

Yea, Though I Walk

by Aurette

After the Final Battle, everyone has their demons to wrestle...

Finding

Chapter 1 of 13

After the Final Battle, everyone has their demons to wrestle...

This story is a gift for the incredibly patient **Dark River Tempest**. She had the winning bid in the TPP Every Flavour Auction, and it's taken me this long to get the story just right. She sent me some truly yummy prompts, and I shall include them at the end, so as not to ruin the surprise. Many thanks go to the wonderful **Karelia** for her fantastic beta skills, and also to my beloved partners-in-crime, Dressagegrrrrl and Hebe GB, for cheerleading me out of abject panic and despair. I love them to pieces.

Hermione sat at the table in the kitchen of the Burrow and tried to wish herself invisible. The grief around her was so thick one could reach out and touch it, and she feared if any more of it pressed against her, she would implode.

She couldn't do anything to help. She tried, but it just seemed like whatever she did was futile. The Weasleys all had their own way of dealing with guilt, and Hermione was utterly useless in the face of it.

Fred's funeral seemed to have only made things worse. Molly and Arthur were mere shells, hollow, and fragile, but still beautiful in their way. Ginny and Harry spent all of their time silently clinging to each other, and George looked like he had died as well, but just didn't know it. Charlie had left for Romania after the funeral, but both Percy and Bill stopped in at least once a day to try and be there for their family.

Hermione fluttered around in the middle of it all, trying to do what she could, but nothing she did really helped their pain, or her own.

Ron was an open wound, pulling away from her during the day and desperately pulling at her under the blankets at night. It was a wretched time to have formalized their feelings toward each other. She wished they had waited until this cloud had passed, but in the euphoria of victory, there was no logic or conscious decision.

That first night after the battle, he had come into her room and crawled into her bed, and they had finally consummated their complicated relationship, whispering words of love and need and sorrow. He'd come to her bed every night since. They spent fifteen minutes fumbling their way toward distraction, and hours holding each other for a comfort that always failed to come. There had been little sleep since the battle.

As the days grew longer and heavier, each member of the household sliding into their own depression, Hermione had started to become even more desperate.

"Morning, Hermione. Ron sleeping?" Harry slouched into the kitchen and dropped the morning paper on the table.

"Morning, Harry. Yeah, finally. I didn't want to disturb him. Did you get any sleep?"

He shook his head.

"There's tea," she said, reaching for the paper.

"Thanks." He poured a cup and came and sat next to her, gesturing at the paper. "If you ignore all the bogus articles about us, it's all funerals, memorials, and coverage of Kingsley. I did see something on page four you might want to look at."

"Oh?" She started to riffle through the pages.

"St. Mungo's needs volunteers. They're still swamped with injured people and are short staffed."

She raised her eyebrows and scanned the page for the article.

"I thought you might be interested," he added. "I know you don't like sitting around, and none of us are good company."

Hermione raised her eyes to Harry's and saw his understanding. "Thank you, Harry, but no. It's a good idea, but I need to stay here. Even if all I do is make tea and watch people cry."

Harry reached out and squeezed her hand. "You have a fine hand with the tea, Hermione. Even that little bit has been a help."

They both looked up at the sound of someone coming down the stairs.

Ron shuffled into the kitchen, and Hermione jumped up to pour him some tea.

"I thought you'd sleep longer," she said as she sliced some bread for toast.

"I did too," he answered. "Don't bother with that. I'm not really hungry."

"You need to eat. It will only take a moment."

"Hermione, leave it. I don't want anything."

"But, Ron..."

"Just sit!" he snapped. "Honestly, I can't deal with you hovering this early in the morning." He slurped at his tea. "Is anyone else up yet?"

Hermione sat down and folded her hands in her lap with a heavy sigh. "Your mum took George his breakfast. Your Dad went to work."

"He went back to work?"

"Yeah."

"Already?" he said in a small voice, looking lost.

Hermione reached out and took his hand, but he just squeezed it and let go. He poked the paper with a finger.

"Anything worth reading in this rag?" he asked.

"Not really," Harry said. "There was an article on how St. Mungo's still needs volunteers to help with the injured after the battle. I thought it might interest Hermione."

Ron turned and looked at her. "That's a good idea."

"I couldn't possibly," she said. "You need me here." She saw the stiffness in his face and quietly asked. "Don't you?"

Ron sighed and sat back. "Honestly, I think it would do us both some good to get a little space, you know? You could actually help someone, instead of just hovering around." He pushed the paper towards her. "You should do it."

Hermione blinked several times, trying to keep her face from reflecting her feelings.

"All right."

"It's madness," declared the tall, stout woman across the desk. The lilt of her accent gave away her Caribbean heritage. "We still have patients on beds up against the walls in the corridors. The wards are chock-o-block with people suffering from all sorts of injuries and spell damage. There is no logic or order. We have eye injuries in with patients that need light therapy."

Hermione nodded sympathetically as Healer Gayle shook her head in frustration, making her iron gray braids dance around her head.

"I'm very glad you came, Miss Granger, but I'm afraid if you were looking for publicity, this job isn't it. We need people to do the scutwork. Our staff and even our house-elves are overwhelmed. We need people to run trays of food and help feed those that can't feed themselves. I need bedpans and sheets cleaned and patients bathed where possible. It won't get you in the papers."

Hermione frowned. "I don't want to be in the papers. I just want to help."

The woman gave her a direct stare, her golden eyes seeming to pin Hermione to her seat. She finally gave her a short, sharp nod. "How soon can you start?"

Hermione smiled. It was the first time she'd done so in days. "Now?"

"Excellent! Come with me, and I will show you whom you will be following. I hope you are a quick study."

Hermione found herself smirking. "Actually, I'm an annoyingly quick study."

Healer Gayle laughed. "I was an annoyingly quick study myself. I think that's a good sign."

Hermione stepped through the fireplace and brushed ashes off herself.

"Bloody hell, Hermione. Where have you been?"

Hermione looked up, confused. "St. Mungo's. You knew that."

"All this time? You missed *dinner*."

She looked around the empty sitting room. "Ron, it was your idea that I go help. They need a lot of help."

"Yeah, but I didn't think you'd be gone all bloody day."

She sighed and hung her cloak by the fireplace.

"Well, I was. And I will be tomorrow as well, and every day for the foreseeable future."

"Seriously? And what about me?"

She spun around and pinned him with an angry glare. "What *about* you, Ron? You've been snapping at me for hovering for days and practically shoved me out the door this morning. What exactly is it you need? You have to tell me because I'm growing just a little dizzy from spinning in circles trying to figure it out."

He looked at her with eyes full of resentment. "Forget it," he muttered, stomping away.

"That's getting easier to do!" she called after him.

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Hermione climbed under the covers and blew out the candle. Ginny had already slipped out of the room they shared to be with Harry, so she knew Ron was on his way. Maybe if she pretended she was already asleep, he would take the hint and leave her alone.

No such luck. The door opened and closed, and Ron jounced her as he dropped onto the bed. "I don't like it. I need you here."

"Ron, we've been round and round about this all night. You need me here to make you feel loved. I understand that, and I love you. I do. But Lavender Brown needs me to help her go to the bathroom. Cho Chang needs me to feed her because her hands are still burned to the bone. Mrs. Springlander needs me to keep her feeding tube clear. They don't have anyone to do these things! It's awful! There's so many who are hurt!"

She sat up and put her arms around him, but he was stiff and unyielding. "Come with me. Just for a few hours. Harry and Ginny can keep watch on George and help your mum a bit. It will do you good to feel like you are making a difference."

He jumped up from the bed. "Are you saying I don't make a difference around here?"

"No!" She huffed and dragged at her hair. "Ron, I'm not saying anything of the sort. I just need to do this. Why are you making it sound as if I am doing something terrible when it was your idea?" She shook her head. "Let's not fight anymore. This isn't what either of us wants. We're just hurting."

He sat back down on the bed. "You're right." He lifted the blanket and slipped in next to her. "It's just so hard to lose someone like that. You don't understand how it feels inside."

Hermione blinked back tears and rolled away from him. He snuggled up behind her and wrapped his arm around her. "I love you, Hermione."

She sighed and relaxed against him. "I love you, too, Ron."

He didn't reply. He just pressed his hardening prick up against her arse.

She closed her eyes and frowned.

"I think that looks amazing!" Hermione said, holding the mirror as still as she could.

"I almost want to take a picture," Lavender said with a laugh.

"At the rate you're healing, you should do it now, or it won't look as dramatic tomorrow. Maybe you should ask your mum to bring a camera?"

Lavender inspected her face in the mirror. Half of it was swollen and lumpy, with the new skin pink and glistening where it had been burned. The other half was flawless. She swept her mascara brush across the lashes on her right eye one last time. "I will. I want to show this off to my grandchildren. Do you think a purple dotted line down the middle would be too much?"

Hermione laughed. "Leave it, it's a dramatic difference already," she said, setting the mirror back down on the table.

"How's Ron?" Lavender asked in an overly neutral voice.

Hermione sighed. Ron had been the elephant in the room since she'd started a week ago. "Honestly? He's not doing well. None of them are. I'm not sure anyone in the Wizarding world is." She lifted her hands and then dropped them in her lap. "He's growing cold. He won't let his grief out, he's too busy trying to be all things to everyone else. I don't know how to help him. Nothing I do or say helps, and I'm stuck just watching him hurt."

"Is that why you spend so much time here?"

Hermione scrunched up her face. "Probably. But the make-up tips are a plus." She got up and quickly straightened Lavender's sheets. "Harry and I are taking him and Ginny out to see a Muggle movie tonight. I'm hoping that will distract him a bit."

Lavender pushed her make-up kit away, and Hermione picked it up and placed it on the table next to them. "Well, tell Ron I was asking after him. Just as a friend. I hope he pulls out of it soon."

Hermione squeezed her hand. "I will. I'm sure that will make him smile." She stood up. "Did you want me to bring you anything when I come back in the morning?"

"I can't think of anything. Thanks, Hermione." Lavender gave her a direct stare. "For *everything*."

"It's been my pleasure. Honestly," she said before stepping out of the curtain with a last wave.

She headed back up the ward, pulling her beaded bag out of her pocket and looking through it for the cinema tickets. She had just enough time to pop home and change before the show started.

Turning a corner, she was almost mowed down by a frantic Midge O'Riordan. "Granger, I know you wanted to leave early, but can you take this to Mrs. Dayre? She's in 209, I think. It's just more soup. She wanted a second helping, but Healer Gayle needs me to help catalogue the third floor potions supply immediately. She said their inventory numbers were a mess and they're running out of things."

Hermione grabbed at the tray. "No problem."

"Thanks!"

Hermione turned on her heel and headed back up the way she'd come. Mrs. Dayre had been in the third ward the last time Hermione knew, but as patients were released, those that remained were being shuffled around too quickly for her to keep track of without the chart.

She found 209 and saw it was marked 'Isolation.' Surely, that had been left over from the previous patient, or they wouldn't have been sending aides with soup. She turned and hit the door with her hip, pushing it open.

"I hope you didn't have to wait too long, Mrs. Day...Oh! Oh, my god! What are you doing? What the hell are you doing? Get away from him!"

Hermione dropped the tray on the table by the door and raced over to the bed. Professor Snape was lying naked and apparently helpless while Michael Corner was randomly grabbing hunks of hair and slicing them off with his wand.

Snape seemed to be almost completely immobilized, only his chest was heaving. Tubes in his mouth and neck prevented him from speaking, but he didn't need to. The fury in his eyes spoke volumes.

As soon as he saw her, his eyes went from furious, to humiliated, to murderous in an instant.

Michael looked at her as if she'd gone insane. "I'm just cutting his hair. I can't keep it clean. The Healers said I could."

"At least cover him! For god's sake, can't you leave him a little dignity?" Hermione reached into the cupboard and pulled out a sheet.

"You can't! He's got nerve damage! It hurts to touch his skin. Besides, it's just Snape." Michael lifted up another hank of hair and Hermione saw the wince of pain on the former Headmaster's face.

"His hair is attached to his skin, you prat! You're hurting him! Stop! Just fucking stop!"

She pulled out her wand and aimed it, and Michael tripped over himself, falling to the floor to get out of her line of fire. Hermione just rolled her eyes and used it to lift all the rails around the bed. She snapped out the sheet and draped it over the rails, hiding Snape's nudity without hurting him.

"Make your notes on his chart and get the hell out of here," she snapped, as she secured the sheet so it wouldn't sag.

Michael glared at her as he came up off the floor. He grabbed up the patient chart and started scribbling on it with the self-inking quill that was attached. "Don't think I'm not going to tell Healer Gayle about this, Granger."

"Make sure you tell her the part where you said, 'It's just Snape'," she snarled back. "Take that tray, find out what room Mrs. Dayre is in, and bring it to her."

When Michael had left with the tray, Hermione started to shake uncontrollably. Emotions that had been dancing just under the surface for weeks threatened to burst out of her in a paroxysm of hysteria. Severus Snape was alive. After everything they had been through and everything she had been trying to deal with, the sight of this man in particular being brought so low, broke her.

She walked up to where Snape was propped up on the pillows and started to gently pull away the hairs that had landed on his shoulders without touching him.

"I'm sorry, Professor. Are you all right?"

He didn't answer. He just lay there in the bed, looking weak and pale and frightfully gaunt. His mouth was taped shut around a feeding tube, and there was a drain tube running from his bandaged neck to a small vial hung on a pole next to the bed. His chest was still heaving, and his face was bright red, but his eyes were closed tight. She stared at the web of lines etched around his eyes. He looked so much older than he had when he'd last been her teacher over a year ago.

When she saw the sparkle of a tear buried in his sooty lashes, she lost the last of her composure and collapsed into the chair behind her. She wrapped her arms around her belly and began to cry.

"I didn't know you were alive... I didn't know. Oh, my god, I left you there alive!" She dragged in great gulps of air between her nearly incoherent words. "I'm so sorry, sir! I'm so sorry!" She bent her head down to her knees and sobbed uselessly for a full five minutes, utterly unable to stop.

When the worst of her pain had run its course, she lifted the front of her striped, blue and white volunteer's robes and mopped at her face. "Right," she said, hiccuping. "This is useless, humiliating, and if I know you, at all, extremely irritating." She shuddered and tried to pull herself together and remain professional. "You can't exactly order me out of the room, nor can you sweep out in a billow of robe and slam the door." She swallowed and sniffed. "My apologies, sir. I was just overwhelmed to see you. I'm so glad you're alive." She heaved up to her feet, swiping at her eyes with her sleeve, and picked up his chart. "Okay, let's see. You just had a bath and fresh linens. You're fed through the tube. You don't need any medications for now." She flipped the page over. "Let's see what you're dealing with." She quickly read through the Healer's page, skimming the technical speech and concentrating on the words she understood.

Professor Snape was paralyzed from Nagini's venom. His only voluntary movement seemed to be his eyes and his right thumb. His skin was hyper-sensitive, calling for unique spells on the bed underneath him that kept him fractionally levitated. His hearing was excellent, as was his eyesight. She scanned down to the prognosis and saw that they expected a slow but solid recovery, but feared permanent damage to his vocal cords. She sighed and hung the chart back on its peg. She turned her head and saw him peering at her with a completely inscrutable look.

"All right, I'm going to ask you just a few questions and then I will leave you in peace. Can you blink?"

He did.

"Alright, we'll do one blink for yes, two blinks for no, and furious blinking for 'Granger, fuck off out of this room,' shall we?"

He blinked once.

"Are you in any pain?"

One blink.

"Is it your skin?"

Yes.

"Are the charms on the bed working?"

Two blinks and a relieved breath.

"All right, Professor. I'll get that taken care of right now." She pulled out her wand and whispered, "*Nuntius*." A streak of blue light sped across the room and under the door. She turned back to him and saw the look of gratitude in his eyes. "I don't think I want to know how long it's been since the charms failed," she said quietly.

He blinked once, slowly.

"Does anything else hurt?"

Yes.

"Internal?"

No.

"Your neck?"

No.

She began to slowly list off body parts. "Hands? Arms? Legs? Feet? Head?"

When she got to head he blinked once. "Is it your hair?"

Yes.

"Is the pain extreme?"

Yes.

She colored. "Was Michael doing you a favor when he was cutting it? It would be just like me to have jumped to the wrong conclusion."

He rolled his eyes, obviously agreeing, but blinked, 'No.' Thank god.

"All right. I'll let the Healer know that also."

She turned at the sound of the door opening and Healer Pye came bustling in. "What's going on?" he asked, striding over and picking up the clipboard.

"The charms on the bed failed," she said. "He's lying on his skin and in a great deal of pain. Also, he was subjected to half a haircut, as you can see, and now his scalp is also paining him."

She stepped out of the way as Healer Pye ran through a series of spells she couldn't follow. He marked the chart each time.

Finally, he renewed the charm on the bed, and Hermione watched as the professor lifted up a fraction of an inch. He heaved a sigh and gave her a look of profound gratitude that nearly made her cry all over again.

"It's the venom, you see," Pye said distractedly. "It's attacked his nerves. The potions we've developed are repairing the damage, but the pain is something akin to Crucio. Until we get the venom out of his system, he's basically immune to any pain medications. I actually deadened some of the nerves to his neck just to be able to treat that injury. It was a bit of delicate spellwork, if I say so myself. Tricky business, but we got the job done." He placed the chart back and turned to her. "Aside from his scalp, were there any other complaints?"

Hermione's brows rose in surprise that he would be asking her and not the patient. She turned her head to Snape, and he blinked at her twice, managing to convey whole paragraphs about his opinion of Healer Pye with one look. She smirked and said, "No. Those were his main concerns."

"Good. As for his scalp, I want you to administer a Depilatory Charm. His follicles are bruised and will continue to pain him unless we relieve the pressure. His hair has probably been hurting him for days, and no one thought about it until now. Good job. Come to think of it, go ahead and remove all of his body hair."

Hermione's eyes flew open and she whipped her head toward Snape. He looked back at her in horror. She'd never seen his eyes go so wide.

"I'll check in later and see how he's faring. Good job, uh," he looked at her nametag. "Miss Granger. Oh, I say, you're not related to Hermione Granger are you?"

She blinked furiously. "No," she said. "No relation."

"Oh, well. According to Rita Skeeter, she's quite the publicity hound now. She would never have time to come help us out. It would have been a nice bit of PR though."

The healer walked toward the door while Snape and Hermione shared a look of incredulity. "Excuse me, Healer Pye?"

"Yes?"

"How much longer will his nerves be like this? The Crucio sensation..."

"Difficult to say. There's something about his magical signature that's slowing the process down. I would have predicted it would have abated already, but now? I think he's been Crucioed so many times he's prone to it. It should only be for a little longer." Pye shrugged and left the room.

Hermione turned back to Snape and saw the same look of profound gratitude in his eyes. They really were incredibly expressive.

She stepped closer to the bed. "No one told you how long it was going to last, did they?"

No.

"Did you think it was permanent?"

Yes.

She teared up. "It's not. Your chart says that with the exception of your vocal cords, you should make a full recovery. You won't be paralyzed forever, Professor. You will leave this place eventually, I promise."

He closed his eyes and again, she saw the moisture on his lashes. She shook her head. "Didn't anyone tell you *anything*?"

He opened his eyes again and stared at her helplessly. Then he slowly blinked 'no.'

She started to weep again. "We won, sir. Voldemort is dead. You got your final message across in time to change everything. You're a hero."

At this last statement, he blinked furiously. She decided he was trying to keep from being overly emotional and not telling her to fuck off out of the room.

She scrubbed at her eyes and lifted her wand. "Let's get you out of pain." She stared at his head, half of it long and lank, and half of it looking like it had been caught in a wood chipper. She grimaced. "You look like a half-plucked chicken. I'm sorry it hurts you. I'm rather fond of your hair. It always added to your drama. I hate to see it go."

She kept her eyes averted from his and whispered, "Depilo."

When she saw the result, she was horrified and burst into hysterical tears. "Oh, *god*/Fuck! You look awful! Christ! You look like a baby bird! All beak and no plumage." She stared down at him in horror, realizing what she'd just said.

He was scowling back at her.

"Oh, shit! You don't even have eyebrows! You can't scowl! I broke your scowl!" she cried in horror.

He looked at her with a mixture of anger and amazement. She supposed she might actually be a little unhinged.

"Does it feel better? Tell me it was worth it!"

He blinked once.

"Thank gods, because you look..."

His eyes narrowed dangerously, and the words choked off in her throat. "Right. I think you get the idea. We'll just look forward to that growing back, shall we?"

She took a deep breath and carefully folded the sheet hanging suspended over his body until it was across his hips. She repeated her charm, ignoring the way his narrow torso splotched red. Snape could blush like no one's business. It probably helped that he was fish belly pale.

The sparse black hairs on his chest disappeared, along with those under his arms, and, after two more passes, his arms. She paused to look at the shadow of his Dark Mark, on the inside of his left forearm. It was dark and angry looking, and she had the sense it was about to move. She shuddered and looked away.

She folded the sheet back up to his shoulders and walked to the end of his bed, folding the sheet away from his feet. It struck her that he had remarkably elegant feet. They were long and narrow and graceful. She'd never noticed feet before. Ron's were square and broad. They were just feet. Snape's feet were actually... shapely.

She took a deep breath and folded the sheet in sections, working as she went.

She finished his legs and turned her head back toward him. His face was still bright red, and his eyes were dancing on the edge of anger. Without looking, she folded the sheet up higher and performed the spell. She tucked her wand back onto her sleeve and started to tug the sheet back down, all the while staring straight into his eyes. The angry indignation melted into gratitude, mixed with humiliation.

"I've been washing bodies of all shapes and sizes since I started here a week ago," she said conversationally. "I know it's got to be dreadfully embarrassing for you. I think I was about as uncomfortable as I could get by the end of the second day and after that, it just became part of the job. Strange thing, when you think about it. I spent the last two years hating Lavender Brown because Ron had dated her in sixth year. I've had to give her three baths now because she was caught by a blasting hex during the final battle. It puts things into perspective."

She finished securing the sheet and straightened up. "Someone's got to give you a bath, professor, and all the volunteers are your former students. There will be little dignity involved, but if it helps, not everyone is as mindless and insensitive as Michael Corner. Most of us are here because we wanted to help. The pain and suffering going on around you is terrible. You're not the only one. At least you weren't one of the ones stuck out on a gurney in the hallways. We still have about twenty patients waiting to get into a ward."

She looked into his eyes. He looked ridiculous without hair or eyebrows. She hadn't known it was possible to make the man look more homely.

"I will ask Healer Gayle if it is possible to have a house-elf tend to your more intimate needs. I think you deserve as much dignity as we can spare."

He looked at her with an expression she couldn't understand.

"Are you more comfortable?"

Yes.

"Good." She grabbed the clipboard and started making notes. "Then that's worth our collective embarrassment, I think. Would you like me to bring something back for you to read tomorrow? I can rig something up to hold it over the bed. Turning pages might be a bit problematical, but I'll think of something."

His eyes gentled, and he blinked once again.

"Fiction?"

No.

"Poetry?"

No.

"Journal?"

No.

"Textbook?"

He gave her a sour look.

"Not the *Daily Prophet*, surely."

Yes.

She gave him a sad look. "Oh, sir. Are you sure? It's all so depressing."

He held her gaze captive and blinked slowly.

"Alright. Would you like all of them since the battle?"

Yes.

She sighed. "Fine. Just promise me you will ignore all the idiotic things they print about me. I'm either a hero or a whore, depending on the day. There's no pleasing them. I'll see you again tomorrow, Professor. I'm very glad you're alive. I can't tell you how upset I was when I thought you had died thinking we all hated you."

He looked at her for a long moment, before he closed his eyes and kept them shut.

She replaced the clipboard and left.

Losing

Chapter 2 of 13

After the final battle, everyone has their demons to wrestle.

Thank you goes to Lady Karelia for her wonderful enthusiasm and excellent Beta skills!

"I can't believe you! You kept us all waiting for you, Hermione. Ginny was unbelievably disappointed!"

"Ron, I'm sorry. But I told you, I found..."

"I know! You found Snape! That's great! But you had people depending on you here! Harry and Ginny were counting on you!"

"I'm not worried about Harry and Ginny, Ron. They understood why we missed the movie and were thrilled at why I was late. I'm just upset I disappointed you. It won't happen again, I promise. I'll get the tickets exchanged. We can go another night."

Ron threw up his hands. "You just don't understand, do you? You don't get it! It's not about me, it's about *them*. I thought I could count on you to have my back as I did something good for them! But you're off fixing everyone else except my family!"

Hermione felt close to screaming. She was so angry with him her jaw ached from grinding, but she couldn't let it out. She couldn't tell him that he wouldn't let her help...that his family didn't want her to fix them. Ron was as fragile as glass. If she lost her control now, she could hurt him terribly.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

He sighed and walked away.

That night, when he came to her room, he slept in Ginny's bed.

Hermione dashed through the ward with a stack of dirty meal trays. She scraped them into the bin, stacked them to the side, sanitized her hands, snatched up a pile of clean sheets, and then darted off in a new direction.

She hit the door with her hip.

"Are you ready for the next paper, Professor? Or do you want to take a break? Oh, shit, that's two questions." She shoved the linen in the cupboard, went over to his bed, and pulled down the long spindle she'd erected over his head. "Another?"

Yes.

She shook her head, fed the next *Daily Prophet* into the spindle, and hooked it back up. She tapped it with her wand. "Is the amount of time per page working for you?"

Yes.

"Do you need anything else?"

No.

"All right, I'll be back."

He gave her the look she'd come to interpret as a combination of 'thank you,' 'good bye,' and 'you have pleased me'...a slight scrunching of the eyes. He probably would have swallowed his tongue if he knew she'd dubbed it 'the eyehug' in her head.

"Catch you later."

She dashed back out of the room to go change Cho's sheets.

"What are you working on?" Harry asked, sitting down next to her on the couch.

"I'm trying to figure out how to convert my spindle invention for books. Arthur and I scrounged around in his shed, and I think I'm close."

"Ah. How's it going with Snape, anyway?"

"Good. I think. He's making progress. The Cruci effect seems to have worn off. He can stand touch now. He's still paralyzed, but his hair has grown back in. He's like you. You know, how your hair always grows back over night after a haircut? He's already got about three inches and it's only been two weeks. Thank god. The man looked ridiculous bald." Hermione shuddered. "I'm running out of things to give him to read. He reads incredibly fast. Faster than me, if you can believe it. We've run through all the latest journals, so I want to rig up books."

"Has he talked to you yet? Has he told you anything?"

Hermione looked up from the wires she'd been binding together. "Harry, he has a tube down his throat, and his mouth is taped shut, never mind the drain in his neck. He can't swallow, never mind talk. I know you want to speak to him, but there's only so much one can convey with yes or no."

Harry looked abashed. "I forgot. You always seem to talk about him as if you're having conversations."

She laughed. "No. Conversing implies a willing exchange. He's basically a victim of my chatter. I suspect if he ever gets his voice back his first words will be, 'Granger, shut up.'" She fiddled with her gizmo. "Although, I have to say, we've worked out a pretty good form of communication despite the barriers. I can tell I don't irritate him as much as I would have thought. He can say so much with his eyes. Just his eyes, you know? It's like, he's paralyzed, but I can still read his body language." She snorted. "At least I think I can. I could be wrong, and he could be nearly demented with how thick I am."

"Did you tell him Kingsley is holding an inquest to exonerate him?"

Her face clouded. "I did." She twisted another wire around the thin metal rod she held. "I don't think he cared. He didn't seem pleased." She picked up the wire cutters and snipped off the end. "Honestly, Harry. I'm beginning to think Snape didn't want to survive. I think that's why his recovery is so slow. Little things are taking the longest time to heal, and they can't explain it. Pye says he thinks that Snape is actively working against his own healing."

Harry looked at her in surprise. "That doesn't make sense. Why would he have been so relieved to find out he wasn't going to stay paralyzed then?"

Hermione lifted up her head and looked at him. "Oh! I hadn't thought of that. You're right!" She added another little rod to her bundle and picked up another wire. "I'll have to tell Pye that. There must be some other explanation."

Harry kicked back on the couch. "How are the rest of your patients?"

"Good. Mr. Reilly was released today. He'll be back for treatments, but he's almost good as new. Oh! Did I tell you Lavender came back to volunteer?"

"That's great!"

"Yeah, I was so excited to see her in the pinstripes. Funny how things change. All those years as roommates and we couldn't stand each other. Now we get on really well."

"Things always change in unexpected ways," Harry said.

His tone made Hermione close her eyes.

"I heard you and Ron arguing again last night."

Hermione just shook her head. "It was nothing."

"I know. It's been a whole lot of nothing, Hermione. How much longer are you two going to let this go on?"

"It will get better."

Harry sighed. "Are you sure?"

Hermione's eyes pricked with tears, and she looked back down at her gizmo with blurry eyes.

