat on the damp grass alongside the basin and stretched his legs. "It's beautiful here, so what could it hurt to enjoy it?" he asked. "We're not supposed to go in until moonrise, are we?"

"That is correct," said Severus. "However, we have still not established how to get beyond..." he made a wide, sweeping gesture with his arm "...that."

The waters roared their agreement.

"Stop thinking," said Hermione, pulling him down to sit alongside her. "The fortune-teller told us that this would be intuitive, so let it be." She didn't know where the impulse came from to say so, but the moment she did, she knew it was right. Years of strategies and plans had done them little good. They had nothing left but raw instinct to guide them. She closed her eyes and said a silent prayer that it would be enough.

Neville was right. It was exceptionally beautiful here, beneath the flowing water and towering cliffs. Spring had arrived, and the soft grasses gave them a cushion on which to sit or lay or, if you were Ron, sprawl. It was hypnotic, she thought. The sound of the water rushing faster and faster until it collided with the earth below. She wondered how long the falls had been here, and what, if anything, they concealed behind the mouth of the cave.

The sun was moving to its nadir at the edge of the horizon. Its corona burned her eyes but she couldn't look away. Severus sat beside her, silent, staring at the water with narrowed eyes.

"Let it be," she whispered. "It will come." She hoped.

As darkness fell, only the sound of the water pounding the rocks and the whisper of the wind remained, wrapping around them like a silken cloak. They sat together, for how long she would never know, and just listened. And breathed. Until Severus reached into his cloak and pulled out the pouch containing the glowing mesh of light.

He drew it from its cover gently, as if it might shatter from the scents and sounds around them. And for a moment, it seemed as if something *had* shattered. Silence, deafening in its suddenness, startled them.

Silence. And the reflection of the nimbus in an enormous, rippling pane of glass...glass that had, just an instant before, been a raging waterfall.

~**~

The moon was rising, and they were at an impasse.

"I will not discuss this any further," he said, endeavouring to ignore Hermione's stricken look. "I will stay out here, anchoring all of you with the nimbus. Otherwise, how will you find your way out again?"

"We won't leave you behind, mate," said Weasley, as stubborn as ever. "Hermione would have my head. Can't have it."

Severus snorted. "Hermione will be the least of your troubles if you don't get yourself behind that glass," he said.

Weasley snorted and muttered something that sounded like, "Just wait."

He might not have to, he saw when he turned back to Hermione. Her expression was stony, and he could feel the shadow lurking beneath her skin. Fear. Anger. Hurt.

Severus took her arm and pulled her to the side, away from the others. Her expression was fierce, and his heart swelled at the protectiveness he knew she must be feeling. Towards him. *Him*. And yet. It didn't matter. It *couldn't* matter. He knew his role in this as he had in every conflict before it.

His was to stay behind.

Alone.

"I am the anchor," he said to Hermione. "The fortune-teller said that I was the 'bearer of light'. I have to do this. I can't stand the thought of you getting lost in there."

The light strands had already attached themselves to each of them in turn, as if they'd been instructed as to their purpose. His had found him, too, but still, he held onto the woven ball of thread with both hands. He would not relinquish the circle of light. He would not leave it behind and join them in the cave. It was his job alone to lead them back. And if it meant sacrificing himself in the process, well, he would deal with those consequences later.

"Hermione, please," he begged. "Please." *Let me*. Let me do the right thing without hiding it. For once. This time. "Please."

She was sobbing when he kissed her that last time, tears wet on her cheeks, and then on his when she clung to him.

"I love you," she whispered into his ear. "I will always love you," she murmured into his tear-dampened skin.

"I cannot lose you." Words and tears, and heartfelt wishes falling into the wind.

Which were hers and which were his would have been impossible for anyone to say.

~**~

The basin was cold, the water knee-deep and still.

In the reflected and refracted light, all they could see was black ice laced with golden strands, a rippled, massive shield. There was visible breach through which to access the cave behind it. No spell or hex could penetrate it.

Arthur stood closest, looking at it with a contemplative look on his haggard face.

