

Just a Little Bit

by Melenka

Hermione is stuck in a house with two difficult men, one bored cat, a hapless mouse - and a physics problem.

Objects at Rest

Chapter 1 of 16

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A/N: Many thanks to the conspiracy of ladies who requested that I tell them a bedtime story.

NOTE: This particular AU takes place after HBP and ignores entirely DH. Thanks to MollysSister for reminding me to clarify.

Hermione sat at the kitchen table in number twelve, Grimmauld Place, contemplating the paper before her. She hadn't bothered using parchment. There was something comforting about the lined paper of notebooks.

The information was in no particular order. In some places, the words overlapped, a sign she had written them without looking. She glanced down at the open book on her lap, shaking her head. She had missed something, and she was fairly certain the answer was in this book. Fifteen other tomes were stacked on the table.

A terrified squeak interrupted her studying. She looked down at Crookshanks and sighed. He had been torturing a mouse for the past hour.

"Stop playing with it. Either finish it off, or let it go." She had said the same thing several times.

"Mrat!" The big orange cat had responded the same way each time, his meaning obvious. *Stay out of it; this one is mine.*

Still, the distraction worked as Hermione had expected. The mouse got away, racing across the room for the hole next to the cupboard. The poor thing would not make it to safety. Its attempt was both admirable and heartrending.

"Leave it be, please." For a wonder, the cat complied, giving her a lazy stare before padding down the hall. They both knew he would get the mouse the next time it poked its nose out of the hole. It was the way of things.

She went back to crafting the spell or attempting to. She was so close, the solution just out of reach. She pushed the paper away and slumped back in her chair, making guttural noises.

"Do you require assistance?" The contemptuous words flowed like oil, coating her.

She sat up straight, then grit her teeth. It rankled that he could still do that to her. "No, thank you. I can do this on my own." She did not turn her head.

"I am quite certain that you are capable of finishing alone." He drew out the last word.

She was alone. Everyone had gone to the Quidditch World Cup. Everyone save her. She had volunteered to be confined to a house with Severus Snape and the shell of a man the world thought dead. She was to spend the remains of her summer break playing nursemaid to the lost and whipping girl to the reviled. *Lovely*. No amount of brownie points were worth this.

"Just because a thing can be accomplished alone does not mean it is best done that way." His shadow fell over the table.

She resisted the urge to hide the page with all its imperfections. Let him look. He wouldn't be able to decipher it. She could barely read it, but that was not the point. Once she'd written something, she would remember it.

"What are you attempting? There are several spells indicated here." His sleeve brushed her shoulder as he pointed to a three-pronged figure.

She shivered, whether from the brief touch or the fact that he recognized pieces of her quick sketch she didn't know. She tilted her head slightly, watching him through a curtain of wavy brown hair. His eyes shone as his fingers traced the design. He had leaned in closer without realizing it. She found the warmth of this cold man strangely comforting.

She pulled away, shaking her head. It had obviously been too long since she had been touched. Ron's quick and awkward hug before leaving did not count. They had ended their foolish attempt at dating earlier in the summer, both relieved yet unsure of how to repair the friendship. There had been more than one reason for her to stay here.

"Very subtle, Miss Granger," Snape drawled.

She jumped, blushing before she realized that he referred to the notes and calculations. He was as unaware of her as he had always been.

"Which part?" Her voice cracked. She cleared her throat.

"You are modifying three diverse spells, one of them quite dangerous." He turned his head, pinning her with his gaze. "So I ask again, what are you attempting?"

She shrank back against the chair, then straightened. She had nothing to hide. *Then why are you afraid to tell him?* It occurred to her that she was no longer obligated to answer him.

"I don't believe it's any of your business." She folded the page.

A pained look passed over his face, followed quickly by the familiar look of annoyance and disdain. "I was merely curious. There is little to do, trapped in this house. I had thought you might enjoy conversation. I can see I was wrong." He turned abruptly. She felt the swish of a cloak not worn.

"Perhaps," she said to his back. He stopped. "Perhaps when I have gotten closer."

He nodded. "When you are ready, then." He strode out of the room.

She let out a breath.

"Remember to feed the dog." His command echoed down the hallway.

She glanced at her watch. It didn't always work properly in the house. She wasn't sure why. She tucked the paper into her back pocket and set about preparing a dish she knew would not be eaten. When it was ready, she straightened the books, knowing she was stalling. With a small sigh, she picked up the bowl and carried it upstairs.

The attic room was dark, as always. She had tried bringing light with her, but as it had gone out the moment she stepped in the room, regardless of source, she no longer bothered. Labored breathing came from the corner. She walked slowly, carefully towards it.

"I brought you some food." She spoke softly, setting down the bowl.

There was no response.

She picked up the dish she had brought earlier. "You should eat something. You need your strength."

More silence. She turned to leave.

"I am quite strong, Hermione. Would you like me to show you?" He formed each word carefully, like a child at a recitation. She froze.

"You could come downstairs. I could make you a proper meal." She had wondered how long he would tolerate the diet they had recommended. *Not long at all*.

"I would rather not. The light hurts my eyes. Still." Fear and frustration bled through as he spoke.

"A small light, then, for up here? It might help you adjust."

"I don't remember you being the one in your circle to make light." His cackle ended in a series of coughs. She took a step towards him.

"Don't!" he barked. "I don't want you to see me like this."

"That won't be a problem, as I am effectively blind. Why won't you let me help you?"

"There is no magical help for this no salves, spells, charms or potions. Only time." His laugh was clearer. She didn't understand the joke. "If you can arrange for a screen to hide the bed, I will allow for one candle."

"I'm sure Snape can find something that will do," she said.

He growled. "He is not to come in here."

"No, of course. He can leave it on the landing. I'll manage from there." She hesitated. "Will you let me visit with you once the screen is in place?"

"I would like that." All the tension had bled from his voice and with it all indications of life.

She took his words for dismissal. She peered into the unfathomable dark and sighed. It was a start. She closed the door softly and leaned against it. She wasn't sure what had happened to Sirius Black when he had been brought back through the veil, but she was determined to find out.

"I see he is not eating," Snape said as she passed the library.

"No. I worry about him."

"Don't. He will either recover or he won't." His tone made clear which he would prefer.

"I don't know why you hate him so, and I don't care to, but I won't leave him to die. He deserves better than that." She lifted her chin, not looking at him.

"He hardly deserves your devoted attention." His words dripped with derision.

"What do you know of devotion?" she shot.

"A great deal more than I am willing to share with you, Miss Granger." He returned his focus to the book on his lap.

For the second time in minutes, she had been dismissed. She ground her teeth and returned to the kitchen. It was the only place she felt remotely at home, as Snape had claimed the library. She half suspected he'd done it to spite her.

She put the bowl in the sink and returned to her chair. Pulling the paper out, she looked around. The mouse was peeking out of the hole, cautious, afraid. Crookshanks was nowhere to be found. She tossed a corner of her scone towards the mouse. It withdrew with a squeak, and then, unable to resist the lure, darted out and grabbed the crumb.

