As You Wish

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As You Wish

by tyrannic_puppy

Summary

The story of a radiant beauty, her true love, and their journey back to one another against all obstacles.

Notes

In response to a prompt by Anonymous in the Harmony At The Movies: A Film Fest collection.

Prompt: The Princess Bride (1987)
All canon characters, plots, and situations from the Harry Potter series belong to JK Rowling. I am not profiting from this work. The setting of The Princess Bride belongs to William Goldman.

Beta'd by Vikky Kitchen and Elwyn (Iltazyara).

See the end of the work for more notes

Hermione Granger was content with life. She lived on a small farm in southern England with her parents, Richard and Helen, where they kept cows and sheep and grew grains of several different popular varieties. Life was good, simple.

She had grown up in the beautiful countryside surrounding their estate, and as such, had developed a true love for the outdoors and nature itself. She would spend lazy days among the hills on the beautiful white mare she had named Hedwig, and when it rained, as it so often did in her home country, she and Hedwig would hide under one of the great trees with the dense branches that dotted their property and tuck herself against the trunk so she could read one of her beloved books.

For Hermione truly loved to read; fact or fiction, it mattered not. Expanding one's knowledge of the world was as vital as keeping a fertile and wild imagination. Stories of swashbuckling pirates and daring princes. The names and histories of their fair lands and the storied kings and rulers. No subject was beyond her understanding or desire to learn.

The only thing that Hermione enjoyed more than her books and her adventures was toying with the loyal farm boy who worked the fields with her father and helped her mother about the house. An orphan whose parents had lived nearby, and upon their deaths had been taken in by her father.

He was a small boy for his age, with unruly black locks and the most intense green eyes she had ever seen. Not even the fanciful heroes in her books could match their intensity. And yet, despite his size, he had a surprising strength. And he would never shy away from a task, even ones that were not expressly given to him.

Hermione delighted in having him complete menial and silly tasks: ordering him to wash her horse's saddle so finely she could see her reflection, chopping more firewood when there was plenty already inside and in the woodpile, or simply knocking him into puddles or mud for a laugh.

And yet, no matter how silly or possibly demeaning the task, the farmboy would only look at her with those emerald eyes and say three simple words.

"As you wish."

Every day for more than a decade, this continued. Hermione would assign young Harry a task; he would utter those three words, and complete it.

"Clean the troughs, farmboy."

"As you wish."

"Fetch more hay, farmboy."

"As you wish."

"Go into town and fetch some fresh tar for the roof, farmboy."

“As you wish.”

No matter how silly the task she assigned, he always gave the same reply. It irked her that he never seemed to tire of her games. And the fact that whenever she gave him a task in front of her parents, he would give the same response, disappear to complete his task, and her parents would giggle at her face and whisper to one another.

And so life continued on the Granger farm. For more than ten years, this played out. Hermione coming up with new and inventive jobs for him to do, Harry whisking off and finishing them with nought more than those three words, and her parents watching all this and laughing. It had become their routine and so commonplace that it took Hermione, who prided herself on her intellect, all those years to figure out what it was her parents found so amusing about it all.

As Harry laid a large pile of freshly cut wood by the stove where she was busily cutting up vegetables, she noticed the look in his eyes as he glanced at her while heading for the door. And that was the moment that Hermione realised that when he said ‘As you wish,’ what Harry was really saying was ‘I love you.”

“Farmboy,” Hermione called, causing Harry to turn and look at her with those eyes once more. She cast her gaze about the kitchen until her eyes came to rest on the earthen jug hanging just above her head, well within reach. “Fetch me that pitcher.”

Harry walked over to her, and for the first time in years, she realised he was now taller than her. He had filled out and hardened up after all the work he had been doing, and his very presence so close to her made her stomach both soar and twist itself into knots. A reaction she had never experienced before.

“As you wish.” His lips were right there, mere millimetres from her own nose, and she felt the words wash over her in an entirely new way. That sent an unfamiliar yet quite enjoyable shudder down her spine.

His irises as bright as a fresh lime bored into her own cinnamon ones, and Hermione found her breath catching in her throat as his hand rose above them and freed the jug from its hanger, before holding it delicately before her. Not once during the action did his eyes leave her own; he didn’t even blink.

Feeling her face glow with a fiery blush, Hermione finally tore her gaze from his entrancing stare and returned to chopping the vegetables. She could feel him there, his presence almost choking her with its solidity before he silently turned and departed without another word.

Over the months that followed, Hermione found herself watching Harry in a whole new light. And it wasn’t long before she came to realise that she too loved him in return. That very night, standing together underneath her favourite reading tree in the yard by the house, lit from afar by the violent red light of the dying sun, their lips met for the first time in a true and passionate kiss. A kiss that lasted until long after the fiery globe had descended past the horizon.

The only dark shadow in her otherwise bright world was that Harry had no money with which to propose, and though her parents approved of their love, he had decided to step out into the world in order to seek out his fortune so that they would have a happy life together when he returned to his love.

Hermione was worried that if he left, she would never see him again. But Harry promised on their love to always return to her, no matter the obstacles placed between them. For that was the unconquerable power of true love, and theirs was as true as mortal man could achieve.

The pair shared one last long kiss in the same place they had shared their first before Harry pulled slowly away and, gently cupping her soft cheek in his hand, stepped back. He did not turn away until he stumbled slightly over some small rocks in the bright green grass under the afternoon sun, drawing a soft smile from her once more.

Hermione continued to stand under the tree watching his retreating form until he was no longer visible past the verdant hills. Several tears fell as she felt his absence almost as deeply as she had long been comforted by his presence. It took her several hours before she was able to tear herself away from the spot and return to the house.

Many months passed, and every evening, Hermione would wait beneath their tree, hoping to see her handsome love cresting the far hills as he returned to her, but each night she would abed disappointed. Until that fateful day arrived that she had hoped never to see. As the tawny owl swooped through the branches one night and landed by her amidst the tangled roots of the tree she associated with her love, she watched it carefully, noting the pale parchment clutched in its beak.

Reading that letter broke Hermione’s heart. For the letter brought tidings that Harry’s vessel, upon which he had been travelling for months, had been set upon by the Dread Pirate Riddle, who never left a man alive. Hermione wept as the gentle evening breeze knocked the letter free from her limp grasp, and she barely noticed as her mother sat beside her and wrapped her in her comforting embrace.

From that day, she never sat, stood or ventured under that tree again. Spending most of her time locked away in her room where she would pass the days crying out the agony in her heart at her lost love, and the terrible nightmares that came every night to plague her in his absence from her life.

Hermione knew she would never love again.

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Five years later, all and sundry had gathered in the nearby capital to hear the announcement they had been waiting on for several weeks. The naming of young Prince Draco’s bride-to-be. Rumour had spread from the castle that she was a rare beauty, and much speculation had arisen as the people wondered and pondered.

“Good people,” Draco called, standing high up on the battlements, gazing down over the gathered crowd who fell silent at his words, “today, as we approach the momentous anniversary of the founding of this kingdom, you shall, at last, learn the secret that has been

nought but whisper and rumour among you. For today, I reveal to you your future queen. For on that auspicious day, at sundown, I shall marry this young beauty who was but a commoner, yet is now so much more. I present to you the Princess Hermione."

Draco raised a perfectly manicured hand and gestured to the side entrance where Hermione was standing. She felt naked before the crowd, though she was draped in the finest of silks and delicate jewellery. As though everyone there could see the truth of her heart. That she was hollow inside. Even as the mighty roar of the crowd met her ears at the announcement, it brought her no joy.

She had only met the prince a few months earlier as she attended the market with her mother. And under an archaic law, he had chosen her as his future bride. Her rejection fell on deaf ears as he brought her to the castle and set his servants to work making her presentable to the people.

Throughout, only her many books had kept her sane as the countless men and women bustled in and out of her quarters, matching coloured silks and fine gemstones to her complexion. But none of it stirred her heart, for that was as dead today as it had been since the arrival of that dreaded letter. And nought now existed in this world that could stir it once more.

Nothing the handsome prince had done to win her affection had come close to winning her heart. No gift of fanciful jewels, nor even her beloved books. Though she continued to devour their content, it did not bring the pleasure it once did, and certainly engendered no feelings for the blond man who gave them.

The only sliver of light in her life came in her daily rides. She had convinced Prince Draco to allow her to bring Hedwig to the castle, and the pair would spend hours each day riding over the unfamiliar hillsides surrounding the castle. Freeing her mind as she swept away from the castle and its dreary world of politicking and dealing with the struggles of the nation. Instead, dashing between the trees in the nearby woods spurred a faint remembrance of the fire that Harry once stirred within her soul, allowing her to treasure those moments that existed only in her memory. The guard Prince Draco had assigned had long ago given up trying to match her wild riding; after all but one had been thrown from their horses or ploughed into thick branches as they tried to keep up.

It was not unusual to encounter others on her rides, but rarely had she come across a group as varied as the one she now approached by the edge of the river winding through the countryside. One of the men was far taller than any person she had ever seen, almost as tall as two whole men of standard size, with a girth that was reminiscent of a great English Oak. Hermione doubted she would be surprised if the man were able to lift both her and Hedwig clear off the ground with little effort. Yet his face was as gentle as she had ever seen on a stranger, concealed as it was behind his wild scraggly beard. His small beady black eyes had a warmth that she was certain echoed down to the man's very soul.

To the giant man's right was a smaller man, of much more average height. He bore shaggy dark curls of hair and very rugged facial hair the colour of night's embrace. His eyes were grey as granite, and he looked every bit as quick and vigorous as the giant was tall and powerful. On his belt, he wore a fine hilted sword, yet his hands were clasped gently in front

of his waist, and the smile on his handsome face belied the first impression his garb and weapon brought to mind.