"I wonder..." he muttered and stepped up to the glass, placing his hand against its surface. He sighed, and then with a shudder of air and light, stepped right through.

**

The cave was dark, even with the light thrown off by the threads they'd each wrapped around their wrists. High-ceilinged and damp, it seemed bottomless, with no light at the end, or anywhere they could see. Still, they made their way, marking the path as best they could in the dark, hoping that the meandering path was, in fact, more direct than it appeared.

"Do you see anything ahead?" asked Harry. "Anybody?"

"Not a thing," said Neville grimly.

"Whose idea was this, again?" muttered Ginny.

Hermione bristled.

"Now, now, Ginny," said Arthur, his arm around her shoulders. "Let's not do this."

Ginny nodded and shot Hermione an apologetic look.

"I hate this," Hermione muttered, her voice filling the small space. "It's wet and it's dark, and I don't know where we're going."

Ron laughed, sharp and short. "If you can do it, so can we," he said. "You're here, aren't you? Without your planner and everything."

"What rousing encouragement, Ronald," she said, scowling into the dim light. "I'm ever so grateful that you appreciate the depth of my sacrifice."

He snorted and walked on.

She was thankful that he had moved in front of her. This way there was no chance he could see her eyes fill with tears. Did he know that it was hardly her planner...or even a plan...that she missed most? She thought of Severus, of her last view of him standing outside the mouth of the cave, holding onto the nimbus...their anchor...as if for dear life.

Sacrifice, indeed.

~**~

He could *feel* them in there. He hadn't anticipated that when he'd insisted on remaining behind, guarding and holding on to the ball of thread that would lead them back to him. Until he held it in his bare hands, he hadn't noticed.

Arthur's fascination with the nooks and crannies of the cave. Preoccupation a distraction from helplessness.

Harry's eagerness to plumb its depths, his vague worry for his wife's well-being. And his wife, Ginevra's, anxiety hidden beneath bravado. How frightened she still was; how frightened she'd been for so long. What a tragedy that for so short a life, she'd had so many reasons to fear.

Weasley, irritation kept barely at bay. Hating that they were wandering again. Wishing he could be a hero, that he could find what they needed and triumph.

He felt the ebb and flow of emotion, broken with long stretches of concentration as they climbed a slippery patch or climbed an incline to a new ridge. Disappointment as each new archway led nowhere.

Neville's cautious tread, watching for flora and fauna despite the shadowy darkness.

And Hermione. Her heart pounding with anxiety for what they might find around each sharp corner and beyond every ragged archway. Terrified of plunging into the unknown, but doing it anyway. Doing it for all of them. For him, because he couldn't. Wouldn't. Her heart with him no matter how deeply she ventured into the cave.

And so, when six of the survivors of Voldemort's Horcruxes turned one more corner, out of the dank cave and into fresh air and sky, he felt their collective surge of joy and rush of peacefulness as if it were his own.

~**~

They stumbled out into a copse of trees. Well lit by moonlight, the golden glow of the nimbus-threads lent an ethereal feel to an already idyllic scene.

Trees.

Hundreds of them. Perhaps thousands. To Hermione's untrained eye, it seemed a motley collection of all shapes and sizes. Towering trees with branches that reached into the inky blackness of the sky. Lush ones with leaves the size of dinner plates; spindly-trunked ones with branches as delicate as spider webs.

"So many," whispered Hermione.

Neville nodded, running his hand along the smooth branch of the one nearest the mouth of the cave before darting to another alongside, and then another, across the clearing.

Not a cave, Hermione realised. A tunnel. A passageway, perhaps. To this place.

"Where are we?" asked Ron.

"An excellent question," said Arthur. "Neville? You seem best equipped to tell us. Do you have any idea where we are? What this place *is*?"

Neville nodded again as if he were unable to speak. He had stopped moving from tree to tree, leaning against a squat tree with luxurious branches that reached its arms wide, his forehead against the rough bark of its trunk.

"They're wand-wood trees," he said finally, breathless. "I can't be sure, but I think all the types are here. I saw an oak over there." He pointed to the sturdy tree at the edge of the clearing. "And see, there's a hawthorne hedge over there, and holly here."