"Good morning, Professor. I finally finished my gizmo. I already loaded it up with a book, and it will spin ten pages before I need to reset it.

"I was up all night trying to figure out what you would like to read. I thought Shakespeare was a bit twee, and War and Peace seemed too trite. I couldn't figure out what would constitute escapism for someone as intelligent as you. Then I decided to go with Salman Rushdie, Umberto Eco, and Iain Banks. If you hate those, then we'll need to play twenty questions. I think you'll like Banks. He's completely nutters, but the genius kind of nutters. Very surrealistic, brainy stuff. I thought we'd start without the M. I don't know how much science fiction you could handle without being confused by the science."

She finished babbling, replaced the spindle with her gizmo, and looked down at him.

He held her gaze and slowly lifted an eyebrow. He'd been able to lower them all along, but this was the first time she'd seen him raise it.

"Professor! Your eyebrow! Can you move them both?"

He blinked and then slowly waggled them, looking smug. "That's wonderful! What else can you do?"

She snatched his chart up and skimmed through the pages. "Fingers and toes!"

She yanked up the blankets covering his feet and watched as he moved his toes. She felt ridiculously proud. "Good heavens. I think I'm going to cry. No, I'm not going to look at you. I already know you think I'm daft, so whatever look you have in your eyes is utterly wasted." She heard him snort through his nose and peeked at him anyway. His eyes were smug, with a trace of a smile.

"This is so marvelous! Is there any pain when you move them?"

No.

"Is it very difficult?"

Yes.

"I can imagine. After nearly a month of bed rest, you're going to have some lazy muscles. Have they scheduled you for any physio?"

He just stared at her blankly.

"Exercises, to help get your muscles back in shape."

Understanding lit, and he blinked, 'No.'

"Well, all in good time. I warn you, you'll hate it. All the other patients do. Cho Chang is trying to rebuild the muscles in her hands and swears her first use for them will be to strangle Healer Flark."

He raised his eyebrow, and she laughed. "I know, you're already plotting to strangle me. Now, is there anything you need before I get jiggy with the bedpans?"

No.

"All right. I'll start this. I'm going with fifteen minutes before it turns a page. You'll need to read slow to understand him. It will use your entire brain. I'll come back on my lunch break and see if you hate it."

He gave her an eye hug, and she patted his feet before flipping the end of the blanket down over them. "I must say, Professor, you have the nicest feet I've ever seen on a fellow."

She looked back over her shoulder to see his eyebrows had climbed halfway up his forehead and his cheeks were slowly turning red. She laughed as she headed out the door of his room.

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"Did you hear Lucius Malfoy was admitted?"

Hermione shoveled her lunch into her mouth and shook her head at Lavender.

"Yesterday afternoon."

"What's wrong with him?" Hermione asked after she'd finished swallowing.

"I don't know. I saw Draco and his mother pacing in the hallway. I don't think they're letting them in to see him."

Hermione stirred her noodles. "I don't know what to say," she whispered.

Lavender nodded, vigorously. "I know! Part of me still thinks of them as Death Eaters, but they turned at the end, didn't they? At least Mrs. Malfoy helped Harry. I want to say, 'Gosh I hope he's all right,' but it sticks in my throat."

Hermione nodded her head. "Exactly."

Lavender jabbed her fork at Hermione's plate.

"You'd better get moving, or you're going to miss your date with Snape."

She scowled at Lavender who laughed and threw her hands up. "Joke! But I do think it's odd that, of all the people in the hospital, he requested you."

"He did?"

"Didn't you read the notice at the Nurses' station? None of us are allowed in his room. He'll only allow you or the house-elves. Pye's orders."

Hermione smiled with her cheeks full of noodles. She lifted a hand and held it in front of her mouth. "I knew I was growing on him." She swallowed. "I think I have discovered my new powers. Chatting people into submission."

The two of them laughed as Hermione stood and picked up her plate. "Off to the trenches," she said. She shoveled noodles into her mouth all the way over to the bin, before scraping it in and dashing out of the canteen.

She was still chewing when she pushed open his door, three floors up.

He looked agitated. Fluttering his fingers under the blanket.

"Are you all right?"

Yes.

"Do you like the book?"

Yes.

"Excellent! He's one of my favorite authors!"

He rolled his eyes, and she started to suspect what his issue was. "Would you like me to make the gizmo turn the pages faster?"

He slammed his eyes shut and snapped them open in the blink version of a shout.

She laughed. "Sorry about that. I thought it would take you a minute to adjust to the writing style."

She pulled the book out, and set it to the next ten pages, before twisting a knob on the gizmo and tapping it with her wand. "There. Did you need anything?"

He blinked 'No,' already starting to read.

"I'll be back later."

Hermione sat on the side of her bed as Ron slipped into the room and made his way directly to Ginny's bed. He never even looked at her. She watched him pull his shirt off over his head and drop in on the floor next to his shirt from last night.

"Are we even going to talk about this?" she asked in a quiet voice.

He frowned. "I dunno what to say," he replied.

"Maybe you could tell me if I'm still your girl?"

He sagged down onto Ginny's bed.

"Well, we kind of rushed into it, didn't we? I mean, with everything that's been going on, the timing wasn't that great, was it?"

She watched him fidget as a weight pressed down on her heart.

"So you don't love me?" she asked.

He slumped. "I do. I do love you, Hermione. It's just that... I can't handle it right now, you know?"

She released him from the discomfort of having to talk, by rolling under the blankets. He sighed with obvious relief and blew out the candle.

Hermione buried her face into her pillow so she didn't disturb his sleep while she cried.

"Good morning, Professor. Did you sleep well last night?"

Yes.

"Any complaints?"

No.

"Any new developments?"

He gave her an amused look, and his right arm bent slightly under the sheet. She smiled and glanced at his feet, and he twisted his ankles from side to side.

She reached down and clasped his hand through the covers. "This is so exciting! I'm really happy for you."

He closed his hand around hers, his grip as weak as a kitten's.

"I think I will fall into a funk when you walk out that door. I shall miss you terribly, and I'm pretty sure you're not the type to come back and volunteer, like Lavender."

He pressed her hand and then slid his eyes to the gizmo over the bed.

"Right. Enough of that silliness, eh? Would you like to start with a book or the paper?"

After he had regained movement of his fingertips, they had added to his vocabulary. A twitch of his right hand meant option one, left meant the second. He chose the second.

"Right, the Daily Skeeter it is." She threaded the newspaper into the spindle and attached it to the hooks suspended from the ceiling.

She was about to start the timer when the door to his room opened and Healer Pye walked in. She snatched the newspaper from the ceiling.

"Oh, good. Miss Granger. You can help. Mr. Snape is about to lose his feeding tube." He smiled and looked at the professor. "This shouldn't hurt a bit, since you've no feeling in your neck at the moment. This afternoon, we'll start you on double the amount of Nerve Regenerating Potion and by evening, we'll have you on liquids."

Pye leaned down and started pulling the tape away from Snape's mouth, revealing dry, cracked lips. "Take that pillow away and tilt his head back for me, will you?"

Hermione carefully pulled one of his pillows out, sliding her arm behind his neck for support before tilting his head back. His bare skin was curiously soft.

He gave her an indignant look, and she wrinkled her nose in apology.

Pye made short work of disconnecting the tube and pushing the nutrient bag out of the way. He grasped the tube and started to pull. Snape's eyes slammed shut and his right leg thrashed on the bed.

"I would say he can feel it," Hermione snapped, belatedly adding, "sir."

"That's unusual. He shouldn't. I'm trying to make this quick, but it seems the muscles have spasmed."

Snape's eyes flew open, and he stared at Pye with no small amount of disgust.

Hermione slipped her hand under the sheet and held Snape's. His fingers wrapped around hers, but he didn't look at her.

Pye pulled again, and Snape thrashed, squeezing her hand with a lot more strength than he'd shown so far. She squeezed it back and stroked his shoulder, while cradling his head on her arm. When the tube came out, Snape's grip on her hand didn't slacken, and his eyes were closed tight. They looked pinched with pain, and his chest was heaving as he sucked in great breaths through his nose.

Hermione counted to ten before she trusted herself to open her mouth. "You said the nerves were deadened."

"They were," Pye said, running through a series of Diagnostic Charms. "But they've healed themselves." He shook his head. "Strange. It has to be that damned venom. It shouldn't be acting this way. I'm going to order up a new series of tests for this afternoon. We need to understand what's going on. First it wouldn't let him heal, and now it's healing what it shouldn't."

He straightened up. "Well, we got you off that tube, and the adrenalin seems to have been good for your legs. That's two good things. And having your nerves back isn't a bad thing, just uncomfortable for a while." He inspected the drain in Snape's neck. "If we can get the last of the poison out, you should make a fairly miraculous recovery. You might even recover your voice after all."

He picked up Snape's chart and started writing. "I want you to start him sipping water; we need to get him swallowing again, and it might soothe the pain. I'll be back with a Pain Potion. Hopefully his immunity is at an end."

She nodded her head, not trusting herself to speak, as Pye left the room.

Snape was still clutching her hand, and she leaned down closer, pressing his head to her shoulder.

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

He jerked his arm...more of a spasm, than a movement...and brought her hand to his chest. She felt the dampness that had wicked along the sheet and turned to see the he'd pissed himself. That had been no ordinary pain.

"Was it the Crucio sensation?" she asked, backing away so she could see his eyes.

He opened his eyes and blinked once, closing them again in misery.

She leaned her head down and kissed the top of his head, a gesture she didn't think of as strange until much later, and then carefully tucked his pillow back behind his head.

"Do you want me to call a house-elf? Or would you like me to go ahead and clean you up?"

She watched his hands for a long moment before the fingers on his left hand fluttered.

She pulled back and dug deep for her sense of professionalism. Grabbing up the ceramic bowl from the table next to him, she filled it with water and zapped it with a Warming Charm. She went and pulled a flannel and new sheets from the cupboard next to the bathroom before levitating him a foot off the bed.

He huffed a breath.

"Moving hurt your neck again?"

He fluttered his right hand, rather than open his eyes.

She banished the top sheet to the laundry and set about gently scrubbing him down. She kept her mind focused, noting his long, lean body and the thickness of the black hair around his sex with the same clinical detachment that she viewed his Dark Mark. She dried him swiftly with a soft towel and then snapped a new sheet over him for his pride. She made short work of washing his hair and drying it...it was nearly as long as it had been originally now...and then changed out his pillowcases and switched out the bottom sheet on the bed.

She gently lowered him back to the bed. The entire process took ten minutes.

He never opened his eyes.

He was still breathing heavily, his eyes pinched with pain, and his hands were now clenched into fists.

"Is it any better? Or the same?"

The same.

"Is it like the rippling pain after the Crucio stops? Or is it the agony of when you're hit with it?"

His eyes flew open, and he gave her a shocked, questioning look.

She flushed and looked down. "Bellatrix LeStrange," she said. "After we were caught. I spent an evening writhing in the Malfoys' carpet."

His eyes filled with an amazing array of emotions, regret, empathy, concern, and a profound sadness.

"It's over. We won," she said without much enthusiasm. "We all just need to figure out how to deal with the aftermath, don't we?" She felt a wave of emotion threatening to break her and pushed it away. "Now answer my question."

He moved his right hand, and then jerked his whole arm closer to her. She reached down and took his hand again, and he squeezed.

"Just get better for me, okay?"

He gave her a sad look and closed his eyes.

"Hello, Hermione, dear. It's good to see you finally home."

"Hello, Molly. I'm sorry I missed dinner."

"There's a plate for you if you're hungry."

"Thank you, I'm famished."

Molly swiped her hands on her apron and heated the roast with a flick of her wand before setting in on the table. "I'll leave you to enjoy. I'm going to go check on George before I head to bed."

"Good night," Hermione said as Molly left the room.

Ron stood in the kitchen doorway. They didn't speak until she had finished her food. He sat down heavily in the chair next to her and pushed the salt and pepper around between his hands.

"Hermione, it's ten o'clock at night. I'm supposed to believe you've been changing bedpans all this time? Tell me the truth. Are you seeing someone else?"

"What?" She dropped her fork to the plate and stared at him. "Are you serious?" Pushing herself up from the table with effort, she took her plate over to the kitchen sink. "Ron. You can't keep me running in circles like this. You tell me to go work for the hospital, and then you get upset that I'm working at the hospital. You tell me you can't handle being in a relationship, and then start acting like a jealous git. No. There isn't anyone else, unless you count Professor Snape, who's actually more enjoyable to be around than you are currently."

She dried her plate with a flick of her wand and sent it up into the cupboard, along with the rest of them from dinner.

"You misunderstand," he snapped back, rising from the table. "I was going to be happy for you if there was. Now I just pity anyone who would."

He turned his back on her and stomped out of the kitchen, leaving her staring after him dumbstruck.

That night, she cried herself to sleep on the Weasleys' sofa.

Searching

Chapter 3 of 13

After the final battle, everyone has their demons to wrestle.

Thank you to Karelia for her wonderful beta skills and infectious enthusiasm.

"Draco was admitted," Lavender said as they were heading through the canteen with their trays.

"Really? Is his dad still here?"

"Yeah. Alicia said she saw Mr. Malfoy when his door was left open. He's really bad. She said his skin was black."

"Good lord! What would cause that?"

"I don't know. The Healers won't talk about it. They're taking extreme measures to ward off contagion, so no volunteers are allowed in that area at all now. But the rumor mill says they have no idea what they are dealing with."

"Gods, I hope it isn't some new kind of epidemic. Things are just settling down. That's all we need."

They sat down and started in on their lunch.

"So are you and Ron getting better?"

Hermione shook her head sadly. "Honestly? No. We seem to have split up, but I'm not sure we were ever really going out. I think maybe if we had some space..."

"Really? Because you're kind of here all the time. That seems like space enough."

Hermione sighed. "I know. I just don't know what to do. In my head, I can admit that it's over. In my heart, the idea of not being with him feels like a knife in the gut. We

cared about each other for so long. So many years. It seems stupid to throw in the towel after only two and a half months of being together. And think about what's been going on these last few weeks. I mean, he didn't even kiss me until the final battle. Not the most auspicious time to start a relationship."

Lavender tutted in sympathy.

"And if we're not together, where am I supposed to go? I mean, I live with him and his family. I've no home. It's such a mess."

"You could always move in with me and my parents. We have room."

Hermione smiled and gave Lavender's arm a quick squeeze. "You're lovely, but I think I want to stick it out and try and make it work. I think once the grief starts to fade, we'll be stronger for having tried, you know?"

Lavender gave her a sympathetic look. "Honestly? I never bothered to make it work. I just stomped off in a huff, cried prettily, and then found another. I got over Ron in a week. Jeff in two days, and Antoine in one. I think I don't even bother actually falling for them anymore. I just bop along until they dump me."

"Ugh," said Hermione. "That sounds awful."

"It does, doesn't it? But it's not. I get to go out to eat free a lot. For instance, I have a date tomorrow night with Michael after we both get off work. He's taking me out for Sushi."

"Wasn't he was seeing Cho?"

"Not lately. She dumped him last month. She's having a hard time not seeing herself as a cripple. I try to get her to understand it will get better. I even showed her my pictures. But she's pretty depressed. I think the stress and the battle and even Cedric have all become mixed up with her burned hands. She's got it pretty bad."

"Maybe you shouldn't let her know her ex is taking you for sushi."

"I'm not that stupid." Lavender scrunched up her face. "Okay, I'm not that stupid *anymore*." They rose from the table with their trays. "Hey, I'm going out with Parvati and Padma after work tonight. You want to come? Girls' night out."

"I don't think I would be very good company."

Lavender just shook her head. "You need to figure out what you want, Granger. You always knew what to do once you figured out what you wanted."

Hermione just nodded vaguely and headed for the stairs.

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She hit the door with her hip, balancing the tray on one hand and a new pillow in the other.

"Ta da! Look! Your first meal! And to celebrate, I brought you a replacement for the pillow you've managed to squash flat lounging around in bed all day like a pasha."

He scowled at her, but his eyes held enough humor that she knew he wasn't really offended.

"Has there been any more pain since last night?"

No.

"Good."

She set the tray down on the table and wheeled it over to the bed, sliding it across his chest. After adding the new pillow to his pile, she sat down next to his hip and picked up the spoon. Her hand paused as she saw his expression.

"Oh. Would you like me to get a house-elf to feed you? It didn't occur to me that you'd object. I mean, after yesterday... I'm sorry, I thought you'd be happy to eat something, even if it's just broth."

He stared at her, and then his eyes flicked down to the bowl. He sighed.

She bit her lip and stepped out into thin ice. "You're not helpless, sir. You're just injured. You're getting better every day. There were dozens of other patients that couldn't feed themselves after the battle. You're not alone."

He raised his eyes to her, and they were full of sad irony.

"Okay, you're not alone *anymore*. I'm here, and I'd like to think that we've become friends of a sort."

His eyes spoke volumes.

"Don't look at me like that. We have every reason to be friends."

Another look.

"Um, well, okay... We have a lot of things in common. Stop that, give me a moment. Okay, we both like to read, we're both smart, and we both got swept up in things bigger than we could really handle at a young age. Yes, I know I'm still young, but I feel positively ancient. I'm sure you did as well by the time you were my age."

He gave her a look of understanding and sadness and blinked once.

"And I suspect both of us have spent far too much time being misunderstood. Am I wrong?"

His eyes slid away from her, off toward the wall for a long moment, before he blinked 'No.'

"So there, you see? We're just alike. Practically the same person. Don't think of me as feeding you; think of me as an extension of your will." She smiled, but it faltered in the face of his obvious discomfort. She dropped the spoon back in the bowl and reached under the table for his hand. "I know you remember me as that irritating know-it-all, and one of the damnable Golden Trio, but I think the last year changed us all. If you squint your eyes, you can see I'm not that bad." She sighed. "I actually assumed you already had."

He let out a soft sigh and squeezed her hand, flicking his eyes at the bowl.

She smiled at him, but he wouldn't look at her. She had a feeling they had just rounded an important corner, and it made him uncomfortable.

"Are you ready?" She lifted up a spoonful of broth.

He blinked, and his eyes darted to the spoon. They held a note of anticipation that made her breath catch. His mouth opened awkwardly...he could move his jaw, but didn't

have much control of his lips...and she tilted the broth onto his tongue.

She'd fed dozens of people in the last few weeks, but this was different. It was only in that moment that she realized what an intimate act it was.

When he closed his mouth around the spoon, she withdrew it slowly. He sighed, and his eyes slid closed. She watched his reaction intently, and when he swallowed, so did she. When he opened his eyes again, she had to clear her throat.

He darted a look at her, and his eyes widened as she blushed. He looked at her with a mixture of surprise, humor and embarrassment.

"I'm thinking I should have had the soup for lunch," she quipped.

His eyes softened, and he snorted his laugh before looking back at the bowl.

"Is it warm enough?"

Yes.

"All right then."

She fed him slowly, giving him time to get used to manipulating his tongue again. "While we are on the subject of friends, I never see any other visitors besides me. I know Minerva had said she wanted to see you, but she hasn't been allowed. Is that by choice?"

Yes.

"Is there anyone you *would* like me to contact?"

No.

"So, I'm it then? Well, aren't you the lucky devil."

No.

His eyes held a spark of humor, and she laughed, trying to turn it into a scowl. "Don't blink with food in your mouth."

She couldn't help the feeling of possessive pride she felt knowing he didn't want any other visitors but her. Not that he'd had a whole lot of choice about her in the beginning.

Snape was a creature of intimidation and power, even terror, if one were on his wrong side. In having him allow her to tend him, humor him, and bring him books and such-like, there was a sensation of slipping inside a wall and being firmly ensconced on the other side. She liked that feeling.

She fed him, dabbing at his lips with a napkin every so often, until the spoon clinked into the empty bowl. "Was that enough?"

Yes.

"Good. Your Healers want to see how your body takes to that. Then they'll decide if you can maybe have something with a bit more bite to it."

He gave her the all-purpose eyehug, a simple thing with as many nuances as leaves on a tree. She gathered up his things and pushed the table out of the way.

"Would you like to read more? No? All right. Is there anything I can do for you?"

He blinked twice and then closed his eyes.

"Professor?"

He opened them again.

"I'm glad we're friends. I really needed a new one."

He rolled his eyes, but then peered at her with a look of concern.

She shook her head. "You nap. I'll be back later."

Hermione sat at the end of the bed and carefully clipped Professor Snape's toenails, while he read the current copy of *The Modern Potioneer Digest*.

"Sir? I'm going to be taking a couple of days off, and I wanted to know if you would like a volunteer to help you with your books, or a house-elf?"

His eyes switched from the journal down to her, and he raised an eyebrow. He didn't look pleased. At all.

"I haven't taken a full day off in forever. There are some personal things I need to tend to. Even I have to admit there's more to life than looking for opportunities to play with your feet day after day."

His right cheek twitched.

"Oh, look! You almost sneered!"

He rolled his eyes and then gave her an ominous scowl.

"If you must be nosey, I need to find a new place to live."

He gave her a questioning look, and she scowled back at him.

"I've been staying at the Burrow since the battle. It's time I went looking for my own place."

His eyes turned speculative, and he raised his eyebrow and flicked his hand to her.

"No, I'm not going to tell you more. It's late, and you need your sleep." She cleaned up the trimmings and sterilized the clippers and file. "So, What's it going to be? House-elf? Or Lavender Brown?"

House-elf.

"All right. I'll bring you a stack of books to tide you over as well. More Eco?"

Yes.

She stood up and patted at his foot. "I'll miss these feet. They really are far too sexy for their own good."

She twitched the sheet back over them and ignored the look he was giving her. She washed her hands in the small bathroom and then came back over and dropped a kiss on his head.

"I'll leave a few things at the front desk tomorrow morning before I head out. They should keep you busy for a few days. Good night, Professor."

He gave her an eyehug, flicked his hand at the door, and went back to the Journal.

Hermione woke up and dressed hurriedly, leaving Ron sleeping in Ginny's bed. She pulled out her marked-up copy of the *Daily Prophet*, shrank down a pile of books for Professor Snape, and jumped into the fireplace without bothering to even make a cup of tea.

She had carefully checked her finances and figured out exactly how much rent she could afford to pay and still be able to eat before things became dire.

She lifted up her chin and headed out of the Leaky with a determined stride.

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Six hours later, Hermione walked out of another dump in Knockturn Alley. She ignored the smell of rot in the alley around her and made her way over to a cracked stone bench. She flopped down in utter despair.

She'd thought it would take about two days to look at all the rentals on her list. She'd imagined herself spending the third day tallying up the good points and bad points for each one and then making an informed decision.

She'd even brought along parchment and a self-inking quill to take notes.

The parchment was still blank.

She wanted to scream. She wanted to shout, *'It's not fair!'* However, if her life so far had taught her anything, it was that life wasn't fair.

She closed her eyes and tried to keep her lip from wobbling, but it was a lost effort. She dropped her head in her hands and cried.

The flash of a camera bulb sent her scurrying away.

Discovering

Chapter 4 of 13

After the final battle, everyone has their demons to wrestle.

Thank you to karelia for her awesome betas skills!

Hermione gave a quick knock and then pushed open the door to Snape's room. "Surprise! I'm back early! I missed your feet and couldn't stay away. *And I* brought you croissants to go with your tea so you could better pretend you're happy to see me."

Snape's eyes danced, and he gave her an eyehug before showing off his newest trick, a small smile.

"You can *smile!* I never knew that! It's a good thing I only was gone for two days, or who knows what other miracles I'd have missed out on."

He scowled, adding a sneer, and she laughed.

"What have you got there?"

Snape had managed to get his clipboard off the peg and was crudely scribbling on the back of it. It looked about like what one would expect if one put a quill between their toes. Since the ink stayed wet on the metal clipboard, it smeared easily. She couldn't read what he'd been writing.

"Well, look at you! Smiling, sneering and defacing hospital equipment."

He gave her a smug look as she placed the tea tray on his table and pushed it closer. She set the bag of fresh croissants next to his hip.

"This is really fantastic. In fact, I'll be right back. I'll get you some parchment." She heard him snort behind her as she hurried toward the door.

She came back five minutes later with parchment, a new clipboard, and a self-inking quill. She'd charmed them all larger, giving him more room to make his crude letters, and a fatter quill to make it easier to control.

She placed them in his lap and stepped back.

He gave her an eyehug and picked up the quill in his right hand. His control was dreadful, but it had been only a few days since he'd started moving his arm at all, so she was rather impressed. His left arm was apparently still immobile, and he'd taken to hiding it under the covers. He could move the hand well, but it seemed the rest of the arm wasn't coming back as quickly, and he was self-conscious about it.

She watched as patiently as possible as he formed his letters. When he reached the forth one, she interrupted.

"Oh, don't say, thank you! This is the first thing you'll say aside from yes or no since you were hurt! It's a momentous occasion. You should write something important."

Profound, even. Thank you goes without saying, as does you're most welcome."

He scowled at her, his lips flattening out in annoyance. He'd certainly regained control of his mouth.

"Sorry. Go ahead and write what you want." She went and sat down in the chair next to the bed and bounced her knees up and down, waiting to hear one of his thoughts for the first time in ages.

When he had finished, he sighed heavily and pushed the clipboard away.

"Hand cramp?" she asked.

He blinked a yes.

She stood up and picked up the clipboard, taking a moment to decipher what he'd written. When she understood, she blushed to the roots of her hair.

It said, "Why do you always cry at night?"

She sighed and set the clipboard against the rail by his other hip. "I guess the puffy eyes in the mornings gave it away?"

He blinked and then pulled a scrap of crudely torn newspaper from under his pillow. It was a photo of her sitting on the bench in Knockturn Alley. She was dropping her face in her hands over and over.

She sighed. "Surely you had enough teen-aged angst when you were a teacher. You don't need to hear my drama."

He held her gaze and frowned.

Watching his mouth move fascinated her. She'd been amazed at the range of thought he could convey with his eyes, but he more than doubled his skill at nuance with the slightest twitch of the lips.

He licked his lips and mouthed, "*Tell me.*"

His voice came in the quietest of whispers, just air through his mouth with no vocal cords to give it timbre or tone. He was still so weak, he couldn't force enough air through to give it any volume.

Her eyes watered as she beamed at him. This was far better than crude letters on parchment.

"You're just full of surprises," she said softly. "Fine. Eat your treat, and I'll tell you."

She helped him as he opened the bag and spread jam on his croissant with one hand. He had a far bigger range of movement than he'd had when she'd seen him last, but it seemed moving the other arm or his head and neck wasn't in the cards yet.

He took a bite and looked at her expectantly.

She sat down on the bed by his knee. "I've been staying at the Burrow since the final battle. It's been hard on everyone. Fred's death shattered the Weasleys. Harry feels each and every death is his fault; Molly and Arthur are like ghosts. Ginny is made of glass, and Ron..."

She shook her head. "I don't know at what point Ron started to become more to me than just my irritating friend. That last year on the road was terrible for all of us. What you didn't read in the papers is that Ron left us. The Horcrux fed on all of our darkest feelings, and it hit him worse than Harry and I because he still had family. He said some terrible things and abandoned us. As soon as he was clear of the Horcrux's influence, he tried to come back, but we'd moved, and it took him a while to find us.

"He came back the night you brought Harry the sword.

"Anyway, our feeling became really twisted up and complicated and in the crazy grief and euphoria after the battle, we... slept together."

She stared down at her lap and began furiously smoothing wrinkles out of her pinstriped robes. "It was a terrible idea in hindsight.

"Ron wasn't ready for more than just sex, and I... I just wanted to be wanted. I need to belong to someone, you know? Oh, not because I'm weak, or because it's my place. I just..." She dashed at her tears and took a quick breath.

"Anyway, the Weasleys took me in with no question, but in the weeks since, it's grown very awkward between Ron and I, and I just need to get out.

"The problem is there's nowhere for me to go. I spent the day looking at flats I could afford, and not all the charms in the world will hide the fact that the best I can do is a cesspit with mould problems and broken windows."

She sniffed and darted a quick glance at him. The sadness in his eyes made her ashamed. "I know. I'm being selfish, aren't I? There are people out there with real problems..." She twisted the bit of fabric in her hands. "It's just that I spent a year being in charge of my life with no voice of experience to help. I made the mistake of thinking this made me a grown up." She gave a bitter laugh. "The fact is, the brightest witch of her age isn't very bright about basic finances. I had no idea flats were so expensive. I'm a bit trapped." She shrugged and looked away. "I don't know how it's possible to feel so old and so young at the same time."

He reached for the clipboard. Setting it in his lap, he scrawled a message and pushed it toward her. It read, "Where is your family?"

Her lip wobbled out of control, and she pressed her hands to her mouth. Her shoulders heaved from her silent sobs.

She dragged in a loud breath and blurted, "I got rid of them!" She grabbed at a handful of tissues and furiously scrubbed at her face, mortified by her sudden loss of composure. "So many Muggles were being attacked and killed, and I was going to go on the run with Harry. I couldn't be there to protect them, so I Obliviated them! They're living in Australia now, with no memory of ever having had a child."