Yet it was the third figure on the giant's left that most caught her attention. Hermione was a wise young woman with a great knowledge of the world. She had visited the nearby towns and cities and seen many odd folks, in both the world at large and her many books. But she had never before seen in person one of his kind: a goblin.

He leered at her with dark sunken eyes in dull recessed green sockets. A smattering of dark hair circled his wrinkled head and his large pointed ears stuck out wide on either side of his face. A nose to match extended from the centre of that same face, but bore evidence of having been broken multiple times. Where the two men had an air of gentleness about them, the goblin was anything but. Everything about his posture and his visage screamed danger to Hermione as she drew her horse to a stop and eyed the trio warily.

"Forgive me, my lady," the goblin began in a gravelly voice, "we are poor circus performers who have become dreadfully lost. Is there a village nearby?"

Hermione paused before replying. She was wary of the goblin, unsure if the look on his face was malicious or simply a trait of their kind. But her fiancé's encouragement to bond with the people echoed in her mind, and she decided to give it a try.

"I'm afraid not. The nearest village is not for miles. Back behind me down the path a few hundred yards over that way." She replied, pointing to the main path through this section of the woods.

Upon hearing her response, the giant approached softly and the goblin's face split in a horrid grin that bared all his sharp, pointed teeth. "Then there will be no one to hear you scream."

He gave a gravelly laugh as the giant reached for Hermione and Hedwig reared up on his hind legs. But the giant was so tall that he still easily reached her shoulder, and with a sharp pinch, the world fell to black.

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As the world began to encroach on Hermione's senses once more, she noticed that the floor beneath her had an odd sway to it. She could smell salt on the air, and the bird calls filling her ears were unfamiliar. The sounds did not seem to be blocked in any way, and yet she could no longer feel the warm kiss of the sun on her cheeks as her mind slowly rejoined the world.

Opening her eyes, she quickly confirmed what she had suspected. They were now on a boat, and night had clearly fallen. That meant she had been unconscious for several hours, and they could be almost anywhere by now. She remained as still as possible while letting her senses stretch over the deck.

The giant was to her right, his heavy footfalls echoing through the timber of the decking as he stepped to and fro. The sound of a blade gliding over a whetstone came from the boat's edge opposite her prone position, yet she could see the man with the sword at the tiller glancing back over the dark waters behind the ship.

“What are you doing, Sirius?” She heard the scratchy voice of the goblin over the continuous grinding of the blade.

“I am making sure that nobody is following us.” The man replied without turning about.

“Utterly inconceivable. Nobody from France knows what we’ve done, and nobody from England could have followed us so quickly.”

Hermione pondered the statement. They were on the English Channel and were swiftly taking her to France, England's most adversarial neighbour. That was not good.

“At the rate we’re going, we should reach the cliffs by dawn. Then onto the frontier, a quick blade to the throat and we walk away with a boatload of gold.” There was a wistful tone to the goblin’s comments, and Hermione felt a shudder slide down her spine at the words. They planned to murder her in order to start a war between France and England.

“You’ll never make the frontier alive,” she proclaimed, rising from her prone position and glaring at the goblin as he watched her move, “the prince is the most accomplished hunter in all the land. You’ll be dead by midday, and I shall be on my way home.”

“Is that true, Griphook?” The giant questioned.

“No, you moron. Any rescue they dispatch must also traverse the Channel in order to catch us. Their ships might be fast, but unless they departed the moment we nabbed her, they couldn’t possibly be on us already. And I highly doubt they have a faster way than us to scale the cliffs. We’ll be long gone before anyone can rescue you, princess. Fret not. I’ll have your throat out soon enough.”

If his earlier smile had been malicious, this one was truly predatory. Hermione quashed her body's urge to shudder and look away. She refused to be seen as weak before this monster.

“You never said we had to kill anybody.” The giant stated, leaving his task to loom over Griphook.

“We’re out to start a war, Hagrid. How’d you think we were planning to achieve that? Prick the French monarch's finger with an English rose?”

“That don’ sit right, though. She’s a wee thing. Would be a right shame to do her a harm.” Hagrid replied.

“You were hired for your muscle. Not your brain or your morals. Do your job, and you’ll get your pay. Fail,” Griphook took a step toward the enormous man, brandishing the glistening blade in his hand, “and where I found you will seem like a picnic compared to the fate that awaits you.”

“I agree, Griphook. The lady doesn’t deserve such a fate. Can’t we try something else?” Sirius spoke, looking down from the raised helm at the group below.

“Look, you two were less than nothing when I found you. You were so drunk and useless you could barely keep yourself plied with your favourite firewhiskey.” Griphook scowled,

pointing at Sirius. “And you were the laughing stock of that travelling freak show. I gave you both purpose and payment and asked nothing but loyalty in return. If you’re both done doing so, I will happily deal with you in typical goblin fashion.”

Hermione used the distraction of the three arguing goons to sidle her way closer to the edge of the vessel, noting the rather calm surface of the water. Seizing on her chance, she jumped into the water and quickly began to swim away from the boat, hearing the angered voices of the trio behind her.

“Get after her!” Griphook yelled.

“I don’t know how to swim,” Sirius replied.

“Grrrr, you go then, you ginormous buffoon.”

“I only know the doggy paddle,” Hagrid replied, and Hermione smiled to herself. None of them was able to follow her. She would be free of them in minutes, and then it was just a matter of swimming back…

She froze in place as something brushed past her thigh. A moment later, a horrible screeching sound bubbled up from the depths below her, and a vicious laugh echoed out over the water.

“Hope you’re a fast swimmer, Princess. Or you're going to be dinner.”

Several small bow waves rose on the surface of the water as whatever was hunting her swept circles about her. Several more of the horrid crooning sounds joined the first, and she felt something else brush past her as she trod water, frantically spinning about as she tried to track the progress of the hidden creatures.

“The kelpies are particularly vicious at night.” Griphook goaded her. “The louder they croon, the hungrier they are. Right until the moment they strike.”

One of the waves grew in height as it circled about, and a fin that resembled kelp broke the surface. The creature drew all Hermione’s attention as it swooped about and made a beeline straight for her defenceless form. Some escape attempt, she thought to herself as she prepared to be eaten. The bulbous head of the sea creature breached the surface as well, and she saw the long, sharp teeth in its maw as it opened, ready to bite down and pull her into the depths.

Right as the jaws would have closed about her head, Hermione felt herself yanked aside, and an enormous fist collided with the swooping kelpie's head, sending it careening into the side of the boat with a meaty thunk before it sank under the stirring surface of the dark waters. The other large hand lifted her easily from the water and plonked her roughly down onto the deck where Griphook quickly advanced on her soaked form.

“I hope you’ve had your fun, Princess.” He taunted, brandishing the sharpened dagger in her face, before shouting to Hagrid. “Tie her up this time.”

Whipping around, he yelled at Sirius as well. “Get us back on course.”

“Are you sure that nobody could be following us?” Sirius replied, a look of confusion on his face as he followed the order.

“As I told you before, it is in every way totally and utterly inconceivable,” Griphook grumbled as he shuffled back to his spot on the deck before freezing in place. “Why do you ask?”

Sirius shrugged as he pointed over his shoulder. “Only because, well, somebody is following us.”

“What?” The goblin ran up the steep steps leading to the helm and glanced out over the starry waters. “It’s probably just a fishing vessel.”

“Fishing in kelpie-infested waters?” Sirius questioned.

“Shut up. Get us to those cliffs.” Griphook turned to Hagrid once more, who had now tied her hands tightly with a soft silken rope. “Prepare the gear; I want to ascend the moment we come in contact.

Hermione’s heart was still racing from her close encounter with death, but the thought that someone was coming to her rescue buoyed her hopes. It wasn’t over yet.

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The breaking of dawn lit the pale green sail of the ship behind them like a beacon on the sea as their small ship approached the jagged base of the Cliffs of Insanity. A torturous stretch that went on for miles in either direction where sailors would oft lose control of their vessel and find themselves dashed on the barely submerged rocks. Countless dead husks littered the area, making navigating a path through even trickier.

Those who survived the wrecking of their transport would often die in reach of land as the base of the cliffs were worn almost glassy smooth by the constant motion of the waves, leaving no handhold with which to climb out. The lucky one or two who did find a handhold to mount never lasted long as the cliffs were enormous, stretching into the sky like a monster. Their dark, shadowy surface looked all the more daunting when backed by the halo of dawn’s light.

Hermione noted Sirius watching their tail with fascination. “Do you suppose that he is using the same wind as us?” the man mumbled to himself, loud enough for her to hear.

Hermione smirked at the thought as the stranger had been gaining on them all night at a steady rate. As if some greater power drove him to catch up to them.

“It matters not. We’ll be out of his reach in moments. You know the way, bring us in.”

Hermione looked back and forth between the following vessel and the cliffs and realised that Griphook had been right. They would not reach her before they reached the cliffs. Sirius guided the small boat through the gauntlet like he was born to it, an oddity she considered

given his apparent inability to swim. Deft shifts of the tiller allowed them to narrowly miss the dangerous rocks and kept them clear of the dangerous husks.

Before she could truly gather a sense of her surroundings, she was lifted up by Hagrid and tucked into a massive leather harness strapped to his body. She noted that Griphook was already in a similar fitting on the far side, and a pair of large handholds were on the rear of the harness.

“Quickly!” Griphook hissed at both his subordinates.

Glancing upwards, Hermione was struck by vertigo at the sheer height of the looming surface. The only blemish in her view was a tremendous thick rope hanging down from the unseen summit. Hagrid grasped the rope firmly, and the boat halted around him as Sirius leapt down from the helm and climbed the handholds on the back of the harness and, with a quickness that belied his size, Hagrid began his ascent up the sheer cliff face, carrying all of them on his back.

