

Night Whispers

by gersknightlady

In the dark halls of the castle, Hermione hears soft whispers of desperation.

A One Shot

Chapter 1 of 1

In the dark halls of the castle, Hermione hears soft whispers of desperation.

I know N.E.W.T.s are usually proctored by someone else, but for this story I used the regular teachers.

Hermione Granger sat among piles of books in a corner of the library. It was late...probably past midnight...but she continued to pore over the text before her, cramming for her History of Magic N.E.W.T. the next morning. Returning to school after the war had been difficult, but it helped her to focus and not dwell as much on those who had been lost. She saw the effects on many of the survivors' faces daily...scars that hadn't been there before and faraway looks of terror. They had been common sights at the beginning.

Surprisingly, teachers and friends that she had thought dead had survived. They had been stunned by a curse of Voldemort's creation: Living Death. Hours after his death, those lying dead among the ruins of Hogwarts began to stir and come back to life, freed by the deaths of the casters. Lupin and Tonks were alive. Fred was still gone and so was Colin Creevy. Others who had been grievously injured had been saved by the miracle works of Poppy Pomfrey, who had surprised all of them with her skills.

Hermione yawned and snuffed out the candle. If she did not go to bed soon, she would not be able to concentrate in the morning. It was only because of who she was and the fact that she was an adult still in school that she had the liberty to walk the corridors at night and use the library after hours. She left the library, locking the door behind her, and used her wand for light as she walked down the dark corridor toward the Gryffindor Tower stairs.

There seemed to be an odd breeze blowing through the dark hallway. It rustled her robes, and she felt a chill. She pulled her robes tightly about her with one hand and gazed into the darkness. Perhaps it wasn't so wise to be in the corridors so late. If Professor Snape found would take her to task for being out so late. She listened for his shuffled step. He'd survived the war, but he had scars and a slight limp now. He was as nasty and cruel as ever. She couldn't blame him. They'd left him to die, only checking hours after Voldemort had fallen to find him in a suspended state of death. He'd been saved only by his potions knowledge and the few vials he'd kept with him at all times.

She rounded a corner, the stairs in sight, when a sound made her freeze. The wind carried a low moan and whispered words, "Don't leave me!"

She felt a chill. Goosebumps formed on her arms, and she shivered. She turned, holding her wand before her, and cried out, "*Lumos Maxima!* Who's there? Show yourself!" she demanded.

The light revealed the empty hallway and only the moan of the wind answered her.

She laughed nervously and said to herself, "Hermione, you're punchy. Go to bed."

But when she crawled into her bed that night, she could still hear the words, "Don't leave me!" The agony of the sound tore at her heart, and tears slipped down her cheeks. She finally fell into a restless sleep.

The next morning, despite the restless night, she found the test easy. She'd been at the top of her class, of course, and she really hadn't needed to study at all. Poring over *Hogwarts: A History* had been a favorite pastime of hers since before coming to school. She also had an Arithmancy test; but since it was one of her favorite classes, she was pretty confident that she would do well with only a few hours of study.

Ron had not come back to school. He'd taken a position on a minor league Quidditch team but was working his way to a higher team rather quickly. Harry had taken his N.E.W.T.s in the summer and squeaked by enough to enter the Auror program. He wanted to get his training out of the way so he could be ready to marry Ginny after she finished her N.E.W.T.s in the next few days.

Hermione was glad that neither had followed her to school. But she missed them terribly. She and Ron had broken up after the war. Too many girls idolized him afterwards, and she had not been able to handle his flirting. In her heart, she'd always known they were too different.

She took her Arithmancy test after lunch and then headed outside to sit by the lake with her Charms books to study. A black-robed figure at the edge of the forest caught her eye, and she watched as Professor Snape limped into the forest and vanished. She felt guilty every time she saw him. Sitting in his class was agony. They had left him for dead. If she had stayed to help him, he might not have the partial paralysis that he now had to bear. She sometimes found him looking at her. His black eyes bored holes in her. She couldn't blame him for hating her. He probably didn't know she'd sent Madam Pomfrey to him. She wasn't about to tell him and have him blast her apart for it. She wasn't sure he was happy to have survived. His evil temper seemed to be proof of that. She'd hoped that now that he was free, he would show more of his true self. She'd always found the man intriguing. She wanted to be free to talk to him. He was brilliant and had so much knowledge to share, and in a dark sort of way, he was handsome.