"You're right, Neville!" exclaimed Ginny, breathing in the nutty scent of the hazel tree she was leaning up against. "I've never seen so many different sorts of trees all together like this."

"That's because they wouldn't naturally grow in the same environment, Ginny," Neville explained. "There must be some enchantment on this place. Otherwise, not all the trees would survive the climate here, or the soil. It's inexplicable without magic." He had turned away from the group to commune with the cherry-wood tree, and he looked as if he might burst from the joy of it.

"Neville?" Hermione asked, but it was no use. He had begun to whisper to the leaves, stroking them until she swore the branches had wrapped themselves around him. He nodded, as if he had come to understand something gravely important, and then he pulled out his wand.

If a tree had hands, fingers to clasp, Hermione would have said Neville's tree...for that's what it was, she realised, Neville's...had reached its out to take his wand. For an instant, Neville trembled, his body shaking as if the earth trembled beneath him, and then so did the branches above him until, without warning, the wand was swallowed into the vibrant wood that cradled it.

And Neville sank onto an indentation in the tree roots and fell asleep.

At least Hermione hoped he was asleep. She ran to him, felt for a pulse, breathing a sigh of relief when she found one. Slow and steady.

Asleep, then.

Oh, hell.

~**~

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'What final hours?' you may ask.

Well...

This is the penultimate chapter of King of Swords. The final chapter of the story is complete and will post sometime tomorrow.

Thanks to all of you who have read, reviewed, and been so enthusiastic about this story. I hope you enjoy the final installment.

*hugs you all

Chapter 22: That which is love, and that which is light...

Chapter 22 of 22

It was only after Snape followed her into the neglected shop, moving furtively between the shafts of sunlight that pierced the gloom, that it occurred to him to wonder why, ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione Granger was running. And why, in a world with magic, *real* magic, she should be seeking the counsel of a Muggle Tarot reader.

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Asleep, then.

Oh, hell.

It was a good thing they hadn't had a plan, thought Hermione, because there wasn't a force on earth that could have stopped the rest of them from finding *their* trees.

Without thought, without discussion, with an almost compulsive zeal, they circled the grove. Frozen, Hermione watched them go. Arthur, to a rowan tree that birthed his wand, and Harry to a holly that had given him his. Ron, to a willow whose flowing branches seemed to swallow him whole, and Ginny, whose hazel leaves seemed to embrace her, welcoming her arrival.

She watched them, one by one, as they fell into trance, lulled by the trees that understood their magic. Even, or perhaps especially, their broken magic.

They slept, all but Hermione, and she saw in their steady breathing and relaxed bodies a peace that she had lately felt only in the arms of the man she loved.

The vine wood was calling to her, like thin strains of music lulling her to come close, to surrender, to sleep, but she stayed far away. She couldn't go, not yet. Not until Severus was here. Otherwise, how would he know to follow? How would he find them?

Severus, come.

She called to him. With all her heart and the gentlest of tugs on the gossamer thread that connected them, she bade him come to her.

Severus, I need you. You need to be here, she begged him whilst, across the clearing, graceful branches dotted with lush, green leaves reached for her, thick stems of vine wood wrapping around its brilliant, white trunk.

~**~

Severus. Her voice in his head. *Severus, come. I need you.*

Now, he thought, was not a good time to start hallucinating.

He was so tired. It had been hours. Hours holding this nimbus of light that might as well have been a living organism. Hours, until he was sure the moon would set again and they would have missed their chance, lost in the maw of the cave. And when the illumination of each of the strands in turn began to dim, and then disintegrate, until

only one tethered him, his heart sat firmly in his throat.

He Occluded almost without thinking about it. The silence deafened him, leaving him more cut off and alone than he had been since the night he saw Hermione drowning in her shadow. His heart *hurt*, and it occurred to him that this was the farthest he'd been from her since that night not so terribly long ago.

He dropped his shields.

Severus. There it was again. Hermione's voice. Urgent. Insistent. Maybe it was a trick. Part of the enchantment that guarded this place.