As soon as his feet left the deck, their boat was taken by the waves, rocking back and forth and twisting in the turbulent currents before wrecking on the rocks Sirius had so carefully avoided. Hermione watched as her only way back disappeared beneath her as they continued their climb.

“See, now he’ll have no choice but to sail around the cliffs. He’ll never catch us now. Nobody out-thinks a goblin.” Griphook snarled.

Hermione watched the other ship sweep into the narrow passage that Sirius had guided them through with no hesitation. His speed did not lessen in the slightest as he ground his ship off rocks and ship alike, whisking quickly to the still dangling end of the rope they were now about a third of the way up. And with a running leap, a man in black robes leapt onto the rope as his vessel slammed heavily into their own, knocking it free of the rocks, and both soon sank below the waves as he began his own climb behind them.

“Er, Griphook,” Sirius called, his eyes following the same target as Hermione.

The goblin glanced down and noted the man in black rising swiftly up the rope. “Inconceivable! Climb faster!”

He smacked the back of Hagrid’s head as he made his demand, and the giant put on a small burst of speed. They had now ascended at least halfway up the cliff, but the man on their tail was moving even faster again.

“You were supposed to be the strongest man alive; why is he catching you up!?” Griphook snarled in the giant’s face.

‘I’d guess it’s a whole lot easier climbing a rope with just your own weight to worry about, rather than carrying two full-grown humans and a moody goblin.” Hagrid replied, keeping his attention on their ascent.

“Faster!” Griphook screamed, whacking the giant once more. “Your life depends on it!”

As Hagrid's enormous hands grasped the top of the cliff's edge, Sirius quickly climbed using the holds on the harness and whipped over the top, reappearing a moment later to help Griphook up over the top as well before the pair pulled her free of the harness and onto the summit.

With a mighty groan, Hagrid followed, hauling his massive body up and over the lip, but Griphook had already stepped away. Pulling his viciously sharp dagger, he made short work of the rope's mooring to the stone outcropping not far from the edge, and Hermione squeaked in fear as the ragged end sailed over the cliff and down to the depths below.

She followed as Sirius guided her by the arm to the edge where they glanced down to see the man in blacks fate. And she felt the spear of horror lessen. Only a few dozen metres down, the figure in black was clinging by his fingertips to the cracked surface of the upper cliff face, and with a swing of his legs to find secure footing, he resumed his climb.

"Them's some good hands he's got there. I don't think even I'd have been able to do tha'." Hagrid pondered, as Griphook stepped to the cliff beside them.

"He's still alive! Inconceivable!"

Sirius looked to the goblin. "You keep using that word, inconceivable. I do not think it means what you think it means."

"Regardless, he's seen the Princess, so he must die. You'll stay here and finish him off." Griphook ordered Sirius, who nodded in reply. "We'll continue on, and you can catch us up when he's dead."

"Very well, but I will duel him left-handed. It wouldn't be sporting otherwise."

Griphook fumed at the man, but she could see his impatience win out. "Fine, whatever. Just be quick about it. I'll likely need your duelist skills to get through to the frontier. Come on, you two."

Hagrid lifted Hermione and carried her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes as the cranky goblin picked their way forward through the rocky terrain. Hermione watched Sirius as he practised his footwork atop the cliff and occasionally glanced down over the edge, his voice now too far away to make out. Hermione prayed that the man in black was a good duelist or her life was soon to be over.

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Hermione's stomach was really beginning to hurt; being held in place over Hagrid's broad shoulder was not comfortable for long journeys, and the sun's position indicated it had been several hours since dawn, possibly even midday.

As she glanced back over the now grassy terrain they had been traversing, however, a shout of surprise left her lips as she noted a black figure racing along behind them, causing her captors to turn.

“He beat Sirius? Inconceivable.” Hermione rolled her eyes at the goblins' insistent use of the term. She agreed with Sirius that he must be ignorant of its true meaning. “Put her down.”

The suddenness of her descent caught Hermione off guard, and her legs gave out, dropping her onto her behind. She did not have long to wallow in her discomfort as Griphook grabbed her bindings and dragged her to her feet.

“You finish him off. I’ll take her the rest of the way. And then I’ll be looking for better assistants. Can’t finish off one measly human.” Griphook growled as he began to drag Hermione away.

“How do you want me to finish him?” Hagrid asked behind them.

Hermione watched Griphook roll his eyes as she suppressed a giggle at his frustration. “You’re half-giant, the strongest man alive. Crush his skull with your bare hands. Clobber him in the face with a boulder. Use your strength, you moron! Must I think of everything?”

Hagrid shrugged at the angry goblin and turned about, picking up one of the enormous rocks still littering the landscape. He gave Hermione a soft smile as he watched them go before Griphook’s demanding dragging pulled her around and she had to focus on her own feet lest she fall and be dragged along. She began to despair once again. She had no idea who it was that was following her but was sure his goal was her rescue. Yet she had become somewhat fond of the large Hagrid; he seemed a gentle soul, and she didn’t want either to come to harm.

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As the duo rushed over the hilly terrain, made even more difficult for her by the blindfold the goblin had placed on her, Hermione flinched at the thunderous sound that echoed up from far behind them. The Man in Black had apparently arrived at his tangle with the giant Hagrid, and it sounded as though the very stones of the earth were being cracked and shattered. A small tear began to form in the corner of her eye as she felt that last glimmer of hope for rescue being squashed while trying not to picture the very same thing happening to her would-be rescuer.

She allowed the feeling to take over for a moment before quashing it fiercely. She was Hermione Jane Granger. She was nobody's damsel. There was currently only the goblin guarding her alone, and while they were approaching the frontier, it was still a few hours travel at best guess. Plenty of time to come up with a way to get free.

Griphook continued to lead her by her tied hands, and Hermione considered how she might get free of the binding. She knew the goblin had a sharp blade on hand, but getting it without his notice would be difficult, especially without her sight. So focused was she on her planning that she almost tumbled when the goblin stopped suddenly and yanked her backwards.

“Inconceivable.” His gravelly voice murmured, and Hermione was even more confused.

What could possibly be so… A shiver of hope ran through her as she considered the other times that day she had heard that same word uttered. It seemed the only thing the goblin

considered inconceivable were things that did not go according to his master plan. Hermione felt a moment of sorrow for the loss of Hagrid and Sirius. They had both seemed a good sort, being manipulated into their work by the angry goblin. She did not linger in it, though. The pressure of the continued pursuit would help distract Griphook. A distraction she intended to make the most of.

Hermione felt herself being dragged to the side once more, no longer in the direction they had been travelling, where Griphook threw her to the ground roughly. His voice chanted a few lines in a guttural language she did not understand and a grating sound the like she had never heard before began to fill the air around her.

“Should do.” The goblin grunted to himself before lifting her again and forcing her into a seated position on what felt like a stone bench.

More sounds filled her ears as a bag was opened, and she heard different items being placed on a table before her. Her wonder at where the table and bench had come from was fleeting as she instead tried to focus on the sounds so that she could get an idea of her surroundings. She needed to know the layout if she was going to make good on her plan.

A plan that unfortunately fell apart as soon as the goblin seated himself beside her and she felt the sharp edge of the blade she hoped to steal lay across her throat. Panic set in as she thought that this was it. He was going to kill her here and now before the man following could catch up. He’d then be free to make his escape, and she was likely near enough for their plan to succeed. The French would be blamed for her death and the two countries would go to war once more.

Yet as she sat and listened to the sound of her own blood rushing in her ears, she noted something unusual. Her blood *was* still thrumming in her ears. Which meant her heart was still beating and the vicious goblin had not yet slit her throat. He was positioned and ready, and yet hadn’t gone through with it. Was he having second thoughts?

“By all means, if you wish her dead, keep coming.” Griphook’s voice broke her out of her thoughts. The Man in Black couldn’t have possibly caught up with them so quickly.

“Quite the spread you have. Would you begrudge a fellow traveller the chance to sit and dine with you?” A distorted voice replied from not that far away. A voice that, despite its distortion niggled at the corner of her mind.

“I’d sooner dine on your corpses than share a meal with you, human.” Griphook snarled.

“Well, I can see that in my case, but surely there are better uses for a lovely woman like her.” The voice was closer now, and Hermione felt the blade press harder against her flesh.

“I said, don’t move.”

“No, you did not.” There was a hint of humour in the voice that was even closer again.

“It was implied. Shall I show my resolve?” Griphook’s hand tightened on her arm, and she felt the blade break the skin as a trickle of blood fell from the opening.

“If you kill the girl, there is nothing you have to prevent me from killing you in return.”

“Death in battle is always a glorious way to go. Goblins do not fear the end as you humans do. Anything else you’d care to try?”

Hermione sat in silence, listening to the back and forth. Griphook had far too firm a grip on her to get free without diverting his attention, and yet her ‘rescuer’ seemed more interested in verbally sparring with her captor than getting her free. A shuffling sound drew her attention, and she realised that the Man in Black had just sat opposite them at the table. Griphook had threatened to end her at his presence and yet had not followed through with his threat to the point that the man was now seated at a table with them. Perhaps there was still hope for diplomacy or escape after all.

“Mmmm, that’s good.” The man’s voice sounded, though distorted this time, as if he had a mouth full of food. Hermione felt the heat rising in her cheeks as this man so callously handled her capture. She may not care much for Draco, but she was sure she would be having words about the calibre of tracker he sent to her rescue. “Shall we discuss terms?”

“There is nothing to discuss. You are seeking to kidnap that which I have rightfully stolen.” Griphook retorted, and Hermione was sure there was a sliver of enjoyment in his tone as well.

“Surely we can come to an arrangement. Lighten your burden as it were.”

The blade pressed against her once more, and more blood trailed from the small wound. Hermione hissed in pain at the sensation, and Griphook said only a single word. “No.”

“If not an arrangement, then perhaps a challenge?” The man proposed.