"There's more where that came from," she said, smiling. "I have plenty."

The mouse settled down by the hole, whiskers twitching. He was the best companion she'd had in days.

Severus flipped through the book. He wondered if she would notice it was missing. *When, not if.* Hermione missed very little, especially when it came to books.

The forgotten tome fell open on his lap. He glanced down at it and frowned. The center of the page was filled with one-third of the figure she had drawn. No, not the same image, but one very close to it. He devoured the information in the book, then snapped it closed. He was no closer to discovering what she was up to. In all his years of teaching, no student had frustrated him the way she did. And as he was no longer a professor, he could not punish her for it.

"No!" Her cry filled the house.

He jumped to his feet, dropping the book and pulling out his wand. He was in the hall, heart racing, trying to prepare for what he might find. He was almost to the kitchen door when her next words stopped him.

"Crookshanks! Leave it alone!"

He stood, quivering with rage or the aftermath of fear. He dismissed the latter. He had seen the worst the wizarding world could offer, been responsible for some of it. He had not been able to afford fear for many years.

And yet, for her... He shook himself and returned to the library. His reaction had been instinctual, nothing more. He comforted himself with the lie.

The sun was near to setting when Hermione gave up for the day. She gathered up a stack of books and hauled them to the library. Mrs. Black's portrait shrieked about lazy, slovenly Mudbloods if the books were not returned every night. Compliance only resulted in her screaming other obscenities, but at least it was a change. *Perhaps I should devise a spell to permanently silence portraits.* She flinched at the dark notion. She would simply have to endure the abuse. It was worth it for the knowledge she would gain.

She steeled herself to enter the library. After a day of running into brick walls, the last thing she wanted was to deal with Severus Snape. She stepped into the library and breathed a sigh of relief. The room was empty. She replaced the volumes in their proper places, her eyes skimming other titles to see if they might help. The last book slid into place at the end of a shelf. She avoided looking at the titles below. They held things darker than she wanted to know.

She straightened up, knuckling her back. She really needed a more comfortable chair. She looked with longing on the big armchair by the fire. Startled, she crossed the room and picked up the book that lay open on the rug. *What is this doing here?* She stood up, staring at the page where she had found the design.

"It's to do with motion." He stood behind her. She had not heard him enter.

"Wh... what?" She hated the way her voice faltered.

He reached around her and plucked the book from her fingers, leaning over her shoulder, his chest barely touching her back. She resisted the urge to lean into him. *What is wrong with me?* She stepped away and turned to face him.

"The spell you are attempting to create." His long fingers traced the design on the book.

"All spells involve motion," she sniffed.

"Not all spells, Miss Granger, simply the ones you have been taught. There are many things you have yet to learn."

"Fine then. Most spells involve motion. Now, may I have my book?" She held out her hand.

"Your book, is it?" He smirked.

"Put it away yourself," she said, brushing past him. "I have no more need of it."

His soft laughter followed her out of the room.

He waited for her to return. She had no choice. The painted harriidan on the wall would not cease howling until the job was done. He would have helped her, had she asked, if only to get a better look at the books she was using, but as she had not, he was content to sit and watch. Fifteen minutes later, his patience was rewarded and his mood improved by knowing he had made her nervous.

He had begun spending time in the library with the expectation that she would join him. Her reluctance was both irritating and satisfying. It had also led to hours of boredom. He now knew the exact way the light fell on the intricate pattern of the rug, the position of every gaudy bauble, the order and titles of each shelf. That last was key to unraveling the mystery she had presented him.

She stumbled on the threshold, the stack of books coming perilously close to tumbling to the floor. He flicked his wand imperceptibly as she regained her balance. Let her think she had managed on her own. Inadvertent shame was not nearly as entertaining as intentional humiliation, and now was not the time for either.

She studiously ignored him as she put away the books. Memorizing each location was hampered by the sight of her perfect ass. She should not be allowed to wear Muggle jeans. Focus. He watched her struggle to reach the upper shelf. She could have used magic, but then he would have been denied the delicate curve of her waist as she stretched. He added tight t-shirts to the items of clothing that should be forbidden, cursing himself. *Where did that last volume go?*

He still held the book she had left him. He opened it on his lap as she turned. Damned if the girl was going to know she'd aroused him. She left the room without looking at him. He sent the book flying to the shelf. *Idiot.* He stalked out of the room and down the hall to the chamber he had been given. If his exile had not denied him his usual

outlets, he would not be reacting to her in such a way.

He fervently wished that were true.

Gravity

Chapter 2 of 16

Weighty matters must be taken into consideration.

A/N: Many thanks to the conspiracy of ladies who requested that I tell them a bedtime story.

NOTE: This particular AU takes place after HBP and ignores entirely DH. Thanks to MollysSister for reminding me to clarify.

Sirius lay on the bed, staring into the darkness, paralyzed by fear. Hermione would bring a light, and he would let her. The mirror bolted to the wall would show him what he could not bear to see, even in dim reflection.

He was dead, but they had refused to let him be. Thrust out of the first sanctuary he had known since leaving school, he had woken to near-blinding light. He had screamed until they'd covered the windows, but even then the pain was nauseating. They kept him for as long as they could, allowing only enough light to tend him. It had taken hours to recover from every visit. They had moved him here on a moonless night, the two who had been sent to receive him. He might never forgive them for seeing what he had become.

They were all afraid of him. No one knew why he had been sent back. He preferred to think of it as having been rejected, and as he refused to speak, he was allowed to believe his version of things. Of all his friends, Lupin had tried the longest to engage him, but even he had given up. And now they were all gone and he was alone.

Except for her. Others had brought him food, retreating after leaving it. Perhaps they'd felt guilty for serving him swill. Hermione set the dishes where instructed, but each time she stayed a bit longer. She told him little things about her day, vague mentions of research and observations. Sometimes, she relayed the latest bits of information from *The Daily Prophet*. Better were her dramatic interpretations of articles from *The Quibbler*. He had learned to laugh, however quietly.

Hermione leaned against the wall, breathing hard. The heavy wooden screen had proven impervious to magical attempts to move it. Her first impulse had been to study it, possibly unravel the spell, or at least determine how it had been done. Unfortunately, it was the only screen in the entire bloody house, so she had hauled it out of the basement, cleaned it off, and wrestled it to the top floor. Severus had remained locked in his room. She would have to remember to kick him later.

"*Accio* lamp." She flicked her wand and held out her hand. Sirius had agreed to a candle, but she thought he would prefer something adjustable. She set the lamp down, then knocked softly on the door. When he did not send her away, she pushed it open.

She hauled the three-part screen into the room, stepping carefully in the darkness. Placing it at what she assumed to be half-way into the room should work. She would have to guess at the proper angle to hide the corner. She could always adjust it later. Or he could, if he had been honest about his strength. She suspected he was bluffing. Men did that to save face.