She broke down again, struggling to keep some semblance of control to no effect.

"When the battle was over, it hit me all over again. All my reasons and justifications were gone...vanquished...but my parents still were too. I'd orphaned myself. It's so stupid, really. Fred Weasley's dead. My parents are just... *ishing*. I tried not to mope about it. They all had enough on their minds. It seems so minor in the face of what they went through, you know? My parents are alive and happy and doing something they always wanted to do."

She blew her nose. "Now I'm just stuck. I've ruined things with Ron because I was too needy, and now we're trapped living in the same house. Harry offered to let me stay at Grimmauld Place, but that's now become a Burrow annex. He'll be moving back there in a couple of weeks and George is moving in with him. I need to find somewhere else to go. I think I'll take Lavender up on her offer and move in with her and her parents if it's still a possibility. I just didn't want to watch any more families that I don't belong to, you know?" She twisted the tissues into rope. "My Gringotts account was seized to pay for the damages to the bank. I did empty my Muggle savings and had Molly convert it for me. There's just not much there, not enough to pay rent for more than three months at best. I don't even have a job. I'd have to quit volunteering, or at least seriously cut down on the time I spend here, but I like it here. It makes me feel useful." She swiped angrily at her eyes as the tears came again. "And I'd miss you," she added softly.

He pushed aside his table and tugged on her sleeve. She turned to him, but he didn't meet her eyes, just kept tugging at her sleeve. When she realized what he was doing,

she started to cry again and slowly tilted over onto the bed next to him, as he wrapped his one good arm around her.

She ended up with her back pressed against his side, and her shoulder tucked into his armpit. She laid her head on his shoulder and bawled as he held her. His hand caressed her elbow in soothing circles until she had cried herself out.

When the sounds of the hospital filtered back into her consciousness, she pushed back up. Grabbing a fresh handful of tissues, she did the best she could in cleaning herself back up.

"Thank you," she whispered. "I really needed that."

He stroked a knuckle down the side of her arm and then patted her on the wrist.

She turned to him, and he cleared his throat. He started to speak, but she couldn't read his lips with so many words, and he was too quiet to hear.

"Hang on." She put up a Silencing Spell to cut out the background noise of the hospital and then leaned down and tilted her head to the side. "Say it again."

He sighed, his warm breath gusting over her neck. His voice was a mere phantom of words.

"Severus Snape lives at Spinner's End, Manchester."

Hermione's eyes flew wide, as she realized he had just given her the location of his Secret-Kept home. She popped her head up and looked at him. "Are you saying what I think you're saying? Because this would be a very bad moment for me to misunderstand."

He smirked and blinked at her carefully.

"I could move into your home?"

Yes, he blinked again.

"You would do that for me?"

He blinked one more time.

"Why?"

He gave her an incredulous look before flailing his arm at the gizmo overhead and the parchment at his hip.

"You don't need to feel obligated. I did those things because I wanted to. You helped me as much as I helped you, you know."

He rolled his eyes.

"But as long as you're offering, I'll take it. Just until I get a job and can get on my feet."

She shook her head, stunned. "You realize this means we're really friends now. There's no way to get around that fact. I'm even going to start calling you Severus."

He bent his arm and aimed his thumb at his shoulder, still wet with tears and what looked suspiciously like snot. "Oh, yes, I guess that would have meant we were friends as well," she said with a blush, cleaning him up with her wand.

He just rolled his eyes again and flicked his fingers in the gesture that had come to mean, 'Go away.'

She stood up and leaned down, kissing him on the top of his head. "You're marvelous," she said, laughing softly when he scowled.

"Now that I know where you live, is there anything you would like me to bring you from your home?"

Yes.

She leaned back down, placing her ear by his lips.

"Some fucking clothes."

She bolted up and blushed. "Oh, heavens! I'm so sorry! I'm so used to looking at you in nothing but a sheet that it just started to seem normal. I never even thought to get you a hospital gown! I'll go get you some tonight after work. In fact, why don't you spend the day writing a list of anything else you can think of. And perhaps some house rules, as well. You know, 'Don't go in the basement after dark,' or 'ignore the sound of scratching in the locked cupboard,' or anything else you think I might should know."

He smirked and blinked at her once, then closed his eyes and flicked his hand again. She kissed the top of his head again and then set off to see to the rest of her patients with a heart that felt at least a stone lighter.

Hermione landed near some bushes in what looked like a fairly run-down part of Manchester. She could see crumbling factory chimneys rising above the old, Georgian row houses down the lane. As she moved closer, the houses seemed to ripple, revealing another door and set of windows on the end. A quick look around, and then she was darting over to the door. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out a wand, longer and stouter than her own. It was ebony, with an elaborately carved handle.

She still felt a little awed that he had so casually offered it to her so she could get past his wards and reset her own.

She held the wand to the door and waited for the click before reaching down and turning the knob. She slipped inside quickly and quietly closed the door after herself, using her own wand for the Lumos. She held it up and looked around.

For some reason, she had expected the place to be as creepy and dreary as Grimmauld had been the first time she'd been there. Spinner's End wasn't nearly as forbidding. It just looked neglected and felt more than a bit lonely.

The sitting room was a monument to bibliomania. Books were everywhere; on shelves from floor to ceiling, stacked in heaps on the floor. The cushions of the old sofa were piled high with journals, and the end tables looked like they wanted to complain. There was only one usable seat in the entire room, and it made Hermione smile.

It was worn and tattered and had the tell-tale pulls and tears of a cat, now long gone. It was the type of chair her grandfather had loved. One that was so comfortable and beloved that one didn't see how wretchedly ugly it had become.

She flicked her wand at the candle lamp hanging from the ceiling, and the room lit with a soft, golden glow. She tiptoed across the room and sat in the chair. It had obviously been moulded to a different form.

As if sitting in the chair had flipped a switch, she grew cold. She looked around and pulled out the parchment he had given her. Rule number one was, *'Beware of the books. This is not an idle warning.'* Now that she was here, she understood. Fully half of them were Dark Magic. She could feel them, wintry and malevolent, but unaware. If felt as if the act of sitting had made them stir, but she wasn't the one they were looking for. She was beneath their notice and staunchly preferred it that way. She

shuddered at the memory of certain tomes kept chained up at Hogwarts and could only wonder at what she was sitting with here.

She stood up and headed into the kitchen. The furnishings were a mishmash of eras. The cabinetry was the old metal style popular in the fifties, and the worktop was scorched Formica with a pattern that was no longer recognizable. The pantry was original to the house and covered with so many layers of enameled paint it looked like shiny wax. The floor was linoleum, newer than the cupboards, but predating Hermione, for sure. It sloped toward a backdoor hung with faded curtains.

Rule number two was, *'Don't use the cooker.'* One look at the way it leaned precariously, and she could see why. Surely, it would burn the house down if she switched it on. There was a hotplate and an electric kettle next to the chipped enamel sink.

She headed back into the sitting room and found the hidden door to the stairs. They creaked ominously as she climbed them. Upstairs she found only two rooms. A bath...complete with claw-foot tub and shower adapter...and an ancient toilet and sink. Rule number three was, *'Turn the water on before you get in.'* He'd underlined 'before' twice. She leaned over and switched on the tap, and it gurgled and belched a clot of rust before it ran clear. She switched it off, shaking her head.

She peeked in the cupboard and found a toothbrush, toothpaste, several vials of potions, all out of date, and a bottle of cologne. She popped it open and smelled it... and suddenly her Professor was there, stalking the aisles between tables in the classroom. She hadn't even realized he wore cologne, but her subconscious would have recognized that smell anywhere. She smiled, placing it back, and closed the mirrored door.

She headed toward the other room and stopped. There was something deliciously wicked about scurrying around in his house, but there was something forbidding about being in his bedroom.

Professor Snape had become something ambiguously special to her in the last months, but there was still a wall there. One made from great blocks of age and experience and mortared with the fact that she'd been his student. Nevertheless, the mortar was crumbling.

Letting her nose drain all over his shoulder will do that.

As she stood in the doorway of this very private space, there was a sense of being on the cusp of a moment. He had invited her into his life in a way that she never would have foreseen. He'd offered her his home as refuge. Now that she had seen it, she realized he had offered her his own bed. There was no other, and the sofa downstairs was far too small for him to have intended her to use that. She stared at the bed...large, four-postered, and taking up nearly the whole room.

She knew he was being generous because of the things she had done for him. But nothing in his history, or even the memories that Harry had shown her, would lead her to believe he was a man given to such gestures casually.

She couldn't help the feeling that he intended something other than what she understood.

Was offering her his bed akin to inviting her to share it?

She thought over their interactions in the past weeks and shook her head. They had certainly developed an intimacy, but she didn't think they had crossed any lines. The man blushed too easily to have hidden an interest, and was far too indignant when she'd had to manhandle him to do her job.

She stepped into the room and it was like piercing a veil. She walked over and sat down on the bed, smiling and flopping back when she discovered one of his secret pleasures. Despite the neglected manner of the rest of the house, Professor Snape had decadent taste in mattresses. Sleeping might just become her new hobby.

She sat up and looked at the bedside table and the smile dropped off her face. There, lying on top of yet another book, was the torn picture of Harry's mother. It called to her, demanding that she understand something of vital importance. She looked around at the room again, and realization started to prick at her mind insistently.

He hadn't offered her his bed. He certainly hadn't invited her to share his bed.

He'd *given* it to her.

She thought back again and replayed certain conversations, reexamined the various looks in his eyes, and it all made her blood run cold.

Snape offered her his home almost casually. He'd pointed her to the drawer in his bedside table with his wand in it as if lending it to her was of no matter. His attempt to relearn how to write, on a day he'd been able to control his mouth enough to actually speak, was odd. Most damning was the way he consistently kept his left arm under the sheet. She'd assumed he'd only regained control of his right, but now that she was looking for suspicious behavior, she saw it. He always regained control of the right side first, but the left had always followed closely behind.

Her heart slammed in her chest.

Basilisk, she thought. The last time she had made such a crazy leap of logic had been when she'd realized the monster in the Chamber of Secrets had been a basilisk. She'd wasted time looking for proof and had ended up a victim.

She knew in her gut she was right this time as well, and she was already wasting time.

Her heart started to thump in her chest. She pulled open the drawstring of her beaded bag and dropped it on the bed. She ran over to his chest of drawers and began pillaging it. Socks, pants, pajama bottoms, trousers, and a belt went into the bag. She snatched open his wardrobe and pulled out his robes, some shirts and, when she spied them folded in a corner, two pairs of faded jeans. She grabbed up a pair of boots, knowing it was overkill, but unable to control her sudden mania. He already had a pair of his dragon-hide boots sitting in a drawer next to his bed. On impulse, she swept her hand under his pillows and was rewarded with a nightshirt.

She shoved them all into the bag and then ran off and grabbed his toothbrush, toothpaste, floss and even his damned bottle of cologne.

Pulling the bag shut, she raced back down to the sitting room and reset the wards with an angry swish of her wand. Grabbing up a bit of Floo powder from the bowl on top, she cried, "St. Mungo's!"

She swirled away in a flash of green flame, knowing she would have to do some fast explaining for using their emergency Floo.

:

She blew into Snape's room in a gale of anger.

His eyes popped open, and he looked at her with concern.

She stomped over to his bed, looked around for the most likely hiding place, and realized there could only be one. She dropped her bag on the table and shoved her hand under his pillow.

She found it on the second swipe. She snatched the piece of parchment out from under him, ignoring his furious glare and his clumsy attempt to stop her.

She danced back a step and read, 'I, Severus Snape, being of sound mind, do hereby...' That was as far as he had gone. She threw it down on the bed next to him, and he glared daggers at her. She glared right back.

"Why?" she demanded.

He slid his eyes away from her and looked at the ceiling. His face was blotching with red even as she watched. He was furious, and helpless. A terrible combination.

Well, she was too. She stomped around the bed and grabbed at his left arm. As she'd suspected, he snatched it away with surprising speed. She grabbed at the blanket and pulled it away, revealing a good portion of his pale torso and his arm.

He hissed in anger as she stared in horror.

"Oh, fuck, Snape. When did this start?"

Her eyes filled with tears at the sight of his forearm. The Dark Mark had lost its definition, but had spread. The inside of his arm had turned black from his elbow to halfway down his palm. It pulsed and writhed like a live thing under the skin.

If she hadn't arranged to have him bathed by house-elves, someone would have noticed it sooner.

She looked to him for an answer, but he gave none. He just stared at her with anger, shame, and... profound sadness.

"You knew."

He blinked.

"You always knew. As soon as I told you Voldemort was dead..."

Yes.

"This is why the Malfoys have been admitted," she said more to herself.

He winced, using his all the muscles in his face to do it. How could he be getting better and dying at the same time?

"Lucius and Draco have been here for a while now." She fixed his sheet, covering his pale chest. "It's the venom, isn't it? The venom that was trying to kill you, was somehow also holding your Dark Mark in check, wasn't it?"

Yes.

"As we lower the amount of venom in your body, we release the... whatever it is?"

Yes.

"Professor, is there a way to stop it?"

He gave her a look of such pain and sadness that she reached out and grabbed at his blackening hand. He clutched hers back before closing his eyes and whispering, "No."

She started to cry, and when she saw a tear finally escape from his lashes, she crawled up onto the bed...careful not to disturb the drain in his neck...and wrapped herself around him. He clumsily pulled her against him and together they cried over how cruel the world could be.

That night, Healer Thriven rushed into the hospital and straight up to the Isolation rooms on the sixth floor. There, he found Madam Ashtonley and Healer Parks staring at Narcissa Malfoy dead on the floor. Her white-blonde hair was fanned out around a face that was strangely less cold than it had been in life.

A pentagram had been scrawled in blood on the floor under her body.

"How did she get in here?" he demanded.

"No one knows," the nurse replied.

"Have you checked on her son?"

"He's sleeping peacefully, unlike the father."

Lucius Malfoy thrashed in his bed. His body was emaciated and blackened as if it had been burned to char. His limbs had curled in on themselves in a grotesque parody of a newborn. He seemed to be having an attack of some kind, but after running several tests, Thriven came to the same conclusion that the other two had. Despite his coma, he somehow knew his wife was dead. He was mourning.

Understanding

Chapter 5 of 13

After the Final Battle, everyone has their demons to wrestle...

Chapter 5: Understanding

It was six in the morning when Hermione stepped out of the fireplace at the Burrow and brushed soot out of her hair. She looked up to see Harry, Ginny and George sitting at the table drinking tea.

"Wow, Hermione, you look terrible," George said.

She let out a forlorn chuckle. "I bet I do."

Harry poured her a cup of tea and brought it to her. "Are you all right?"

Hermione's lip wobbled, and she bit it to keep it still, shaking her head. She took a sip of the tea and sighed heavily.

"What happened?" Ginny asked. "Mum got your message, but we were still worried. Did you even get any sleep?"

"No. I was at the hospital all night and had to meet with several Healers this morning. We just figured out that the Dark Mark is killing Snape, along with Draco and Lucius Malfoy. He says there's no way to stop it. He's dying. Mrs. Malfoy died last night."

"Oh, god," Harry whispered, sitting down hard in the closest chair. "I didn't know she had a Dark Mark."

"She didn't. They don't know how she died. The Aurors came. They think it could have been murder, but they're not sure. I wasn't privy to the details."

The sound of footsteps made her look up. She took another sip of tea and set her cup down on the table just as Ron came over and gave her a hug.

"I'm sorry," he said.

For a wild minute, she thought he was apologizing for everything that had gone wrong between them. It occurred to her in that instant that she didn't want him to.

His next words dispelled the thought like smoke. "I know you and the git have become close. It's not fair."

She sagged against him and nodded her head against his shoulder. "Is there such a thing as fair?"

"No," said George. "Only balance. We mistake them for the same thing."

"Come," Ginny said. "Let me make you something to eat, and then you can catch some sleep."

She didn't sleep. Instead, she thanked Molly and Arthur for looking after her, made her peace with Ron, and packed her things. Ginny tried repeatedly to talk her out of it, and Harry wasn't happy that she was so secretive about where she was moving to. Ron made himself scarce.

She walked to the edge of their property and Apparated away. There were too many people in the kitchen for her to feel comfortable shouting Snape's address in front of them all. Even if it was Secret-Kept, she felt better using discretion.

She entered his sitting room and looked around. It was still bleak and derelict, but she felt as if an enormous weight had been pulled off her shoulders and the air of neglect was transmuted to one of comfort.

She walked upstairs and unpacked a few of her things, her toiletries and work clothes, before she stripped and crawled under the covers. She pressed her face into his pillows, enchanted by the smell, and curled up on her side.

She slept like the dead in Professor Snape's enormous, decadent bed.

"What can I do for you, Hermione?"

"I was wondering if there were any paying positions open at the hospital. I've had a bit of a change as far as my circumstances, and I'm going to need to find a job. I like it here and would prefer to continue on if it was possible."

Healer Gayle sat back in her chair, patting at the back of her head before smoothing her braids. "Well, I can't pay you to be a volunteer, you know that. I'd have to start paying the other volunteers as well, and we're already running out of work for all of you.

"I could look into the apprenticeship program. You could begin studying to be a Healer yourself. From what I hear, there are several people that would be happy to take you on, but that doesn't pay either. Not until you become a resident.

"If you need immediate income, then I would say administrative assistant. How are your organizational skills?"

Hermione smiled like a shark.

Hermione walked into Snape's room to find him sitting up in bed with his knees bent.

They both stared at each other. His eyes scanned her jeans and cardigan and lingered with an amused expression on her hair. She'd worn it up since starting the job. Today it was in its preferred state of epic chaos.

She took in his attire...white shirt, improperly buttoned, and black trousers...with the same sense of strangeness. It was as if the clothes changed the dynamic.

However, not in an expected way.

His hair was working its way past his shoulders now, and the sight of his bare feet added a frisson that had never been there before. Snape naked and helpless under a sheet wasn't quite the same as Snape casually sitting partially undressed on a bed. Not since she'd spent the night holding him, and most of the day breathing in his scent while she slept in his bed.

She shoved her inappropriate thoughts to the side and walked over and picked up his chart. "I see they've cut down on the antivenin. That should buy you a little time. You're making remarkable progress for a man who's dying."

He snorted.

She reached for his left hand, and he lifted it, twisting it so she could see the blackened skin hadn't spread any farther down his hand. "Can you move your neck at all?"

"No," he mouthed.

"I wonder if Pye severed the wrong damned nerves."

Snape snorted again.

She put the chart back as he gave her a questioning glance.

"I've been hired as an administrative assistant here. I'm off until I start Monday. I've decided to haunt you until then," she answered.

He gave her a warm smile that turned to a scowl as she sat down on the side of his bed and started to fix the buttons on his shirt. The tube on his neck drained into a small vial that was now spell-o-taped to his chest, so she only buttoned it three-quarters of the way up.

"Would you like me to find you some shirts without buttons?" she asked.

He frowned and blinked twice.

"Stubborn," she retorted. "Your fondness for buttons is a problem if you can't look down to see them."

She finished fixing his shirt and dropped her hands into her lap. "I moved into your place this morning." When he raised an eyebrow, she explained. "I found I just couldn't put it off. Once you offered refuge, it became a compulsion. So that's two things off my list. Find a new place to live and find a job."

She looked him in the eyes. "Thank you, Severus. I can't tell you how much freer I feel. I didn't realize how heavy everything was until it was gone."

She shook her head sadly when he gave her an eyehug. "Of course, everything would be a bit peachier if you weren't dying. So I've decided to see what I can do about that as well. I figured between the two of us, we've improved our quality of life at least a thousand percent, and we should plow ahead while we're on a roll."

Snape scowled and reached for his clipboard of parchment. He pulled a sheet off and handed it to her.

She read it aloud. "I, Hermione Granger, solemnly swear not to seek out, research, or attempt in any way, a means to save..." She threw it down on the bed. "Fuck you, Snape. Do you really think I'm going to sign that? You're a goddamned hero. You're *my* hero. You handed me the answer to all my tiny little problems on a platter just yesterday, and you expect me to just sit back and watch you waste away without trying to help?"

He handed her another piece of parchment.

"You'll get my house, my library, my patents, and the hundred and thirty-seven thousand Galleons in my Gringotts account if you let me die. If you disobey my wishes, you'll get nothing." Seriously, Severus? This is the best you can do?" She threw that one down as well. "How delirious were you when this struck you as a good idea? When the hell did bribing a Gryffindor ever work? And thanks for the notice, if you're going to reach out from the grave and have me evicted, I'm taking that mattress before you drop. Trust me on that. I'm in love with your mattress. I think it has already become the most important thing in my life."

He snorted again.

"Laugh all you want; you didn't spend last winter living in a bloody tent."

He reached down and picked up another slip of parchment, handing it to her with a serious expression. It only had two words on it. 'Hermione, please.'

She teared up and swallowed with difficulty. "Okay, that one was well-played." She folded it and tucked it in her pocket. "Give me a reason I can accept, Severus. You've become very important to me in a very, very short amount of time. I don't think I am really all that stable, mentally, and I'm a lot more fragile than even I would have thought. Watching you die is going to hurt me more than making my parents forget I exist. You have to give me a good reason."

He sighed and reached for one more slip of paper.

She read it in silence. 'If you try to save me, you will die. Without years of training in the Dark Arts, even the research needed will damage you in ways you cannot understand. What you don't know will kill you. You have no hope of success. Accept my fate. You have found a way to let me die with dignity. I am in your debt.'

She dropped her hands into her lap, crumpling the note. "But I don't want you to die, Severus." Her voice sounded small and pathetic to her ears.

He gestured, and she leaned in close. "*Everyone dies, Granger,*" he whispered in her ear. "*Not everyone is given the honor of being missed.*"

His words were like a knife in her heart. She nodded and then laid her forehead on his shoulder and cried. He put his arm around her and leaned back, and they ended up as they had been when the sun had come up that morning, wrapped around each other for comfort.

The wall between them crumbled, as the mortar sifted away, and the blocks tumbled into insignificance.

It was a strange thing when looking at it objectively. Only a handful of months ago the idea of lying in bed with Professor Snape would have been ludicrous, but then, so was the idea of beating Voldemort. Now, crying in her former teacher's arms was as natural as breathing.

The two of them had been through so much; life had become so twisted and warped, before and after their victory. They had established an understanding and a bond that transcended logic or common sense. The foundation had been laid down without words to get in the way. Weeks of being restricted to yes and no had turned into a conversation held on so many other levels. They'd been forced to see beyond the surface, and to listen beyond the words.

It was as if only he understood...and only she could comfort. His inability to push her away when she'd first trespassed into his private hell had set the tone. His humiliation had turned into a gratitude he couldn't have expressed if he'd had his voice. She knew he took great comfort in the fact that he would be missed. She knew it without his words, just as she knew he understood that she wasn't what everyone assumed she was. She was less. She wasn't as strong, she wasn't as brave, and she wasn't even remotely as self-assured as everyone had thought. She'd just done what she'd had to do because there was no choice.

The one person that she had always felt had misjudged her the most, was now the only one that let her simply be what she was.

It had been such a short amount of time for two people to come to be so dependent on each other.

And there was only a short time left.

She stayed for hours, reading to him, sharing stories about the hunt for the Horcruxes with him, and saying nothing at all, simply holding his hand.

"Hi, Lavender. I'm glad I caught you."

"Hermione! Where were you today?"

"I took a personal day. I was up all night with Professor Snape. Are you done for the day?"

"Yeah, I was just heading out."

"I'll walk with you."

Lavender dropped her armful of sheets down the chute to the laundry room and grabbed her handbag out of her locker. "So what's up?" she asked as they headed for the stairs.

"Well, a few things actually. I moved out of the Burrow this morning."

Lavender winced and gave her a one-armed hug. "I'm sorry. I know you had wanted to make it work with Ron."

Hermione sighed. "Actually, I feel a lot better."

"Ouch."

Hermione gave a tired chuckle. "Seriously. What does that say about me?"

"That you're human?"

"There was more to it than that though. I feel like I've broken the Golden Trio for good. They're all hurting so much..."

Lavender tugged on Hermione's sleeve and pulled her to a stop. "Hermione, everyone is hurting. The Wizarding world is a small place. You can't have a war without someone you care for being killed or maimed or lost in some way. I went on with life. Michael went on with life. Even Cho. Did you hear she was released today? She was. She'll be back for therapy, but that's beside the point. As low as she was, she's moving past it. You need to move on, too. You, and Ron and Harry have been in the thick of it since first-year. If you wallow in it, it will crush you. Ron will find his way, or he won't, but you're doing no one any favors by needlessly suffering. Your moving out is the best thing in the long run."

Hermione looked down and shook her head. "When did you get so wise?" she asked with a small laugh.

"Probably five seconds *after* I was caught in that Blasting Hex. If I was wise before, I'd have run *away* from the Death Eaters and not towards them."

Hermione laughed, and the two of them headed out onto the street. "Well, that's the burden of being a Gryffindor. When push comes to shove, we leave logic to Ravenclaws."

"Too right. So what was your other news?"

"I was hired in the Personnel department. I'll be assisting with employee schedules starting on Monday."

"Oh, that's great! I got a job too! Although not at the hospital. I'm going to be working at Madam Malkin's. She's even said if I learn well, she'll allow me to showcase my designs!"

"Lavender, that's fantastic!"

"I know, right? I'll still do volunteer work two days a week. I owe this place. Healer Gayle said that they could still use a few of us for a couple more months."

"Hey, since you're the fashion designer, perhaps you could help me shop for a new wardrobe for work. Everything I own still screams 'on the run,' and I want to look more professional."

"Absolutely! When?"

"Tomorrow?"

"That would work, or if you're not busy now, we could do a little shopping and grab a bite?"

"You know what? That sounds like a great idea."

"Wonderful! Let's g...Hey, isn't that Draco? I thought he was at death's door..."

Hermione turned around in time to see Draco let go of the front door and head down the stairs toward the alley. He looked pale and shaken and his eyes were filled with grief. She took two steps toward him, but Lavender caught her arm.

"I don't want to sound like a bitch, but you and he don't have a good relationship to start with, Granger. Let me go. I'll owl you later about when we can meet up tomorrow."

"You're right. I'm being ghoulish. I just wanted to ask him questions. Go. Let him know I'm sorry for his loss."

Lavender squeezed her arm and hurried after Draco.

Hermione watched them talking quietly until they went around the corner to Apparate; then she spun on her heel and raced back inside St. Mungo's.

:

When she pushed the door open, Snape was sitting up in bed with his arms wrapped around his knees and his chin wedged between them. Her heart tripped when she saw the look of hope on his face quickly change to something akin to joy and then to his usual bland indifference.

She walked over to the bed, trying to keep her composure. "I just saw Draco," she said.

He winced and looked back down at his feet.

"He was walking out the front door."

Snape's eyes widened, and he slanted a look up at her. She sat down on the end of the bed so he wouldn't have to strain his eyes.

"Severus, is Draco being cured linked to Narcissa Malfoy dying?"

His eyes watered before he closed them. She reached out and touched his wrist, and he let go of his leg and clasped her hand. His grip was stronger now. He was healing so quickly. So illogically. It was hard to accept that he was dying.

He tugged and she slid closer, resting her own chin on one of his boney knees, her ear by his mouth.

"Yes," he said in his ghost whisper.

"What killed her?"

"*She did.*"

"Did she willingly die to save him?"

"Yes."

"Is that what it would take? Someone willing to take your place?"

"*Exactly.*"

Hermione sighed and wrapped her arms around him. "That's evil."

He chuffed out a breath and dragged up his left sleeve, head still resting on his knees. "*That's what this always was, Granger.*"

She pulled back and reached down, feeling his warm skin, soft, with a prickle of fine hair. The mark hadn't changed since she'd first seen it spread. His long, pale fingers stood in stark contrast to the blackened palm. It didn't feel like anything but an arm, but her hand wanted to recoil from the roiling blackness underneath. She felt a strong

urge to wipe her hand as if it was now tainted.

She kept it there, holding his wrist firmly. "Can you feel it?"

"Of course. Every day for twenty-two years."

"Oh, gods, Severus. I'm so sorry."

He looked up through his lashes with his sad eyes. *"So am I. I have been for each of those twenty-two years."*

Hermione nodded, accepting his pain and remorse, and his inevitable fate. The look they shared spoke more than they could ever put into words. The regrets, the sadness, the irony of finding a true friend just before all was to be lost...

He pulled his arm out from under her hand. *"You should go,"* he whispered. *"I'm tired."*

She pushed off the bed and hovered, as he dropped backward. His head hit the pillows awkwardly. She reached down and lifted it, smoothing his hair out of his face and shifting his head into a more comfortable position.

She leaned down and kissed his forehead. "Sleep, Severus. I'll see you again tomorrow. We still have a handful of tomorrows."