She watched a while, and he didn't come out. He was probably searching for potion ingredients. She no longer had Harry to tell her everything the man did was suspicious...not that he would nowadays...and she would never again believe Snape was evil after all he'd done for them.

That night found her back in the library, burning the midnight oil. Her Defense Against the Dark Arts N.E.W.T. was the next day, and she wanted to do well. Snape was an excellent teacher, but he demanded perfection from her. She sometimes became nervous and made stupid mistakes around him.

The candle on the desk before her suddenly went out as if unseen fingers had snuffed it out. Instead of a chill, warmth surrounded her. She heard the same plea, "Don't leave me." It was a soft whisper, but there was pain and longing in the voice.

As she cried, "*Lumos*," she knew she wouldn't see anything. She flung her hand out into the place the warmth had come from, but only chilled air met her hand. "Show yourself! Why are you playing these games?" Silence greeted her. She stood, slammed her book closed, picked up a small stack, and headed for the door. Furious that it might be Draco or some other Slytherin, she stamped back to her room.

As predicted, Snape was relentless the next day. He pushed some of his students until they cried. Hermione, angry and embarrassed after missing several moving targets, shouted, "Enough! Why do you stay here if you hate us all so much, Professor? You're free to live any life you want. If you would choose to enjoy this job, we would all be able to give you so much more."

Snape glared at her and said, "Miss Granger, if you would be so good as to gather your things and leave this room. Your N.E.W.T.... is... at... an... end."

Hermione cringed and withered under his gaze. She grabbed her books and fled. Tears blinded her as she ran through the corridors; she did not stop until she reached her room. She fell onto her bed and cried. He always had a way of making her feel 11 again. She did not understand why she wanted him to be her friend. She wanted so much to at least gain his respect, but it would never come. Finally, she fell asleep. Hours later, she woke with a start and glanced at the time dial at her bedside: 1:00 p.m.

She jumped from her bed and ran out the door down the stairs and through the halls into the dungeon. She pulled the door to the Potions room open, and every head turned to stare at her.

Professor Slughorn stared at her like she had two heads. "Miss Granger, you're late! I would not have believed it possible...and on N.E.W.T. day! Please take your station and get started. The instructions are on the board."

Hermione flashed him a grateful smile and immediately got to work. Three hours later, everyone had gone but her.

Professor Slughorn came to stand close, watching her as she bottled her potion. "I will have to deduct 5 points off your final score for your tardiness, Miss Granger," he told her. "If you had been a regular student and not a returning war hero, I could have dismissed you when you entered the door."

Hermione nodded, tears threatening to spill down her cheeks. Why had she been so emotional for the last couple days? She felt dizzy suddenly and sat heavily on her stool and put her head in her arms and cried.

"Miss Granger, are you ill?" Slughorn asked, placing a gentle hand on her arm.

"No, sir, I missed lunch, and I'm stressed about my N.E.W.T.s. I haven't been sleeping well... Professor Snape..." She stopped, not wanting to whine over the incident. It was her fault.

"Yes, Professor Snape..." he asked, his voice prodding her gently.

"I failed his Defense Against The Dark Arts N.E.W.T. He told me to leave after I confronted him about his attitude toward his students. I'm not a child, and I will not be treated like one," she burst out, scrubbing a hand across eyes.

Slughorn grabbed another stool and placed it on the other side of her desk. He lowered his ample body onto it slowly as if his bones ached. They probably did. She had no idea how old he was.

"Yes, I did hear about it in the teachers' lounge. I may be letting the cat out of the bag, but you have no reason to be upset. Sev... Professor Snape seemed quite impressed that you stood up to him. I did hear him say you would receive an outstanding for your grade."

Hermione's head came up, and it was her turn to stare at him like he'd grown two heads. "Are you in earnest?" she asked.