I've done. She stomped on the thought. She was **not** going to dwell on those few weeks at home. *Bloody American prat.* She wanted to scream. If she took the memory out of her head, she would never have to remember being a total fool. *Does a Pensieve work that way?* She would have to ask. She rejected the notion instantly. The only person she could ask would be Snape, and that conversation need never happen.

In her distraction, her hand slipped from the screen. She grabbed it, wrenching backwards. She lost her balance, let go, and fell to the floor, the breath rushing out of her. The pain in her back was astounding. She waited for the screen to crush her.

The sound of wood scraping across the floor made her realize she was not going to suffer further injury. He had not been bluffing.

"Sirius?"

"I'm here."

She tried to sit up, but fell back with a moan. Tears ran into her hair. *Fabulous.* At least no one could see her like this. That was something.

"Are you hurt?" Sirius was walking slowly to where she lay.

Dogs don't see well in the dark. She laughed at the thought, sending another spasm of pain up her spine.

"What have you done?" He whispered, his voice a balm.

Then he was beside her, strong hands running over her legs, her arms, her ribs. He slid his hands under her neck, fingers probing for injury. She sighed as some of the pain receded.

"I've hurt my back," she whimpered.

"Can you move your arms and legs?"

She nodded, then realized he could not see her. "Yes, I think so."

"Good." He rolled her onto her side and slid his fingers along her spine. When he probed the muscles, she cried out.

"Nothing is broken, but you have a nasty strain. You'll be able to move sooner if you let me put you on the bed."

When she did not protest, he lifted her, cradling her to his chest. She gritted her teeth against the pain and let her head fall on his shoulder, his smooth skin warm against

her cheek. The ends of his hair tickled her forehead. He smelled of morning and heather.

"Mmmm, nice," she mumbled.

"You must have knocked your head." His gentle laugh rumbled against her.

He laid her on the bed, apparently better able to see than she had thought. Or maybe weeks in this room had made him comfortable in the dark. She welcomed the soft mattress and his presence beside her. He brushed the hair from her face, gently stroking the curve of her jaw. Her heartbeat quickened.

"Do you..." She swallowed. "Do you know a spell to relieve the pain?"

"I came back without a wand, Hermione, and there's not been occasion to find a new one." His laugh was bitter.

"You can use mine if it will help," she offered.

"That may not be the best idea. I would hate to ruin it. I've not tried to use magic yet. I'm not certain it would work."

"Surely you're not..." She could not finish.

"A Muggle? No, I don't think that's possible. Once a wizard, always a wizard, if only in name. It hardly matters, as it does not seem I will be leaving this room for some time. It would be ironic, don't you think, if the great name of Black faded to obscurity, the last scion a despised Muggle?"

She bristled. "There are worse things than being a Muggle."

"Yes, and a good number of them have happened to me. I rather suspect I would enjoy living a Muggle life. Perhaps in America where I would never be recognized."

"America is overrated."

"But so very interesting. I could get lost there."

"You are lost here," she said softly.

"I know exactly where I am, Hermione. I just don't know what I am."

"You're a man, Sirius. Muggle or Wizard, you're still a man."

"What I am is wrong," he snarled, getting up. "Shall I show you? The sight has made stronger than you flinch." His voice drifted across the room.

The scuff of metal across wood told her he had picked up the lamp. Had she blinked, she would have missed the small spark in the middle of the room. The plink of wood on wood was unmistakable. He had dropped something. He cursed in the darkness. He set down the lamp on what she assumed was a table by the bed. Then he placed her wand on her chest.

"Do you dare light it?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"In the dark, you can remember me as I was. All that will change once you bring the light."

"What you look like has no bearing on our friendship," she huffed. "Cover your eyes."

She gave him a moment, stealing another one to steady herself. If she was to help him, she could not react badly to whatever would be revealed.

"Lumos," she whispered, having determined that the strength of the spell adjusted according to the volume at which it was spoken. A faint blue light shone at the tip of her wand. She spotted the lamp. Knowing where things were before she flung fire around a room seemed best. She took a deep breath and turned to regard him.

He stood with his back to the screen, his arm over his eyes. The small amount of light would cause only a little pain. Her reaction was likely to cause more. He stayed perfectly still, waiting for the gasp. It took but a moment.

"My god, Sirius." She could not hide her horror. He had not expected her to.

His trip through the veil had stripped him of everything. He had emerged, pale, skeletal and bald, every nerve rubbed raw. The feel of fabric on his chest still made his skin crawl. He had learned to walk, and eventually to talk, though he had not done so until Hermione showed up. He'd had nothing to say to the comforting words that leaked sadness, even less to the apologies reeking of discomfort, offered by the few friends he had left. She had not asked him to respond.

Perhaps the Fates had given him an aversion to light to spare others the sight of him. The only part of him that had returned whole had been the memories. They must have thought it a comfort. They did not know they had consigned him to hell. He would not share it. *Until now.*

"You're beautiful," she whispered.

He flinched. She really had hit her head.

"A poor joke, Hermione. You should leave them to the Weasleys."

"You don't know, do you? You haven't seen yourself since "

He cut her off. "Since I became a monster? I know all too well how I look." The image of himself in the infirmary mirror would never leave him. He should not have inflicted it on her.

She stared at him in wonder. Every scar had been erased, leaving behind only smooth, pale skin, tinted blue in the light from her wand. She adjusted the color. Even in the soft yellow glow, he was whiter than Snape, a thing she'd not thought possible. It would take some getting used to.

He was leaner than he had been when last she'd seen him, a bit narrower in the waist. She lifted her eyes. His bare stomach was distracting. His broad chest was no less so.

"Sirius, look in the mirror."

"Do you hate me?" he ground out. "I had thought we were friends. Allies, at least."

"As a favor for a friend, then. Please." She held her breath, willing him to comply.

He lowered his arm, showing her his face for the first time. The beauty of youth stared at her with ancient eyes accusing. He looked as he did in the pictures from Harry's album, the ones where he had been laughing with James and Lily. Dark curls brushed his shoulders. Tears ran down her cheeks.

"You ask much of our friendship," he said, walking slowly toward the mirror.

She pushed herself into a sitting position, back against the pillows, biting down on the pain. She needed to see this, to bear witness to his discovery. If it meant an extra day in bed, it would be worth it.

He had kept his head down as he crossed the room, his shoulders hunched. She wondered what he expected to see. She would never ask. His willingness to grant her this boon was more than she had hoped for, far more than she deserved.

He stopped in front of the mirror and took a deep breath. When he looked up, his entire body went rigid. He stayed that way as the moments stretched out. She clutched the comforter, wanting badly to go to him, knowing she couldn't.

"This is a trick." His voice broke. "What do you see when you look at me?" he demanded, his gaze riveted on the mirror.

"A man," she replied. *A bloody god.* That would not help him.

"This is not " he choked on the words.

"I don't know what happened to you when you came across the veil, and you don't have to tell me." She let herself slide down on the bed, the pain fading as she lay still. "I would have seen a man no matter what, Sirius."

"Light the lamp."