He captured her hand and brought it to his lips and placed a gentle kiss on her knuckles, then he closed his eyes and flicked his hand at the door.

Hermione sat in his chair in the sitting room compulsively rubbing her hand on her thigh. She had to force herself to stay in the room. Her logical mind knew she was being ridiculous, but her tired, overwrought imagination told her that the books around her knew she had touched the Dark Magic in his arm. She was sure there was some sleeping beast contained in all the books and that it was stirring. It knew she was there.

A folio slipped off a shelf behind her, parchment notes fluttering to the floor. Hermione hurtled out of the chair like a shot, the bookcase door to the stairs banging shut behind her before the last paper settled to the dusty carpet.

Upstairs, she sat in the middle of the bed with her hands wrapped around her knees, castigating herself for her childishness as she trembled from the adrenaline rush.

Healing

Chapter 6 of 13

After the final battle everyone has their demons to wrestle.

Thank you to karelia for her wonderful beta work!

Hermione rummaged around in her beaded bag, reaching around her purchases to find the lunch she'd ordered from the Leaky Cauldron. When her hands found the box, she pulled it out and hit the door with her hip.

"Good afternoon, Severus. I brought you some..."

She stopped, clutching her bag in one hand and the box of food in the other.

The bed was empty.

She spun in a circle...as if he could have possibly been hiding behind the door...and her emotions immediately careened out of control. Her lips started to wobble helplessly, and tears spilled from her eyes, even as her mind started to race through perfectly logical scenarios as to why he might have been moved.

She was still standing there, barely breathing, when she heard a toilet flush, followed by the sound of a faucet from the tiny bathroom in the corner of the room.

The relief that flooded her left her shaking, caught between the two extremes.

The narrow door opened, and he stepped out of the bathroom, dressed in his long, black robes, open at the neck, and his dragon-hide boots. Surprise lit his features, and then, when he saw the state she was in, he cocked his head to the side with worried concern.

His neck. He could move his neck. He was up and about and moving his neck.

It was all too much, and she burst into tears. Holding up the box of food, she blurted, "I brought you baked cod and some banoffee pie."

He came over and gently took the box from her, patting her back gently when she threw her arms around his chest. She buried her face in his robes and sobbed, and his arm tightened around her.

"I thought...I was afraid..."

"Shhh. I'm not. Not yet," he whispered.

He led her over to the chair in the corner and urged her down into it. Then he dragged over the chair by his bed and the little table on wheels as she tried to pull herself together.

He sat and opened his lunch, giving her an eyehug when she removed the stasis charm for him and turning the box to offer her some.

"No, thank you, I'm quite full. I ate with Lavender when we finished shopping. Oh!" She dug back into her bag and pulled out a bottle of boys bitter. "I asked, and Pye said it couldn't hurt."

He smiled at her, genuinely pleased, and her heart thumped proudly. He pulled out the utensils, snapped out the napkin, laying it in his lap, and then waved at her imperiously...his latest gesture...signaling his desire to hear what she'd been up to.

She told him of her adventures shopping with Lavender, the new additions to her wardrobe, the people she'd seen out along the way, and the mundane conversations she'd overheard here and there.

She chattered away through lunch, sat reading with him through the afternoon, and in the evening, when his strength gave out, helped him off with his boots and outer robes and tucked him back in bed.

She was adjusting his pillows when he scowled and clutched at the bandages on his neck. He twisted his head up at her as his hand came away holding the loose drain tube. Her eyes widened and, pulling her wand from her sleeve, she turned to the door and summoned a Healer.

She resisted the urge to peek under his bandages; instead, she quickly unbuttoned his white shirt to look at the vial taped to his chest. "It's empty," she whispered. "It must have come loose soon after Pye changed the vial this morning. When did you start moving your neck?"

"Before he changed it," he whispered.

They both turned as the door was pushed open, and Healer Thriven came in. "Good evening, I'm covering for Healer Pye tonight. What seems to be the matter?"

Snape held up his drain tube and swept a hand to the vial on his chest.

"I see." Thriven picked up his chart and scanned it as Hermione stepped out of the way. Hanging the clipboard back, the Healer pulled out his wand and ran through a series of Diagnostic Spells. He flattened his lips, reached forward, and began peeling the bandages off Severus's neck, revealing a long, jagged scar, still an angry pink, and nothing else. The hole where the drain had been had closed over. He leaned back and lifted Severus's left arm, unbuttoning the sleeve and pulling it back. The black stain seemed the same as it had been since they'd cut down on the antivenin and Healing Potions.

Hermione let out a breath she hadn't known she'd been holding.

"It would seem, Mr. Snape, that you no longer have any venom in your system. The good news is that the darkness doesn't seem to be spreading yet, although I have no assurances that it won't. The bad news is that it would appear that the damage to your vocal cords is permanent. Your body has healed far beyond our expectations, so we were holding out for another miracle or two. Pye and I have conflicting theories as to what's going on. I believe the Dark Magic in the venom was in conflict with the Dark Magic in your arm, creating superfluous side effects. Pye believes the venom was trying to kill you and the mark was trying to preserve you. A bit farfetched, I grant you, in light of what it's done to Mr. Malfoy. However, one cannot deny that your body *has* healed.

"Technically, you're now healthy enough to go home. However, I would like it very much if you stayed at least for a few more days so we could monitor the Dark Magic in your arm. I won't lie to you, sir, we've not been able to make any headway in Mr. Malfoy's case and, as you know, can claim no responsibility for his son's recovery. The choice is up to you."

Snape heaved a long sigh before whispering, *"I'll stay."*

When Hermione came back on Sunday, Snape was up and dressed again, reading the morning paper in one of the chairs. She sat and talked with him for hours before she realized he never pulled his left hand away from a fold in his robes. When she noticed, she froze.

She held out her hand. "Show me."

He grimaced and held it up.

It was completely black.

She tugged his sleeve up slowly, as far as she could. There was no pale skin left.

"How far does it go?"

He touched his arm at a point four inches above his elbow.

She let go of his sleeve and just held his hand.

Hermione stared at herself in the mirrored door of Professor Snape's wardrobe. She'd woken up extra early to shower and attack her hair. Lavender had gone to great lengths to help her pick robes that would create a more professional look and had taken the time to teach her how to get her hair to cooperate.

"The sloppy chignon you had was perfect for volunteering. It had a sweet, nurturing thing going on. But if you want them to take you seriously as a professional, then you need to project your seriousness."

It had seemed like great advice at the time, but now Hermione wasn't so sure.

Her hair was pulled back in a sleek French twist that she feared looked pretentious, and her navy-blue tailored robes seemed a bit severe. She wore a cropped jacket over a slim, wool skirt that flared at the knees and fell to mid-calf. She had to admit the shoes...a playful take on the style popular in the forties...were perfect.

She just wasn't sure she was perfect in them.

She shook her head...nothing to be done now...and grabbed up her ubiquitous beaded bag.

:

Hermione knocked quickly before pushing the door open. "Good morning! I brought you your paper and some donuts. I hope you like..." She stopped when she realized Snape had gone very still. "Are you all right?"

He blinked.

He blinked again.

When he blinked a third time, she realized he wasn't trying to answer her, he was just blinking. She blushed.

"Is it too much? I thought it was, too, but Lavender said..."

Her words trailed off when he plucked the paper out of her hands and sat down in 'his' chair.

She fished the bag of donuts out of her bag and placed it on the table next to him.

"Thank you," he whispered, without looking up.

"I'll come back on my lunch break," she said, backing away.

He lifted his head from the headlines, and she barely heard his quiet, "Good luck."

"Thank you."

:

"So? How's your first day? You look fantastic, by the way."

"So far I'm just learning what is where and who is who," Hermione said, setting her tray down. "And thank you for the compliment. I have to say, I was really self-conscious until I got into the offices and saw I was dressed like the rest of them. You're now my permanent personal fashion consultant. Severus didn't help. He looked at me like I'd grown a new head this morning, and I wanted to throw up."

"Men are stupid when it comes to such things. Ignore him. How's he doing by the way?"

"Not good. Now that the venom is out of his system, the darkness is spreading."

Lavender stabbed at her salad. "It's just not fair," she said. "I Floo'd Draco on Sunday, just to see how he was doing. He's a wreck. His mum's dead and his father's now a vegetable."

"Is he really a vegetable?"

"Yeah. He had some kind of seizure late Saturday night, and there's little brain activity now. I'm meeting Draco for dinner tonight. I hate the idea of him being alone in this. He has no friends, you know?"

Hermione gave her a warm smile. "That's really nice of you." She cocked her head to the side. "But I thought you had plans with Michael?"

Lavender waved an airy hand. "I changed them. He'll be fine. Draco needs at least one person to take the time to listen."

Hermione knew she was traveling into dangerous waters, but couldn't help herself. "Did Draco talk to you about how he was cured?"

Lavender shook her head. "No. I asked, but he grew too upset. It's not like we're bosom buddies. We barely spoke two words to each other in seven years of schooling. He's just so grateful for a kind word that he'll even put up with mine. The trick is to let him feel superior. He needs that like he needs air."

Hermione winced, both with disappointment and empathy.

"Have you heard from Ron at all?" Lavender asked.

"No. I haven't spoken to Harry or Ginny since I moved. I'll Floo Harry when I get home tonight."

"So are you ever going to tell me where you're staying?"

"I can't. It's Secret Kept."

"Ohhh..."

Hermione could see the fires of speculation burning in her friend's eyes.

"I'll catch you tomorrow," she said, forestalling further inquiries. "I want to go see Professor Snape before I head back to the office. Give Draco my best."

"Shall do."

:

Severus was standing by the window, hands clasped behind his back, peering out into the Muggle street below, when she entered his room. His abandoned lunch tray disappeared with a soft pop just as he turned and saw her.

She smiled, and he fell back on habit and gave her an eyehug before turning away again. She stepped up to his shoulder and looked through the blinds.

"Starting to get a little stir crazy?" she asked.

He snorted and nodded slightly.

"How is your energy?"

"Fine," he whispered, not taking his eyes off the view.

She studied his profile, with his elegantly slanting forehead and his high-bridged, implausible nose. The daylight threw his features into harsh relief. His dark, almost feminine brows and lashes contrasted with his pale skin. She scrutinized the tiny lines bracketing his mouth and creasing his eyes, all seemingly caused by anger or pain. There were no smile lines that she could see. His mouth was narrow and sharply defined. It looked soft and slightly sad, unlike when he had been a teacher.

She was so lost in her reverie that she didn't even realize at first when he turned or that she was now staring at his whole mouth and not just the profile. She flicked her eyes up and met his.

His eyes held a fierce, intense expression, and the air seemed to gradually thicken and crackle between them.

She blinked.

"Would you like me to take you out of here for a while?" she asked. "If you think you're up to it, we could go for a walk."

He looked away, back out onto the street below. "No," he said.

She let his answer fade into nothingness and joined him in gazing at the occasional Muggle who went by.

"Severus, if I wasn't staying at your house, would you have gone home yesterday?"

He sighed and a darting glance showed he'd closed his eyes. "No. I have accustomed myself to the idea that I will die in this room. To leave now would give me false hope."

She nodded, blinking back tears.

"What will happen to you?" she asked irrationally.

He snorted amusement. "You were ever curious about things best left unmentioned." He turned to her. "I can only assume that I will waste away and fall into a coma, like Lucius. Then I will join him and the Dark Lord burning in hell for eternity."

"You don't know that!" she hissed. "That's just morbid speculation. Only idiots believe in hell. It's a construct of the Dark Ages, not Dark Magic! Even if there was a hell, a man as noble as you won't go there. After the sacrifices you've made? Please. For god's sake, Harry said he met Dumbledore at King's Cross Station. There's nothing of Muggle mythology beyond the veil, all of that is just superstitious nonsense. I would have thought a man as intelligent as you wouldn't believe in such rubbish."

His eyes danced with mirth as his lips quirked, and her words sputtered to a halt. She felt a bit like a fool.

"I hope you end up stuck in some eternal Disneyland until I get there to let you out," she muttered. "That would serve you right and be hell enough even for you."

He snorted and looked back out the window with a smirk on his face. She huffed and turned back to the window.

A moment later, she felt his hand slip into hers and clutched at it until her lunch hour was over.

Grasping

Chapter 7 of 13

After the final battle, everyone has their demons to wrestle.

Thank you to karelia for her amazing betawork! Now, fasten your seatbelts. It gets a bit bumpy...

Hermione pushed the door open with a sigh. "Well, I survived my first day," she said, leaning against the wall and pulling her shoes off. Her Cushioning Charm had failed around three o'clock, and her hair follicles were screaming. She reached up and pulled the combs from her hair. "I suspect there's an outside chance that I might just end up bored to death long before you start to look crispy," she muttered as she hung her head upside-down and scratched at her scalp. She flipped her head back up and looked at him for the first time. "Oh, you're ready for bed already? It's only half-past five."

He was in his pajamas, sitting against his mound of pillows with his book flipped-over on his lap.

"Are you not feeling well?" she asked with concern.

He blinked twice before he apparently remembered he could move his head and shook it. "I'm fine," he said softly as she sat down by his hip. "Just tired."

"And bored?"

He grimaced and nodded.

"That's no way to treat a book, you know. Ah, *A Man for All Seasons*. I thought you might like it. Had you read it before? Seen the play or the movie?"

He grabbed at the book as she reached for it, and she snatched it up and held it over her head. "Good heavens. I know you don't have any porn, so there's no reason to blush like a firsty."

He scowled, his face crimson, and snatched at the book again as she went to place a bookmark in it.

"What is wrong with you?" Looking down to where the bookmark had fluttered, she saw the answer. "Oh. Oh..."

Through the thin cotton of his pajamas, it was clear that Snape had been attempting to hide a rather impressive erection. His legs folded closer to his body with a snap as he grabbed the book and dropped it back in his lap. Apparently not feeling that was enough, he grabbed at the thin cotton sheet, gathering it into a wad over the offending member. He lifted his hands in frustration, dropped them halfway back to the bed, and then pitched forward and buried his flaming face in them.

Hermione's brain shot off in several directions at once, most of them highly inappropriate. In an effort to lighten the mood, she said, "I'd offer to give you a hand with that, but according to Ron, I'm not all that. You're probably better off taking care of it yourself. Do you need a moment?"

His head snapped up, and he gave her a thunderous scowl. "That's not funny," he hissed. He could now put a good amount of volume into his whisper when he was riled.

"Which part?" she quipped. "Look, Severus, you don't spend as much time in a tent with two hormonal boys as I did without getting used to certain male realities. Not that, I mean, I didn't...I was still a virgin until after..." She finally managed to shut up, but not until her own face burned hot. "Oh, god. Now I've managed to embarrass myself."

He closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Look," she said, still trying to salvage the situation, "at least all your nerves are working again, right? That's a good thing, yes?"

Severus flopped back onto the pillows. "Go away, Granger."

She sighed and heaved up off the bed. "All right. I've had a long day too. I'll see you in the morning."

She bent over to kiss the top of his head, but he hissed, "Don't!" She froze. "Stop... kissing me all the bloody time! It's not..." He turned his face to the wall, obviously mortified.

Everything snapped into focus, and she finally understood the whole picture. The blinking this morning, the charged look at lunch. How could she have been so stupid? Just a few days earlier, she'd been sure if he'd had an interest in her, she would know. She was right. He just hadn't had one *then*.

A thousand thoughts rushed through her mind all at once, creating so much white noise it was impossible to think at all. Instead of straightening up, she leaned down farther. She moved slowly, giving him all the time in the world to move away.

He didn't. His eyes widened, and he twitched his head toward hers, but then he went still. His eyes dropped down to her lips, and he let out the softest sigh just before she gave him a gentle kiss.

His lips were warm and dry and welcoming. She pulled away slightly, looking into his fathomless black eyes, only to shut them against the incredible need she saw there. She leaned in again, and his hands came up and gently embraced her shoulders, pulling her close and kissing her back.

He was trembling.

Hermione's head was still ringing with white noise as she sighed against his mouth, rubbing her nose against his larger one. She felt wild, out of control, slightly terrified, and *wanted*.

She brought her hands to either side of his face and kissed him again, and his fingers dug into her shoulders. He pulled her down and wrapped his arms around her, transporting the kiss to a level of instant frenzy.

She clutched at his face, slanting her mouth across his as he sucked gently at her lower lip. Enthrilled by the sound of his heavy breathing, she unconsciously tried to match it with her own, making herself dizzy.

She twisted her hips and got one knee on the bed, lifting herself up on it as he crushed her breasts against his chest. Feeling the desperation in his taut muscles, she moaned an echo of his silent song. She slid down next to him on the bed, draping herself along his body.

He kissed her passionately as one of his hands slid down her back and cupped her arse. Her toes curled, and she let a quiet little moan escape. She shifted when he guided her on top of him, and together they somehow dislodged the book in his lap. It landed on the tile floor with a loud slap that startled both of them. They broke away and turned toward the sound, both panting from their exertions. When she looked back, she could see his desire already being eclipsed by remorse.

She leaned in to kiss him again, but he grabbed her shoulders and stopped her.

"Severus..."

"No. *This is stupid. I-I...*" He let out a long, shuddering sigh and pushed her away. "*I'm a selfish bastard.*"

"Is that so bad?" she asked. "Not to put too fine a point on it, but you've not got that many more opportunities to be selfish. Or happy."

He shook his head. "*It's wrong. It's too twisted. You're already hurting and I... This is a cruel insanity. You offered friendship, and I couldn't be content with that gift alone.*" He reached up and stroked a finger down her cheek. "*You're so young. You deserve better than to be the object of obsession for a desperate man.*"

"But I..."

He pressed his fingers over her mouth. "No."

She pulled away and glared at him. "But you want me," she snapped.

"*I want to live too, but that's not going to happen, is it? Go home, Granger. You will thank me when you're older.*"

"Piss off, Severus," she snapped back, grabbing her beaded bag off the table and shoving herself off the bed. "I'm supposed to be grateful that even lonely, desperate, and dying men reject me? Fuck you."

"Hermione..."

She waved her hand in the air and headed for the door, stopping to put her shoes back on. "I'll be back in the morning with your paper. You're due for some new books, as well."

She straightened up and pulled the door open, but his hand came over her shoulder and slammed it shut. She yelped. She hadn't heard him move.

He grabbed her elbow and spun her around, wrapping his arms around her. "*I do want you,*" he whispered harshly. "*Christ, I want you. No one has ever treated me with such kindness, nor come to mean so much in such a short span of time. Nevertheless, you must see that this is the height of foolishness. I'm twice your age, you were my student, and I'm fucking dying! Not someday...*" He let go of her and swiftly unbuttoned his pajama top, pulling it aside and exposing his left pectoral muscle. It was roiling with black. "*Soon. Anything between us doesn't make sense. If you weren't so fragile right now, you would see that. What kind of a man would I be if I shagged you and died, callously ignoring everything you've already lost?*"

The white noise was still roaring in her ears, muddling her thoughts, and scrambling her emotions. *He's so tall*, she thought irrationally. *I'd forgotten that*. She reached out and ran her hand across his chest, feeling him quiver at her touch. "Do you really think your restraint will make your loss easier to bear?"

He grabbed her hand and stopped it. "*It feels like folly,*" he replied. "*No good ever came from my grasping for things I wanted. You're fragile right now. My desires are more than you were bargaining for.*"

She sighed and leaned against him. "You're right. Of course you're right. I'm just being needy again. This is stupid and illogical and the worst case of bad timing in the world. I just..." She shook her head, lost for words, and sagged. "I just wish I could have come to know you under different circumstances. I like you, Severus. I like you a lot."

He sighed and tightened his arms around her. "*Hermione, there were no other circumstances,*" he whispered. "*You must know that the only way I could have tolerated your presence long enough to discover who you really were would be if I was utterly incapable of getting away or telling you to go hang.*" She snorted through her nose and heard the breathy chuckle in his chest.

He pushed her back gently and looked down into her face. She had to turn her head to hear him over the sudden burst of noise out in the hallway. "*Allow me to thank you, for everything you've done. For all the chatter, and the books, and the conversations and debates. Most of all, I thank you for showing me there's one person on this earth who cares if I pass on. I'd rather not soil all of that with pity sex.*" He kissed her forehead, and it felt like a benediction. "*I do thank you for a rather splendid kiss.*"

She leaned in and gave him a quick, possessive kiss. "There's another one," she said. "Now I'm going to take my bruised ego home and feed it ice cream."

He smiled and leaned over to open the door for her gallantly. They both turned at the sound of running feet and slamming doors.

Hermione darted out into the hallway, grabbing Nurse Chisholme's sleeve. "What's going on?"

"We have to protect the patients!" she cried. "Help me seal their doors!"

"Protect them?" She snatched out her wand. "From what?"

"We don't know! I've heard that everyone on the sixth floor is dead and there are screams coming from the fifth. We need to lock all the patients in and seal the wards. There are Aurors swarming all over the place."

Hermione turned to lock Snape's door, but found him already behind her, stamping his feet into his boots and throwing his outer robe on over his pajamas. He grabbed her arm and leaned close. *"What floor was Lucius on?"* he rasped into her ear.

Her wide-eyed look of shock gave him all the answer he needed.

"Go back into my room and wait for me," he ordered. He took off up the hall, robes and shirt still hanging open, and hair swaying in time with the slashing flicks of his wand. He slammed doors closed and locked them as he passed.

"To hell with that," she muttered, taking off after him.

She darted through the doorway to the stairwell just as he turned to seal it. He saw her and let out a string of profanity that she couldn't hear above the chaos. She warded the door behind her, and he took off up the stairs.

When they reached the door to the fifth floor, they could hear nothing. The muted chaos on the floors below them dwindled to a taut silence beyond this door.

Severus looked through the thick glass window on the door and whispered, *"Granger, go back."*

"Not a chance."

He spun around and grabbed at her arm, fingers digging in painfully. *"This is not a fucking game!"* he hissed, his face morphing back into the terrifying teacher. *"Go back!"*

She swallowed and nodded, backing down several steps.

He turned and began dismantling the wards on the door. In a moment, he snatched it open and was through. It slammed closed and flared bright blue from the wards he threw up.

She backed farther down the stairs to the landing, clutching her wand and staring at the door.

Two minutes later, her resolve broke, and she rushed back up the stairs and peeked through the window. Severus was striding confidently down the hallway, robe billowing behind as he ignored the bodies. Aurors, Nurses and Healers were sprawled on the floor in varying degrees of dismemberment. The walls were full of scorch marks and burns. Only two doors were open, and there was blood splattered on the floor everywhere.

She saw an arm, still clutching a wand, lying at an impossible angle next to a head full of iron-grey braids. The rest of Healer Gayle's body was hidden behind a small cart.

Hermione shoved her hands over her mouth and swallowed thickly.

She felt paralyzed, unable to choose whether to dismantle Snape's wards and guard his back, or run screaming out into the streets like any sane person would. She stayed where she was and watched Snape stalk away from her.

She realized she was still clutching not just her wand, but also her beaded bag and quickly looped the straps around the stair rail. Wiping her sweaty palms on her wool skirt, she gripped her wand tight again and looked back up.

She screamed.

There, on the other side of the window, was a creature unlike any she had ever seen before. It had shriveled, black skin, stretched over a head more skull than face. Gravity pulled what was left of its platinum-blond hair into a parody of a mohawk as it hung upside-down, grinning at her with perfect, white teeth. It stared at her with eyes that looked like putrid pools of burning lava. Drawing back its desiccated lips, it opened its jaws, revealing row after row of sharp, dagger-like teeth. Its mouth continued to open until the top of its head was lost to sight.

With no warning, it dropped off the ceiling and flew at her.

Hermione screeched just as it slammed against the door. Her piercing shriek echoed in the stairwell as Severus's wards exploded around the creature.

She heard the sound of a door banging open several flights below and footsteps pounding up the stairs. She didn't take her eyes off the flaring brightness of the wards as they sizzled and failed. The glass melted out of the window, and she threw herself backwards as a clawed hand reached through.

A carrion stench filled the stairwell, and she gagged as she threw nearly every spell she could think of at it to no effect.

Its jaws slammed shut with a clack, and its putrid eyes were visible again. It let out a scream that made her blood freeze in her veins.

Bloody talons clawed at the door, leaving deep gouges as it was pulled backwards by an unseen force. Hermione aimed again and took its eyes out with two fast, slicing hexes, and it roared in anger.

Footsteps rounded the turn on the landing, and she held her free hand out to stop them, not taking her eyes off the beast.

As it slipped farther away from the door, she could see Severus behind it holding his wand arm out with the other up in an elegant dueling stance. He was bathed in a pulsing red light that fluttered his robe and made his hair dance around his head. The light slipped just beyond the visible spectrum in time to an unseen heartbeat.

The creature was drawn backwards against its will, shrieking its anger and gouging the floor with arms that only vaguely looked human. At one point, it broke the spell's hold and scuttled straight up the wall, but Severus's enchantment caught it again and drew it back in. It landed on the floor with a sickening splat and began to keen. It looked back at Severus and snarled but conceded defeat by turning and going to him of its own volition.

Severus's mouth never stopped moving, but Hermione couldn't hear his words. He kept his wand pointed at the creature, but his spell left his wand-tip and flowed back on him, feeding the pulsing aura around him. The creature snarled and whined and then rose to its full height and bellowed at him.

Snape never flinched. He just kept up his stream of words until the monster settled down on its haunches, as docile as a pet hound.

Severus lowered his wand and spoke to it. It shook its head like a horse but then bowed down and touched its face to the floor by Severus's feet. Then it sat back, evidently waiting for an order.

Hermione couldn't hear him, but she could read his lips, as Snape spat a final curse and bathed the monster in green light.

It fell to the floor, dead.

"What the hell is that?"

Hermione turned to see Kingsley Shacklebolt and Arthur Weasley, along with two other Aurors, crowded up behind her.

"I have no idea," Hermione rasped. "I've never even read about such a thing."

"Is the danger past, Snape?" the Minister called.

He nodded and then aimed his wand at the monster and incinerated it.

Kingsley vanished what was left of the door and stepped through, followed by the Aurors.

Arthur placed his hand on Hermione's shoulder. "Are you all right?" he asked softly.

"I'm fine. I think. I don't know."

He squeezed her and stepped through the melted doorway. Hermione followed close on his heels.

"Gareth, head downstairs and tell them it's over," Kingsley ordered. "Farris, start searching for survivors on this floor. Arthur, could you go with him?"

Severus looked lost and overwhelmed, standing there with his wand still drawn staring down at the smoldering pile of ash on the floor. Hermione slipped up next to him, carefully stepping around, to button up his robe.

"Snape, I'm going to need you to come down to the Ministry and answer a few questions."

"He can't," Hermione blurted. "He's a patient here." She gestured at the carnage around them. "When you finish here, you can find him in his room. He's on the fourth floor, room 423. I need to take him back and make sure he's all right."

"All right," Kingsley said. "I'll be there in a little while."

Hermione tugged on Severus's sleeve, and he followed her docilely toward the door. Once in the stairwell, she snatched her bag off the rail and grabbed his hand. She practically dragged him down the three flights and back to his room on the second floor. She banged the door shut behind them and started stuffing all of his things into her beaded bag.

Snape looked at her, obviously lost in his own horrific thoughts.

"Come on," she said, pulling the bag shut.

He didn't move, just stared at her in a daze. She grabbed his hand again and headed down to the lobby and straight out the door with him following silently behind her.

Once they reached the alley, she threw her arms around him and Disapparated.

He clutched at her as they spun away.

Plotting

Chapter 8 of 13

After the final battle, everyone has their demons to wrestle.

It occurs to me that I have yet to say I don't own these characters. JKR owns all. I made no money off this. Just friends.

Snape nearly toppled her with his weight as they landed in Manchester. She pulled at him until he followed, leading him across the street, into his house, and up the stairs.

When they reached his bedroom, she spelled the candles lit, dropped her bag on a chair, and quickly unbuttoned his robe, stripping it off before pushing him down onto the bed. She squatted down to remove his boots, but he grabbed her shoulders and dragged her back up.

In the preternatural silence of the house, his voice seemed sharp and clear. "*What have you done?*" he rasped.

"Severus..." She shook her head and then just pointed to the open door of the wardrobe.

He turned to the mirror and saw how the blackness had spread up his neck, and across his entire chest down to his navel. It hadn't been like that before he'd battled the monster.

"Once they realized that that creature was Lucius Malfoy, you were never going to leave the Ministry alive."

"*Hermione...*"

"No!" She swiped angrily at a tear. "No. You still have time. Lucius had a seizure on Saturday. He had two days of being practically brain-dead before this happened. He was in a coma for nearly two weeks before that. Don't you dare think about giving up while you're still human!"

She pulled out of his arms and dropped down, snatching his boots off. That done, she stood and folded back the coverlet on the bed. "Get in. Are you hungry?"