Silence carried for several moments, and Hermione felt the pressure on her throat lessen. “A challenge?”

“Indeed. I’ve already bested your duellist and your giant, proven my mettle in battle. So, while we could battle it out to the death for glory and the spoils,” Hermione grated at being termed so, “you seem a learned sort. As such, I offer a challenge of wits.”

“For the Princess?”

“She is all you hold in which I have any interest.”

“To the death?” Griphook sounded delighted at the prospect.

“Such is only fitting.”

Further shuffling could be heard, and the voice came from closer than ever before. “Smell this.”

Griphook growled as he recoiled, dragging Hermione back with him and nearly toppling her from her seat. “Iocaine!”

“Indeed, the rumours of goblin senses are not exaggerated. I smell nothing.”

“Of course not; you humans are a weak and pathetic species.” The goblin replied, easing his grip slightly, but not allowing his body any closer to the poison.

“The challenge is simple.” The voice was muffled, as though facing away from them. “Iocaine is deadly to both our species, especially when ingested directly. I have poisoned one of these goblets. You choose which goblet you prefer, and once you have, we drink.” Once more, sounding as though facing the pair, Hermione heard the chink of glass resting on the stone. “The battle has begun. It ends when you choose; we both drink and find out who is right, and who is dead!”

“Very well.” Hermione heard more delight in those two words than she had from the goblin since this journey had begun. He was enjoying this. She felt the pressure on her throat lessen again as the blade came almost completely away from her neck. “All I need to do is deduce what I know of you to figure out where it is. Simple as anything.

“You are of a clever disposition, which would lead you to put the poison in your own goblet, as only a complete fool would drink what he had been given by an adversary. Therefore, I cannot choose the wine in front of you.

“However, as you indicated, I am not a fool, and with you counting on that fact, I cannot choose the wine in front of me.

“We all know that iocaine is from the new colony and its residents are, every one of them, criminals. Criminals are used to being distrusted, as you are most assuredly distrusted by me, reinforcing that I cannot choose the wine before you.”

“Truly you have a dizzying intellect.” The man replied in an impressed tone. Hermione scoffed, and she felt the hand on her arm tighten in response.

“A genius even amongst my own prodigious kind.” Hermione could hear the snarling smile in the words. “You knowing the powder’s origins in Australia would mean I cannot possibly choose the wine presented to me.

“Beating Hagrid proves you are strong, and you could then be counting on said strength to protect you. An idiotic yet human flaw, but it also proves I cannot choose your wine.”

“Are you done stalling?” The man asked, a tinge of boredom in his voice now.

“Not even close. Defeating Black indicates you have studied extensively. A learned man would know that man is mortal and would put poison such as this as far as possible from himself, and thusly I cannot drink the wine before me.”

“You won’t trick me into giving away anything,” the man replied again in the same bored tone.

Griphook gave another gravelly laugh. “You’ve given everything away.” His voice was cool and calm as the standoff boiled across the table. “I know exactly where the poison is.”

The goblin gave a slight snap of his fingers as he finished the sentence with a flourish, and Hermione felt a hint of something wash over her at the sound. But her thoughts were distracted from the effect by the fact that if the goblin had been able to snap his fingers while holding her arm, he was no longer holding the knife.

“You’ve made your decision?” The man questioned, a tone of delight in his voice now.

“Indeed I have. We each drink from our own goblet.”

The sound of glass scraping on stone sounded out as Hermione carefully let her fingers brush over the stone tabletop. She kept her movements slow and short so as not to draw attention as she listened to the sound of the pair draining their glasses loudly. Her fingers closed over the handle of the small dagger, and she smoothly lifted it from the table’s surface and retreated her hands to her lap, adjusting her grip so that she would be ready.

“You chose wrong,” the man stated as he laid his own glass back onto the table.

“Hmmm, you would think that, human. But that’s where *you* are wrong. Goblin magic is undetectable by human eyes, so you never noticed me cast a switching spell on the wine. I hope you enjoy death, as I will greatly enjoy watching yours. You should have known better than to challenge a goblin when death is on the line.”

Griphook’s voice dripped with animosity and victory as he shattered his own glass on the tabletop, making Hermione jump with surprise. Silence returned to fill the air as she could feel the tension build, but the man opposite them did not fall. Instead, she was further surprised by the sharp-clawed hand that had been cutting off the circulation in her arm loosening and falling away. A heavy sound indicated her captors fall onto the grassy ground, and a light chuckle sounded from the other side of the table.

Hermione left the dagger in her lap as she raised her hands and removed the blindfold. A glance to her right showed the twitching and gurgling form of Griphook staring up at her with disbelief in his eyes as his hands clutched at his throat in vain. After a few moments of pointless struggle, the goblin fell still, and silence once more filled the air.

“So the poison was in your goblet the whole time?” Hermione asked, speaking for the first time in the confrontation.

The man opposite her smiled. While she had caught a few fleeting glimpses of him since the ship, now she could see him in detail before her under the full light of day. He was dressed entirely in black robes of light fabric, even wearing a cloth mask over his face. There was clearly something unusual about the fabric, as she could not make out his eyes or other features. She noted the glint of metal on his left hip where a sword was fastened to his belt.

“The poison was in both. I am immune to iocaine powder. Something he should have considered with his ‘dizzying intellect’. Goblins are so easy to manipulate when you know the right buttons to press.”

He leaned forward, and Hermione raised her hands but stopped as he instead reached for more of the food laid out on the stone. “Eat up, Highness. I doubt they fed you well given the

plan to cut your throat."

He reclined as he ate, looking every bit like there was no rush to return her to her homeland. Hermione gestured at her bonds, and he laughed softly around the food in his mouth. "If you wish to be free, I suggest the dagger on your lap." She watched him eat in disbelief. "Do not think me as half-witted as this lot. I see more than most."

"Who are you?" She enquired.

"I am not someone to be trifled with. That is all that you need know."

She watched the man for several long moments before turning her gaze to the blade in her lap. It was sufficiently sharp to make short work of the ropes on her wrists. A snap of the man's fingers had a delicate belt laid on the table before her as he reached for more of the food. Hermione looked at Griphook's form and noted the sheath he had kept the dagger in was now resting before her.

"It is unwise to travel without some form of protection. One could find themselves kidnapped."

Hermione seethed at the comment as she slipped the knife into the sheath and tied the belt about her waist. She continued to watch the man closely as she ate her fill, feeling the hunger that had built during her capture keenly now that he had brought her attention to it. After all, she had not eaten since she left the castle the morning before. As ravenous as she was, though, she kept her manners throughout, and it was not terribly long before she was full once more.

"Shall we depart? It will take us some time to return to England." Hermione asked at last.

"We're not going to England." The man replied, standing and preparing his sparse gear.

"What?"

"We are not going to England. Are you hard of hearing?" He questioned, not even bothering to look at her.

"Where are you planning on taking me if not home?"

He stared at her now; though she could not see his eyes, she could feel the intensity of his gaze upon her face. "And just where would it be that you call home, Highness?" There was an undertone of pain in the distorted sound of his voice.

"Malfoy Castle is currently where I reside." Hermione's reply was almost too quiet to hear.

"So you would be hoping to return to your daring Prince then, is it?"

"We are to be wed. Such a thing oft requires a bride to be present." She retorted angrily. "Returning me would see you handsomely rewarded. I can promise you that."

The man broke out into irritating laughter as he spun away from Hermione. “Ha, that’s good. The promises of women are worth nothing to me.”

“I only sought to ‘lighten your burden’. Prince Draco is the finest hunter in all the lands. He will find us, and I will be wed to him. Returning me would see you alive on that day.”

“You believe that your love will save you then?”

“I never claimed to love him. But he will save me, of that you can be certain. And the swift death of the one holding me captive.”

“And your prince is content to marry someone who does not love him in return?”

“Princes will do as they want. We are subject to their will. I shall marry him regardless. There is nought else in life any more.” Hermione’s voice trailed off at her last.

“Hmmm, I doubt you were capable of loving him. Of loving at all, really.”

“How dare you! I have loved more deeply than a killer like yourself could ever imagine. I know who you are. The Dread Pirate Riddle. Only he is so viciously cruel.”

The man turned to face her before dropping into a short bow. “The very same. And what is it that I may do for you?”

“You can die in agony. I would see you cut slowly into a thousand pieces.” Her voice was cold and hate-filled.

“Hardly a compliment. But many would. And what have I done that has your venom directed at me?”

“You murdered the only man I ever loved.”

He placed a hand on his chin as if contemplating her words. “That is highly possible; I kill a lot of people. Who was this great love of yours then? Another prince like this one, ugly, rich and arrogant?”

“No, he was an innocent farm boy. Kind and poor and perfect. With eyes greener than the deepest forest that let you see into his very soul. Hair the shade of night and as wild as a summer storm. And love, deeper than the oceans and kinder than anything in this world. On the high seas, your ship attacked, and the Dread Pirate never takes prisoners.”

“Well, you cannot afford to make exceptions in my line of work. If word were to get out about a pirate being soft, people would cease to fear you. That leads to fighting back and all of a sudden it’s all work, work, work. All the time.”

“Do not mock my pain!” Hermione yelled at the man.

“Life is pain, Highness! Anyone who says differently is selling something.” He growled in return, causing Hermione to stumble onto her behind. He turned away from her, and for a

moment she watched as he stood there. “I think I remember this precious love of yours. Some five years ago, I believe. Does it bother you to hear?”

“You can say nothing that would hurt me more than the pain you have already caused,” Hermione replied, not bothering to stand again, the feeling of her loss weighing heavier on her soul than any time in the previous years. For here before her was the very man who took her heart from her.