She obeyed, waiting for him to cry out. She had been told he could not bear the light. He recoiled from the flare, then reached out to lower the flame. The spell had been clumsy. She set her wand on the table and closed her eyes.

His kiss was gentle, the bare brush of his lips on hers. Her eyes flew open, locking on his as he pulled away. She reached out a hand, stroking his cheek. He froze. Her fingers trailed down his neck, coming to rest on his shoulder. Breath shaky, she pulled him down, and he let her.

"Surely a man in his prime can do better than that," she murmured.

He threaded his fingers through her hair and kissed her again, lingering. She sighed. He must still think her a child. His third kiss gave that notion the lie. He growled softly, nipping at her lip then flicking his tongue over the bite. One knee on the bed, he pressed her back, possessing her mouth.

"Be careful what you wish for, Hermione," he breathed in her ear. His fingers traced her collarbone, then dipped into her cleavage, barely brushing the curve of her breasts. She thought her heart would beat right out of her chest. He took his hand away.

"Sirius," she rasped. She had no idea what she'd meant to say after that. He kissed her neck as he trailed his hand over her breasts, the thin shirt no barrier to sensation.

"What shall we do now, we broken two?" he said, fingers tracing circles on her stomach, sliding just under the waistband of her jeans. She arched and cried out at the resulting pain.

"What you will do is take your hands off her." Snape's voice rang across the room.

"I don't recall inviting you in, Severus." He did not turn his head. His gaze held her motionless as he slid his hand down her thigh.

"I said get your hands off her."

"I heard you. I'm ignoring you. It's worked well for me in the past." Despite his calm words, he vibrated with tension.

"This is my last warning, Black."

Hermione let her eyes drift to Snape. His wand was raised in barely controlled fury. She blushed. She was well and truly caught. *Bastard.* She pushed Sirius aside and grabbed her wand, leveling it at her old professor.

"And this is my first. He is unarmed, Severus." The use of his given name brought him up short. "Now back down."

"Not until he lets you up."

"Don't be a fool. He's not keeping me here. I can't move. I injured my back dragging that blasted screen up three flights of stairs." Her reproach was clear.

"And I suppose he's checking your... body... for injuries?" His scorn snaked across the room, wrapping around her throat, choking her.

"Aside from a strained muscle in her back, there's not a thing wrong with her body," Sirius said. She was glad his wicked smile was hidden from Snape.

"If you are incapable of releasing her, then at least bring her downstairs so I can tend to her." Snape glared at both of them. "Unless you lack the strength?" The challenge was unmistakable.

Sirius slid his hands under her. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he lifted her from the bed and turned to face Snape.

"As I told Hermione earlier, I am quite strong. For her sake, I will bring her to the library. You understand if I prefer that you go first."

Snape hissed, turned on his heel and stormed from the room.

Third Law

Chapter 3 of 16

To every action there is always opposed an equal reaction: or the mutual actions of two bodies upon each other are always equal and directed to contrary parts. ...This law takes place also in attractions...

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They're like two alley cats. She watched them circle each other. She imagined them with lashing tails and giggled. The potion Snape had given her had made her light-headed, but the pain had faded until it barely registered.

If they're cats, I suppose that makes me the mouse. She giggled again. "Mouse."

They both turned to regard her with glittering eyes. She swallowed her laughter, suddenly remembering Crookshanks in the kitchen. She had no wish to be devoured by the two furious men across from her.

Don't I? The thought came unbidden and with it all the potential she had ignored. Not ignored, denied. She swallowed heavily.

"I want to go to bed," she said, more truthful than she'd wished to be.

"That would be best." Snape was all business.

"I will take her," Sirius said, his sly wink telling her that he knew exactly the sort of reaction his assertion would cause.

"Take, take, take," she chirped, unable to stop herself. *What was in that potion?*

"The hell you will. I think you've taken liberties enough tonight." Snape snapped, stepping between them. "Perhaps you should return to your kennel."

"It seems the light is no longer an issue," Sirius looked around the room. "I think I'll take up residence in my old chambers."

Snape's hand twitched towards his wand. Sirius had rooms down the hall from hers.

"Sleep where you want. But her room will be warded."

"Such concern for a girl you've never liked," Sirius chided. "Neither you nor Hermione need fear for what I might do under cover of night. I have every intention of sleeping."

"Sleeeep," she said, eyelids drooping. "Want."

"Pleasant dreams, Hermione," Sirius smiled at her, then turned and left the room.

Severus lifted her gently. Her head fell against his arm. He smelled of darker things than Sirius, moss and leather and something else she couldn't identify. His body was harder, leaner, not the sort one could snuggle up to. She found herself doing just that. *Guess you can.* She floated down the hallway in his arms, the faint whiff of bergamot tickling her nose each time he exhaled. She wondered if his kisses tasted of it.

"Kiss," she murmured as he set her on her feet. She leaned into him. He was so warm.

"I gave you too much." He shook his head, pulling down the covers as he steadied her. "You should take off your jeans before you get in."

She flopped down on the bed. "Off, off, off" she chanted, fumbling with the button. She looked at him. He was a bit blurry. "Help?"

"I..." His loss of words amused her.

"Help. Off." She tried to lift her feet, but her muscles wouldn't obey.

He sighed, pushing her legs down. Long fingers made short work of the fastenings. Supporting her back, he lifted her enough to slide her trousers off, trying very hard not to notice her scandalously brief knickers. He pulled the covers up.

"Someday, you'll want to do that," she mumbled as she drifted off to sleep.

He looked down at her, splayed across the bed, relaxed in sleep. Her hair was a tangled mess. He wanted to run his fingers through it until they snagged, pull her head back and mark her neck. He did not need to wait for someday. He had wanted to take off her clothes since he'd seen her in the library. He wanted to revel in the feel of her skin against his, bury himself in her, pound her until she screamed his name. He shook off the image. She was not the sort to play his games, and he would not touch anyone who had been drugged, much less this girl. He'd mixed the potion in haste and without proper stores. Done properly, it would keep her from remembering most of the night. If she forgot the last thing she'd said to him, it would be enough. He closed the door and set the wards.

Two men lay in darkened rooms, tortured by their thoughts, their desires, the past. Hermione snuggled deeper under the quilt, safe from memory and dreams.

She awoke to sunlight flooding the room. She kicked off the covers, swinging her feet over the bed. The barest twinge in her back brought memories of the night. Hazy memories. She frowned, rubbing her temples. She could not recall getting into bed.

She walked gingerly to the chair where she had thrown her jeans. It wasn't like her to do that. She contemplated taking a hot bath, but chose to get dressed. Bathing could wait. She wanted a cup of strong coffee. That was one good thing the American had shown her.

Clinging to the banister, she made her way slowly down the stairs. The pain was slight. She remembered lugging the screen up the stairs. Why had she done that? *For Sirius.* She halted to keep from tumbling the rest of the way down the stairs. *Bloody hell.* If she let herself fall down the stairs, she might break her neck. Surely that was better than facing Snape after he'd caught her in full snog. Then again, if she died, she wouldn't have the chance to find out what Sirius might have done next. There was nothing for it but to live. She took a deep breath and continued her slow descent.