But no. He knew her. He *felt* her. She was in some sort of danger. She needed him. He'd worry about finding the way back later. None of it would matter if she were hurt. If she were—

No.

She had called for him, and he would come.

**

He stepped into the water and shivered. So cold.

The sheet of glass stood before him, a frozen sentinel. He breathed into the ice and felt the heat of his body reflected back at him.

Come, please.

He touched the surface with his fingertips and felt it vibrate against his skin.

Would the shield allow him to pass through? He, who had always been a creature of darkness?

Severus stepped closer to the barrier and held the nimbus in front of him as a guide...

This time, he would carry the light with him.

...and shivered just a little as he pushed through the threshold to the other side.

~*~*~

It was dark, the nimbus giving off only the faintest light. But he was used to that. Dark and dank and lonely, only the faintest illumination to guide him.

Severus, I need you. Her voice again. Perhaps she could feel him now just as he could sense her.

I'm coming, Hermione. Hang on.

A pulse of relief rushed through him—hers, then his.

On and on he walked. Tripping on stones in the path, scraping against the rough walls, dripping with damp. How he wished he hadn't had to do this so many times alone.

I'll wait for you. You're nearly there.

So grateful that, this time, he wasn't.

**

The moon was low in the sky when he met fresh air, taking in great lungfuls as remedy for the long moments... *a lifetime* spent swimming in the heavy darkness.

She was there, right at the mouth of the tunnel. Waiting for him, her arms around him almost simultaneous with those cleansing breaths, as if she might be the source of his oxygen, clearing the poison of Dark magic from his body once and for all.

She was talking, but he couldn't think, couldn't listen yet. Disoriented, he wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her hair. No matter where they were, he was safe here, right now, the scent of her skin reminding him. Calming him.

"Where are we?"

She looked up at him, her eyes red-rimmed, eyelids heavy.

"Where magic is born."

~*~*~

As soon as he emerged from the mouth of the cave, she knew.

She tried to tell him, but he was exhausted. Distracted by the trees, and the figures lying still beneath them—and who could blame him?

Still, he needed to know. The heartbeats of the others were steady, but growing weaker. They were linked, she saw. Linked by a common injury and a common need.

"We have to finish it," she said. "Together."

"Finish what?" He looked concerned, eyes resting on his sleeping companions.

"The wand trees. Our wands. It must be the link between our selves and our magic. I think—" She swallowed hard. "I think we have to return our wands. To their source."

"To their—what?" He looked alarmed. "They relinquished their wands? Made themselves completely vulnerable? What were they thinking?"

Furious.

No, she reminded herself. Terrified. For them. For her.

"Severus, wait." She laid one hand on his chest, the other circling around his waist. "Listen." She pressed her fingertips to his lips. "Listen."

"We're already vulnerable. The thing you're most afraid of—that we've all been so frightened of, it *already happened*. The barrier that protects us from the darkest parts of ourselves, it was breached a long time ago. We've been as vulnerable as a person can be—for years. Severus, compared to that, this—" she looked at the others,

immobile on the soft ground, thought about their wands, one after the other, melting into the wood that bore them “—is nothing.” She took another breath. “We have to trust. Surrender. Severus, surrender with me. Look.”

She took him by the hand and turned towards the birch tree. Its white bark obscured by the tendrils of vine wound around it, twining through its branches until it looked as if the two had always grown together as one.

“My wand,” he said. “It’s birch.”

“I noticed,” said Hermione. “And mine is vine.”

Together they stood, the trees that held the root of their magic winding together. Vibrating, as if impatient for them to get on with it.

“I don’t understand,” he said.

“I don’t either, not really,” she told him. “But I can *feel* it. The magic, the shadow, it’s all there. It’s always been there. We’ve just been pushed so far from its source.” From where it found balance. Ebb and flow. Dark and Light informing each other. Enhancing and deepening their humanity.

Voldemort, terrified of all that made him human, all that left him vulnerable, tearing into the fabric of everything inside himself that might be peace, and joy, and love, and light. Embracing only the Dark and destroying the light inside of himself. Ripping it end to end, grotesque and pained. Broken and alone. Tainting anyone who came near him with the same poison. Dragging them further from the essence of themselves where both Dark and Light coexist. Balanced. Ultimately cracking the barriers that kept the Darkness all people carry within themselves from drowning their Light.