He shook his head and crawled under the blankets, lying back with a sigh.

She tucked him in and turned away.

He grabbed her hand. "*Where are you going,*" he asked quietly.

"I still need ice cream."

She reached into his wardrobe, pulled out one of his white, linen shirts, and walked off.

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A little while later she returned, wearing his overlarge shirt and nothing else, carrying a bowl of ice cream with two spoons.

She pulled down the blankets and climbed in. "Gods, I love this bed."

"Hermione..."

"I know, it's only vanilla, but I've had enough of the exotic for one day." She propped up the pillows on her side with an elbow and offered him the bowl, shoving her own spoon in her mouth. He sighed and sat up, reaching for the spoon. They ate half the bowl in silence.

"All right," she said, dropping her spoon in with a clink. "Talk. What was that thing?"

"Lucius," he answered, pulling the bowl out of her hands and holding it under his chin as he ate.

She reached over and tucked his hair behind his ear. "I know that. I'm also pretty sure that Lucius actually died on Saturday and something else took his place."

Severus sighed and set the bowl on the table next to the bed. "*It was a demon*," he told the ceiling.

Hermione stared at him. Without seeing his eyes or hearing his tone of voice, she had no idea if he was making fun of her or not.

"A demon," she repeated in a flat voice. "There's no such thing."

Still staring at the ceiling, he said, "*The universe is not required to be in harmony with human ambition.*"

Her eyebrows popped up. "Did you just make that up?"

"No. Carl Sagan did. But it's apt. Just because you don't believe it doesn't mean it doesn't exist, Granger. By the same token, just because you want something to work out a certain way doesn't mean it will." He sighed and turned to her with eyes full of horror. "I thought we would just die and serve in hell. I was wrong. There's no escaping the fact that I will turn into that thing next, and now that Lucius is dead, there's probably no one left that will know how to stop me when I do."

"Then teach me how."

"The hell I will. I don't want you knowing how to do something like that. Look at me," he said, pointing to his black chest. "Did you think I was using a harmless spell? You would have to know how to bind a demon to you, and there is no way you would have the time to learn enough Dark Magic to pull that off. Your wanting it bad enough just won't cut it."

"Is that what you did? You bound the demon to you?"

"Yes. For as long as it remained on this plane. Only by forcing it to accept my will could I force it to accept banishment."

"What about holy water or suchlike?"

He snorted. "You watched too many Muggle movies. Are you suddenly Catholic?"

"Vaguely Jewish."

"Then you would just have a wet demon. Without an unyielding belief, relics have no power, no matter what religion."

"Why did it kill all those people?"

"It's evil, Granger. Hence the term, 'Demon'." Despite his snide remark, his face reflected his horror again.

She sighed and rolled towards him, taking his hand. "I won't let that happen to you, Severus. I promise, I'll kill you myself if I have to."

He closed his eyes and let out a long breath. When he opened them again, he rolled towards her and pulled her into his arms.

"Hermione, don't you think it would have been preferable to have someone else do the honors? I wouldn't have minded being taken to the Ministry."

"I know. That's why I snatched you out of there while you were still in shock. In the state you were in, you would probably have talked them into killing you tonight."

"Would that really have been so wrong?"

"It feels wrong to me, if that counts for anything."

He sighed and pulled her closer.

Hermione rested her head on his shoulder as he pulled her tight against him. It felt good to lie next to him again, to wrap her arm around his chest and listen to him breathe. So much of the conflict and upheaval seemed to slough away when they held each other like this. All that remained was the feeling of rightness, the warm bubbling emotions that defied categorization... and the knowledge that he was going to die.

She twisted her head up and kissed his cheek, and he responded with a light kiss on her forehead. She rose up and, with a question in her eyes, kissed his lips. He didn't even hesitate. He leaned his head up and kissed her again gently, teasing her mouth open and deepening the kiss.

She broke away with a sigh, "Could I have my pity shag now? I could really stand a good bit of pity."

He snorted. "*I fear I've used up my quota of noble today. After what we just saw, I could do with a little pity myself.*" He slid his hand into her hair and pulled her close for another kiss.

Rolling them over until she was safely tucked under him, he leisurely explored her face with kisses.

Every so often, he would pull back and just look at her, with a broken little smile. Once, he whispered, "*My gods...*"

She wanted to ask him what he was thinking. She wanted him to tell her everything in his mind. She craved hearing that he found her attractive and what exactly he liked best about her, but it all felt too much like she was bleeding insecurity. She just kissed him back and tried to shut off her mind. It became easier to do as his breathing grew more labored, and he started to kiss her neck.

She ran her hands under his still unbuttoned shirt and felt his silken skin. He chuffed out a breath into her ear, and his hand slipped away from her jaw and made its way down her neck and past her shoulder.

She cried out softly as his long fingers enveloped her breast.

"Hermione," he breathed into her ear. *"I want you so much..."*

"You have me," she replied, digging her hands into his shoulders.

He kissed his way back to her mouth and sucked on her lower lip. She mewled in response and attacked him with her own desperate kisses.

They had all night; there was no need to hurry or leap into a frenzied grappling like before. Nevertheless, it was only a handful of minutes before their desire began to burn too hot, and they started pulling at each other's garments. He grew impatient with the buttons on her shirt and simply pushed it up out of his way so he could kiss her breasts. She dragged his shirt off his shoulders and stroked her hands across the planes of his body. Hot breath exploded across her chest and neck when she reached down the front of his loose pajama pants and took him in hand. Her hands caressed the length and breadth of him with gentle explorations as he pushed himself against her fingers.

He surged up, shoved his pajama bottoms down, and gave her a wild, needy kiss before settling himself between her legs. She listened to his breathing shift and hitch and race as he gently pushed his way in.

Her belly seemed to tumble into an endless series of flutters and rolls as she came to the full realization of what she was doing and with whom. It almost seemed too surreal, too bizarre, but it really wasn't. The simple fact was, he had been just as lonely as she was, and now they weren't. Even if it was only for a little while, it made her feel at peace.

The white noise in her head cleared, along with the final echoes of the monster's screams, as he eased himself inside with whispered curses.

She could feel him pulsing with excitement inside her, yet he took his time. When he was fully seated, he stopped, taking the time to kiss her and stroke his hand down her side, as if he were gently deflowering a virgin.

Hermione swallowed around the sudden lump in her throat. She wished he were. Her first time with Ron had been all mad passion and grief and dashing to a quick and uncomfortable end. This was something far different.

She wrapped her arms around his chest and held him tight as she kissed him with a confused explosion of emotions. She wanted to explain how right it all felt, how happy she was, but there were no words, so she cried instead.

He started moving his hips, gently rocking into her as he kissed her cheek, her temple, her ears, kissing away her tears.

"So beautiful," he whispered.

"Oh, god," she sighed back. "So are you. It's so unfair."

"Shhh... Don't think of that now."

Gentle gave way to frantic as their bodies took command, and their minds were blank to anything but fulfillment. He increased his pace, as she urged him on with breathy cries.

He straightened his arms and lifted up, sweat dripping down his face and onto her neck. His mouth hung slack and his eyes were scrunched nearly shut. The candlelight revealed the blackness staining his torso down to his navel, and spreading down his right arm to the elbow.

She bit her lip and spread her hands across his skin, wishing she could reach in and pull the darkness out.

He shuddered from her touch and opened his eyes, whispering, *"Nox."*

"I want to see you," she said when the room went dark.

"You can see me, the real me, in your mind," he replied, leaning down and kissing her again.

He rolled off her, dragging her with him and when she was on top, he lifted her hips. Following his lead, she grasped him and sank back down. She groaned, and her head dropped back on her neck.

"Yes," she cried softly. "Right there, just like that..."

She heard his breath rush out and felt his stomach muscles clench as he pushed into her exactly as she wanted. The world spun away, and all that was left was this man, this bed, and the sound of their frenzied breaths as her pleasure hurtled toward its peak. One of his hands held her hip in a crushing grip, and the other danced between her legs as she rode him to a mind-shattering climax.

She collapsed down onto his warm chest, and he wrapped his arms around her and held her close. He twisted his head so he could kiss her as he worked his way to his own release. She moved her hips, keeping his pace and shuddered when she heard him start to come apart.

His voice was an erotic rasp in her ear. *"Oh, gods... beautiful... and so... Ohhhhh!"*

He pulled her hips down against him, arching them both up off the mattress, and his breath came out in a long, broken sigh.

He dropped back down onto the bed as he leaned up and kissed her frantically. *"Let me love you, Hermione,"* he panted. *"I know I'm dying and I'm damned, but I need to. I know it's foolish, but, please... love me anyway..."*

"I do. I will," she replied, desperately wanting to mean it.

He stroked his hands down her back and peppered her face with tender kisses as she closed her eyes and tried not to cry.

He held her close and caressed her with his soft hands. When their breathing settled, he rolled them to the side and slowly began to make love to her again.

"Hermione! Are you all right?"

"Lavender, I need you to do me a huge favor, and I don't have much time to explain."

"What's going on?"

"Did you hear about what happened at work yesterday after you left?"

"Of course! It was all over the morning papers. I was just heading over there to help. I sent you an owl to see if you were all right..."

"I'm fine. It's just...I had to take Severus away and hide him..."

"Snape? What does he have to do with this?"

"Lavender, it was Draco's father. Some kind of monster took over his body. The same thing could happen to Snape. If I'd let Kingsley talk to him, Severus would have... I just had to get him out of there. Look, I'm running out of time. I told him I was going to buy food and tell Harry I was all right, only I'm going somewhere else. I need you to let Harry know I'm all right, that I'll be fine, and to tell the hospital I won't be back to work for a few days. Can you do that?"

"Hermione, this doesn't sound like a good idea..."

"It probably isn't, but you're the only person I can think of that won't try to stop me."

Lavender shook her head. "All right. I'll get your messages through. But what do I say if they want to know where you are?"

"Tell them the truth. You don't know..." She turned and hurried down the front stairs. "Thanks, Lavender. I owe you one."

Hermione spun away before Lavender had finished saying good-bye.

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The gates hung slack on their hinges, and the lawn looked overgrown and unkempt. The forlorn cry of distant peacocks added to the gloomy atmosphere.

Hermione waited patiently, having given her name to the house-elf that had appeared when she'd tapped on the broken gates. Before long, the house-elf returned and bowed her past them. She walked up the drive, passing an incongruously cheerful fountain, before gaining the front door. It opened as she approached, and Draco stood there, looking like a ghostly wreck of his former self.

His pale hair was stringy, his skin looked nearly bloodless, and his breath was flammable.

"Not the person I expected on my doorstep," he drawled with a sneer. "I thought it would be more Aurors, or the new Minister again, trying to find a new reason to arrest me."

"No, I imagine I'm not who you would have expected at all. May I come in anyway? I need to talk to you."

He eyed her suspiciously before stepping back. "You remember where the drawing room is, don't you?"

She stopped and gave him a sharp look. "Perhaps we should just talk here, then, since civility is beyond you in your present grief." She straightened up and said, "I am terribly sorry for your loss, Draco. To lose one parent is hard, to lose them both is devastating."

"And just what would you know about it?" he sneered.

"Plenty, actually. I Obliviated both of mine last year and sent them to Australia. Yes, I know, they are still alive, but the fact that I'll never hear them say I make them proud, or have the pleasure of their advice, or even see them smile when I walk in the door doesn't really make it feel much like a victory. They are dead to me."

Draco seemed to lose his bluster. His shoulders sagged, and he bowed his head. "Come on, then Granger. We can take tea in the dining room."

She nodded, accepting both his offer of tea and his unspoken offer of détente.

Resolving

Chapter 9 of 13

After the final battle, everyone has their demons to wrestle.

Thank you to karelia, and all hail to the queue!

Hermione waited while Draco called a house-elf and ordered tea and toast. "Were you there last night?" he asked, offering her a seat at a large, ornately carved table.

"I was."

"Did you...?"

"See what your father had turned into? Yes."

"That wasn't my father."

"I know."

He gave her a sharp look. "You know? What do you know?"

"Not enough. I know there is Dark Magic involved and that it was your mark that was killing you. I know that somehow, your mother freed you, sacrificing her own life."

"She did. Or I would have become that thing next."

"Then you knew what he would become?"

He looked down at the table. "Not at first. He was affected weeks before I was. Mother and I thought he had caught some stray curse in the battle that was reacting to his

mark. He holed himself up with his books night and day until he knew what was happening. He didn't explain anything, kept it all very mysterious. Mother was furious." Draco looked around the room as if he could still see his family at table, arguing. "Then, when it had spread so far that he grew weak, he told us he had to be killed."

Hermione impulsively reached over and squeezed his hand.

"We thought it was part of the illness. We took him to St. Mungo's instead. They couldn't figure out what was wrong with him. By that point, the mark had engulfed his entire body. He kept telling us we had to kill him. We thought he was raving."

"When my mark went, it was much faster than with my father. It started as a mild burning, less than when *he* would summon us. Then it itched." His eyes filled with the same horror she had seen on Severus' face. "Then you could feel it. Well, more than any of us already could. It was a cold awareness just under the skin, and you just knew it was loose. It was *alive*. First it blurred, and then it started to spread. My whole arm was done for by the end of the first day. Mum took me to St. Mungo's right away, thinking we had waited too long with father.

"She told me she was going to read father's texts. Go back over his notes. That must have been when she found his letter. He'd known she would try to find an answer when I took ill. He had left her instructions on how to save me and explained what he would turn into if she didn't kill him."

Draco fell silent and stared at the tea tray that had appeared as if he didn't know what it was.

"She told you all this?" Hermione prompted.

"No. I found the letter after I came home again."

"I'm so sorry. That must have been a terrible moment."

He looked up at her, and his eyes filled with tears. He just nodded and set about pouring tea.

"She left me her own letter. I found it when I woke up, after I was healed. She told me he really *did* need to be killed. She said I had to or the consequences would be terrible." Draco wrapped his arms around himself and whispered, "But I failed." He began to rock back and forth.

She leaned over and rubbed his shoulder uselessly. He was desperately in need of comfort but she didn't have much to give.

"Because you couldn't do it? That's not failing, Draco. He was your father. You loved him. Even I could see how much you idolized him. Of course you couldn't."

Draco pulled away from her, drying his eyes with a quick swipe of his sleeve. He reclaimed a bit of his hauteur and sneered. "Why are you here, Granger? Curiosity? Come to gawk at the Slytherin orphan?"

Hermione sat back and shook her head. "I needed answers. I'm trying to help Professor Snape..."

"He's still *alive*?" he blurted.

She nodded. "Not for much longer. His Dark Mark is killing him too. He was badly injured in the battle and was in isolation in St. Mungo's. He was there for two weeks before even I knew he'd survived, and I was working there." She gave him a direct stare. "He killed the creature that took over your father's body last night. He knows now that that's his fate. I'm pretty sure that once everyone puts all the pieces together, then the Ministry will know as well. That's why I grabbed him and ran."

Draco's eyebrows shot up, and then back down as he scowled at her. "Ran? What do you mean, ran?"

"I mean, I couldn't let them kill him while he was still aware. Your father was in a coma for weeks before that thing took over. Severus is still a vital human being..."

He tilted his head to the side. "You can't go by father, or me either. The timing depends on variables we can't understand." He gave her a level stare. "You seem to be on rather good terms with him."

Hermione blushed, obviously confusing him even more. "I've been tending him these past weeks. We've grown... *close*."

"How close?"

"Close enough that I hid him where no one can find him and promised to kill him when the time comes."

"Did he teach you how?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did he teach you how he killed that demon last night?"

"No. He said there was no way he would. That I would need to know how to bind a demon to me first and that just learning something like that would corrupt me. I'll have to kill him before he turns into it."

Draco looked at her with pity. "He'll turn into it anyway," he said with a shudder of revulsion.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that there's no hope, Granger. I did kill my father on Saturday. I slipped into his room and smothered him with a pillow." His face spasmed and twisted in grief, and Hermione reached across the table and clutched his hand. "I know he was dead. I didn't fail. I did what my mother asked me to."

"What went wrong?"

"Don't you see? You can't kill a fucking demon with a pillow! I just killed his body, not what was in it. It regenerates what it wants. If I'd stabbed it through the heart, it would have healed. I didn't understand how he came back to life until I came home and read his letter to her. She didn't tell me everything. I wouldn't have known how to anyway. I don't..." He dragged in a long breath and blew it out. "I don't really know enough about the Dark Arts. I don't know what spells Severus used to kill it."

Hermione winced. "Avada Kedavra. He had to bind the demon to him first and order it to accept banishment before he could."

Draco shook his head and prodded at his rapidly cooling teacup. "I'm sorry. If you were looking for me to help you figure out how to kill him, I'd try incinerating the body and scattering the ashes. Do it while Severus is still in charge. If he accepts it consciously, it might be the same as binding. Don't wait until his mind is gone."

She swallowed thickly. "Actually, I was looking for you to help me figure out how to save him," she said quietly.

His head snapped up. "You're willing to die for him? To take his place in hell? Do you love him?"

"I-I don't know. I've certainly come to care about him a great deal... I was hoping there would be another way."

Draco shook his head slowly. "Voldemort made a bargain with a demon so he could have greater power. He promised to serve in hell as payment for greater control over us

all. He pledged the souls of his followers as well. He never intended to keep his end of the bargain, because he never intended to die." He flicked his lank, white-blond hair out of his eyes and paused a moment before saying, "Every one of us that took the Dark Mark was damned. It linked us to the demon plane. I don't know if anyone really knew. Perhaps Severus. Certainly not my parents. Not until it was too late."

Draco started unbuttoning the sleeve of his tailored robes. "The only way to save him is to take his place, Granger. That's what my mother did." He pulled up the sleeve to reveal pristine, pale gold flesh. "My mother never took the mark, and she never killed anyone. She had her faults, but her soul was still clean enough to make a good trade. She bartered her life, and the eternity of her death, to take my place serving in hell."

He leaned across the table and gave her a fierce look. "Would you do the same for Severus? He was my godfather and my head of house, and even I don't love him enough. Not enough to be able to compel the demon that holds the cord on his soul. If you don't love him enough, if your intent wavers for an instant, or if you're careless when you summon him, the demon will simply kill you for having wasted his time, and drag your soul back with him. When you pull them out of their plane of existence, you already give them a certain amount of power over you. If you're not strong, they crush you."

Draco sat back. "That's all assuming you can find the name of the correct demon. There are millions of them, perhaps billions."

"How did your mother find the correct one?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know. She didn't leave any notes. Just a letter saying good bye and ordering me to kill father." Draco stood up. "If you want my advice, Granger, go back to wherever you have him hiding and kill him while he's still in control. Then incinerate the body and scatter the ashes. Don't feed him false hope. That would be too cruel. He can feel it inside of him. He knows the truth."

"There has to be a way," she said. "None of you knew. Voldemort couldn't have bargained away your souls without consent. Kill you? Yes. Doom you all to an eternity of... whatever it is? It doesn't work in my mind, and I know little to nothing about it. If I hadn't seen the thing that had taken over your father's body with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed any of this."

"I only know enough to know it exists. It's real. The Dark Mark was a vile, disgusting thing that terrified and repulsed me once I received it. The others seemed to deal with it by shedding their humanity. I couldn't make the same leap. I don't know how my father dealt with it all those years. I don't like the answers I come up with when I think about it."

"As for your concept of bad sportsmanship, unless you can find some supernatural court of law, you're wasting your breath. I wish I could offer you hope. I would like to see my godfather survive. Nevertheless, Severus is already dead, Granger. If you drag things out, you will only make it far worse for everyone."

He led her back to the entrance hall. "If you wait here, I'll get you father's notes. It will explain in more detail why I think it's hopeless. If it will convince you to hurry his end, it will be worth it. It's the least I can do."

"I would like that very much," she said.

He nodded and disappeared into the one room in this enormous house she hoped never to set foot in again. It didn't take him long to return. He handed her a thick, leather-bound tome with folded parchment in it.

"I won't pretend I understood everything my father wrote about. I doubt very much that my mother did either. The book is Dark. It will have some of the answers you seek, but you need to take all due precautions before you read it."

"Thank you," she said, taking it. It felt wrong in her hands immediately. She quickly tucked it into her beaded bag. "I'm sorry for everything, Draco. Truly. I know it was dreadful of me to intrude on your grief to pester you with questions. I hope you know I wouldn't have had I not been desperate."

He opened the door for her. "I appreciated the chance to talk to someone who understood. You did me a service. I wish you luck. Let me know when it's over. The sooner the better."

She nodded, and he quietly closed the door behind her.

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Hermione stepped out of the fireplace at Spinner's End and brushed soot off her robes. She looked up, expecting to see Severus, but found herself alone. She'd left him to sleep in...they'd managed to exhaust each other quite thoroughly the night before...so she wasn't surprised that he wasn't up yet. What surprised her was that she was sure someone was there.

She stood there, momentarily disoriented, until she realized what the sensation was. It was the books. The feeling of a presence in the room had magnified.

When she had first arrived, she'd felt like a mouse, beneath the notice of some slumbering beast. Then, it had felt as if the presence in the room was aware of her, yet tolerant.

Now that feeling of toleration had vanished. She had the sense she was being stared at, and whatever it was, wasn't pleased.

The feeling grew more intense, and she found herself backing toward the kitchen. It didn't ease with distance from the Dark Arts books. *All* of the books seemed aware. They were all discontented. She'd never felt anything like it. She fled into the kitchen and nearly sagged as she heard the sound of Severus moving through the house upstairs.

From the soft sound of his feet on the stairs, she knew he was barefoot. He burst through the bookcase door dressed in an old, grey dressing gown and his pajama bottoms. After a quick glance around the sitting room, he came straight for her.

She was so relieved, she lifted her hands up toward him. He reached out and snatched the beaded bag dangling from her hand. She stood there dumbstruck as he yanked open the string-tie and overturned it on the table.

She could see the number of items that fell out of it surprised him. Bags of groceries bounced off the table, and tinned fruits and vegetables rolled across the floor. He dug through it all until he came up with Draco's book.

"*What the hell do you have this for?*" he hissed, brandishing it in her face.

"For answers," she said in a small voice.

"*I told you not to look for answers! You don't understand what you're dealing with!*"

He turned and stormed back into the sitting room, and she darted after him.

"Severus, wait!"

She was too late. He'd already thrown the book and Lucius Malfoy's pages of notes into the fireplace and blasted it with an *Incendio*. The book actually howled before it burst into flames and turned to ash.

"Why did you do that?" she yelled. "That belonged to Draco! It contained some of his father's last writings! It wasn't mine!"

She felt an answer of a sort as the flames died down. The room seemed to settle again, the awareness in the room seemed to sigh and the crushingly heavy atmosphere popped like a soap bubble.

"What the hell is that?" she asked, looking around.

"*What is what?*" he snapped.

"Are these books alive?" she asked, stepping close to him.

He snorted. "*The Dark Arts books are incredibly dangerous. That doesn't make them sentient. I have mastered them, made them mine. I can touch them with impunity. Bringing Lucius's book here was dangerous. He had bound it with his own Dark Magic. It could have eaten away at my own and weakened my control over them. I don't have enough time left to protect you from them all over again. The Dark Magic I would need to use would hasten my demise before I could finish. Do you see?*"

"No, I meant the anger..."

"*I was angry because I thought you would heed my warning. You promised...*"

"Not you," she snapped. "The books! The books were angry!" She spun around. "All of them!"

He gave her a long look before taking her hand and pulling her closer. "*Hermione,*" he whispered. "*You're overwrought. The Dark Arts books are dangerous, but with precaution, you're safe from them. They are keyed to me. As my heir, they will be keyed to you upon my death. I highly recommend you sell them. They will bring you a good sum, and none of them are good for your peace of mind.*"

She nodded her head but didn't completely understand.

He stroked a finger down between her eyes and along her nose. "Come. I've made a mess of the kitchen. You can talk to me as I tidy up."

She blinked, having to replay his last words to make sense of them. She'd been distracted by his right hand stroking her face.

It was completely black, just like the other one.

When he noticed, he clenched his hand into a fist and walked past her into the kitchen.

She followed, but stopped in the doorway to place her palm on the spine of an ancient copy of *Useful Botanical Serums*. The book seemed to purr under her touch. She looked around the room before joining him in the kitchen to clean up the mess and make something to eat.

:

By the time they had finished lunch, half of Severus's face had succumbed. His left eye, his brow, his cheek and half of his mouth were black. Using his magic had definitely quickened the process. There was no white in his eye, just the liquid gleam of moisture. The darkness pulsed and writhed, slowly stealing more of him as she watched.

She knew in her heart she no longer had days. She had only a handful of hours left. She needed to make a choice, but the cold hand pressing on her heart wouldn't allow it.

He finished cleaning the last dish and placed it in the cupboard. Turning, he leaned against the worktop and heaved a deep sigh before lifting his ruined face to her.

"*I'm tiring,*" he said.

She took his hand, and he pulled her into his arms, pressing his face into her hair.

"Then let's go rest upstairs," she said softly.

"*Rest won't help, Hermione,*" he replied. "*After all these weeks of healing, I can tell that my body has reversed. I'm losing my strength. The end has begun.*"

Her eyes filled with tears, and she pressed herself against him. "We have a little while yet, surely."

He shook his head slowly. "*Not enough. Not enough to show you what you have come to mean to me. How much I hold you in awe. Not enough time to understand why I was granted this just before it's all taken away.*"

He kissed her forehead. "*I'm so sorry. I wish you had never found me. I wish I'd died thinking you all hated me. It would have been easier to let go. However, what is, is. All that's left is for me to fade away until I turn into a monster.*" He pushed her back and looked into her eyes. "*Let me go to the Ministry. The Unspeakables might know how to deal with me, surely my fellow Death Eaters in Azkaban must have turned by now. Let me go now, while I'm still me. I don't want it to be you.*" Her breath rushed out from the force of his hug.

She closed her eyes and looked down at the floor. "I promised you I would."

He lifted her chin with his blackened hand, and kissed her lips with the gentlest of pressures. "*You should never have promised such a thing. I should never have put you in such a position.*"

He kissed her again, a deeper kiss, filled with everything that couldn't be. "*Let me go. I want to be far away from you when I turn.*"

His quiet words fell upon her like a poisonous spring rain. She drew in a deep breath, and made her decision.

She scrubbed at her face and nodded, swallowing around the lump in her throat. "All right. Come on then. Let's get you dressed."

She led him up the stairs and into the bedroom.

Letting go of his hand, she watched as he walked over to his wardrobe and pulled open the doors.

He stared at himself in the mirror. In the short time of their conversation, his forehead had succumbed. Only his right eye and cheekbone were left untouched. He closed his eyes and shrugged out of his dressing gown, laying it down on the bed next to him.

She admired the strange magnificence of his body. It looked as if it had been sculpted in onyx. His sleek lines seemed like a silhouette. He struck her as beautiful, even in his corruption.

He reached for the drawstring waistband of his pajama pants, as she stifled her tears and pulled out her wand.

His head came up sharply, and he stared at her with wide eyes in the mirror.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered in a broken voice, aiming her wand at him.

He closed his eyes briefly and pain flashed across his features. When he opened his eyes, they were full of acceptance.

"*Don't be,*" he whispered back, turning to face her. "*I thank you.*"

Tears flowed freely down her face as she aimed her wand at his heart. "*Petrificus Totalus!*"

Learning

Chapter 10 of 13

After the final battle, everyone has their demons to wrestle.

Many thanks to karelia for her superfast beta work on this fic!

Snape's face froze with a look of total surprise as he toppled over.

Hermione lifted him with a spell and set him in the center of the bed, folding a blanket over him. She was irrationally worried he would get cold.

She looked down on his incongruously beautiful face and kissed his forehead. "I meant, I'm so sorry I can't do what you want, Severus. I just can't let you die without a decent fight, and I can't have you mucking up my research anymore."

She kissed his Petrified lips and headed for the door, muttering, "Make me promise not to research. What the hell was I thinking?"

:

When she walked into the sitting room, she was struck by the palpable expectation in the room. Whatever entity lurked in the books knew what had just happened and was... eager. The air was pregnant with anticipation.

She walked over to the most benign book she could think of, Lavitia Morrel's *Book of Common Healing Spells*, and pressed her fingertips to the spine. It throbbed excitedly under her hand. She crossed over to the chair and crouched down to look at the papers that had slipped off the shelf the other night. A quick scan through the old, yellowed sheets showed they were notes on the subject of demonic possession. "Stupid, Hermione. Truly stupid. You could have been looking at these days ago."

The awareness in the room fluttered against her mind like a butterfly. She straightened up and looked around.

"All right," she snapped, stepping away and pulling out her wand. "Whatever you are, show yourself!"

A barely perceptible rustle of paper circulated around her, one she might have missed had she not attuned herself to Severus's muted voice.

"This isn't a game! Come out now, or go away. I've no time for this nonsense. A man's life is at stake!"

The barely audible susurrations again raced around the room again. Awareness pressed against her, and she felt both censure and amusement.