Her prayers for an empty kitchen had gone unanswered. Snape sat at the table, reading. She stifled her curiosity, refusing to look at the book. He ignored her, not even bothering to make his usual protest about the vile smell of her coffee. She could have used magic to hasten the process, but it never tasted right that way. She waited for the slow dripping to cease, the silence deepening with each passing minute.

I need a French press. She snorted softly. She wasn't likely to find one in Hogsmeade. Perhaps her internment would abate before it was time to board the train. She shook her head. There would be no time. Soon the house would be full of too many people, all wanting to tell her about the World Cup. She might be able to get her revenge by attempting to explain football the real sort or the tuggery of the American debacle, the point of which she still could not fathom but that would hardly result in the delightful shopping trip she imagined in perfectly normal London. While she daydreamed, the coffee finished brewing.

She filled her cup and walked out of the room, trying to keep from wincing. She could not bear it if he expressed concern or worse, sympathy. Her anxiety was for naught. He continued to pretend she did not exist. She left him sitting at the table with his cold tea and dry toast.

For once, the library was hers alone. She sank into the armchair and sipped her coffee, letting her gaze wander over the shelves. So many books. So much to explore. He had kept her from her passion, forcing her to sneak in early in the morning, banishing her to a room where she could not protest interruption.

You did it to yourself. She tried to deny it, but lying had never been her strong suit. She had stayed away because she feared him. Not what he could do, nor what he been to her all those years when she could never do the right thing in his eyes, but who he was under the layers of secrecy and contempt. At Hogwarts, she had seen hints of it, flashes in unguarded moments when he had not known she drew near. Nothing had prepared her for the onslaught of his humanity in a place he felt relatively safe. *I will not pity him.* She doubted he would give her the chance.

She returned to perusing the books. Most titles had been rejected in her initial search, perhaps too quickly. The aspect missing from her spell did not magically appear. Perhaps if she looked at them in reverse order, a solution would present itself. She scanned the shelf where the last of the books belonged. One was missing.

Snape was even now reading it, she was sure, attempting to sniff out her purpose. He could do it if anyone could. Hermione was not like others, blinded into thinking he was only good at potions and intimidation. When he showed up where he was least wanted, it was by design. She had realized that early on, but attempts to explain it to Ron and Harry had been met by accusations of paranoia followed by merciless teasing about her being sweet on Snape. Subtleties escaped them more often than not. She doubted that would ever change.

Her empty cup provided an excuse to return to the kitchen. She rose, stretching slowly. The aches were fading far faster than she had expected, even with the help of the healing potion. Her head was still a bit muzzy. More coffee was definitely in order. *Pathetic.* She knew why she wanted to return to the kitchen, and it had precious little to do with books or coffee.

When she walked into the kitchen, it was empty save for Crookshanks, who was hunkered down, one paw in the mouse hole. She imagined the poor mouse, pressed back against the wall, terrified of the inevitable. Her attempts to shoo the cat were futile. It would play out as expected. She sighed.

The book lay open on the table. She glanced quickly at the doorway, then cautiously approached. He wasn't one to play jokes, but she wouldn't put it past him to do something to humiliate her or at the very least teach her a lesson. She scanned the pages and frowned. The book had nothing to do with her research. He could have left it as a red herring *Does he know what that is?* but she didn't think that was the sort of game he enjoyed.

She left the book where it was and poured another cup of coffee. Crookshanks wandered off, bored without the opportunity for a kill. The plate with the remnants of Snape's toast sat on the counter. She removed a corner and tossed it into the hole. She wouldn't tempt the poor thing out if there was a chance he would get caught. She interpreted the surprised squeak as a thank you. Something good had come of the morning.

Severus stood in the library, perusing the shelves. She would have to come back if she was to work on her research. Until this morning, she had always managed to arrive before him and disappear as he approached. Perhaps he should dose her with another potion tonight. *Despicable.* He would simply have to rise to the occasion tomorrow and every day thereafter.

He was correct about the spell involving motion. One component involved air, though used in a way he'd not considered previously. He was fairly certain heat would be used, but not fire. That was where the subtlety lay. The third part would need to be something that kept the air from cooling or fanning the heat. Or perhaps not. She was far too clever to make his quest easy.

The slightest sound prompted him to turn his head, expectation rising, only to be quickly squelched.

"Sirius." His greeting could not be taken as an invitation.

"Snape. Here for some light reading? Or merely lying in wait?"

"Research." He'd had years of enduring the wretch's taunts. They meant nothing to him now. "I had expected you would be brooding in your rooms, as usual."

"Hate to disappoint you, but all that has changed. As I can tolerate the light, I no longer feel the need to hide."

"I wonder how long that will last when the world discovers your return."

"I doubt that will happen. Too difficult for the Ministry to explain. When the time comes, I will disappear."

"You might consider an early start." Severus pulled out the book before him, not bothering to check the title, and strode from the room.

She finished tidying the kitchen, knowing it was only a stalling tactic. He would be waiting in the library, likely holding the missing book. He would smile at her, a challenge, and she would do nothing. She straightened her shoulders. She was many things, but never a coward. She stomped back to the library, defiant.

He was sitting in the chair, the book resting on his lap, head tilted back to get the full sun on his face. His stunning, perfect face. She stopped, fearing her movement would break the tableau. She wanted nothing less. Her gaze wandered over his naked chest, the smooth expanse of his stomach, the slight arch of his back, the length of his legs, powerful even at rest. She could not forget the feel of his skin on hers. *To do that again.* She wanted nothing more.

Sirius lifted his head, grey eyes fixed on her, pinning her where she stood. She barely kept from gulping for air. His breathing was slow, measured. He smiled, licking his lips like the cat who had already devoured the canary and was looking for a morsel to finish his meal.

"Come in, Hermione." Lazy words rubbed against her. "It is what you'd intended. You don't have to hesitate on my account."

"I didn't mean to disturb you."

"You didn't. I was waiting for you." He let his gaze wander over her. It was no less paralyzing. "I wanted to know how you feel."

Words failed her.

"After your mishap," he added.

She sighed. Last night must have been a fluke. "There's some pain, but nothing that can't be endured."

She managed to stand upright, breathing a sigh of relief when he looked past her. She turned her head to discover what had made his eyes flash so fast she had almost missed it but there was nothing in the hall behind her.

"Perhaps I can help you with that." His voice pulled her back.

"I should be right in a couple of days. The potion worked well. It would, of course. He's quite brilliant." She clamped her mouth shut.

His smile faded. "He is... accomplished, in his areas."

"What are you reading?" she asked, desperate to change the topic. *Very subtle, like a brick to the head.* She wished she had one so she could put herself out of her misery, if only for awhile.

"You should recognize it, Hermione. You've read it recently."

"How did you know that? You were..." She pointed up. He stared at her. This really was not going well.

"Your scent is all over it. Odd, I had expected to find it everywhere in this room, but it was only on a few volumes." He furrowed his brows.