“Our magic hasn’t been working properly,” he said, almost to himself. “But Ollivander said that the wands weren’t damaged. You told me Ollivander said it.” He looked at her, his expression turbulent.

“I don’t think it’s the wands that are the trouble,” she said, thoughtful. “It’s just... I think our wands must be tuned in to our magic, and our magic is at the core of our selves. The trees—” She looked around at the low-hanging branches and the soaring ones. At the blooms and leaves wafting through the spring air, falling to earth under the moonlit sky.

“The trees aren’t just trees.”

“I suppose not,” she agreed.

“What happened to their wands?” he asked. “If the trees took back the wand woods, where are the wand cores? Aren’t *those* the wand’s magical essences?”

Hermione looked over at the grove, at the people who lived in her heart, who lay now peacefully beneath sheltering trees. What had happened to their wand cores? Had the trees taken their magic back in payment for—she hoped—healing?

As if he knew her thoughts, he said, “What if we wake up and have no magic? What if they’ve given their magic back to the source?”

She paused. What might it be like to live without magic? Without the ability to reach out her hand and *transform* what she touched. She looked at Severus. He was stroking the delicate skin on her hand with his thumb, unconsciously grounding himself, and her. The shadow lurked, yes; it always had, she realised with a start. Stalking her with anxious whispers in the night, driving her to push ever harder, no matter the cost.

But here, now, it occurred to her that it had never been *magic* pushing aside the shadow. No enchantment or trick of the ether. Only his gentle touch—his respect, compassion and ultimately his love for her kept it at bay. This sort of magic was not connected to wand wood and wand cores; this sort of magic would always be hers, and his too, to keep.

“If we survive, if you are with me, I can live without magic,” she said. “If it repairs the breach so that we can *live*, the trees can have my magic back.”

He closed his eyes and nodded, and Hermione wondered what sort of bargain he was striking, what hopes and fears he might be sending into the heavens. She drew his face closer to hers and kissed his closed eyes, one at a time, and then his forehead, lingering there.

His eyes opened, and warmth flooded her at the passion there, the trust. The love. He drew out his wand, light wood, darkened by years of wear, and laced his fingers with hers.

Hand in hand, they crossed the clearing under the setting moon.

~*~*~

He hadn’t expected the bark to be warm. Almost like living flesh, it pulsed beneath his hands, as if there might be a heartbeat beneath its rough exterior. It called to him in a voice that rode the whisper of its leaves and the rustle of its branches.

Let it go, it said. *Leave it be*.

He lay his cheek against the trunk, rough bark scratching his skin. He would leave it; he would, if only he knew what it was he had to let go of. But the tree didn’t answer him, only beat its steady tattoo against his skin and warmed him.

Hermione crouched beside him, and he heard her gasp when she made contact with the wood—but he couldn’t move to soothe her. The vibration beneath his hands reassured him. This was a journey they must each make alone, no matter that they were intertwined as surely as the birch and the vine.

Slowly, gradually, his heartbeat thrummed in time with the one within the wood. A synchronous dance between them. A tuning of the instrument that was his heart, his soul, his magic.

And he slept.

And he dreamed.

**

The ice was cracking again, and the weight of all of them on it was doing it no favours.

“About time you got here, Snape,” said the Weasley boy. “Where’s Hermione?”

“Here.”

Her voice, the touch of her hand, the taste of her mouth when he kissed her—the rest of them be damned—reassured him that she was real, for all that this must be, had to be, a dream. There had been no frozen lake, no precariously cracking ice in the grove where they all, presumably, still lay sleeping.

“Where is here, then?”

Damned if he knew, he thought, looking around. Nothing but ice as far as the eye could see. Ice, and a thin slice of what must be the shore.

"I've been here before in my dreams," he muttered.

"The ice isn't going to hold up much longer," said Harry, as if he were commenting on the weather.