“He died well, if that pleases you to hear. No blubbering for his life like most, nor attempts to bribe me like the rich so often do. He simply said ‘please’. ‘Please, I need to live’. ‘Twas the please that caught my memory.” Riddle stated as he turned back to look at her prone form. “I asked him what was so important for him here. ‘True love’, he replied. And then he spoke of a woman of such beauty and faithfulness, a true treasure. I can only assume he meant you.” He waved an absent hand in her direction, as he walked to the edge, looking out over the descending hillside below. “You should bless me for destroying him before he found out what you really are.”

“And what am I?” Hermione growled in return, standing once more to face down the demon of her nightmares.

“Faithfulness, Highness! He spoke of your enduring faithfulness. And yet, when you find out he is gone, suddenly you get engaged to your prince. How long did it take you to move on? Was it that same hour or did you wait a whole week out of respect for the dead?”

“You mocked me once; never do it again. I died that day.” The sound of galloping horses pulled Riddle’s attention back towards the rocky outcropping where she assumed he had battled the poor giant. “And you can die too, for all I care.” And Hermione shoved him towards the steep edge by the stone table, sending him tumbling down the mountainside.

As his black-clad form slipped over the edge, three words sounded back at her without distortion. “As you wish.”

Hermione’s heart both swelled and stopped as she at once recognised the voice. “Oh my, Harry. What have I done?”

She quickly lost her footing on the uneven terrain and soon was tumbling along. Hermione felt pain sprouting all over her body as the ground tenderised her form as she fell helplessly after the man in black until she smacked straight into his open arms as she reached the bottom and knocked them both to the ground at the base of the surprisingly tall incline.

He quickly removed his mask, and Hermione’s breath caught as she once more looked into the gorgeous eyes of her lost love. They were even greener than she remembered as he looked all over her now grubby face.

“Beautiful.” He whispered as his fingers moved through her hair, pushing it from her face. “Are you hurt?”

“You are alive. If you asked it of me, I could fly.” Hermione wrapped him in a fierce hug, causing them both to groan in protest as their bodies were not as willing to ignore the fall as

their souls.

“Show me where it hurts, my princess.” As he spoke, Harry pressed his fingers to her face, and she felt the pain diminish. She looked at him with astonishment as it disappeared entirely. “It’s a long story that can wait until you are better. Now tell me where it hurts.”

Hermione spent several minutes testing her muscles and pointing out where the pains were before he was satisfied. Several more were spent as he ran his hands over his own form, and he straightened as each pulse of energy Hermione felt from him receded.

“Much better, no?” Harry smiled and held his arms open. “Now I’ve waited for this for five very long years.”

With a will, Hermione threw herself into his arms once more, and the pair kissed. Hermione called it a kiss only because she could think of no other word to describe the utter bliss that spread throughout her form at the touch. Harry’s lips felt familiar and yet different. He had grown in his absence. Hermione could feel well-defined muscles under his clothing, even more so than they had been before he left. Her hands entangled in the much longer black hair on his head, most of which was tied back into a ponytail behind him.

Pulling away from the kiss, her eyes scoured his form, trying to memorise it and prove it was really here all at once. “You’ve grown.”

“As have you. Even more beautiful than when I last laid eyes on you. How long did you stand on that hill after I disappeared over the horizon?”

Hermione blushed as she recalled the day vividly. The anguish at her fear that it would be the last she would see of him. “An hour or so.” She provided bashfully.

Harry smiled in return and pressed his lips to her forehead. “I promised you that I would always come for you. Why did you not wait for me?”

“You were dead!” Hermione called out in exasperation.

“Death cannot stop true love. Merely delay it a while.”

“I shall never doubt again.” Hermione pressed her lips to his own once again, and they lost themselves in the moment. Feelings both had long since sought to hide overflowed into and out of the other.

The sound of horses once more distracted them, and they looked up the steep incline to see a gathering of troops above them.

“That would be your dashing prince.” Harry offered, earning a punch in the arm.

“Do not be like that.” Hermione cautioned, and he smiled at her in return.

“Here, hold still a moment.”

He passed his hands up and down her sides three times, and Hermione felt the same strange energy passing over her as her clothing changed. The long red dress she had worn riding the day before darkened until it was almost the same shade of black as Harry's robes and contorted about her into much more fitting clothing for the terrain they now found themselves in. Long trousers and thick travelling robes.

"Better?" He asked.

"Much. But how do you intend to outrun them? We are on foot, and while they must find a way down, they will soon catch us up with little effort."

Harry smiled as he led her through the ravine they found themselves in. "That is easy," he replied, indicating a large treed area directly ahead of them. "We'll lose them in the Fire Swamp."

Hermione froze and yanked Harry to a halt as he reached the full stretch of her hand. "But the Fire Swamp is dangerous. We'll never survive in there."

"You only say that because no one ever has. Just like no one has ever been spared by the Dread Pirate Riddle." He laughed as he set her moving again, and the pair soon vanished between the trees.

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Dangerous sounds came from all directions as Hermione followed Harry deeper into the woods. She felt as if evil eyes were staring at her through the darkness, and were it not for Harry's hand in her own, she doubted she'd have had the courage to even walk.

"You know, it's not that bad," Harry stated, looking about the oppressive forest appraisingly.

Hermione fixed him with a stare that she truly hoped conveyed her disdain for his statement, and he smiled defensively.

"Look, I'm not saying I want to build a home here, but the trees are really quite lovely."

Hermione continued to stare at him with the same look but was unable to keep up her facade as she once more felt his lips against her own.

"So, I believe you are owed an explanation." Harry offered as he pulled back, looking into her eyes as she nodded. "Well," he began as a slight popping sound built to his right when they began walking once more, "most of what I told you before was true. We were at sea, the pirates attacked, and I asked Riddle to spare my life so I may return to you."

Hermione felt her heart thud against her chest at the thought once more. Her Harry was alive, and he had returned as promised. However, the joy quickly soured as a sharp burst of flames shot into the air around his arm and caught his robes alight. Harry gave her a soft shove back as a second spurt appeared where she had been standing a moment before, and he quickly doused the flames on his robes with some water he appeared to conjure out of nowhere.

An additional wave of his hands soon righted his robes, and he pressed his left hand over his arm where the flames had been and closed his eyes, appearing to focus intently for a moment. Hermione could feel the swell of energy from him before it vanished, and he looked at her face once more.

“Are you hurt?” Hermione shook her head before lifting the fabric of his sleeve and revealing his arm. Where she was certain there would be burns was only some lightly reddened skin.

“How?”

“I promise, it is a part of the story. Where was I? Right. I asked him to spare me, and he hesitated. In that moment, I chose to tell him of you. Your radiant beauty. Your enviable mind. And your loving kindness. I’m not sure what part of it stayed his hand, but it worked. Instead of killing me, he trussed me up and threw me in the brig. As he walked out, he told me that he’d kill me in the morning, and then he was gone.

“It was the oddest time of my life. Each morning I was dragged from the brig and set to work, cleaning the deck, cooking the meals. It became familiar. Just another job that needed doing. It was after about a month of this, with Riddle telling me every night, ‘Goodnight, Harry. I’ll likely kill you in the morning’, that he came to the brig and instead of letting me out and setting me to work, he sat inside the cell with me.

“He wanted to take me on as his apprentice. To teach me all he knew. With no better prospect at the time, I agreed, and so began the training. Every night was still the same. He’d lead me back to the brig and promise to kill me in the morning. For three years it continued as he taught me everything; you’d have been proud of me. I was ravenous in my desire to learn it all. Training by day, death threats by night. But it was after a year of this that he finally agreed to teach me his second most guarded secret, as he put it.”

Hermione was listening intently as he spoke, but her breath caught again at that line. Was this the mysterious energy he had been using?

“Yes, I thought that would catch your attention. It’s magic, you see. Like what the goblins can do. He taught me to manipulate it. Heal wounds faster, change one thing to another, and conjure elemental forces. Something I intend to teach you, which should make for a nice change, don’t you think?” A firm slap on the arm was her only reply as Harry spent a few moments cutting a pathway through some particularly dense vines in their way.

“By the end of the three years, we had become very good friends. I’d moved at last from the brig into proper quarters. And one night Riddle called me to his cabin, sat me down, and we talked. ‘I am not the Dread Pirate Riddle’, he confessed. He was, in fact, a man by the name of Ryan. He had inherited the ship and the name from the former Dread Pirate Riddle, as he intended for me to inherit it from him. The man he had inherited it from was not the Dread Pirate Riddle either. His name was Benedict. The real Riddle had been retired 35 years and was living like a king in Patagonia. He further explained it was the name that was the important thing, as no one would surrender to the Dread Pirate Harry. So, we returned ashore, swapped out the crew, and he stayed on as first mate, all the while calling me Riddle. Once the crew believed, he left the ship, and I’ve been the Dread Pirate Riddle ever since. But now we are together again; I shall retire and hand the name to someone else.”

Hermione was stunned. Not only had her love been returned to her, but he was a man of singular talent and willing to give up being one of the most feared and respected people on the planet for her. She was not too surprised, as she knew that he loved her as deeply as she loved him, but it did help to further impress on her the depth of that feeling.

So lost was she in her thoughts that she wasn't watching where she was walking, and with a scream, she found herself surrounded by a pressing blackness. No air but what she had in her lungs, and nothing to hold onto in the darkness as it pushed inward on her, even pressing into her nose and mouth, a physical force drowning her. Fear gripped at her as she pondered how ironic it would be for her to go and die in the Fire Swamp the very same day that fate returned her true love to her.

A muffled screech left her lips, allowing the darkness to enter further as she felt something warm wrapped under her arms and pulled against the darkness. Her eyes flickered as they were assaulted by a blinding light, and she felt fresh air hit her lungs once more as she gasped and coughed the rough material that had been seeping into her mouth all over the ground.