She swallowed, breath shaky. "My scent?"

"Mmmm. Very distinct. Wood flowers and mown grass, with a slight overlay of musty old books. That last is difficult to detect in a library, as you might imagine. It's much more complex than that, of course."

"My scent." She felt a right fool, but she could not understand how books, some of them hundreds of years old, could smell like her.

"Months in the dark improved my already heightened sense of smell. I could point to every book you've held since you've been here, though the ones most recently handled would be easier to find. It should be interesting to see what else you've been delving into." The corners of his mouth twitched, as if listening to a private joke.

"There must be a spell that would do the same thing," she mused.

"I would imagine there is, or could be, but I doubt it would work quite as well." He placed the book on the end table.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know that a spell could be tailored to deliver as much information as a naturally enhanced sense."

"What sort of information?" Her question was rote, half her mind already devoted to what might be involved in creating the spell.

"Well," he said, rising, "I doubt that a spell would tell me that you are excited and curious possibly the same thing with you or that under it all is barely acknowledged fear." He stood in front of her, heat pouring off his chest.

"I am not afraid."

"Not of me, though perhaps you should be." He put his arm around her waist and pulled her closer. The pain disappeared as he slid his hand up her back.

"I have no reason to fear you." She looked up into his eyes. They had gone silver.

"No?" He kissed her. "That's good, if a bit naive."

She had trouble catching her breath. "Sirius, I "

"Need to study," he finished. "I'm no help to you there. I was an average student, at best." He kissed her forehead. "Though I was good at some things." He left her leaning against the door frame.

She stumbled to the chair and dropped into it with no hint of grace. Her hand fell on the book. He'd had it open to the page she had used to form the middle of the spell. Maybe she should be afraid of him just a little.

Forces of Nature

Chapter 4 of 16

Small, fast movements create the greatest force.

Severus looked down at the open book. She had not taken the bait. He put his finger on the page, the words fading to be replaced by a diagram. It would have done the same for her, had she touched it. It was a simple spell, performed in a rush at the sound of her feet on the stairs.

He studied the drawing, comparing it from memory to the one she had sketched, trying to determine why she had made the minute changes. Straight lines had curved slightly, marked by tiny points where she had let her quill rest for a brief second. He would think they indicated hesitation if drawn by a less careful student. *Not student, witch.* She had eclipsed most students early on and was making inroads on the skills of even accomplished wizards, all because she wanted to know more than they could or would teach her. Almost no one had noticed, preferring to see a bright young girl rather than a meteoric star. They saved their adulation for Potter. *Fools.*

He was not so blind. Hermione was far more dangerous than the boy. He would have thought they'd realize the hazards posed by such a brilliant, dedicated student. *Why do they not?* The answer came unbidden because she was just a girl. Had his life not been ruined by their last failure of perception, he would find the irony delicious.

He flipped the page, revealing the notes for the spell and a list of cautions. A cold ball formed in the pit of his stomach as he read the first one. *Failure to perform exactly may prove fatal.* She had to have seen it. He snatched up the book, hoping she had not left the library yet and that Sirius had.

Hermione had abandoned the chair for the grotesquely carved desk under the windows. The light was better, and she had room to spread out. *I need a place like this, only not so ugly.* She dreamed of her own library, one where she could lose herself in silence. Shaking her head, she returned to the problem at hand. It wouldn't do to get distracted at this stage.

She dipped her quill in blue ink and carefully drew another vector. It was no more likely to be the right one than the ones before it. *How many now?* Her brain supplied the

answer automatically. Twenty-nine a small number considering the infinite possibilities. She might be working on this for the rest of her life. She smiled at the prospect.

She picked up another quill. Red ink followed the blue. She did not react to red ink the same way her fellow students did, largely because she saw little of it on her assignments. She knew they thought her stuffy, often dull, but it didn't rankle as it once had. They didn't understand the beauty of her method, seeing only a desire for perfection. They were wrong about that. What she wanted was truth, and truth could be imperfect. Sometimes, it had to be.

She traced over the red arc with green, turning it a muddy brown. *Better*. But not yet right. She shoved the page away, pulling out another, returning to blue. If this was not it, she would try again. And again. She tucked her hair behind her ear and adjusted the calculation, only a hairsbreadth. She hoped it was enough, as she had every time before and would until she gained what she sought.

He swept into the room, wielding the book like a cudgel. If she refused to listen to reason, he could bludgeon her with it. He took grim pleasure in the thought. She didn't look up as he approached the desk, merely held up her hand. He ground to a halt, then cursed himself. He would not allow her such power.

"Do you have any idea what you are doing?"

"Yes." Her quill hand was steady on the page. "Be quiet and let me do it."

He seethed. Interrupting her might mean disaster. How had he let her get away with this? *I paid insufficient attention*. A mistake he meant not to make again. He closed his eyes, going still. When he opened them again, she was sitting back in the chair, carved gargoyles looking over her shoulder.

"What did you want, Severus?"

"Professor Snape!" he snapped.

"Not any longer." There was no malice in her words, just truth. It stung the same.

"It is more than a job title, Miss Granger."

"As you say. What did you want... Professor?"

"This!" He slammed the book on the desk, careful to keep it from touching her pages. He pointed to the sketch. She did not look at it.

"That is a book." She met his gaze. "And I am not the librarian."

"No, you are a madwoman."

"You base this on what? A drawing in a book? A book, I note, that bears little resemblance to the one you were reading in the kitchen." She picked up a volume, similar in size and color, and tossed it at him. He caught it reflexively and set it aside.

"What are you playing at?" He waved a hand over her pages.

"I would hardly call it playing. Speculating would be more accurate."

"Answer the question," he growled.

"No."

He struggled to regain his composure. "What you are doing is very dangerous, Miss Granger."

"You have no idea what I'm doing, and that infuriates you, but it is hardly incumbent upon me to explain it to you if you haven't done your homework properly." She turned his own words back on him.

"Modifying that spell is madness."

"No, it's science. Trial and error. Have you never pushed the boundaries of what you should do, in search of what you want to know?"

"Not when the consequences were so dire."

"No?" One eyebrow arched.

"Magic is not science, Hermione."

"It is very close to it." She sighed. "There is nothing in the changes I am working that endangers you or Sirius."

"You could blow him back through the veil, and I would consider the world a better place. But as that is not your intention, you need to tread carefully."

"I am always careful." She stacked the pages and tucked them in a folio, tying it closed with a black ribbon. She took a cloth from the corner of the desk, wiped the quill, and returned it to her writing case with the others. Corks fit into bottles of ink, lined up precisely by the folio.

He curled his hands to keep from hauling her over the desk, now that the pages were safely stored. Jaw clenched, he waited for her to finish. Then he would wipe the smirk off her face. She stood up and stretched, a soft groan escaping as she straightened. She would still be in pain. *Good*.

"There. I have put away my frightening research. Happy?" She moved around the desk, trying to slip past him.

"Not yet." He grabbed her wrist and pulled her to him.