"It's a long way to shore," mused Ginevra, eying the horizon.

"I doubt I swim well enough to make it that far." Arthur looked worried.

"You're not alone, Arthur," said Hermione, putting her hand on his arm. "We'll make sure you get there."

"We'll stick together, then," said Ron.

Harry nodded, his arm securely around his wife's shoulders.

"We will," said Severus.

They stood for a time on the wide expanse of ice, watching the cracks widen as the sun made its way across the sky. Stood until the cracks beneath their feet had no more purchase and let go.

They plunged into the water below.

~~**~~

The water was warm, and the sun was hot. The ice evaporated into particles of air and sea, leaving them swimming in what felt like lukewarm bath water.

They swam.

Hermione would never have predicted that Neville would be so playful, splashing and ducking as they made their way towards the shore. She sputtered and hid behind Severus until she, too, discovered the thrill of gliding through the water, ambushing her friends with unexpected showers. Harry and Ron made it a game to see who could stay beneath the water longest and, when that grew old, diligently attempted to create a tidal wave in the placid waters until Arthur made them stop.

There was far more laughter in the middle of that uncharted lake than there had been between any of them in a solid decade.

When Arthur had, as he'd feared, tired, Severus offered him a shoulder to lean on, and with hardly a blink of hesitation, he accepted.

Hermione thought it to his great credit that Severus didn't retaliate when Ginny splashed him later on, ribbons of water streaming off his face, his former student diving beneath the dark water to escape his possible wrath.

At last, that hazy strip of land became firmer, and Hermione thought it no small miracle that they'd made it to shore. Rising from the water, soaked, exhausted, and still giddy, they fell upon the sand, reaching out to one another, hands clasping hands, or ankles, or elbows. Limbs askew and tangled in oddly reassuring knots. Grateful for the solid presence both of the earth and of one another.

And they woke.

~~**~~

Soaking wet, warm, cradled in Severus's arms. In all, not exactly what she'd expected.

They were huddled together in the middle of the clearing, wand wood trees all around them. The sun was rising, and Hermione wanted to sing. She sat up and stretched, magic thrumming through her body, flowing like lifeblood. Clean. Clear. Pure.

Severus was looking down at his hands, as if amazed at the intricacies of bone and tendon. And magic.

"Some dream," murmured Severus, pointedly squeezing out his cloak. Water sluiced off all of them, as real as the grass beneath them and the arching branches above.

"Didn't feel like a dream to me," said Harry, stroking Ginny's hair as she leaned into him. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I don't usually wake up drenched when I dream about swimming."

"Awfully strange turn of events, nonetheless," said Arthur. "Ice and water. Swimming to shore. Rather strange, I'd say." He looked around. "Though I suppose it's in keeping with the rest of the night."

"I should say so," agreed Severus.

"What do you reckon happened to our wands?" asked Ron.

"Gone, I guess," said Neville, unconcerned. "I suppose we'll get new ones when we get back."

"It's been almost eleven years since Harry vanquished the great snake," said Ron. "It's right on time, then, right?"

Hermione sat up straighter. "Ooh, Ron! You're right!"

"Always with the tone of surprise*," he said with a smirk. But then he was laughing, and so was she, the others rolling their eyes in amusement.

Eleven years, she thought. Eleven years since Harry died, and Severus nearly did.

Both reborn, too, she thought. Severus into a world without secrets. Still alone. And now, again, into what she knew was, for him, a wholly unfamiliar place filled with people who smiled at him and a woman who loved him.

"I don't fancy trudging back through that tunnel soaking wet," said Ron, shaking the water out of his hair with a sharp toss of his head. But he looked awfully eager despite his words, Hermione thought, and he and Harry wandered off to peer into the mouth of the tunnel like two boys about to set off on an adventure.

"We haven't got a guide wire to get back," said Neville. "We took a whole lot of turns on our way through."

They had, Hermione thought. More twists than she'd been able to remember, though she'd made every effort during the first leg of the journey before letting it go.

Surrender.

"There's no way, mate," Ron was saying to Harry. "The mouth of the tunnel's too narrow. How did we all fit through there, anyway?"