Hermione coughed and sputtered, realising it was sand that had been suffocating her. Harry wrapped her in his arms and snuggled her tightly as he leaned back against the trunk of a nearby tree. A spongy vine was clasped in his hand, and she assumed it had been what he'd used to rescue her from the lightning sand.

"I'm sorry." She whispered in his ear.

"Whatever for? Thanks to you, we know what to look out for now. People make a big deal about the Fire Swamp, but it's really not that bad. The flames are preceded by the popping sound of the methane buildup, and once you know what it looks like, the lightning sand will be easy to avoid."

Hermione laughed into his shoulder and used her fingers to try and clear the last vestiges of sand from her mouth. Harry offered her a canteen he pulled from who knows where, and she quickly used it to clear her mouth and body of the gritty nuisance.

"What about the R.O.U.S's?" She enquired, handing him back the canteen as he stood once more and used his hands to dry her hair and clothes.

"Rodents of Unusual Size? I don't believe they exist." Harry chimed a moment before he disappeared from view as a large furry lump collided with him.

Hermione tracked his path and noticed him lying on the ground on the far side of the large root he'd been standing next to, rolling on the ground with a giant animal clutched in his arms. Skinny legs with sharp-looking claws swiped at him again and again, but Harry had a firm hold in a good position. The rodent could not reach him properly with the claws.

Hermione looked about for something to help when her hand brushed the bone hilt of the dagger on her belt. Freeing the blade from its sheath, she leapt forward and buried the dagger into the belly of the struggling beast. It gave a horrid yelp of pain and began thrashing even harder as she pulled the blade towards her body once more, slicing it open deeply.

Harry seemed to notice her efforts, and as a rising popping sound echoed around them, he looked about the ground. Suddenly he released the R.O.U.S and twisted about as the creature tried to right itself. He pressed both legs to its side and kicked hard, throwing it a few metres aside right as a burst of flame shot from the nearby vent it moved through and caught the creature's fur alight.

Hermione recoiled from the smell of burning flesh as the beast rolled in agony, flames licking over it, before Harry stood and walked over, drawing his sword and ending the poor beast's torment with a single swift thrust.

“See,” he panted, “no problem.”

Hermione just stared at him for several moments before bursting out in laughter at his state. His clothes were ragged, and there was blood coming from several scratches on his torso, but he still looked good as he watched her with a smile.

“Shall we, my dear?” he asked as he offered his hand, and the pair continued through the dangerous, but not too dangerous, swamp.

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Hermione was so relieved as the sunlight filtered once more through the dense foliage above. They were approaching the edge of the swamp. They had succeeded. She threw her arms around Harry in joy, and the pair were soon lost in another deep kiss. Tiny remnants of sand in their mouths slightly soured the feel of the kiss, but neither was ready to pull away after their ordeal. Neither pulled away until someone clearing their throat broke the moment.

She looked up at the figure on the horse only a few metres away and was disappointed to see Prince Draco looking at them both. She had been hoping that they would get away and she would be free to continue her life with Harry from now on.

“Surrender.” Draco sneered.

“You wish to surrender to me? Very well, I accept.” Harry agreed, and Hermione was hard-pressed not to laugh at her love.

“You surrender now, or I’ll kill you where you stand, peasant.” Draco rephrased.

“Not likely. We know the secrets of the Fire Swamp. We can live here quite happily, so unless you feel like dying, I’d not follow.”

As Harry verbally sparred with her fiancé, Hermione noted the guards spreading about them, many armed with crossbows and taking aim at Harry.

“Promise you will not harm him.” She called, drawing Draco’s attention.

“What?” the Prince replied.

“Promise you will do no harm to him and that you shall return him to his ship. Promise me this, and I shall go with you.”

Hermione's heart broke at the look Harry gave her as she spoke. She turned to him and whispered, "I lost you once before, my love. I could not survive if I were to lose you again."

Harry still looked hurt, but he nodded his acknowledgement.

Draco sneered at the sight, but he agreed. "As you desire. Come with me, and my men will make sure that he reaches his ship safe and sound."

Harry's hand was still clasped tightly in her own, and she turned away from the prince. Looking Harry deep in the eyes, Hermione gently pressed a kiss to the back of his hand as she backed away. Several of the guards helped her onto the back of Prince Draco's horse, and as she continued to stare into the forlorn green eyes of her love, her fiancé rode her swiftly away.

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Harry awoke to find himself in a dank dungeon bound to a wooden table. His face was strapped in place, and his arms and legs were bound. Several odd trinkets were stuck to his torso in various positions, and a twitchy little elf was tending to his wounds from the Fire Swamp.

"Hello," he said to the surprised figure.

"Stay still, Mister. You'll hurt yourself if you try to struggle. Mistress won't like that." The house-elf replied.

"I am in a dungeon. Why are you tending my wounds if I am your captive?"

The elf looked at him with a deranged smile. "Not just any dungeon. This is the Pit of Despair. Mistress likes everyone to be as healthy as can be before they go on the Machine. It's important for her research."

"You're awake," a high-pitched voice sounded from higher up in the dungeon, "good. We can get right to it then. Kreacher, prepare the Machine."

The deranged face of his captor came into view, and Harry recognised her as the Prince's right-hand. "Countess."

"Oh please, call me Bella." She replied with a mad cackle. "We keep it informal down here. Helps when people don't have to remember titles. Or words. My work needs accuracy, not flowery nonsense."

Harry grimaced at the foul woman. He'd heard of her depravity even on the seas. One man had begged for his death to escape going back to the insane Countess of Pain. "Very well, Bella. I take it I'm to be tortured then?"

"Tortured, no. We're beyond such barbaric practices here. That's why I invented this." She indicated a large device built around a water wheel that the twitchy elf was in the process of preparing for use. "It's an ingenious design if I do say so myself. And it's been ever so helpful to my research. You see, I'm assembling a compendium on pain, and you will be able to

contribute to that masterwork. Such is the punishment for attempting to steal the prince's bride. And for ruining his plans to have her killed and start a war."

Harry violently strained against his bindings as he sought to strangle the woman who would threaten Hermione.

"Oh, fret not, little pirate. You ruined that plan by killing the goblin. Now it's going to take a more delicate touch. A dagger to the heart on their wedding night ought to do the trick. Or perhaps the Prince shall strangle her himself."

Bellatrix gave a sinister cackle as Harry struggled in vain against his shackles. Hermione was in danger, and he was stuck, God only knows where, at the hands of a madwoman and a crazed elf. An elf which was now attaching the strange devices on his body to hoses coming off the Machine.

"Kreacher, set it to two," Bella called as she settled over a large open book on a nearby desk.

The little elf moved a handle and an agony the likes of which Harry had never known surged through his body, ripping a horrific scream from his throat.

Hermione shot up in her bed, panting heavily. She'd had another one of those horrible nightmares, the same sort she'd been having since they returned to the castle. Dreams she had assumed were Fate's punishment for turning her back on the gift she had given her. When the Countess had returned the day after their return and confirmed that she had delivered Harry as the Prince had commanded, she spent the entire afternoon weeping in her room. Fate had returned love to her against all odds, and she had given it up to save his life.

Her nights had been punctuated by terrible nightmares, though she definitely preferred the ones where the King, whose kindness and conversation were one of her small joys in the castle, would die in the night. And as any King needs a Queen, she'd be married to Draco the next day and yet the people hated her for betraying her true love in such a way. But they at least were a reprieve from the ones where she imagined the twitchy house-elf tying her love to that cruel machine and torturing him in some misguided attempt to understand pain. While she could never recall the explicit detail beyond that, Harry's screams in those nightmares echoed through her mind in her waking hours in crystal-clear detail.

She didn't need torture to understand pain. It was her constant now. At least when she had thought Harry dead, she had been able to sleep at night despite the nightmares of bloodthirsty pirates, knowing that someday they would be together again. But knowing he was alive and that she was about to marry someone else was agony.

Trying to settle her heart rate and clear the horrid images from her brain, Hermione finally made up her mind. She would visit the prince and tell him today. She wasted no time in getting herself ready, shooing away the many handmaidens as they tried to dress her in fine silks, settling instead for one of the only sets of clothing she retained from her life on the farm. She was on a mission, and finery was not required for her work.

It was not hard to find Prince Draco; he was in his study every day lately, filling out requisitions related to the upcoming nuptials. He glanced up from his conversation with

Cormac McLaggen, the head guard, as he heard her enter and a warm smile spread over his face.

“My dear, what brings you here today?” Draco inquired, standing as he held his arms open.

“I cannot marry you,” Hermione stated plainly, not moving from her position in the doorway.

Draco’s smile fell away as his arms drooped. “What did you say?”

“I love Harry. I cannot marry you. I’ll die first before I betray him like that again.”

A shimmer of something passed behind Draco’s eyes, something that she couldn’t identify as he turned away from her, but when he looked back, it was gone.

“My dear, he left. He could have sailed anywhere by now.”

“It doesn’t matter how far he goes; he will always come for me.” Hermione remained resolute. Fate had brought them back together once; it would do so again. True love was not so easy to foil.

Draco looked at her with a slightly shocked expression. “But… Look, how about you write four letters to Harry and I’ll have my four fastest ships sail in each direction in pursuit of him. If he returns, you can go with my blessing; if not, would you consider at least marrying me as an alternative to death?”

“In that situation, I would consider it. But it is a moot point as he will return.”

Hermione quickly left the room as she saw Draco turn to Cormac and ask him to summon the Countess immediately. She had letters to write.

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Once the letters had been sent, Hermione’s spirits lifted considerably. She took to spending more time with the King and Queen, and both were amazed at the turnaround in the girl. She would go for walks through the town centre, always under heavy guard at Draco’s order after her previous kidnapping, and found new joy in watching the lives of the townsfolk as they prepared for the imminent anniversary.

Many congratulated her on her upcoming wedding, but Hermione knew it would never come to pass. Harry would return once more, and she would be free of this engagement. Safe to travel the world with him wherever they might please.