She reached for her wand. It was on the desk, neatly aligned with the books. Her eyes widened.

"You have no idea how much danger you are in."

Her breath caught as his fingers closed like a vise on her wrist. His touch was electric, sending currents coursing up the nerves in her arm. "Let me go."

"No."

"Please." She had hoped it would sound more steady.

"No." He grasped his wand. "You wished to learn about spells that do not involve motion."

"I am not your student."

"Today, you are." His wand did not move. If he spoke a word, she did not hear it. He released her hand. It stayed in place.

"A stasis spell." She rolled her eyes.

"Not quite. If it were stasis, you would not be able to talk."

"Modified, then."

"Yes. And no. It is a matter of will, and at the moment, mine is stronger than yours."

"What did you hope to prove?"

"Prove? Nothing. It is a demonstration, no more." His smile was not friendly.

"This is one of your own making." She thought about what would be necessary to perform it.

"It is."

"So you have pushed boundaries." Her hand moved the barest fraction of an inch.

"Repeatedly." He released the spell.

"Can you show me how to do that?"

"I can show you many things. The question is why I would want to."

"What would it take to get you to teach me?" She was not above serving his meals or doing his laundry if it meant she could learn more. She'd done worse. *And look how well that turned out.*

"Submission," he said softly. She jerked back from the light in his black eyes. "Of an essay," he added.

"On what topic?" She could write about anything.

"What I did on my summer vacation. That's a favorite in Muggle schools, I believe. Surely it presents no real challenge. Two rolls of parchment regarding what you learned when you went home, Miss Granger."

Anything but that. The lump in her throat threatened to choke her. "I doubt you would find it interesting."

"Nonetheless. Two rolls on the most moving experience you had, by morning, and I will teach you what you wish to know. Within reason, of course."

She took a deep breath. "I can do that."

"Good girl." He turned on his heel and left the room, not looking back.

She bit down on her finger to keep from screaming.

The door closed with a quiet click. He dropped into the chair beside his bed and rubbed his temples. A headache had threatened from the moment he'd touched her, a result of his internal war. The spell had been a compromise. He did not care to think about what he had wanted to do. Knowing he would not take advantage of her relative inexperience did not make it more palatable.

That she was no longer an innocent child had become clear before last night's incident. He ground his teeth. He had not needed such validation of his assumption, could not forget it. No matter what she had 'learned' while away from Hogwarts, she did not know enough to stay clear of Sirius Black.

Merely thinking the dog's name sent a spike through his temple. A potion would rid him of the headache. He embraced the pain instead. Something would have to be done. Tonight.

He looked around the small room. He had chosen it for the décor, or lack thereof. The rest of the Black house was a nightmare of garish contrasts. He could endure that to keep her safe. *That is not the true purpose.* He pushed the admission aside. His reasons might not be pure, but they were good. She would not believe it of him.

With a flick of his wand, he began the packing process. He would wait until she had gone to bed before he took the rooms next to hers. The move should irritate Sirius, reason alone to do it. The throbbing pain abated at the thought.

She folded her clothes neatly, then put on the white cotton nightgown her parents had bought for the new school year. It reminded her of the ones she had worn when she was little. She found it comforting. She got into bed, drawing her knees up to support her notebook. The first draft would not be worthy of parchment. During all her years at Hogwarts, she had hidden a notebook under her mattress for that very reason. She chewed on the end of her pen. Ten minutes later, she threw the pen across the room. The blank note pages fluttered as they followed it.

How could she write about **that**? She had, of course, in disappearing ink. It didn't run when she cried over it. Her mother had come in once, concerned that she was suffering from a broken heart. She couldn't explain that it was far worse. Her heart was intact. She simply could not forgive herself for being utterly stupid. She was hardly going to reveal it to Snape.

Think. What else had moved her? Nothing that compared. The American had taken her time, her summer, her confidence all on a lark and she had let him. Not just let him, encouraged him. Dazzled by blue eyes and a boyish smile, she had followed him all over Boston, and other places, until she had almost forgotten what she was. It had felt so good to be treated like a normal girl until she had discovered she was no better at it there than she had been at school. The realization that she could not escape herself had been devastating. Snape should not know that, either. She had been tormented enough.

She slid off the bed. Slouching to the door, she reached down to pick up the notebook. And found herself looking into tiny black eyes. The mouse shook, terrified.

"Shhh. I'm not going to hurt you." She looked around the room. "I'm afraid I don't have anything for you."

His whiskers twitched. She could swear he nodded at her before flicking his tail and darting back in the hole.

He has a system, a way to avoid being caught. She smiled. She had a system, too.

"Thank you," she whispered, retrieving the pen and bouncing across the room.

Momentum

Chapter 5 of 16

Strength or force gained by motion or through the development of events

Hermione soaked in a huge, copper tub, her nose the only part not submerged. Muscles cramped from hours of writing were finally allowed to relax, along with a tension she had carried with her for too long. She slid into an upright position, water streaming from her hair. She stretched, a languid motion, and rose from the tub. She wrapped her hair in a towel and dropped her nightgown over her head, shrugging when the thin fabric stuck to her still damp body. She would be dry by the time she got to her room.

The silence of the house was bliss. She made her way up the stairs, toweling her hair as she went. It would still be wet when she awoke. There was nothing she could do about that.

He was standing in the hall when she got to the top of the stairs, all lean lines and controlled anger. She wondered if he knew how to relax, then dismissed the thought. His comfort was not her concern. She could no more keep his anger from turning on her than she could resist the thrill it gave her when she deflected it. Finding out she was capable of doing so was the best and most interesting thing she had done all summer, but it did not take two scrolls to explain. She smiled when he turned, scowling.

His chest tightened when he looked on her, a vision in white. Smiling at him. She continued her slow progress, letting dark waves fall over her shoulder, towel dangling from her hand. Drops formed at the tips of her hair, falling to trail down her neck and gown. He swallowed. The old-fashioned nightdress barely hid the shape of her body as it swirled around her feet, brushed at her curves. And wherever the droplets fell, it became nearly transparent. He tore his gaze away.

"Up early, Miss Granger?"

"Up late, actually. You may recall giving me instructions last night."

Not the sort I'd have liked. He brushed away the thought. It came back stronger. "So I did."

She stopped in front of her door, fixing him with a steady look. "Wait, and you can have what you wanted." She slipped into the room, the door half open.

He could not keep from watching her. She bent to retrieve her essay, revealing delicate ankles. His eyes would not obey the command to focus only there. The light behind her turned her gown to a shadow screen, illuminating every motion. As she straightened, he stepped further back in the hall, adopting a pose of absolute boredom.

She glided across the floor. *When did she learn to do that?* Hermione had been known to stomp, stride, stalk, even creep. She did not glide. He realized he was staring at her.

"Here's what you wanted, Professor." The last word was a slap.

He stepped up to her, taking the rolls of parchment. He unrolled the first and glared down at her. "I ought to have expected this of you."

"Yes, you ought. I'm practiced at doing as I'm told."