"Quite," he said. His eyes were full of kindness and filled with warmth. "You must understand, Miss Granger. Professor Snape has always respected people who stand up to him. He fosters fear in students, hoping they will have enough moxie to defy him. Few have over the years. I think that's what makes him so bitter about teaching, but he also feels it's his calling to toughen students up...especially before the war. He's done it for so long that I'm not sure he knows any other way."

"So Professor Snape actually talks to you all?" she asked.

Slughorn laughed. "Yes, Miss Granger. He is rather an interesting fellow once you get to know him. I find we can talk about many things because of our similar interests. Now, you go have some dinner and get a good night's sleep. All this late-night studying is really unnecessary for you. You could take your N.E.W.T.s in your sleep, and I dare say you will do fine tomorrow Charms and Transfiguration. You know this as well as I do. Don't try to second-guess yourself. You will be just fine." He heaved himself off his stool and grabbed up her vial. "Go," he said with a kind smile and moved away from her, heading toward his office.

Hermione said, "Thank you, sir."

She stood and gathered her bag, suddenly feeling a lot happier. Professor Snape was going to pass her because she'd stood up to him. She couldn't be more confused. Why had he sent her away like she'd failed? Why had he humiliated her? She considered that she had read him wrong. His words could have been taken several ways. She might have asked him if she was going to fail. Maybe he would have explained then...though not likely. He enjoyed watching her twist in the wind. She knew it was hard for him to communicate with students in any way other than that which he had always done so. She sat in the Great Hall and ate, not really joining in on the

conversations that raged around her. Excitement that school was nearly out was the chief topic and what those who had summer vacation planned to do. Ginny was talking about wedding dresses with her friends.

Hermione let the conversations fade into a dim muttering and thought again about the voice in the night. Despite Professor Slughorn's advice to go to bed early, Hermione found herself the last one in the library at 10 o'clock that night. She stood and waved her wand to snuff out all the candles. She moved through the stacks to return the few books she'd taken down when the warmth of the night before returned, and a finger touched her face. She drew back, pressing herself against the shelves, and the back of a finger slid gently down her cheek. She tried to raise her arms to grab the hand that touched her but she found her arms were like lead. Then the voice whispered again, "Don't leave me!"

"Please," she begged, "reveal yourself. Tell me who you are. How can I stay if I don't know who you are?"

The finger slid back down her cheek once more and there was a strange rustle, somehow familiar, and then the warmth receded. She was free. She ran, her hands out, feeling the air before her, toward the door. Nothing. Whoever it was had gone. She stood in the doorway, exasperated yet somehow drawn by his voice. Whoever it was had not harmed her even though he had come so physically close. She was convinced it was a male, now. The size and touch of his fingers felt male. She was sure it was someone under a concealment spell. Maybe it was someone who was afraid of rejection. It was definitely someone who needed her, and she felt drawn to that need. She'd felt unwanted and unneeded for most of this year. Ron and Harry had moved on. She closed up the library and walked slowly to her room. Once she thought she heard the same rustle behind her, but when she looked the corridor was empty. Nevertheless she whispered, "Reveal yourself, and we will talk."

Only a stony cold silence met her. She finally went to her room. As she crawled into bed that night, she thought about the day, and she tried hard to hear the voice in her head. But it was such a low whisper that there was nothing familiar about it. Who in this castle could be so desperate and yet not be able to face her?

Her tests were over tomorrow, and she would have the afternoon to pack and relax a bit. The Leaving Ball would fill the last evening, and then she would be on her way home...wherever that was, she thought. She hadn't thought much about it. Her parents had decided to stay in Australia, and she wasn't sure she wanted to go there. Their relationship was, at best, strained. She had hoped to acquire a position at the Ministry but had had no real offers yet.

Harry had told her she could stay at 12 Grimwald Place now that it was back under Order control. She had planned to go there but wasn't looking forward to the dark, gloomy, nearly empty house with Kreacher as her only company. She really had no choice.

She finally fell asleep feeling lost and afraid, and she heard herself whisper the words so prevalent in her mind, "Please don't leave me," as she fell asleep.

The last day of tests was finally done, and Hermione heaved a sigh of relief. She left the last classroom and went up to her room to pack, bathe and get ready for the Leaving Ball.