She watched as the increased security the palace had assigned for the events cleaned up the streets and the nearby forest of the ne'er-do-wells and thugs, and she even spotted the towering form of Hagrid amongst the civilian Brute Squad. She realised when she saw him that she had not gotten the full story of the chase from Harry before they were interrupted, and she resolved to do so once they were together again.

Her guards prevented her from going near the giant, as he was always amidst the rounded-up thugs, but she made sure to write a letter to the gentle man that she called a runner to deliver

for her. Seeing him made her wonder what had become of the duelist Sirius, but she did not encounter him directly in her travels.

Every day she would come to Draco's office and enquire whether word had been received back yet, and every day he would assure her that it was too soon. The delay did nothing to lessen her surety that Harry would come. Nothing would keep him away from her once he received one of her letters.

So, it came to be that Hermione was walking to the Prince's office on the 'morning of the wedding' hoping to hear good news regarding her Harry's return. As she approached, she could hear the voices within and decided to wait rather than interrupt the Prince on such a busy day as the country's anniversary. She was in no rush today.

"The forest has been emptied as order, the guard tripled, and the only way into the castle tonight will be through the main gate to which only I hold the key." Cormac preened, sounding every bit the prancing figure he portrayed on the streets. Hermione had wondered if the Head Guard had ever actually held a sword in his life, as his hands looked far too delicate and fresh to have seen battle.

"Good," Draco replied, his voice even as ever, "and the nuisance is definitely taken care of?"

"He still lives, but he is in no state to come here even now. After today's session, I doubt he'll even remember his own name, Highness."

The Countess, however, sounded every bit the malicious monster that Cormac was clearly not. Her disfigured right hand was enough to turn most people's stomachs, but if that didn't, the glint in her eye and her high-pitched, crazy voice would certainly do the trick. Hermione had avoided the woman at every opportunity in her time in the castle, as the woman would stare at her in a truly unnerving fashion.

"Excellent, tonight I shall be wed; tomorrow we go to war."

"To war? Who are you going to war with?" Hermione questioned, at last stepping into the room.

"Oh, I didn't hear you come in, dear," Draco replied, glancing aside to the Countess who was once more leering at Hermione. "The sea, of course. Tonight after our wedding we shall set sail with every ship in *our* armada and head out on our honeymoon."

"Every ship?"

"Every single one. Polished and shined to perfection. Outfitted and ready to ferry us wherever your heart desires."

"All except your four fastest, of course." An uncertain feeling settled in her stomach at the confused look the comment drew on her fiancé's face. "The four fastest that you sent in search of Harry!"

Draco continued to look uncertainly in her direction, but he did not say anything in defence of her accusation.

“You are a coward, with a heart full of fear. You never sent the ships.”

“I would watch what you say to me, fiancé. You have yet to find I have a temper when pressed. Cormac!” The lickspittle was by his side in an instant. “Lock our dear bride in her room until she is called for. We can’t have traitors and assassins finding her before the wedding, after all.”

Draco finished with a pronounced sneer, and the Countess was eyeing her in a truly frightening manner as Cormac stepped forward and grasped her by the arm.

“You shall live to regret such treachery. When my true love comes for me.” Hermione stated with surety as the Head Guard guided her from the room.

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Hermione tried her best to resist the efforts of the handmaidens as they prepared her for the sham she was now being forced into, but these were not the lithe, delicate girls she normally dealt with but hulking women she suspected shared ancestry with Hagrid. As such, it did not take them terribly long to dress her and ready her makeup and jewellery, and before she knew it, Hermione found herself being guided up the centre of the chapel by the King, trailed behind by the guards she now realised had been assigned to ensure her compliance rather than her security.

At the head of the room, Prince Draco stood by the altar dressed in fine green and silver silk robes. Opposite him in the position of maid of honour was the horrid Countess, dressed in her nicest hunting outfit and looking every bit as menacing as she could. Behind the altar was the Head Priest, Cornelius Fudge, dressed in the most ostentatious robes she had seen and wearing a bright green bowler hat that she was sure was not standard church issue.

The gentle King stepped her up to the altar and laid her hand into his cruel son’s, clearly unaware of how vicious the boy had become before he stepped down and joined the Queen in the front row.

Cornelius cleared his throat, and the chapel quietened before he spoke in his high squeaky voice. “Mawage. Mawage is wot bwings us togeder today. Mawage, that bwessed awangment, that dweam wifin a dweam...”

“And wuv, tru wuv, will fowow you foweva...”

His odd monologue was interrupted by shouts coming from the front gate. Several voices could be heard crying out in terror, and many of the attendees were unsettled by the sounds. Hermione grinned slightly at the disruption in the hope that the wedding would be brought to a halt.

“Bella, dear. Go and see what is going on. “Draco commanded calmly. “We can continue in your absence.”

Hermione’s smile faded at the instruction, even though she felt much happier knowing the crazed woman was no longer at her back.

Draco turned to the priest, “Do continue.”

Fudge looked shaken for a moment before nodding his head to the prince and resuming his monologue, “So tweasure your wuv...”

“By skipping to the end,” Draco ordered, interrupting the man again as louder noises could now be heard coming from outside.

“Have you the wing?”

Draco grabbed Hermione’s hand and placed the ring on forcefully, stinging her fingers with his firm grip, but it did not faze her.

“He is coming for me.” Hermione smiled.

“Your precious love is dead.” Draco retorted quietly, ensuring the audience and even Fudge could not hear. “I killed him myself this very morning.”

“And yet, I see the fear in your eyes. Our sins revisit us, Draco.” Hermione commented calmly.

Draco nodded to the priest to continue once more.

“...and do you, Pwincess Heowmiown...” Fudge somehow mumbled with a wide-open mouth.

“Man and wife. Say, man and wife.” Draco demanded, his calm facade clearly cracking under the increasing noise and screams from outside.

“Man an' wife.” Fudge copied with a confused look at the prince.

Draco roughly pushed Hermione back over to his father. “Take her to our suite. I’ll be there shortly.” He leered at her as he walked away, drawing his sword before disappearing out the doorway with the remaining guards.

Hermione felt adrift. Her Harry had not saved her from her fate. She was bound to a man she was fast coming to realise was truly a monster, and nothing could change that now. The King and Queen gently guided the girl through the corridors, the Queen commenting on the oddity of the wedding as the King softly directed her with but a touch on her arm. She glanced at the old man, his long silver hair swept back under the golden crown, almost taunting it with the yellowy sheen his own hair had once held.

She leaned over and laid a gentle kiss on his cheek, and he smiled at her in return. “What was that for?”

“You’ve been so kind to me, and I won’t be seeing you again. I’ll be killing myself once we reach the honeymoon suite.”

“Won’t that be nice.” The King replied, and Hermione smiled at him, noting how truly gone the man was and understanding how her *husband* had corrupted his position so easily. His smile remained as he turned to see his own wife several metres ahead by the doorway to the suite. “She kissed me!”

Hermione couldn’t help but smile at the old man. She laid a soft hand on the Queen’s arm as she passed and gave her a soft smile, which the older woman returned tightly. It seemed that at least one of the pair had noticed the man their son had become, but in their society, it was the one who could do nothing about it.

“Farewell, my Queen.”

“Best of luck, dear.” The Queen returned as she closed the door behind the girl.

Hermione surveyed the room. The honeymoon suite was her own room, exactly as it had been that morning. Draco hadn’t even thought to arrange a new locale or to bring her to his own chambers. At least she knew he’d get a surprise upon his arrival tonight.

She stepped over to the open window and looked out to the courtyard a few metres below and was surprised to see two figures she recognised rush into the open, one a short distance behind the other. She brought her hand to her face in shock; however, when the Countess turned and lobbed a dagger she had drawn from her boot, it lodged itself in the stomach of the man Black, knocking him back against a wall.

“I do remember you now. The little boy Black, I see you even still have the scars. Have you really been looking for me all these years only to fail at the end?” The Countess advanced on the form of Sirius as it gradually slid down the wall, agony written on the poor man’s face. “I think that is the worst thing I have ever heard. How marvellous.”

The dangerous woman thrust her sword at the prone form of Sirius only to have her blow deflected at the last moment with a sudden movement of the downed man’s blade.

“You have an overdeveloped sense of vengeance; that will get you into trouble.” Bella cooed in her sickly voice as she reared back and thrust again, only to have the blade deflected to the other side.

Hermione watched on in shocked delight as Bella stepped back from the now rising form of Sirius Black. He pulled the dagger free and took a shaky step towards the horrid woman, nearly dropping to his knees from the obvious pain he was in.

“My name is Sirius Black. You killed my brother. Prepare to die.” The dark-haired man stated, his voice sounding nearly as weak as his body appeared, yet Hermione could still hear him clearly from her window.

Every time that the Countess advanced and lunged at Sirius, the man seemed to regain some of his vigour. Deflecting her strikes and returning with wounds of his own. Wounds that seemed to match, in reverse, those which she had delivered to him. And with every flourish of their blades, he would recite the line like a mantra.

“Hello, my name is Sirius Black. You killed my brother. Prepare to die.” Every time the words came from him, they grew in volume and force. The mantra drove new strength into his blade and arm.

“Stop saying that!” Bella screamed in return, throwing a second dagger in Black’s direction, which he deftly deflected as well.

Hermione was now clutching her windowsill so tightly that her fingers were white. She had hated the foul Countess since she arrived here, and here was someone standing up to her as she had never witnessed before. Perhaps the vile woman had at last met her match.

“Hello! My name is Sirius Black! You killed my Brother! Prepare to die!”

Bella only screamed in return as the man continued to push her back, and she stumbled over a raised flagstone, tumbling to the ground. With a lightning-quick strike, Sirius knocked her sword away and stood over her prone form.