Hermione looked over to where the boys were standing near the tunnel's opening. A narrow slit barely wide enough for a Hogwarts first year opened into the clearing.

How *had* they come through so tight a space?

Severus walked over to the boys and peered through the opening into the dark.

"It would appear," he said, "that we will not be going back the way we came."

"No," said Arthur thoughtfully. "I don't suppose one ever does."

~**~

The sun beat down, warming and drying them with each step forward. The copse of trees was thick, but just beyond were more hills, and they decided that on the whole, reaching higher ground was a worthy strategy.

The young men took the lead, bursting with energy—especially Neville, who had taken to describing the intricacies of every tree and bush they passed. To their credit, the others seemed genuinely engaged, interested in what their friend had to share.

Arthur and Ginevra walked just behind them, arm in arm, talking softly with one another.

Trailing behind, he and Hermione took their time, meandering off the path when a particularly interesting specimen of foliage or beast caught their eyes. The others would wait for them, Severus knew. If they fell too far behind, they'd not go on too far without them.

He pulled Hermione in close for a lingering kiss. Her body moulded against his, and he felt the heat rise between them. There were patches of soft grass all around. They could stop here, under the blue sky and the sun's caress, to lose themselves in one other—passionate and tender. She had the same thought, he saw, the glint in her eye playful. But neither of them wanted to leave the others for so long. Neither had said it aloud, but it felt important that they arrive together—when they found the castle again at last.

One more caress, her lips brushing his, their fingers intertwined, and they set off once more. She hadn't stopped touching him all the way, he realised. Her hand was constantly in his, or her arm twined around his waist. Now and again, she'd stop and throw her arms around him as if overcome with the joy of it all.

He shared the sentiment.

Free of it now, he more fully appreciated the weight of the shadow that had dogged him for so very long. It was as if his lungs could expand to twice their usual size, suffusing every fibre of his body with light and peace and love. It was, he thought, just like magic.

And when they crested the next hill, the castle rising, inexplicably, before them, its towers and turrets brilliant in the morning sun, the others were there, waiting, spread out in the tall grasses, talking. Laughing. The Weasley boy lay on his back, arms flung open as if to embrace the sunshine that streamed down on them.

"Oi!" he shouted. "Slowpokes! Where've you been?"

Hermione smirked. "Sorry, Ron. We just got a bit distracted—"

"Wait!" he said, his hand shooting straight up in the air as if to stop the flow of information. "Never mind. That's already way more than I needed to know." But he was laughing, and Hermione was blushing and smiling, and Severus couldn't help but join in.

The others stood up and all at once they were huddled together, survivors. Choosing life. Choosing peace. Choosing joy. Choosing light.

Hermione hung back, looking up at Severus, her eyes bright.

"Do you think we'll be able to find this place again?" she asked. This place of healing. Of magic.

"I do," he said, leaning down to brush her lips with his. "It's ours."

She deepened the kiss, and with a toss of her head, turned to join the others, her hand firmly in his.

As they made their way down the hill to Hogwarts, Hermione's hair, corkscrew curls bursting wildly in every direction, glinted like copper in the sunlight.

~**~

A/N: *These were also Hermione's words to Ron when he compliments her appearance right before Bill and Fleur's wedding. From DH, p. 125.

Acknowledgements: And so we come to the end of our tale.

Finishing this story feels like a milestone in a way that completing no other story has done. I'm a different writer than I was when this story was first begun, and I can't click "complete" without indulging in some (possibly long-winded) acknowledgements.

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Some writers write in isolation, keeping their story and their storytelling under wraps until they feel it's ready to see the light of day. I, however, am not one of those writers.

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"King of Swords" would never have been born at all had Ariadne not poked me one night and dragged me over to the Potter Place prompt list on The Petulant Poetess. "It'll be fun!" she said. And it has been. I was still a really brand-new writer, wobbling over every word and shaking with each revealed image. I still do that, but not nearly as much (or for as long) as I did. Thanks to Ariadne and Annie for tolerating me, especially in those early months of writing.

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*hugs you all