She'd chosen deep, emerald green robes. They fit tight at her waist and flowed over her hips to the floor. The top was draped and had thin straps. She wore black heels and had her hair down and tamed into long, thick waves.

She felt a bit out of place entering the ball alone. She'd not gotten any offers of a date, and Ginny had promised they could hang together. The room was full of students of all sizes milling around chatting and eating. Hermione searched for Ginny and finally saw her across the room in a clutch of girls. She glanced about the room and then crossed it to join the girls.

Ginny gasped when she saw her. "Hermione, you look beautiful. Wow, that's some dress."

Hermione said, "Thanks Gin. Too bad there's no one here to impress." She glanced around at all the young men. They looked like children to her. She suddenly wondered why she had come back. She could have taken her N.E.W.T.s at the same time as the rest of the war survivors of their class. Hogwarts had something here she wanted, and yet tomorrow she was going to walk away, possibly forever, without having found it. She stood listening to the girls gossip and giggle over the guys in the room until she couldn't take it any longer. She slipped from the room and headed away from the Great Hall, leaving the loud music and frantic dancing behind. She walked the darkened halls and mentally said goodbye. She climbed the stairs and finally found herself looking out onto the expanse of the grounds. She smiled as she saw the lights of Hagrid's hut and the deep blackness of the Black Lake. She turned and suddenly found she was floating, hands again still at her sides. This time she was pressed against a wall and soft lips pressed against hers in a gently fleeting kiss, and then large hands held her steady at her waist. She felt the warmth of a body press her against the wall, and she gasped. Her mouth was plundered in a warm kiss that set her afire with longing. She felt their magical energies flow together as if they were one.

"Hermione, please don't leave me," a voice whispered against her ear...

She was let go and gently set on her feet, and then the warmth pulled away. The pain of the separation hit her like a wall. There was the sound of rustling and then emptiness. Hermione caught a familiar scent, and she knew... she knew! Her fingers touched her lips, and she knew. Her heart beat loud and hard in her chest, and she sat heavily onto the bench nearby. If she went to him, she knew it would be forever. Could she make that commitment? She sat nearly an hour considering her options. If she stayed, she might find herself trapped in a nightmare; yet the voice spoke of need and longing. If she walked away, she might lose a chance to have the devotion that matched no other. When he gave his heart, it was a lifetime commitment and beyond. Didn't he deserve happiness? Didn't she? The man was her equal in many ways. She might never have such an offer again. Admittedly, this was all bit unconventional. But then he was an unconventional man. Finally she stood, took a deep breath, and left the tower.

The light of a candle flickered under the door of his office, and she grabbed the latch and pushed it. It opened quietly, and she saw him sitting bent over his desk with his head in his hands.

"Professor Snape?" she whispered.

His head shot up, and he looked eyes with her. "Miss Granger, why are you not at the party?"

She came closer. "There was nothing there for me."

He stood as she came closer. "Why are you here? Have you come to beg for a N.E.W.T. grade?" His voice was bitter.

Hermione smiled at him. He would not make this easy. He was, after all, Severus Snape.

The candle flickered and smoldered in his eyes. Did she see hope there?

"I want you to accept me as an apprentice," she stated simply.

"What makes you think I need an apprentice?" he asked, coming a step closer.

"I think you could teach me so much, sir. Please consider it."

"And after I teach you all I know, will you leave?"

"No, Severus, I will never leave you," she said. Her voice quivered slightly.

He regarded her silently for a moment and then extended his hand out to her.

Hermione stepped close and took his extended hand. He drew her into the warmth, darkness, and comfort of his robes. She slipped her arms around his waist.

"Forgive me for leaving you behind," she begged.

"There is nothing to forgive, Hermione. You did what needed to be done. Everything happened as it should have." He pressed his lips against her hair and sighed. "Thank you for my life, Hermione. All that I can be is yours."

She looked up into his eyes, and he bent to kiss her softly.

Fin

Thank you, Lisa, for the quick beta work on this new story and your kind comments.

Thank you, Angela, Becky, and Beth for pre reading this story and for your suggestions and comments.