“Please…” The Countess begged, leaving Hermione stunned as she heard the words.

“Offer me money,” Sirius demanded as he swiped a vicious cut across the woman’s pale cheek.

“Yes, I’ll give you money, a countless amount of gold!” She screeched from the floor.

“Now power, offer me that too.” And another slice cut across the opposite cheek, forever souring what would have been a pretty face if not for the twisted soul within.

“Absolutely. It is yours if you let me live.” Bella crooned, the abject fear clear in her voice.

“Offer me everything I ask for,” Sirius demanded, opening his arms wide, and Hermione couldn’t stop the squeak that left her throat; even she could see he had opened a vulnerability in his guard.

“You shall have it. Whatever you desire.” Bella cooed as she lunged upwards with a third dagger in hand.

Sirius moved like a snake, the hilt of his sword smashing down onto the hand with the dagger and knocking it free, before he swept forward and buried his sword to the same hilt in the Countess’ chest, leaving the woman looking stunned.

Hermione could not hear the whispered taunt that Sirius delivered directly to the dying woman’s ear as the light left the Countess’ eyes and she collapsed over, unmoving on the stone floor. Hermione turned away from the sight, resting her back against the stone wall beside the window as her heart fluttered.

It took her several minutes to come down from the adrenaline rush she had felt witnessing the battle below, but reality soon set upon her once again. Barely aware of the room she was in, Hermione turned to the desk beside her and opened the bottom drawer. Inside was a familiar blade, the very one she had stolen from Griphook, not two weeks beforehand.

“Forgive me, my love, but I must be free of this torment,” Hermione whispered, gently pressing the tip of the dagger to the flesh exposed by the dress just above her heart.

“There is a shortage of perfect breasts in this world.” A familiar voice sounded from behind Hermione, making her jump in surprise as she turned to look at the bed. “‘Twould be a pity to damage yours.”

Tears of joy spilt from her eyes as she dropped the dagger and leapt at the bed, wrapping her lost love tightly in her arms and pressing her lips firmly against his. Several moments of bliss passed before she noted his reaction was somewhat less energetic than she had hoped, and she pulled back, her hands letting his face go free, and it clunked hard against the headboard.

“Ow,” Harry stated simply as he gazed into her eyes but did not move to wrap her in his arms.

“Are you not pleased to see me?”

“Ecstatic; however, I was mostly dead this morning. Still gathering my strength is all.” Harry replied, her favourite smirk gracing his features as she kissed him once more. “Turns out your Prince and his Countess like their torture. We’re fortunate that some old friends found me and got a potion from old Awesome Arthur. But my strength is proving slow to return.”

“I am sorry, my love. Without meaning to, and against my will, I appear to have been married to the prince.” Hermione whispered, afraid to meet his eyes in her guilt.

“From what I hear, there was no wedding today.” Hermione’s eyes shot up to meet his own, a look of confusion on her face. “The priest skipped almost all of the ceremony, and neither one of you exchanged any vows. I can say ‘Man and wife’. Doesn’t make us any more married than you and the slimeball.”

She considered the ‘wedding’ and reached the same conclusion as her love had. There had been no commitment; she was not bound to Draco at all. Hermione broke out into a wide grin and kissed Harry once more, and her joy knew no bounds.

“So,” Hermione whispered once more, “it wasn’t a legal marriage?”

“Not at all, don’t you agree, Highness?”

Hermione rolled off Harry to see Draco standing in the doorway, looking livid. His sword glinted in the candlelight as he stepped forward. “A technicality that shall soon be remedied. But first, I shall have to kill you all over again, it seems, yippie for me. To the death!”

“No!” Harry replied loudly, and Draco stopped short. “To the pain!”

“I’m unfamiliar with that form.”

“Then I’ll be sure to use small words, you warthog-faced buffoon,” Harry responded, glaring hatefully at the Prince.

A look of utter shock spread across Draco's face as the insult settled on his mind. "That may well be the first time in my life that a man has dared insult me."

"It won't be the last, you snivelling cockroach. To the pain means this: if we duel and you win, death for me. If we duel and I win, life for you. But life on my terms. The first thing you lose will be your feet. Below the ankle. You will have stumps available to use within six months, though painful and difficult to walk on. Then your hands, at the wrists. They heal somewhat quicker. Five months is a fair average, but you'll never be able to feed yourself again. You'll be utterly dependent on those around you for your day-to-day existence. Next, your nose. No smell of dawn for you."

"And then my tongue, I suppose." Draco interjected, a look of joy on his face at the absurdity, "I killed you too quickly last time. Something I do not plan to do a second time."

"I wasn't finished, you gutless ferret. The next thing you lose will be your left eye, followed by your right so that you may truly enjoy the removal of the first."

"And then my ears, I understand. Let's get on with it!" the Prince said, his face falling at the repeated insults.

"Wrong, you mangy cur!" Harry's voice rang across the room. "Your ears you keep, and I'll tell you why. So that every shriek of every child at your hideousness shall be yours to cherish —every babe that weeps in fear at your approach, every woman that cries 'Dear God, what is that thing?' will reverberate forever with your perfect ears. That is what To the Pain means. It means I leave you in anguish. Wallowing in freakish misery forever as your outer appearance finally matches your inner filth."

"Hmmm, I believe Bella would like that greatly. But you are clearly bluffing." Draco retorted.

"It's possible, scum. I might be bluffing. It's conceivable, you miserable vomitus mass of slugs, that I'm only lying here because I lack the strength to stand. Then again. Perhaps I have the strength after all."

Hermione moved to help, but Harry gently pressed her hand to the bed. She watched with delight as Harry shifted to the side of the bed and stood gallantly before her, sword raised and pointed precisely at Draco's pale throat, looking every bit the storybook hero. "Drop your sword."

Fear was clearly evident on Draco's face now as his sword clattered loudly to the floor. Harry swiped the tip of his sword in the direction of the nearest chair, and Draco swiftly sat, looking every bit like a cowed child before the dangerous warrior. Hermione rushed over and tied Draco firmly to the chair; it was almost comical how tightly tied he was by the time she was finished, and she considered she may have taken some latent frustration out on the prince in the process, as the ropes were rather tight, especially around the groin.

A surprised eep left her lips as she stood when the beaten form of Sirius Black roughly slumped against the door to the room, his sword drawn and blood covering both his arms and his torso.

“Where is Hagrid?” Sirius asked as he stood away from the door.

“Last I saw, he was with you,” Harry replied, leaning on the bedpost lazily.

Sirius shook his head in response, and Harry moved forward to join him, but collapsed as he tried to step forward, his lack of strength showing plainly as Hermione rushed to his side to help. Her arms wrapped around him tightly.

“Ha, I was right!” Draco shouted.

“Indeed you were,” Harry replied, “and yet you are tied to a chair without a weapon, and I’m about to leave with the most beautiful woman on earth.”

“Shall I kill him for you, boss?” Sirius questioned, his blade dangerously close to Draco’s throat.

“No,” Harry replied, “I want him to live a long, lonely life with his cowardice. And your own battle?”

“The Countess Bellatrix Lestrange is dead. My brother in all but blood, your father, is avenged.” Sirius’ voice was wistful and his smile untouchable. Hermione was surprised by the comment about Harry's father, a man she had never had the chance to meet.

“Bella? Auntie Bella is dead?” Draco whimpered.

Hermione smiled at him predatorily. “Indeed, her body lies outside that very window.”

Sirius looked at her in confusion, before moving to the window and gasping. “You saw?”

Hermione nodded in reply as she helped Harry over to the window. She was surprised to see a large gentle giant come to a stop below with a quartet of sleek white horses, all saddled and ready to ride.

“Hagrid? Hedwig!” Hermione called as she noted her own horse standing beside the large man.

“'Ello, Princess. Look what I found.” Hagrid replied, his jovial voice echoing around the courtyard.

“Very good work, my large friend,” Harry replied as he assisted Hermione up onto the window ledge. “I hope you can catch.”

Hermione turned to Harry and pressed her lips to his once more, before she shuffled to the edge and pushed off, sailing a couple of metres into the giant’s arms. A process that quickly repeated with Harry and Sirius. The foursome climbed astride the horses, Hagrid having to help Harry onto Hedwig with Hermione behind him holding the reins around his torso as they swiftly rode out of the castle and were soon in the countryside.

Once they had put sufficient space between themselves and any pursuit, Hermione found herself leaning into Harry’s back, slowly drifting towards sleep as Hedwig gently trotted over

the grassy terrain. Harry gradually took control of the horse from her as her grip shifted from the reins to hug herself to his form.

“What do you plan to do now, my skilled friend?” Harry asked, and Hermione peered out from under heavy lids to see Sirius beside them on his own steed.

“I do not know. I have lived my life around revenge for so long that I don’t know what to do with the rest of my life.” Black replied, looking somewhat lost at the prospect.

“Well, have you ever considered piracy? The skillset is quite similar. If you were interested, I happen to think that you would make a wonderful Dread Pirate Riddle. I hear that he is retiring.” Harry replied.

Hermione giggled softly into her love's back as she allowed sleep to carry her away. To dreams of the future with her green-eyed farmboy.

End Notes

Cast:
Hermione Granger - The Princess Buttercup
Harry Potter - The Dread Pirate Roberts / Westley
Draco Malfoy - Prince Humperdinck
Bellatrix Lestrange - Count Tyrone Rugen
Sirius Black - Inigo Montoya
Rubeus Hagrid - Fezzik the Giant
Griphook the Goblin - Vizzini the Sicilian
Arthur Weasley - Miracle Max
Cornelius Fudge - The Impressive Clergyman
Kreacher the House-Elf - Pit of Despair Albino Assistant
Cormac McLaggen - Chief Enforcer Yellin
Xenophilius Lovegood - The King
Narcissa Malfoy - The Queen

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