She sucked up her ragged courage and expelled it in a quiet plea. "Help me."

She yelped when she heard a noise by her ear. She whirled around in time to see a book slide two inches off the shelf. Swallowing her terror, she read the title, *Advanced Protective Charms*.

She reached for it, and it flew off the shelf, seeming to leap for her hand. She caught it, noting that the feeling of sentience was gone once the book left the shelf. It was a bit of a struggle to hold, and she nearly dropped it as the cover fell open and the pages started to flap, caught in a mysterious wind. Cradling the book in her palms, she let it flutter until it settled at the beginning of a chapter entitled, "Protecting Yourself from the Unknown and Unknowable." It wasn't what she had been expecting. She'd assumed she was dealing with a poltergeist, like Peeves, only less formed.

A ripple of amusement held the subtle wisp of insult.

"Okay," she said to the entity. "Give me a minute to read."

She walked over to his chair but stopped. The presence in the room became a pressure, which grew as she walked closer to the shelves that held the books on Dark Arts. She swallowed thickly and backed away. The feeling dissipated with each step. She walked back towards the books on healing and felt their lightness soothe her nerve endings, but the pressure grew again.

She looked around the room and finally understood what she had been looking at all along. Severus had organized his library under his own, personal system. He had disregarded any common organizational rules and grouped them according to beneficence, even the ones stacked on the floor and the sofa. The worst of the Dark Arts tomes were grouped right behind his chair. The most benevolent topics were directly opposite. The shelves that she had thought were filled in an almost whimsical order, shaded perfectly from light to dark. She would have caught it sooner if she'd had time to explore his library these last few days.

She snorted.

Most likely, she would have mindlessly rearranged them.

She felt an answering cascade of rebuke and delight.

"I'll just go read upstairs, then shall I?"

She held the page with her finger and pushed past the pressure to reach the door to the stairs. Digging out some parchment and ink, she crawled into bed next to Severus for comfort and began to research what the books wanted her to know.

:

Hermione looked up when she realized she was having trouble seeing. A flick of her wand lit the candle next to the bed.

She'd lost track of how many hours she'd spent, or how many pages she'd filled. She'd alternated between terrified and thrilled on and off throughout the day. Eventually, her awareness and emotions had gone numb. Closing one book with a quiet thump, she would hear an answering thump from the room below. She would cautiously make her way down to the sitting room to find another book lying on the floor open to yet another relevant passage. She would then pick it up and scurry back to the bed like a squirrel hiding nuts.

She closed the book and listened. There was no answering sound from downstairs. She'd apparently reached the end of her recommended reading list.

She crawled out of bed and stretched her back before leaning down and kissing Severus's black marble lips.

His right eye and cheek remained deathly pale.

"Hold on for me," she whispered. "I haven't run out of hope yet."

She renewed the spell on him and left the room.

It was slightly brighter in the sitting room, but not much. She walked slowly into the center of the room, closing her eyes and finding the place of balance by the subtle pressures on her mind. A ripple of contentedness swirled around her, and she knew she was in the right place.

She opened her eyes, mindful of the twilight gloom beyond the faded curtain, and raised her arms to begin.

"Salvio Hexia. Salvio Cura. Fero Anima. Fero Animus. Protego Maximus. Incantato Solidus!"

At the last spell, a cylinder of light flared around her, leaving the room beyond her shields blurry and indistinct. She lowered her arms and bit her lip. Her numbness fell away...and left her terrified and excited, fatalistic and desperately hopeful.

She swallowed down her conflicting emotions and shouted, "Show yourself!"

The room beyond flared with both light and darkness, and she winced against the strobing effect.

She felt herself surrounded by several powerful presences and cowered as they seemed to storm around her in a rage, both righteous and tainted.

Directly before her, the swirling extremes either merged or were pushed aside by a ball of grey. It solidified and lengthened, taking on a human form as it grew.

Hermione panted in fear and awe as the grey shape elongated until it seemed to settle on the floor. Complete, it raised a hand and banished the warring presences in the room, and the conflicting lights and shadows disappeared. It turned to her and she gasped.

It was Severus, but ...not.

The entity before her had his features and his height, but there was something more feminine about him. He was thinner, more delicate, and less flawed, making him less *him*.

His hair was grey, his skin was grey, his eyes...and the robes which made his body ambiguously asexual...were the exact same shade. The thing before her looked like an animated statue, seeming to neither reflect light nor absorb it.

It just was.

It looked at her with placid features, and she swallowed hard, feeling like a bug under glass. She gathered her Gryffindor courage and lifted her chin.

"What the hell are you?" she said, with more belligerence than she'd intended.

We are the Balion Bardo. Its voice was the deep baritone of Severus's former voice, overlaid with the whisper of a hundred other voices. **We are what stands between. We are the cusp between good and evil, law and chaos. Life and void.**

"I've never heard of you."

Does that signify?

"It might. I need help. I'd feel better if I had an understanding of what you are." Hermione felt her curiosity warring with the gravity of the situation. She wanted to question this entity for hours...she felt a minor compulsion to do so...but she was running out of time.

If you have angels and demons, does it not make sense that there would be an avatar of balance?

"I have no idea. One would think somewhere along the way someone would have made a note about your existence. Why are you here? Why are you hiding in Severus's books?"

We are everywhere opposing forces are in balance.

"I don't understand."

No, it is plain that you do not, and yet you are so very sure of yourself. This is what attracts us to you.

"Lovely. Now answer my question."

His books are in balance. The tension in this library creates a harmonic that draws us. It perfectly reflects the man. He is a nexus.

"What do you mean?"

He is balance. He embraces both good and evil, and yet holds them both in contempt. He has brought about great destruction, and the result was fantastic renewal. Because of his actions, both the dark and the light were strengthened. He carried the potential of victory for either side suspended within him for years. Even now, by clawing for the light, he is knowingly pulling you into darkness. This both thrills and torments him.

He is our creature utterly.

"But he's been a force for good!"

By willingly embracing his capacity for evil.

"But he's capable of such love! He did it all for love!"

While clutching hatred to his heart as his most prized possession. Only at the end of his life has his heart embraced pure love, at the very moment pure malice is taking over his body.

He mesmerizes us.

"Why do I feel you when he doesn't?"

Does a river feel the ocean when they meet?

"Don't play word games! Answer my question!"

We are not compelled to.

"Then answer me this, why are you speaking to me at all?"

We find you fascinating. We did not understand why you were able to pull him out of balance. Now we do.

You do not believe, and yet you accept our existence.

You find beauty in his deformity. You show the depth of your regard by betraying him. You are unsure if you love him, yet are willing to sacrifice yourself for him.

This pleases us.

Unaccountably stung by the creature's appraisal, she snapped at it. "So did you just want to gawk at me? Or is there a reason why you're here?"

You have a choice before you. We have a vested interest in this choice.

"Why?"

A nexus we find convenient may be destroyed. This is always of interest to us.

"And you need me to preserve this nexus? By making a choice? Why don't you?"

We cannot make a choice. We are the moment of choice.

"So you need me to choose to save him? Then I do! I chose to have him live!"

It is not so simple. You have many choices before you.

"What are they? Tell me what I need to do!"

We cannot. You must embrace your own choice. However, we will tell you what they are.

"I'm listening."

If you save him and survive unscathed, he will fully embrace the light, and his soul will become the property of the light. You will take him from us.

"How do I do that?"

Destroy the demon tethered to his life-force.

"I don't know how."

You cannot. It is beyond your present capabilities.

"Great. Thanks for that. Next choice?"

If you save him and do not survive, he will fully embrace the dark. His soul will be lost to us with this choice as well.

"You mean if I make the choice Narcissa Malfoy made?"

Correct.

"Right, so that's not an option either. Are there any useful choices here?"

If you chose to do nothing, his soul will join with us while his body pays the debt laid upon him. We will be strengthened, but our nexus will be destroyed.

"And lots of innocent people will die while we try and figure out how to stop it."

There are no innocent people. Only those who have not made a choice yet.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at that. "I don't like you very much."

This means little to us.

"Quit wasting my time. You wouldn't be helping me if you wanted me to do nothing. This whole 'we can't chose' thing is crap, isn't it? You pushed that folio off the shelf. You want to help me. You need him."

You do not understand our nature. He pleases us. He gives us an anchor to your plane. This does not mean we need him. We are incapable of need, just as we are incapable of being sated. For us, there is no love or hate, only fascination, satisfaction, and bemusement, along with their antipodes.

"Then why are you here? Why have you lured me into this conversation? Surely you must experience desire, or you wouldn't have actively tried to recruit me to preserve your nexus."

Our reasoning is beyond your small ability to understand. If it helps you to anthropomorphize, this is acceptable to us. You interest us because you are close to balance, and yet destroy balance. You are an anomaly.

"You want me to choose you? Become one of your sources of amusement, like Severus?"

You cannot choose us. We are the moment of choice. Those that choose balance are not our creatures. Only those caught firmly between against their will are ours.

"Look, this is fascinating, truly, but I don't have time for this. There's another option, isn't there. What do you want?"

We want nothing.

"Oh, cut the crap and just tell me what you think I need to hear."

So brave and so frightened, you are. Very well. If you pay his price, he will stay in balance and continue to give us an anchor.

"But won't I die? You said my death will make him embrace the dark."

His price is not his soul. That belongs to us at this moment. The Dark has no power over it. Your death is not required. However, fail, and it will be an inevitable outcome.

"What price must I pay?"

We do not know. You must bargain with the demon.

"Oh. Great."

One final thing, and then we will leave you to make this choice.

"What?"

The demon is in your debt. It has partially paid the price. For you to win what you seek, you must make sure there is balance, in order to be done with it forever.

"In debt to me? How?"

It did not deign to answer. She felt a ripple of amusement slide across her as the presence dissolved, leaving her feeling like a tiny fish being grazed by a whale.

When the gloom of the evening returned to the sitting room, she had no concept of how much time had passed. It had felt like both an eternity and a mere moment at the same time.

She dropped her shields just in time to see another book fall off the shelf. It landed with a slight bounce on the seat of Severus's chair.

She walked over and read the title, *Liber Malorum Spirituum*. Her hand trembled as she lifted up the book. She headed for the stairs, wondering if learning how to summon demons while huddled next to Severus's body was the brightest thing to do.

Bargaining

Chapter 11 of 13

After the final Battle, everyone has their demons to wrestle.

Thank you to karelia for all her work!

Hermione showered and changed. It was a stupid thing, really, but it gave her the illusion of control. She needed an illusion desperately because the cold, hard facts were crushing her with their weight.

The paper had reported that another Death Eater, as yet unidentified, had been hiding out in Ipswich when he had turned. Forty Muggles had been killed before Unspeakables had arrived to put an end to its rampage. Hermione was nearly crippled from the knowledge that by dragging Snape to the one place the Ministry couldn't find him, she had also dragged him to a highly populated area. She felt a certain amount of relief that the Ministry did, in fact, know how to deal with the situation, but what comfort would that be if she failed? If Snape escaped and more Muggles died because of her?

Did she know enough now? Did she love him enough? Her feelings were confused and complicated. She knew she adored him, but it had all happened so quickly. Was it the right kind of love, or just infatuation? It felt different from what she'd shared with Ron.

One thing was certain: she was going to do this. Even if she didn't love him the right way, she knew fair from foul and what was happening to Severus was foul. It would not happen if she could help it. The mysterious entity slithering around in the books had told her the price wasn't his soul. Her research had shown her that if that was the case, then she didn't need to love him enough. She just needed the strength of her convictions. What else was a Gryffindor, if not sure in their convictions?

She shook her head.

Life was strange.

It had taken her all night and most of the next day to research what she'd needed to know. Books continued to drop off of shelves throughout the night, and she continued to zap Severus with her spell whenever it started to wear off. When the books stopped thumping to the floor in the sitting room, she had zapped Severus one more time and passed out next to him. She'd woken with a headache and a mouth that tasted vaguely like old socks. A weak cup of tea and a slice of burnt toast was all she allowed herself before she went back to her notes. Eventually, she decided she knew as much as she was going to. Her Petrificus wouldn't keep Snape alive forever.

It only took an hour to gather her things and prepare, and then she found herself back in the bedroom, staring down at her former teacher and new lover. He wasn't handsome, although he grew more so every day to her. He wasn't even remotely what she had pictured in her mind in her young-girl fantasies.

She snorted. He wasn't what anyone imagined.

Snape was far more than he'd seemed. He had been all along. Only she knew it. Perhaps Lily Evans had once, before she became a Potter. Hermione felt the secret rush of possessiveness wash over her. What he was was hers. The way he had made love to her let no room to doubt his feelings. He had not only claimed her, but he had given himself to her to hold until the end with no reservation. Nothing held back. She wondered if he would regret how vulnerable he had allowed himself to be once he was saved. It was one thing to declare your feelings when you thought you were going to die. Quite another to wake up the next day and have to live with your words.

She felt a stab of anger. They should have been allowed more time. Just a few more days and she would have been certain, one way or another, if what she was feeling was really love, or just neediness that had run out of control again.

She wiped at the tears forming in her eyes. There was nothing to be gained by these thoughts. One way or another, she was going to save him, or die trying. The man that had given her his home, that had held her to his shoulder and finally let her mourn her own loss, that man deserved everything she could do for him.

Several cleansing breaths helped orient her, and she then reached out and pulled the blanket off him. Smoothing her hand over his cold, hard chest, she placed her palm over his heart.

"*Conservac Ormeum*," she intoned, gripping her wand. She watched, surprised, as the darkness flowed away from her hand, as if recoiling from her touch. It had to be the spell. It hadn't done that last night. She tilted her head and stared at the pale skin, noticing such banal features as a tiny mole, and an even smaller red dot where a capillary rose close to the surface.

She smiled, even though the darkness flowed right back when she took her hand away.

Raising her wand, she whispered, "*Incarcerous!*"

She bound him to the bed securely before canceling the Petrificus. She didn't use an Ennervate, hoping he might sleep through the next step.

He woke with a hiss of indrawn breath when she pricked the inside of his left arm with the lancet. Laying the pipette to the wound, she began to siphon off his tainted blood. She knew when he became lucid, because he started hissing like a snake.

"*What are you doing? Stop, you stupid little girl! Listen to me, whatever you are thinking you must know that you can't do this. Hermione, STOP! God damn you! I'm not one of your fucking causes! Hermione! At least look at me! Stop! Don't!*" His hisses broke off, as she resolutely ignored him, but not for long. When his voice came again, it almost broke her resolve. "*Hermione, please. You fucking promised! I'm begging you... Is that what you want? You want to make me fucking beg? Don't! You'll die! I'm not...*" She heard him swallow, inwardly intrigued by how attuned she'd become to his smallest sound. "*I'm not worth it.*"

She pulled her instruments away and healed the wound before turning and looking at him. "Yes, you are," she whispered. She leaned down and kissed him, and despite his anger, he lifted his head and kissed her back hungrily, straining against his bonds. Whatever she felt for him, it was certainly powerful.

"*You were my one joy I could take to the other side*," he said when his head dropped back to the pillow. "*Why would you take that away from me?*"

She brushed his hair out of his eyes, looking down on a face now utterly sculpted in shadow. "I am as much a guilt as I am a joy for you. If I succeed, then perhaps we can erase the former and enjoy the latter."

He shook his head. The low light and darkness of his skin made it hard to see his expression.

"If I fail..." she swallowed "...well, perhaps we'll get a chance to speak of that on the other side, yes?"

She kissed him one more time and, before he had a chance to reply, Petrified him again. This way, with any luck, he would never know if she failed until he was safe on the other side.

She backed away from the bed and carefully set her things down before flicking away the ropes that bound him. Letting her mask fall, she gave in to the terrified shaking that she prayed he hadn't noticed.

She grabbed her things and headed back downstairs.

Cleansed, purified, and as clear of mind as she was going to get, Hermione held the vial of blood, a paintbrush, and her breath. One mistake at this point, and she was dead. There would be no shields, no protective spells, just the blood construct. She was grateful to the Balion Bardo for their help with her research. It would have been just like her to use the correct words, and not the right words. She would have fallen into that trap without their intervention.

She began to outline the circle on the floor of the library. At each of the four compass points, she chanted a name: "*Amodel, est. Maimon, est. Paymon, est. Egion, est.*"

That done, she scribed a pentagram inside the circle, mindful of the hem of her loose robe.

At each of the five points, she chanted a word. "*Aura, Umbra, Fidem, Infidelitas... Aequipondium.*"

Once she was finished, she poured the rest of the blood into her hands. She smeared it on the bottom of her bare feet before pushing aside the open front of her loose robe and pressing them to the bare skin over her racing heart. She knew this part wouldn't go wrong. Her research had shown her that she didn't have to know the demon's name. She didn't need to summon it at all. With the essence of evil found in Severus' blood, she could transport herself to the demon. If Severus truly loved her, the demon could do her no harm unless she crossed the protection of his blood.

It was a devil of a gamble.

She stood in the center, facing the point of balance, and yelled, "*Hermionesum!*" She gripped her wand and threw her head back, crying, "*Venio, Daemon!*"

Pain tore through her as the blood on her hands and feet seemed to burn its way to her heart. She screamed and heard a thousand answering screams as the air around her began to scorch and smoke. She fought the pain, knowing she needed to keep her wits about her, but it became increasingly difficult.

She heard a sound, and as the sitting room began to fade, the last thing she saw was Severus exploding out from behind the bookcase door with his wand in his hand. He was rage sculpted in jet. "NO! You promised!"

Her eyes widened as she heard the deep roar of his voice. The demon had finally healed his throat just in time for him to curse her for her betrayal. She should have realized the spell she'd laid on his heart, anchoring her to this plane, would have had the power to eradicate the spells she'd used to hold him when she began to leave it.

Damn.

She pushed him from her thoughts, trusting that he would know better than to breach the circle. She had more important things to concentrate on than how furious he would be with her later. If there was a later, she would welcome it.

Her view of the sitting room faded as the air beyond her construct began to glow hot and then combusted into flames.

:

It seemed an eternity later when she became aware of movement beyond the wall of flames. A shadow appeared, and then a pale hand parted the flames like a curtain. A blindfolded Severus stepped into view, stopping at the edge of her circle.

She felt curiously disappointed when she saw him.

He was himself, but better. He stood before her naked, rippling with muscles as his thick, glossy hair danced about his head in a capricious wind. His skin was flawless and in the pink of perfect health, and his teeth, as he smiled at her knowingly, were perfect and straight. His sex dangled between his legs, but began to lengthen under her perusal. It was... well, pretty ridiculous, to be honest. No human was that large.

"Are you serious?" she asked. "Is that supposed to entice me?"

IT IS WHAT YOU COULD HAVE, it replied, again with Severus's voice, and again, overlaid with other voices.

These ones screamed.

"For what you owe me?" she said, diving straight to the heart of the matter. She added a snicker. "I think not. I prefer him as he is, thank you very much."

The creature before her sneered, and even that was more magnificent than the true man's. STATE WHAT YOU WOULD HAVE AS PAYMENT THEN, it demanded.

"And what will happen when I do?"

I WILL GIVE IT TO YOU, AND IF IT EXCEEDS WHAT I OWE, YOU WILL PAY ME THE OUTSTANDING DEBT."

Hermione snorted in derision. "And if you still owe me? What more are you prepared to pay?"

The demon snarled, and the simulacrum began to wither. Severus' skin began to crinkle like discarded parchment, and smoke began to curl from its nostrils.

The pain roiling through Hermione's blood escalated, but she shunted it aside, knowing it was as much an illusion as the oversized cock before her.

I WILL NOT OWE YOU! DO NOT TRY TO TOY WITH ME! I COULD TAKE YOUR SOUL!

The flames around the circle died back, revealing a cavernous space filled with sulfurous stalactites and rivers of lava-like blood. Agonized shrieks filled the air, but she could see no one else around her.

Hermione stared down at the pulsing red of Severus's blood glowing with strength around her. "No, you couldn't," she said primly, quelling her fear.

I WILL TAKE HIS!

"No, you can only take his body. His soul is not yours. What level Demon are you? You're not very bright. Severus is going to be dreadfully insulted when I tell him."

The Demon gave forth a mighty bellow and huge, webbed wings ripped from its back, feathered along its bones with rusty knives. The rest of the Severus façade shredded as the Demon's chosen form burst forth.

It had four heavily muscled arms that clawed at the air around her circle. It stood twelve feet high, at least, on massive legs that bent backward like a bird's. Smoke billowed from its flat, pig-like nostrils, and puss dripped from its razor-like teeth and fell burning to the ground. Its eyes were missing. Flames leaked from the two gaping holes. The warty hide of its face was split with twin slashes across where the eyes had been.

Hermione's gut clenched, and in that moment, she almost lost her hold on everything. Only the shock kept her from taking a step back and breaching the inner form of the pentagram.

Fear brought pain as the illusions gained reality. Hermione kept her face blank, but inside, she was struggling to master herself.

"The wings are very impressive," she said in a polite voice. "Third level then?"

MORTAL BITCH! I AM SONNEILLON! FOURTH IN THE ORDER OF THRONES! I AM THE LORD OF HATRED AND HAVE THIRTY LEGIONS AT MY COMMAND!

Hermione couldn't believe her luck. The demon's vanity had handed her its true name on a platter.

"Oh! I know you! Fascinating. I read about you, you were very naughty back in the 17th century. *Hatred*. That makes all kinds of sense. I'm very impressed. Very impressed indeed."

The demon nodded, apparently mollified, and its wings flared wide. Hermione had the strangest impression it was showing off.

"So... indulge my curiosity. Why does this place look just like all the pictures? Have many humans come here and survived?"

WE PRESENT OURSELVES IN UNDERSTANDBLE SYMBOLISM. IN YOUR CASE, COMMON WESTERN THOUGHT. OUR TRUE FORMS WOULD OBLITERATE YOUR MINDS.

IT'S ANNOYING.

"I see. That's reasonable. And very polite if I may say so. I'm meeting all sorts of your type lately, and I'm just trying to keep them all straight. Being the Lord of Hatred, does that mean you hate everything? Or do you just feed on our hatred? Because if it's the latter, you must be very busy."

The Demon snorted, dislodging a grotesque clot of pestilence that fell to the floor with a wet splat and sizzled.

I FEED ON THE HATRED OF THOSE THAT CALL UPON ME. The massive head tilted to the side. WHO ELSE HAVE YOU MET? DOES ANOTHER DEMON OWE YOU?

"No, only you and the Balion Bardo."

The demon snorted again with the same result. THOSE COWARDLY BASTARDS.

Hermione smiled, warming to the subject. "They are a bit cowardly, aren't they? I found them hiding in some books."

THAT IS JUST LIKE THEM. THEY CREEP AROUND, SERVING NO PURPOSE AT ALL. WHAT DID THEY WANT?

"Well, according to them, they don't want anything. But that was clearly a bit of a lie, wasn't it? Because they obviously wanted me to help them."

The demon shook its head. THEY CANNOT LIE. NEITHER CAN THE OTHERS. THEY WOULD NEED TO HAVE A SPINE TO DO SO.

Hermione sighed. "Then it is a paradox, too complex for my simple brain."

The demon nodded, whether in agreement or sympathy wasn't clear.

"Can I ask you another question?"

YOU MAY. I FIND THIS EXCHANGE AMUSING IN ITS WAY.

"If I did my research correctly, all of the Death Eaters are bound to you through your bargain with Tom Riddle. How were you planning on taking over more than one Death Eater at a time?"

It laughed, a booming, desolate sound, and stood up. It spread its arms wide, and separated into several demons, each one different from the next. They each split until there was quite the crowd before her, growing at an exponential rate. It clapped its hands, and they all clapped as well. The air crackled from the deafening crash.

I COMMAND THIRTY LEGIONS, it repeated with obvious pride.

"Impressive," she said in a choked voice.

There was a wet, sucking sound that accompanied the reintegration of his legion. In a moment, there were none left but the original.

She cleared her voice. "Yes, well. Thank you for answering. Getting back to our issues..."

OUR ISSUE IS CLEAR. AS YOU ARE AWARE, I OWE YOU. THIS STATE IS REPUGNANT TO ME. YOU MUST TELL ME WHAT YOU DESIRE AND RELEASE ME.

"Yes, but we still need full disclosure. If I tell you my price, and it is less than you owe, you will not be free."

The demon roared and stormed around the outside of the circle, making the ground tremble under her feet. She nearly took a step to keep her balance when she realized that was the intent. The illusion evaporated as understanding lit.

"Very clever," she said admiringly, "but you're cheating. Of course, that's to be expected, isn't it? Jolly good."

Again, she marveled at how susceptible the demon was to flattery. It preened and then suddenly changed back into naked Severus.

I COULD OFFER YOU A LIFETIME OF SERVICE IN THIS FORM, it said, stroking itself. DEATH BY NATURAL CAUSES AND NO CONSEQUENCES OTHER THAN THOSE YOU ACCRUE ON YOUR OWN. WHEN YOU DIE, YOU'LL GO WHERE YOU DESERVE.

She kept her shudder of revulsion in check. Clearly the Lord of Hatred had no clue what a woman might find appealing, and yet, it was obviously trying to be reasonable. "Yes, but after a time spent with that," she nodded at its prodigious member, "I suspect natural causes might come faster than I would like, and I doubt I would go where I intend."

It roared a bawdy laugh that looked unnatural on Severus's face.

It snapped its fingers, and gold started to rain from the unseen ceiling, piling up quickly around the outer ring. YOU COULD TAKE ALL OF THIS WEALTH AND SPEND YOUR LIFE DOING GOOD DEEDS. CERTAINLY THAT WOULD ENSURE YOUR PLACE IN HEAVEN.

She smiled innocently. "That would be splendid. However, one cannot buy one's way into heaven. It's in the rules."

The demon growled and snapped its fingers again. The gold vanished without a sound.

TELL ME THEN, it said, obviously frustrated. WHAT DO YOU THINK YOUR PIECE OF TOM RIDDLE'S SOUL IS WORTH?

And there it was.

The Horcrux.

Tom Riddle had owed this demon his soul and had tried to cheat. She had destroyed one of the pieces that would have kept him from paying the price.

Understanding exploded across her features, and she let out a small squeal of delight before she could stop it.

The demon realized its mistake and screamed with rage, bursting back into its natural form. BITCH! YOU THINK YOU CAN TRICK ME AND GET AWAY WITH IT?

"It wasn't a trick! I never said I knew what my part of the debt was! You assumed!" She tilted her head to the side. "How is Voldemort, anyway? Is he enjoying his just deserts? I can only hope that you are making him pay for his hubris. He did set out to deceive you, after all."

The demon's anger guttered as it followed her to a new subject. Honestly, it wasn't very bright.

HE SUFFERS. This last was said while stroking its demonic phallus, and Hermione didn't know if she wanted to crow with glee or wince in sympathy. THE FOOL CALLED TOGETHER HIS FAITHFUL FROM THE PITS AND TRIED TO STAGE A REVOLT. HE THOUGHT HE WAS A BEING OF SOME CONSEQUENCE IN HELL. THE MASTER OF LIES HIMSELF CAME AND TAUGHT HIM HIS INSIGNIFICANCE. NOW HE SPENDS HIS DAYS HOWLING UNDER THE LASH WHEN HE IS NOT... SERVING.

Hermione couldn't help the grin that spread across her face. She took herself to task. The gates of hell weren't the place to indulge in vengeful thoughts. She shook her head.

"And may I inquire about the Malfoys?" she asked in a far more subdued voice.

HE IS NOT HERE. HE SITS AND WAITS. AS FOR THE WIFE, SHE WIELDS TOM RIDDLE'S LASH.

"Oh! What justice!"

The demon stretched its wings in a shrug. THAT IS OUR FUNCTION, IS IT NOT? SHE WILL NOT BE HERE LONG THOUGH. SOON SHE WILL JOIN HER MATE TO AWAIT THE FINAL TALLYING.

"Really? I was under the impression that she had sold her soul for her son."

SHE DID. SHE IS A CANNY NEGOTIATOR. SHE SERVES WILLINGLY, BUT NOT FOR ONE MOMENT LONGER THAN THE AGREED TIME. It settled his wings against its back. NOW. LET'S GET BACK TO OUR OWN NEGOTIATIONS. YOU GAVE ME PART OF A SOUL. I CAN GIVE YOU PART OF A SOUL, OR ITS EQUAL VALUE. DO YOU AGREE WITH THIS?

"Agreed." She folded her arms across her chest. "Would releasing your hold on Severus Snape's body be equal to stabbing a Horcrux? After all, you won't get his soul one way or the other, and if you do assume command of his body, then you will only have a few precious moments of freedom before you're right back here again. It hardly seems worth the effort. In fact, one could argue that having just a mere taste is a torment that one would wish to avoid."

The demon crouched down until it was leaning forward on the knuckles of its four fists. It pressed its face up against the invisible wall of her circle. THEIR BODIES ARE MINE. RIDDLE GAVE ME HIS MINIONS WHEN HE HAD NO FURTHER USE FOR THEM. SO FAR, I HAVE KILLED SEVENTY-NINE INNOCENTS IN THE SHORT TIME I WAS THERE. THAT IS SOMETHING THAT WILL BRING ME SATISFACTION UNTIL THE END OF THE WORLD.

The open lust in its face froze her blood. Her smug feelings from having bested the demon in a contest of wits evaporated as she understood just how depraved and devoid of humanity the creature before her was.

BEING FREE TO KILL JUST ONE MORE WOULD BE WORTH IT.

She swallowed down her fear and raised her chin. "You won't get the chance. You know the Ministry is already isolating the... *minions*. You won't be able to kill anyone but Severus, and that is happening passively. Would that satisfy? Because I can tell you that he is already being watched. You will wake up in his body, trapped in a place from which you cannot escape, and they will destroy you before you have a chance to even get your bearings."

The demon grumbled, obviously displeased. THEY CANNOT HOLD ME, it said without conviction.

"They didn't know what you were at the hospital. Only Severus knew how to handle you. Now everyone does. Tell me you can't feel the loss of the others." It was a gamble, she really had no idea what the Ministry had done with the other Death Eaters. All she had to go by was the look on Kingsley's face that had sent her running, trailing Snape behind her like a kite. "You won't last five minutes."

The demon leaned its head closer, trying to push its snout through the wards protecting her. YOU LIE. I CAN SMELL IT.

"Do you want to bet everything on that? Do you know which part is a lie?" She balled her hands into fists. "That one piece of Tom Riddle's soul would have been enough to deny you his entire soul for eternity. I might not have killed the man, but I prevented him from cheating you. You owe me."

HE IS THE LAST MINION LEFT. I HAVE BEEN CHEATED OF THE OTHERS. THAT INCREASES HIS VALUE.

"He has no value. You will take his body and die for the effort with no gain. If you take him, you will still owe me, and I know your name. I will give your name to the others you owe. And you will be forced to bear the burden of serving them as well. What is five minutes of freedom compared to that?"

It recoiled and spun away from her, pounding the ground with its fists and lashing its tail. It turned back quickly and straightened to its full height, looking down on her.

VERY WELL, HUMAN. I WILL LET GO OF HIS BODY. IT IS WORTH THE PRICE OF THE BIT OF TOM RIDDLE'S SOUL. IT IS EQUAL. It leaned down and sighed, blowing a scorching gust across the barrier Severus' blood created. STATE WHAT YOU WANT.

Hermione almost sagged with relief. Drawing herself up to her own height, she declared, "Sonneillon, I want the life of Severus Snape. I want your hold on him broken forever, as payment for the Horcrux I destroyed. Do this, and you will be released from your debt to me."

The demon screamed, and Hermione's hair began to stand up when she realized it was a scream of triumph. She'd done something wrong. Her mind raced in circles. What had she missed? What had she forgotten?

When she remembered, she began to shake.

The demon leaned down again and pressed its blind face against the ward.

BUT WE ARE NOT EXACTLY SETTLED, NOW, ARE WE, LITTLE ONE? YOU THOUGHT I WAS STUPID, DIDN'T YOU? SO FULL OF YOURSELF, YOU ARE. IT'S TOO LATE, NOW. YOU INVOKED MY NAME, WHICH I GAVE YOU. YOUR WORDS ARE BINDING. YOUR REQUEST HAS BEEN STATED, AND I AGREE. NOW WE JUST NEED TO AGREE ON HOW YOU ARE GOING TO WORK OFF THE REST OF YOUR DEBT. AFTER ALL, I ALREADY PAID PART OF MINE, DIDN'T I? YOU HAVE HARMED ME WITHOUT CONSEQUENCE, HAVEN'T YOU?

Hermione stared at its missing eyes and slowly nodded. "You did something to make me forget them while we spoke, didn't you?"

I CAN DO NOTHING TO YOU WHILE HIS HEART HOLDS TRUE.

"Nevertheless..."

It smiled and the effect was truly wretched. HOWEVER, I CAN DO SOMETHING TO MYSELF. YES, I PLACED A DISTRACTION ON MY FACE SO IT WOULDN'T BE AS NOTICIBLE. I DID IT AFTER YOU DISTRACTED *YOURSELF* WITH YOUR SO-CALLED CLEVERNESS. THE FAULT LIES WITH YOU.

"And if I leave and don't pay the balance?"

IF YOU VOID OUR AGREEMENT, YOU FORFEIT THE DEBT. I WILL TAKE HIM OVER AND COME AFTER YOU. YOU TETHERED YOURSELF TO HIS BODY, FOOL. REGARDLESS OF HOW LONG I LAST, I WILL BE ABLE TO TRAVEL THE LINK TO YOU. I WILL TAKE YOU AS WELL. THERE IS NO WHERE YOU COULD HIDE FROM ME.

She slumped. How could she have been so incredibly stupid? She shunted her emotions aside. She knew the rules when she came. There was no need for Severus to suffer because she didn't play the game well. "Fine."

FINE?

"Yes. *Fine*. What part was unclear?" she snapped.

The demon tilted its head to the side. I WAS EXPECTING MORE... TERROR.

"I *am* afraid. I'm sorry it's a bit underwhelming. I think I used up a lot of my craven terror hunting Riddle's soul. One can only be terrified for so long before it just becomes mundane, you see?"

The demon opened and closed its four fists. NO. I DON'T, THANKS TO YOU.

She blanched. "Sorry, poor choice of words."

PAYMENT IS DUE, the demon intoned in a dreadful voice. YOU MUST BREAK THE RING TO END THIS.

"What is the price?" she asked in a broken whisper.

THE PRICE FOR THE OUTSTANDING DEBT? OR FOR YOUR HUBRIS AND PRIDE? YOU SHOULD HAVE WORRIED ABOUT THAT BEFORE YOU INVOKED MY NAME. NOW YOU HAVE TO PAY WHATEVER PRICE I SET. It stroked itself again. I FIND YOU AMUSING. I THINK I SHALL KEEP YOU AROUND TO PLAY WITH FOR AN EON OR TWO.

She shook her head. "He won't let me pay that. He will find a way to destroy you if you make me stay."

The demon laughed. HE HAS BEEN TRYING THAT SINCE YOU CAME HERE. EVEN NOW HE TRIES TO SUMMON ME, BUT HE WEAKENS WITH EVERY DARK SPELL HE CASTS. IN ANOTHER MOMENT, HE WILL THROW HIS VERY LIFE AWAY SO I CANNOT FULFILL THIS BARGAIN.

"You mustn't let him! We have no agreement if he dies!"

OH, THERE IS NO HURRY. TIME RUNS DIFFERENTLY HERE. YOU HAVE ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD TO DECIDE TO PAY WITH HONOR, OR RUN AND DIE LIKE A DOG.

Hermione wrapped her arms around her stomach, nauseous at her folly.

I SENSE YOUR RESOLVE WEAKENING. PERHAPS YOU WOULD LIKE A LITTLE REMINDER OF WHAT IS AT STAKE?

The demon lifted an arm, and it disappeared as it reached into space. When it brought it back, she screamed.

Severus was dangling from the demon's hand by the neck with red fire boiling up and down his body, pulsing in time to his racing heart.

AN: We are looking for volunteer voices to help create podcasts of fanfic for the reading impaired. We would like to get this up and running soon to benefit a fangirl who has recently developed trouble reading. If you think you could help read a chapter or two, (or more!) we would love to hear from you! If anyone is interested, contact the Admins for further information on how and a list of stories we have received permission to record so far. :-)

Balancing

Chapter 12 of 13

After the final battle, everyone has their demons to wrestle.

Thank you to karelia for her wonderful beta work.

Severus looked emaciated, hanging from the demon's hand in nothing but his pajama pants. His skin was black, dry and desiccated, and his muscles looked shrunken as if he were burning away from within. However, the force of his magic was palpable as he focused his attention on his binding spell despite being captured by the demon he was trying to bind.

The demon shook him and the red fire snuffed out. Severus didn't seem bothered by that fact; he just lifted his wand and shouted, "*Avada Kedavra!*"

Hermione thrilled to the sound of his voice, but the green fire flowed over the demon's warty hide and dissipated.

FOOL! YOU CANNOT BIND ME OR KILL ME WITH YOUR TINY MAGICS! NOT HERE! THIS IS MY REALM!

"You cannot have her! I don't agree to this bargain!"

YOU DON'T HAVE TO AGREE. THIS IS BETWEEN THE WOMAN AND MYSELF. YOU ARE JUST A POSSIBLE REWARD. NOT A PARTICULARLY INTERESTING ONE IF I GET AN OPINION. It brought him up to its face and then turned toward Hermione. THIS MAN IS WORTH IT TO YOU? HE DOESN'T SMELL THAT IMPRESSIVE.

Snape kicked it in the snout, before hitting it with a Blasting Hex.

Hermione watched, helpless, as the demon shook Snape like a ragdoll. As soon as the shaking stopped, Snape pulled a silver knife out of his waistband with his free hand and plunged it into the demon's arm. It let go with a scream of rage, and Snape fell, only to be caught by another arm. He dangled upside down by a leg and twisted until he could see Hermione. The look he gave her was pure fury as he raised his wand.

The demon grabbed him by the arm, sending the green streak off in the wrong direction. Severus bellowed in frustration and began a litany of useless threats. The demon tapped him on the neck with a third hand, silencing him.

I SHOULD HAVE WAITED LONGER TO HEAL HIS VOICE. It turned to her and held Severus out to her by an arm and a leg. ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO SAVE THIS MAN? HE JUST TRIED TO KILL YOU, it said, plucking the dagger out of its forearm and tossing it away.

She closed her eyes and took several breaths to calm her racing heart. "Killing me would have released me from our bargain," she said in a voice full of boiling emotions. "He doesn't want me to serve in hell." Severus twisted his head to see her, and his expression broke her heart. "He loves me," she said. "And I love him." In that moment, she knew she meant it in every possible nuance of the word.

He looked at her with such disappointment.

The demon rumbled derisively. SO WHAT. NOW THAT HE IS HERE, I MIGHT JUST KEEP HIM TOO. YOU CANNOT ESCAPE IF HE IS HERE. YOU'RE TETHERED TO HIM. FOOL.

Severus attacked the demon with still more spells, bending his wrist and aiming at whatever part of the demon presented itself. All of them were ineffective.

When he tried to turn his wand on himself, the fiend began pulling him in two directions by his ankle and his wrist. Snape opened his mouth and screamed in silence. The tendons in his neck stood out like cords, and his chest heaved as he sucked in air to scream again.

All the numbness that she had cultivated throughout the entire exchange evaporated in that instant. The bubbling pain in her blood spiked back into a burn, and she screamed.

"Stop!" She aimed her wand at the demon, knowing it was irrational. "We made a deal! If you kill him, the deal's off! I will never release you, and you will spend the ages owing me and my descendants! The others that you owe will also torment you! I will give all of them your name, Harry and Ron and Neville! They will summon you to wipe their arses! They will force you to sing lullabies to their babies! Leave him alone!"

The demon didn't stop. There was a sickening pop as Snape's arm was dislocated, and his wand dropped from his hand.

"I agree!" she screamed. "Whatever the price is, I'll pay!"

The demon stopped immediately. It tossed Snape in the air and caught him with all four hands, hugging his back to its chest.

Snape dangled in its arms, looking at her in defeat. He shook his head sadly and mouthed, "No," over and over.

"Can you fix his arm?" she asked, staring at the horrifying shape of his shoulder.

YOU WANT A DEMON TO HEAL HIM? THAT IS ANOTHER THING ALTOGETHER.

"True. Then, can you just pull on his arm again? You'll like it. It will hurt him, trust me."

The demon smiled and jerked on Snape's arm. There was another stomach-turning pop and the arm went back into the socket. Severus fainted.

THAT DIDN'T LAST AS LONG AS I WOULD HAVE LIKED. PERHAPS I SHOULD DO IT AGAIN, the demon mused.

"No!" she screamed. "We're done here. Leave him alone."

It left off its appraisal of the ragdoll in its hands.

FINE.

The monster crushed Severus to its chest, and Hermione watched as the blackness flowed back into its body, revealing Snape's pale, sallow skin. His lip was bleeding where he'd bitten through it, and red marks that looked like they would turn to nasty bruises showed on his arm and neck. In the center of his chest, right over his heart, was the glowing imprint of her hand, where she had linked her heart to his.

The demon gave Snape one last look and then shoved him back into nothingness. Hermione swiped at the tears on her face.

"His wand. He brought it with him, you must return it."

HE BROUGHT THESE TEARS TOO, AND NOW THEY ARE ALL OVER ME. DO YOU WISH THAT I RETURN THEM AS WELL?

"Don't be an arse," she snapped.

It recoiled at this bit of lunacy, but picked up the wand and tossed it into the hole in the air it had created. It lifted up the knife and threw that as well.

"You better not have just stabbed him," she threatened.

The demon sank down until its massive face was on her level. OR WHAT, LITTLE ONE? WHAT WILL YOU DO? YOU WON'T FIND OUT UNLESS YOU RETURN TO YOUR PLANE AND BY THEN YOU WILL HAVE PAID THE PRICE. I GAVE YOU THE MAN FOR THE HORCRUX, BUT I GAVE YOU MY EYES FIRST WHEN WE FOUGHT IN THE HOSPITAL. I ACCEPTED THAT LOSS AS PAYMENT TO LESSEN THE BURDEN OF OWING YOU. It smiled, showing row after row of nasty teeth. NOW YOU OWE ME. SPARE ME YOUR THREATS. I DON'T THINK YOU WILL BE IN ANY SHAPE TO EXACT RETRIBUTION. I SHALL MAKE YOU SCREAM. YOU WILL BEG, AND PLEAD AND CRY OUT FOR HELP, BUT THERE SHALL BE NONE. YOU WILL GIVE ME WHAT I CRAVE. It lifted a hand from the ground and opened it to her in a mockery of courtliness. NOW, COME. IT'S TIME TO PAY.

She shuddered out a breath and nodded. Gripping her wand like a lifeline, she lifted her foot to step out of the center of the star.

A CONVOCAATION HAS BEEN CALLED.

Hermione looked around for the owner of the deep, musical voice. She set her foot carefully down in place.

NO! THERE'S NO NEED FOR A CONVOCAATION! WE HAVE A STRAIGHTFORWARD BARGAIN HERE! I WAS MORE THAN HONORABLE!

A CONVOCAATION HAS BEEN CALLED.

Hermione tilted her head to the side, confused, as the demon raged, lashing the ground with its tail and beating the air with its wings.

VERY WELL, it spat.

The sulphurous cavern they were in faded into an endless expanse of nothingness. The only feature was the glowing red of the circle made from Severus' blood. The rest of it was just nothing. No floor, no ceiling. No mist, or swirling vapor. Nothing but muted light.

She looked at the demon, only to find the blindfolded Severus. He was completely black now, as he had been when the darkness had finally taken over his body. He was dressed in black robes and yet clearly was the same form the demon had taken when she'd first arrived. He was more masculine, muscular, wrong.

WHY HAVE YOU INTERFERED? the demon snapped, looking beyond Hermione with its bandaged face.

She turned and saw the Balion Bardo, standing placidly to the side. Grey, from head to toe. Again, this Severus looked androgynous.

WE HAVE AN INTEREST.

She turned again; the Balion Bardo hadn't been the one to speak.

A third Severus stood on the other side of her. This one was blinding white and the source of light in the nothingness. She couldn't see him clearly at all through the glare, even squinting. Her mouth went dry, and she had a sudden urge to kneel. He turned to her, and she felt the warmth of his gentle regard like a chaste kiss.

YOU ALWAYS HAVE AN INTEREST. THIS MEANS NOTHING TO ME, spat the demon. SHE CAME OF HER OWN WILL.

And she will pay the price of her own will. It is the price that we will enforce. You used subterfuge in the negotiations, thus opening the door to arbitration. This last was spoken by the Balion Bardo. **There will be balance.**

YOUR PRECIOUS BALANCE MEANS NOTHING! YOU INTERFERE!

We do not. The bargain is struck. The terms are agreed. However, the price you want exceeds your rights. There must be balance.

FINE! spat the demon. THEN I DEMAND THE OLD RULES.

IS THIS AGREEABLE? the angel asked her.

"What are the old rules?" she asked.

An eye for an eye, intoned the Balion Bardo.

Hermione looked at the demon wearing a ragged bandage over Severus' eyes and swallowed thickly. Deep down, she'd already known. She thought of the man who had tried to kill her to save her from this fate, and knew he was worth it. She bowed her head and whispered, "Yes."

The demon bellowed in triumph and lifted its hand, holding a rusty replica of Severus' silver knife. THEN COME TO ME, LITTLE ONE, AND PAY THE PRICE.

Hermione took a last look at the angelic Severus, who seemed sad and hurt, and yet... proud.

She took a step forward and the blood construct she'd been standing in hissed and spat as it broke apart and faded with a hollow scream. A small moan of terror slipped past her control, and she heard the demonic Snape cackle.

It grabbed her, setting her blood on fire. Her world exploded with pain as the knife sliced at her face. She shrieked. She was still screeching when it was done, as she held her hands to her bleeding face. She screamed and screamed, backing away from the demon until she bumped against another body. The pain was intolerable, the agony was crippling. There was no lessening now that it was over.

Hands came up and laid against her own, soft, gentle and filled with the warmth of healing. The pain vanished, and she could feel the itch as the blood dried and crumbled away under her hands.

IT IS DONE.

NO! the Demon roared. YOU CHEATED! YOU BASTARDS ALWAYS CHEAT! PAIN WAS SUPPOSED TO BE PART OF IT! WHY DO YOU CARE? SHE DOESN'T EVEN BELIEVE IN YOU!

IS IT NOT ENOUGH THAT SHE'S BLIND?

NO! I AM MORE THAN BLIND! NO ONE CARES FOR MY PAIN!

BROTHER, YOU WANT YOUR PAIN.

IT IS NOT ENOUGH!

She felt a rush of wind just before she felt the blows as the demon boxed her ears. Twin spikes of pain stabbed her as she went deaf. She grabbed at her head and curled in on herself, finally overwhelmed and hysterical.

Hands reached down and lifted her up. They were cool and impersonal, letting her go as soon as she had her feet under her and pulling her hands away before gripping her head over her ears.

There will be balance. The price has been set. The price is paid. The convocation is at an end. Go.

Hermione sobbed to hear the voice and felt her tears spilling out of her empty eyes and running down her face. She flinched from the rush of air that accompanied the two loud pops of vacuum.

They are gone. It is done. You please us, Hermione Granger. Go. Live your life. You have succeeded.

"And Severus?"

He will live his. Whether he preserves the nexus is unknown. Once he knows you are safe, he must choose between your love or your betrayal. We do not know which he will cleave to.

Her heart gave a slow, painful thump at these words. "Will I ever see again?"

Do you already regret your bargain?

She shook her head. "Not if he lives."

Your eyes are lost forever, but not everyone needs them to see.

She sighed. She had barely enough strength to stand, never mind argue philosophy. "Thank you. For fixing my ears."

There is a price. The avatar of Light exceeded their duty. It is hard for them to be near suffering. Balance had to be restored. Remember this. For if one of the others Sonneillon owes asks for your loss to be restored, Severus Snape will pay the forfeit. Do you understand?

She nodded at this too, even if she didn't completely. "How do I leave this place?"

You already anchored yourself. Let go.

"Will I meet you again?"

No. For you, balance was temporary. Being caught between actions is anathema to your nature.

"Oh."

Farewell, Hermione Granger.

She twisted her head around, foolishly hoping for a last look. "Good bye."

She felt another pop and another rush of wind, and knew she was alone. She gripped her wand, concentrated on Severus, and let go of the terror, the pain, the grief, and even the sour joy of triumph, and felt herself snatched away.

She landed on her hip, and her breath rushed out in a whoosh, just before she cracked her head on something hard. The last thing she heard before she lost consciousness was Draco Malfoy yelling, "Bloody hell!"

Hermione woke up in total darkness and flailed.

"Hermione?"

"Lavender?"

"Yeah, it's me. I'm sorry, I was just bringing you some more flowers. These are from Cho Chang. Are you alright? How do you feel?"

"Like I've been hit in the head with a spanner. I'm in St. Mungo's then?"

"You are. Draco brought you in yesterday."

"And Severus? Where is he? Is he alright?" She sat up and reached out towards the voice, banging her hand against something cool and hearing glass shatter.

"Oops, well that was an ugly arrangement anyway. They were from Human Resources." Hermione felt a swirl of magic and the wet dripping sound stopped. "The professor's fine. Not a speck of black anywhere, not even a Dark Mark. He's upstairs. Draco brought him in as well. Did you know you're now listed as Snape's next of kin? Anyway, he was a right mess. He'd been stabbed in the arm, had torn tendons from one end of his body to the other, and a nasty case of whiplash, but nothing a potion and a good night's sleep didn't cure. I'm sure. His vocal cords healed. That was unexpected. He looked like hell, though. Bruises everywhere. You look a bit like hell yourself. What happened to you two?"

Hermione let out a ghastly laugh, reaching up and feeling the bandage over her eyes. "Hell, actually." She shook her head. "I don't know where to begin to explain."

She felt a warm hand squeeze hers. "You don't have to if you're not ready." Lavender took a deep breath. "Hermione, about your eyes..."

"I know. They can't regrow them, can they?"

"No. They did try."

"It's alright. It was the price I paid to heal Severus." She scrubbed a hand through her hair. "Do you happen to know if I still have a job?"

"I assume so, though smashing the flowers your department sent wasn't politic. No one's said otherwise."

"Well, that's something. Not very politic to run off and maim yourself after your first day."

Lavender squeezed her arm. "You went all Gryffindor idiot, didn't you?"

She gave a harsh laugh. "Absolutely. Was there ever a doubt?"

"No. You always styled yourself a Ravenclaw, but that just meant you did a hell of a lot of reading before you went rushing off like a fool."

The two chuckled, and Hermione felt a tremendous weight lift off her. She smiled sadly. "I don't think I'll be reading any more books or charging off anywhere."

"Nonsense. There are charms that will read a book aloud for you, and spells that will chime when you're walking in the wrong direction from the place you want to go. That's just off the top of my head. We'll get you through this, Granger. You'll see. There's all sorts of things we can do to help you learn how to deal." She felt Lavender's knuckles brush her cheek. "Don't despair. Leave that for Ravenclaws too."

Hermione gave her a smile. "I don't think I will, beyond a little self-pity and frustration. It was worth it, so there's no sense whining about it, right?"

"Exactly. Now, did you want to look like a banshee? Or would you like me to fix your hair? The bruises on your face are bad enough."

"Oh, fix it, please."

Personally, Hermione couldn't have given a damn about her hair, but she knew Lavender wanted to repay a kindness, and it was easier to let her. She shifted on the bed, trying to keep some modesty in the flimsy, backless, hospital robe, while Lavender stroked through her hair with a soft-bristled brush.

She sat with her darkness and tried not to despair. It wasn't easy. If she couldn't read, she couldn't do her job. She was probably in trouble with Kingsley for lying to him and then running away with Severus. And then there was Severus. She'd saved him, but the last look he'd given her was one of terrible betrayal.

She took a deep breath and let it out. The positives were pretty powerful. She was alive, and so was he. If he never spoke to her again, it was still worth it. At least he could speak.

Although the idea of him never speaking to her again sent her sliding back toward despair.

Lavender tugged on her hair as she twisted it into a knot at the back of her head. "There. Now you look human again."

"Thank you." Hermione reached up and patted her hair lightly. "I'm going to need you to teach me how to control this hair while blind, you know."

Lavender patted her arm. "I can do that. I'll think up a few other things to help you too. Perhaps charming your clothes so you can tell what color they are by feel. Give me a few days to work on it. I can ask Cho, too. She's wicked with charms."

"What would Michael think about that?"

"Pfft. I dumped him. He kept whining that I was spending too much time with Draco. It was rather novel, actually. I'd never dumped anyone before."

Hermione felt the bed shift as Lavender stood up. "Listen, speaking of Draco, he's outside waiting. It would be good of you to let him know you're alright. He's a wreck, and I think he's been through too much already."

"Of course! Absolutely."

"Good. I'll check on you later, then."

Hermione listened to Lavender's footsteps as she crossed the room. The door swung open and her friend exchanged a few words with Draco before she heard heavier steps coming closer. The door swung shut, muffling most of the bustling noise from the hospital.

"Hello, Granger."

"Draco. Come in, have a seat. Is there a seat?"

He gave a dry laugh. "Yeah. A couple of them, actually. They gave you a much nicer room than they gave me."

"I earned it in bedpans."

She waited until she heard the creak of a chair and then she said, "I'm grateful that you were there, Draco. How did you find us?"

He snorted. "Use your brain, Granger. Snape's house is Secret Kept. Who's left to keep the secret? I knew where he was when Lavender told me she couldn't tell me where you lived."

"Oh. That makes sense. How did you end up in the right place at the right time?"

There was an uncomfortable silence for a long moment after that. "Well, I was due, wasn't I? I've been in the wrong place at the wrong time often enough." The chair creaked. "I was worried. I was afraid you wouldn't be able to go through with it. I...I went there to kill Snape."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

She let that sit a moment and then said, "That was well done. I'm glad you failed, but it was very brave of you."

He sighed. "Honestly? My bravery evaporated as soon as I saw him. He was terrifying to see, all black and trying desperately to summon a demon. He didn't spare me more than a glance. I nearly shat myself when that huge arm came out of nowhere and snatched him away by the neck. I didn't know what the hell to do. I stood there like a useless lump until he came flying back out of the air looking like himself again a few moments later. I got pegged in the head by his wand and nearly skewered with a knife a moment after that. I'm afraid I cowered for a while, waiting for more things to come flying out of nowhere." He paused to take a heavy breath. "Then you appeared."

"I heard you yell," she said, "just before I fainted."

"I nearly fainted too," he admitted. "You cracked your skull on the fireplace. I thought you were dead." There was another awkward silence before he said, "So you didn't have to take his place?"

"No. That wasn't his price. Just this," she said, waving her hand at her bandage. She reached out her hand toward his voice and heard the chair creak just before he took it. "It wasn't completely yours either. Your mother is only serving for a limited time, and from what I gathered, her job is to help punish Voldemort. It seems the demon thinks she's a shrewd haggler. As for your father... He's not there."

The hand in hers clenched, and she heard him suck in several breaths. She clung to his hand with both of hers and held on as he struggled to pull himself together.

"Thank you," he said in a hoarse voice. "That means a lot."

"I know. It meant a lot to me, and I didn't even really know them."

Draco pulled his hand back, but not before a last squeeze. "So," he said with forced humor. "I guess you do love my godfather after all."

She felt a blush creeping up her face. "I do. Stupidly, I didn't fully realize it until I saw him dangling upside down from the demon's hand trying to kill me so I couldn't agree to any bargains."

Draco snorted. "How romantic."

"Laugh all you want, but I happen to think it rather was." She frowned. "Of course, he was very put out that I disregarded his wishes and broke my promise. I betrayed him. I suspect he might just decide he's well shut of me."

Draco barked a laugh. "Turn his back on a girl foolish enough to literally go to hell and back for him? You don't know him very well. "

Hermione folded her hands in her lap with a sigh. "That's just it. I don't. Not actually. And he doesn't really know me either. We just sort of threw ourselves at each other when we thought he was dying. Now he's not."

"That does make it a bit complicated."

"Exactly. I think he's going to need a bit of time."

"And you?"

"No. I don't need time at all. I fancy the socks off him."

Draco laughed. "You're barking."

"No, just insecure. I'm not sure when I fell for him, but it was a lot sooner than I let myself see. I think I was so overwhelmed that I made myself numb, but under it all, my heart just went right on feeling what it felt. I just hope I didn't ruin everything."

She heard his chair creak again. "Look, Snape's a bastard, but he's as loyal a bastard as a Slytherin gets, and he never forgets a favor. I think saving his life will earn you a rather special status. If you really managed to get close to him before you saved him, then I would say you probably don't need to worry overmuch."

"That's good to know," she said. "Do you know if the Ministry is still after him? What about the other Death Eaters?"

"I got kicked out of his room when some Aurors showed up to question him. I did manage to gather that he wasn't in trouble before they put up a Silencing Charm. As for the others, a group of Unspeakables turned up at Azkaban yesterday. They tried to keep it quiet, but you know how the *Prophet* works. Basically, there are no other Death Eaters anymore. No one seems to care too much."

"Oh."

"Yeah. You were right to take him out of here when you did. After the demon turned up again in Ipswich, no one was in an understanding mood. They wouldn't have cared he was a hero."

Further conversation was stopped by the entrance of Healer Pye. "Hello, Miss Granger! You've been a busy girl, going undercover so you could save more lives. Such an exciting life you lead. How are you feeling? Miss Brown told me you had a bit of a headache, that's to be expected..."

Draco and Hermione made their good-byes with a promise to talk again soon.

Accepting

Chapter 13 of 13

After the final battle, everyone has their demons to wrestle...

Thank you to all my readers, all my reviewers, Karelia, Dressagegirl, and my Hebe GB. And special thanks to DarkRiverTempest for her generosity to The Petulant Poetess site, and her wonderful imagination.



"Hey, sleepyhead. Are you going to wake up?"

Hermione blinked behind her bandages and then remembered she no longer had any eyes. "Ginny?"

"Yeah. And Ron and Harry, too. How are you feeling?"

She shifted in the bed. "Good. A little muzzy-headed, but good. No pain. What time is it?"

"Six in the evening," Ginny replied.

Hermione felt a small stab of an ache. All day and still no word from Severus. Lavender had said he would be discharged at noon.

She felt a weight settle on the bed. "Hermione, what happened?" Harry asked, taking her hand. "I'm asking *her*, if you don't mind."

Hermione tilted her head at that last, but then remembered Ron was there. "It's a long story, actually."

"We're not going anywhere in a hurry," Ron said belligerently from a few feet away.

Hermione tilted her head, confused. She pulled her hand back and crossed her arms over her chest as she briefly told them an abridged version of the facts. She left out the part about the demon owing her because of the Horcrux, and let them think she had figured out which demon it was through research. If they knew the truth, they would put two and two together, and who knows what stupidity they would get up to. She also skipped over anything to do with her intimate relationship with Snape. That wasn't their business.

"But why?" barked Ron when she was done. "Why would you do that? I know you needed to help people, but you took it too far! You lost your eyes forever. Your scars are permanent. Hermione, you're..."

There was a sudden scraping of a chair to her left and then Ron snapped, "She's *not* fine. She's disfigured for *life*!"

Her throat closed over, and she reached up and touched her face around the bandage, feeling the healed slices on her cheeks and temples.

Ron continued to shout. "But it's the truth, innit? And it's your bloody fault! You took advantage of her kind nature! She was vulnerable. You should never have made her do this!"

The room erupted in sudden violence as furniture was overturned and spells ricocheted around the room. Ginny jumped up, screaming for Ron to stop, and Harry threw his arms around Hermione and tucked her head against his chest.

"What's going on!" she cried.

"That's right," Ron yelled, "just get out, you bastard! She doesn't need you lurking about! Ginny! Get me unstuck."

Hermione panicked. "Harry, what's happening? Who is Ron yelling at?"

There was a pause, and the room went silent. "Snape. Couldn't you hear him?"

Hermione felt her heart slam in her chest. "Severus?" She pushed Harry away. "Severus? Is he still here?" She scrambled off the bed and threw her hands out before her, vaguely aware that her arse was on display. Someone grabbed her elbow but she knew it wasn't the right hand. "Get off me! I have to go after him!"

She felt his familiar hand close over her own, and she grabbed at it, tripping over an overturned chair in her rush. He caught her and pulled her close. She felt a cloak drape around her shoulders and was enveloped by his smell as she turned into his arms and sighed.

Ron muttered behind her, and Ginny barked at him to shut up.

"You're here," she whispered.

She pressed her head against his chest and then replaced it with her hand. A cold blade scraped along her spine as she pressed her ear to his chest again. Her lip began to wobble out of control. "I can't hear you!" She turned toward the shuffling footsteps behind her. "What's happened to him? I thought he got his voice back!"

She heard everyone go still again.

"Hermione," Harry said in a careful voice. "He did."

"Yeah. Shame he's not still hissing like the snake he is," Ron spat.

"Get out!" she yelled. "Ginny, get him out of here!" She turned to where Harry's voice had been. "I can't even hear his heartbeat," she said, feeling her bandage start to get wet from her tears. "I can't hear him at all." She heard the memory of a voice in her ears, saying, *'There is a price... Balance had to be restored.'* She pushed down the rising panic, whispering, "Oh, gods..."

She heard the sound of a chair being righted, and then gentle hands guided her down to sit.

"Say something," she said.

There was nothing.

She felt a breeze against her face, and Harry asked, "Did you hear that?"

"No, what did he say?"

There was a pause before Harry answered. "He didn't say anything that time. He clapped his hands in front of your face."

"Oh, gods," Hermione said in a small voice. Rage flooded her. "Damn them all to hell!"

"Hermione..."

"No!" she snapped before Harry could get another word in. "Don't you see? It's the price! When the demon took my eyes, I was supposed to be in pain for the rest of my life! But then the other one healed me, so instead, that stupid, poxy Bardo took away Severus! This is their balance! I can't see him, and I can't hear him! What use am I to him now? It's all..."

Her words cut off when Snape took her hand. She stifled a sob and wrapped her other hand around his, trying to control her crying enough to speak clearly.

"I promised Lavender I wouldn't despair, and I only managed to last half a day," she whispered in a broken voice. She felt him rub her hand against his cheek and realized he'd crouched down next to her chair.

"So that's how it is," Harry said quietly.

"That's exactly how it is," she answered. "And you can tell Ron that's why I did this. I couldn't let him go."

Harry sighed. "I'll tell him. He won't like it, but I'll tell him."

There was a pause, and she felt Severus' jaw move. "No," Harry replied. "That's a bad idea. I think she should come back to Grimmauld with me tonight. She needs people to watch over her."

"What did he say?" she asked.

"Don't worry about it. Look. You're being released. Ginny brought you some things to wear home. Let's get you dressed and get you out of here. No! Think about it! She can't hear you and she can't see you! It's not a good idea."

Hermione felt Severus let go of her hand as he stood up quickly. Obviously, whatever he said wasn't sitting well with Harry. "I get it! 'You owe her.' I can't say I'm pleased, but I get it. I know the two of you have been through a lot, but I'm trying to think of what's best for her! How the hell...*urk!*"

The cloak slipped off as Hermione jumped up from the chair and flung her hands out in front of her. "Stop! What's happening? Harry, tell me what he said!"

"All right! I will. As long as he stops jabbing me in the throat with his bloody wand." Harry took a deep breath. "He wants you to know you have a home, if you still want it. I think the idea's crap, but he's obviously not inclined to listen to reason."

She sighed, feeling her heart start to beat with a steady rhythm for the first time in ages. She knew there was so much more being offered than what was on the surface. She knew this time he was offering to *share* his bed.

She answered in kind. "If Severus doesn't mind me bumping into the furniture, I'd prefer to be with him."

She felt the cloak drape around her shoulders again and smiled. Severus's hands settled on her shoulders possessively.

She heard Harry scuffing his feet in that frustrated way of his. "Are you sure about this?"

"Very," she replied.

"All right, then." His voice sounded as if he had accepted her choice, and she smiled. "Look," he continued. "If you need me for any reason..."

"I know," she said. "I'll call on you at any time, day or night."

Harry huffed out a breath. "Exactly."

She jumped when she felt Harry's kiss on her cheek. "I'm glad you're safe," he whispered with emotion. "Take better care of yourself, won't you? No more saving the world. We're done with that. I can't lose any more people I care about."

"I promise."

When the door closed, Severus turned her in his arms. She felt his hands stroke her face, the pads of his thumbs caressing her cheeks, and sighed. "Severus, I know we need to have a long talk, but that's not exactly possible now, is it? I just want you to know that I'm very sorry for ignoring your wishes. I promise that I won't make a habit of it." She wrinkled her nose. "Unless you order me to do something stupid again, and you would have to figure out how to get me to hear it anyway." She sighed, lifted a hand until she found his face, and caressed his stubbled jaw.

"We rushed, I know, and things have grown exponentially more complicated. What I'm trying to say is... You don't have to do this because you feel obligated. I understand if you feel guilty or responsible, but that doesn't mean you are in my debt. I'm done with debts, and you should be too. I rushed things with Ron, and it all fell apart. Now I've rushed things with you. If you need time, or if you feel trapped by what I did..."

He silenced her with a kiss, cupping his hand behind her neck and gently pressing his lips to hers. He pulled away, and she could feel his hair tickle her cheek. He stroked the back of his knuckles down her face with a trembling hand.

"Good," she said, swallowing the lump in her throat. "I'm glad we got that discussion out of the way. Can we go home now?"

He tapped her once on the forehead and then took her hand, carefully guiding her back to the bed. Calm hands tapping and patting here and there for her attention directed her through the procedure of getting dressed. She laughed through the process of getting her bra on. He was a perfect gentleman, but the mechanics escaped him, and it kept ending up twisted. He placed her hand on his shoulder and tapped her leg so she could step into her trousers. He guided her hand to the hem of the t-shirt, laid out on the bed, and she smiled and picked it up and put it on. By the time she was working her feet into her shoes, they already had it down to a dance.

Once she was dressed, she turned in place and smiled at where she hoped he was. "We're rather good at that, aren't we?" She felt him lightly snap her bra strap through her shirt and laughed. "Practice makes perfect."

She let her smile fall. "I do wish I could see you just one more time. All I have in my head are images of you covered in black, or hanging upside down trying to kill me, or

looking like one of the three stooges." She frowned. "I'll explain that one over a greasy burger. If we're ready, that's what I want most in the world right now."

She startled when she felt his hands settle on her shoulders. They slid, ever so slowly, to her neck, her jaw, her cheeks and then...

She flinched away. "No, don't! You don't want to see that. Healer Pye said I can be fitted for glass eyes in a few days."

The hands returned and slowly, but determinedly, pulled away her bandages. Hermione tried to cover her face with her hands, but he pulled them away as well and wrapped them around his waist. Lifting her face up by the chin, he kissed her before placing a gentle kiss on each empty and scarred lid. Then he wrapped his arms around her and crushed her to him.

When she felt his shoulders start to heave and felt his tears against her temple, she laid her head against his shoulder and cried as well.

Hermione sat in the middle of the bed and mentally rearranged the room.

Severus had been gone for an hour. As they were leaving the restaurant, he'd asked the server to inform her that he would be running errands when they returned home. Then he'd whisked her home, led her upstairs, sat her on the bed, and kissed her forehead. She'd heard the stairs creak and the Floo activate shortly after that.

She hadn't sat still very long before she grew bored. She'd started exploring the room from memory, taking pride in the fact that everything was exactly where she'd pictured it in her mind. That lasted until she'd tripped over her new shoes in the middle of the floor and smacked her head on the bedpost.

She'd been sitting in the middle of the bed ever since. She knew it was the middle because she'd measured out the distance with her legs.

Clearly, being blind was going to lead to serious boredom issues if she didn't figure out how to entertain herself soon.

All that was left was to sink into a funk. How the hell were they going to make this work? She knew from her dismal experience with Ron that communication was vital, but it was the one thing she and Severus had been denied. They'd managed without speech before...they'd created a vast vocabulary based on blinks, and flicks...but she couldn't see him now.

She flopped back on the bed and blew out a frustrated breath. She had chattered his ear off the entire time he was healing, assuming that one day he would be able to hold his own. Or at least tell her to shut up. Now, she felt self-conscious saying anything at all because there was no way she would know if she was annoying him or not.

It wasn't a total silence. She couldn't hear him speak nor hear if he clapped his hands, stamped his foot, or banged on the wall, but she could hear when he moved a chair, or tapped on something with his wand.

Perhaps they could learn Morse code?

She snorted, imagining arguments that sounded like drum circles.

The Floo activated, and she rolled off the bed in a heartbeat. She cautiously shuffled toward the doorway and couldn't help the huge grin on her face when she heard the stairs creak under his weight. She might just charm every floor to creak just to hear him walk around.

She squeaked in surprise when he pulled her into his arms and kissed her forehead, even though she had been waiting for him with her arms out.

He smelled like heaven.

He took her hand and led her back over to the bed. She could hear a plastic bag crinkling in his hand, and sat down with her hands folded patiently in her lap.

"I'm glad you're back," she said quietly as she listened to him rustling with the bag. He sat down next to her and patted her leg.

She heard the plastic bag hit the floor. "Could you pick that up?" She heard a rustle as it was jerked off the floor and winced. "I tripped over my own shoes earlier. We're going to have to learn to watch the floor." She twisted her hands in her lap. "That is, if you wouldn't mind..."

He patted her leg again, and she quieted down and listened to the sounds he was generating. She heard several clicks, some clacks, and a mechanical whirr that sounded familiar. She tilted her head to the side, just as she heard the distinctive *ker-chick* of a tape cassette player. She grinned and pressed her fingers to her mouth.

When his voice came, it was in a tinny version of his former deep, resonant tone. *'Can you hear this?'* It held a subtle rasp that it didn't used to, but was clear and strong and made her heart thump around in her chest.

"YES!" she screamed as she bounced up off the bed and danced. "You wonderful man! That's what you went to get! Ha! Fuck that demon!" She continued with her happy dance, but stopped when she realized she wasn't sure which direction she'd ended up. She turned when she heard the whirr of the tape recorder rewinding. She cautiously made her way back to the bed as he pressed play again.

'...went to get! Ha! Fuck that demon! Settle down before you brain yourself again. You have a marvelous lump on your forehead already.' His amused voice cut over hers uselessly. *'This is a temporary measure. I shall endeavor to find something less fiddly. They have all sorts of new-fangled things, but I didn't have the patience to listen to their explanations. I just bought what I remembered using before. I wanted to get back to you quickly...and before you ask, I took so long because I needed time to record the lecture I will force you to listen to shortly.'*

"Oh, do I have to?" she whined as he guided her back down onto the bed. "I know what you're going to say."

There was a click and a pause before she heard the tape rewind. *'Some things are worth hearing.'*

She swallowed and nodded her head as he changed the tape. She heard the clunk as he set the tape player on the bedside table and the click as he pressed play. As his melodious voice began speaking, he took her hand and gently stroked his thumb across her knuckles. She leaned her head against him and listened.

'I've figured out how to erase tape rather well in the ten minutes I've been sitting in this blasted bench mumbling to myself like a git with my brand-new bit of archaic technology. I still don't know how to start. Should I tell you that I love you? I do. Although, I know it's wrong. Should I tell you that I still want to throttle you? I do, but I won't. Should I tell you how terrified I was? How angry? How much of a fool I felt like when I realized you were Petrifying me and not killing me? That I was determined to see you dead before you paid the price so your soul would be free? Well, I just did, didn't I?'

'I could mention the indignity I suffered from being dragged to hell in my nightclothes. You have a knack for leaving me undressed. However, that would be petty.'

'Perhaps I should start with how terrible I feel that you suffered for me. That I cost you your sight. Hermione... I don't know how I can ever make it up to you. I don't know how I can get past this guilt. You cannot understand how divided I am in my mind. I'm still reeling from the fact that you took such a risk. My stomach is in knots just remembering what you faced down, and just what you were facing if you had failed.' He sighed heavily.

She threaded her fingers through his and began to speak, but he placed his free hand against her mouth.

'I can't help but feel you betrayed me by doing something so rash. Nevertheless, I cannot help but feel a giddy euphoria that you would think me worthy of such a'

spectacularly stupid act. I sat by your bedside all day while you slept, marveling at how such a little bit of a thing would risk hell for me. The betrayal fades quickly in the face of that.

'Oh, Christ. Now I'm getting odd looks from the mothers in the park. Marvelous. They probably think I'm a paedo.'

Hermione let out a musical giggle and clutched his hand tighter.

'And while we're on the subject, I must say your... youth... is your least attractive quality to me. You were spared the looks Potter gave me when he realized the nature of our connection. I'm not looking forward to more of them, or having people mistake you for my daughter, or, God help me, finding out that you're just looking for a father substitute. Are you? Christ, I hope not.'

"I'm not," she said, laughing. It wasn't funny, but the horror he managed to convey was. "You're just about the last person that comes to mind when I think of fatherly types." He tried to pull his hand away, but she clung to it, laughing harder, as she turned her attention back to the voice.

'What I really want to tell you is that I understand what you said in the hospital about rushing. I feel the same. Only I fear that you rushed in, and now you will realize the mistake you made, or that the price was too high, and I'm not worth it.'

'If you do feel this way, I will understand. However, I ask that you at least let me help you. I would like to make the burden of the price you paid for my life less onerous. I will do whatever I can for you. I... There was another, long, shaky sigh. I will do anything for you.'

'You see, despite all the logical reasons why we don't suit, I'm rather desperately in love with you. I fear no one has ever gone out of their way to make me feel as if I had worth before, and it quite overbalanced my reason.'

'I did my level best to keep my feelings under control...I tried to focus on being a mentor, or perhaps some sort of a beloved uncle, not that I have a clue how to be either...but when I saw you dressed for your new job... Christ, you were so lovely. I was lost.'

His voice fell silent for a while. They listened to the background sounds of birds, and children playing, and the occasional sound of a car passing. When his voice came again, it sounded so wistful. 'How stupid to fall in love on one's deathbed.'

She heard him fill his lungs with a loud sniff through his incredible nose. 'Of course, I didn't die, now did I? Because of you, I'm alive and still in love and here you are.'

'Hermione, you said once that you needed to belong, needed to be wanted. I would very much like it if you felt you belonged with me, because I want you very much...'

Hermione turned and found his face with her hands and kissed him. "That's all I needed to hear," she whispered.

He reached across and fast-forwarded the tape, taking a moment to find the part he wanted. '...protective of you, but I still think he's a little worm. He's lucky all I did was pin him to the wall. I wanted to smash his face in, but it would have been beneath me. And he was dead wrong about your scars, as well. You're not disfigured. He made it sound as if you're gruesome to look at. You're fucking beautiful to me. He had no right...'

He clicked the tape off, and she wrapped her arms around him, preventing him from straightening up.

"Show me what else you wanted me to hear," she whispered.

He slipped his arms around her, and she felt the breath of his sigh just before he kissed her. She smiled as he pulled her tight against his heart.

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Six months later...

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Hermione stepped out of the fireplace and hit herself with a quick Anti-Soot Charm before turning her wand back into a long, thin cane. She pulled her mobile out of her pocket and hit the auto-dial.

"I'm home, as you well know. Where are you?"

"In the bedroom," his voice replied in her ear.

The sound quality was much better than the cassette player, but the phones had a dreadful habit of dropping the call when magic was used and wouldn't work at all in St. Mungo's, Hogsmeade, or Diagon Alley.

She started through the sitting room, sweeping her cane before her by force of habit. She didn't really need it. As long as no one added anything without telling her, she could run full-tilt through this house. Since Severus had sold off his Dark Arts books and shelved the books that had been stacked on the floor, there were no longer any tripping hazards. They had kept everything else the same, with the exception of the cooker and the upstairs plumbing.

"I had a fun day at work," she said into her phone. "That's a joke, mind. My dicto-quill broke, and I didn't notice until I handed the completed schedule to Miranda to copy and it was blank. I know, nothing was lost because it's all in my head, but it still was a pain in the arse to repeat the whole bloody thing."

"One would have to agree."

"I met with Filius for lunch, and he's onboard for the project."

"Good. I'm glad, although I had little doubt. He loves a good project."

"He did seem very excited. He thinks there's a chance he can charm my glass eyes to be like Moody's. I'm really glad you approached him about it. I admit I had thought of it, but I was afraid I might look a bit freakish with my eyes rolling in two different directions."

"I couldn't care less."

"True, but that's you. You know I get self-conscious. I almost prefer the dark glasses."

"They don't stop the pillocks from pointing when you ask for directions," he grumbled.

"Also true."

She felt the brush of air against her face and pulled the phone away so he could kiss her. He always waved his hand at her to keep from startling her when he came near. It wasn't necessary, she could track him by his cologne.

She put him on speakerphone and placed her mobile on the bed when she sat.

"Anyway, he said it would take a while, possibly six months, to fully research, and then there is a seventy percent chance of failure. However, if he did figure out the charm, he was sure he could make them with limited motion so I couldn't look behind me without turning my head."

She reached out, and he took her hand. "How was your day?"

"I believe I have worked through the problem," his voice replied from the coverlet.

She sighed. "Severus..."

"It will work this time. Let me try."

He had yet to stop trying to find a way to repair at least part of her damage. She wished he would. It was difficult enough for her to accept her limitations without his constant hope. The guilt he carried pressed against their relationship, adding a weight that was difficult to bear.

"Very well. Did you want to do this now?"

"I do."

She nodded and turned her phone off with a beep. His beep swiftly followed.

He tugged on her hand and she stood. As always, she let him lead her where he wanted without resistance. Her memory of the room told her they were standing next to the bed facing his wardrobe.

He pressed her shoulder in the gesture that had come to mean, 'stay put,' and she did.

She tilted her head to the side as he shifted until he was standing behind her. When he pressed her wrist, she nodded. He always warned her when he was about to use magic on her. She sighed.

She felt him remove her dark-tinted glasses and place them in her pocket. He swept one arm around her, gently pulling her back against his chest, and she felt the tip of his wand press against her temple just before his magic washed over her.

She waited patiently while he performed whatever spell he had looked up this week and tried to keep her expression as neutral as possible. Draco and Lavender had told her that now that she couldn't see herself, she was even more likely to convey her opinions by the expression on her face. She leaned against him and thought about pleasant things instead, like the dinner they had shared the night before. He was a lovely cook, but had outdone himself with the roast lamb. She'd taken some to work and had eaten it all long before lunch.

Of course, thinking about dinner made her think about what they had got up to after dinner, and she was hard put to keep the smile off her face then. Severus might be reserved in many areas, but the bed wasn't one of them. She smirked, remembering with relish the time she had snuck the tape recorder under a pillow and played it back the next day when he'd run errands. Severus had grown rather accustomed to the fact that she couldn't hear him. He'd grown very vocal and deliciously foul-mouthed. She'd saved the tape and played it whenever she started to feel blue. Hearing him scream how much he loved her was a potent cure for the blahs.

Her reverie was interrupted by a quick, sharp pain in her head. She hissed in a breath and flinched, but he kept his wand against her temple.

"Severus, it hurts, stop."

He rubbed circles into her shoulder, but kept her pulled tight against him as the sting grew.

"Seriously, Severus, it's..."

Pain exploded in her head, and she saw bright spots of light. She pressed the heels of her hand against her eyes, feeling the glass balls behind her lids. "Please, you're hurting me!" she gasped out.

The arm across her chest relaxed, and he continued to rub at her shoulder in apology, but it was too late. The pain was crippling. When it started to recede, images began to form in her mind. At first they seemed like memories, but they grew in clarity and definition.

Her breath caught in her throat when she realized the image in her head was of her and Severus. He was standing behind her with one arm over her chest, looking grim and determined and she, pale and distraught. They were looking at the mirror on the door of his wardrobe.

She could see.

She gasped and spun in his arms, looking up to his face, but the image in her mind showed only that she had turned around in his arms. She felt dizzy and nauseous until she understood.

She was seeing with his eyes.

"Severus! It worked!" She spun back around and stared at him in the mirror, but his attention was focused on her. "Yourself! Look at yourself! I don't want to see me!"

He smirked and lifted his gaze. He was as pale and gaunt as she remembered, and the worry lines on his face were deeper than before. His hair, still fine and limp, hung down to his waist. She liked to feel it running through her fingers, so he never cut it. She sighed. "Oh, my heavens. You look so handsome." He glowered at her with a magnificent sneer, but she ignored that and broke out of his embrace. "Closer! Come closer to the mirror! I want to see you up close!"

He grimaced and followed her to the mirror, bending down slightly to keep his head in the glass. He gave her an eyehug and a small smile.

"Oh, Severus..."

His eyes flicked to hers, and she saw herself. She'd gained a bit of weight, and her glass eyes were a little strange. She could move them, but they were sluggish and uncanny. Her face was bisected by twin slashes that crossed the bridge of her nose and formed an X.

"I'm not bad," she said. "A little creepy looking."

He scowled at her, and she laughed. "I did miss your sneer. And your feet! Kick your shoes off and look at your feet. In fact, take everything off!"

He rolled his eyes and shook his head impatiently, pulling her back against him and raising his wand. He tilted his head and raised an eyebrow.

"Oh! There's more?"

He nodded.

"Is it going to hurt?"

He palmed his wand and held his thumb and finger an inch apart.

She took a deep breath. "Okay. It's worth it. I'm ready." She took a deep breath and noticed that her fake eyes were rather expressive when she was afraid.

He sighed and closed his eyes briefly before aiming the wand, not at her, but at his own reflection in the mirror. The effect was that he was pointing it directly at her.

She watched through his eyes as he mouthed, "*Legilimens!*"

She felt a pressure in her mind that grew more intense until she felt as if her head had been shoved onto a vice. She tried to keep her eyes on Severus and then realized how silly that was and closed them against the pain.

When it came, it was the barest whisper spoken from far away. "Can you hear me?"

"Severus?" She focused on the image of Snape staring in the mirror. His eyes were narrowed with focus, and his face was drawn tight from the effort. In her mind, she heard the trace of a whisper again and threw her mind towards it. "Again! Call me again!"

"Come to me," she heard in his deep, rich voice. "You must bring your thoughts closer."

She pushed her mind towards the voice hiding in the corner of her head, and when she heard it begin to fade, she mentally leaped for it.

"Severus?" she said in her own head. Her vision ended, and she realized he had closed his eyes. She felt nearly overwhelmed by the amount of warmth, love, relief, and joy that washed over her.

She felt both of his arms wrap around her, and his voice sounded like silk in her head, loud, strong, and utterly beautiful. "I'm here."

She turned in his arms and hugged him. "How long will this last?" she asked.

"I can keep this up for perhaps five more minutes, or... I could make it permanent."

She squealed. "Do it!" She felt an undercurrent of fear and insecurity ripple across her excitement.

"It wouldn't include the vision. That's a separate spell, but you will have new eyes soon."

"I might not, Severus. You need to accept that. Now, what are you waiting for?"

"Hermione, it would link our minds. We would be able to talk to each other, but we would also be able to feel each other's moods, eventually hear each other's thoughts."

Another wave of trepidation shivered through her and she tried to push it away. Why was she pretending she was nervous? "Do it!" she said firmly.

"Permanent means forever. If in the future you were to perhaps change how you feel about this arrangement..."

And then she understood. It was *his* insecurity that she felt. The link would be more enduring than even a marriage, and he worried that she would regret a hasty decision.

She lifted her face and leaned up on her toes. She found his mouth on the second try.

"If you think your feelings might change in the future," she whispered, "or if you're unsure in any other way, then don't. Me? I want this. I want you. *Permanently.*" If he was feeling her emotions then he must now accept just how much she meant what she said. Perhaps now he would believe her when she said the only thing she regretted was how guilty he felt. Perhaps now he would understand just how happy he made her, how grounded she felt, how cherished and wanted. Losing her sight would be less of a loss if she could hear his voice in her mind and not on some piece of equipment.

She felt his answering thoughts and emotions. She was flooded with an exhilarating joy, the intensity of his love, and a primal surge of sexual arousal. She smirked, catching one of his stray thoughts. Apparently, despite his glowering and sneering, Severus never grew tired of hearing she found him attractive.

He kissed her back tenderly. "My feelings for you are impossible to change," he said in her mind.

She swallowed around the lump in her throat, feeling the truth of his words caress her as she felt his love envelope her.

"Then do it."

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...and so it was done.

Thank you to my team for encouragement, Dressagegrrrl, Hebe GB, and karelia. Thank you to Dark River Tempest for her wonderful prompts and her winning bid in support of The Petulant Poetess Archive.

As promised, here are the original prompts I was given to choose from. They were all so good I just smushed them together!

Le Prompts:

~ Of course, I'm a sucker for angst, hurt/comfort, dark . Take a Grimm's Fairy Tale and put a SS/HG twist to it. I'm rather fond of Beauty and the Beast, but the Beast doesn't turn into a prince (I always hated that) or Red Riding Hood. Again, with a very dark slant.

~ I have a fetish for men with long hair (yes, I love Lucius' locks, but Severus' as well). Hermione must be forced to cut the beloved hair, possibly sobbing the entire time how and why is up to you. Does Severus forgive her? This can be done during any time frame: pre/post war, doesn't matter. I also love strong, thin feet on men as well. Yes, I have an unabashed foot fetish. ;)

~ Hermione or Severus is blind and it cannot be cured, via magical or conventional methods. How does their relationship start? How did he/she become blind? I prefer nefarious reasons, such as Ron, in a fit of jealousy, hurled a curse at Hermione and refuses to offer the counter-curse, something along those lines. Also, how far will the other go to try and cure the blindness? Will Hermione make a deal with an up and coming dark lord for Severus' sight, or vice versa? What is the person with the blindness reaction?

~ Love Dark Mark stories. The Dark Mark is killing Severus. How far will Hermione go to keep him from dying? Will she do anything? Even give up her soul? Involve gods/demons of the Underworld for this: Lucifer, Hades, Leviathan, etc. Greek, Roman, or Christian, it doesn't matter. Bonus points if you have Tom Riddle as a disgruntled demon, miffed because he didn't get to rule Hell.