"I am not certain this will fulfill the assignment," he warned.

"Surely you aren't backing down from our bargain? I followed your rules. Two rolls by morning." The stubborn set of her chin was a warning.

"I did not instruct you to lie."

"Perhaps if you read past the title, you'll find what you were looking for." She turned away. "I'm going to bed." She marched across the hall.

Better. He glanced down at the scrolls. Her script was perfect. "The Intertwined History of Magic and Science in New England." It did not improve when read aloud. He ground his teeth. She had purposely settled on a dull topic, likely tarding it up to seem that it had been all-important. Others would have believed it. Still, he could not fault her. She had given him what he had asked for, if not what he had wanted.

He looked at her closed door. Such potential there, most of it as yet unmet. Clutching the parchment, he descended to the kitchen in hopes of finding something to take the edge off his appetite.

Sirius stepped out of the shadows at the end of the hall. *What a delightful little show.* Hermione was oblivious. He could blame it on her exhaustion, but it was more likely a result of inexperience. Severus had reeked of desire frustrated. There was no mistaking that smell.

The scene in the attic made more sense now. He had thought the protective gesture a result of so many years teaching. That the man was besotted had never occurred to him; rage had covered that scent. It was almost enough to make him feel sorry for Severus. Almost, but not quite. Glee was much more entertaining than sympathy.

He waited until clattering pots told him Severus was slamming around the kitchen. Then he quietly opened the door to Hermione's rooms and slipped inside.

She lay on the bed, her damp hair twisted like a rope, soaking the back of her nightgown. He looked down at her. He would have hours alone to think and do little else while he waited for her to wake. She moaned as she shifted position, twisting. He reached down, pushed her hair aside, and ran his hand over her back. She quieted. He did it again, listening as her breath deepened when the pain disappeared.

It does work. He could hardly believe it. He leaned down and placed a kiss on her forehead. A soft sigh escaped her lips. He pulled up the covers and left the room. It seemed he did have something to occupy his time until she joined him.

Severus stood before the desk, hands still by his side. He had laid the two rolls in the center. She enjoyed symmetry. In the space of an afternoon, she had made the room

hers. His eyes took in the folio, willing its contents to spill open. He would make no move to disturb her research. Enough spying had been done for the wrong reasons. The puzzle would come together without that. He turned away.

Sirius stood in the doorway, smiling faintly. "I'm proud of you, Severus. Such restraint."

"I was merely returning an essay."

"How is our Hermione this afternoon?"

"She is not **our** anything." He clenched his fist. "She has not yet risen."

"I see." The smile grew.

Severus remembered that smile. On that boy. He had avoided looking at Sirius, returned to the perfection of youth. It was unbearable. He turned his head, but not so far that he couldn't see.

"Then it's you and I today." Sirius pushed off the wall and walked across the room.

Pure grace. Severus clenched his jaw. Sirius dropped into the chair, propping his boots on the table. He tilted his head back, smile still in place, knowledge bleeding into his eyes until they were almost black.

"I have better things to do." He turned to leave.

"I doubt that. You've been rattling around this house for days with no idea what to do with yourself." The smug tone was too familiar.

"And how would you know," he said, looking over his shoulder, "having only just escaped confinement?" He was rewarded with a flinch.

"I hear very well, Severus. Better than I did when we were young." The memory passed between them.

"Perhaps you will put your... senses to better use this time." He made it to the door.

"I have every intention of doing so. Shall I tell you what I find out?" The indolent question lashed across the room.

He spun, gripping his wand. "Stay away from her."

"Whatever for? Hermione and I get along quite well, or hadn't you noticed?"

"She is meant for better things."

"Like you?"

He stood, riveted.

"Did you think I would miss something that obvious? I'm surprised she hasn't discovered it yet. She's terribly clever. That always was your weakness clever women with a streak of kindness. One of your weaknesses, at any rate."

"Don't." It was the only warning he would give.

"Oh, no need to dwell on the past when the present is so intriguing. She's quite the young woman, isn't she? Just aquiver with curiosity waiting to be satisfied. Not the usual sort, either. She's looking at dark things."

"She doesn't know."

"Doesn't know what? That her research touches on the forbidden, or that you desire her? I dare say she doesn't know about that. How long have you been hiding it? Quite some time, I would guess. Your patience has improved."

"I learned many things while you were locked up."

"And all I have to fall back on is instinct. Which will prove more effective, do you think skills or intuition?"

"Leave her alone."

Sirius rose, supple grace giving way to animal tension. "I'll be damned if I let you tell me what to do in my own house," he growled.

"Then you'll be damned." He raised his wand, spell forming on his lips.

"Severus, no!"

Hermione raced into the room, hitting him low on his waist and bearing him to the ground. She landed half on top of him. All he could see were wide brown eyes. All he could feel was her fear.

"Kindly get off me." He placed his hand on her shoulder to shove her aside. Her hand covered his. He still held his wand.

"Please. No."

"I am not going to kill him." He held her gaze until she nodded. He gently pushed her aside and stood up. She remained at his feet, arms wrapped around her knees, looking up at him. He offered her his hand. She hesitated for a moment, then took it.

"Nice tackle, Hermione." Sirius laughed.

Had he not just made a promise against it, he would have dropped the dog where he stood, consequences be damned.

"Touch football, American style." She shrugged.

"That was more than a touch." Severus rubbed his hip.

"They play rough." Her grin was worth the pain and faded far too fast. "What, exactly, were you two arguing about?"

"It was nothing," Sirius said.

"Nothing." She narrowed her eyes and turned on him. "Don't mistake me for an idiot, Sirius. If he raised his wand, it was because you pushed him to it."

*She is **defending** me.* He could not move.

"What a terrible thing to say." Mock outrage could not cover the dog's enjoyment. He thrived on this sort of chaos. "Why would you think that?"

"Because in all the years he supervised total gits, he never once raised his wand to them in anger." She had one hand on her hip, a sure sign she was about to veer into moralizing. "I not only know your type, Sirius, I know you."

"Not as well as you may think." Severus stepped up behind her, breaking her concentration. He despised her when she was full of righteousness, regardless of on whose behalf. Better to face her wrath.

She whirled on him. "And you!"

The distraction had worked. "What about me, Miss Granger?"

"Clever, but I won't be your student here. From what I just saw, I am the most mature person in this room."

"Clearly." He looked her up and down. Strands of hair hung in her face, freed from a lopsided ponytail. The hit had carried them off the rug. Her shirt was dusty from the slide across the floor. His hip throbbed. She glared at him.

"I am going to my room to change. When I come downstairs, you will have hot water ready for my coffee." She turned on her heel and looked at Sirius. "And you will both be playing nicely for a change." She stalked from the room. The pounding of feet on the stairs was followed by the loud slam of her door.

Sirius walked towards him, arms open, palms up. "Shall we play nice, Severus?" He stopped, too close. "For once?" The smile had returned.

"Only for her."

Hermione tore her shirt off and threw it across the room. "Men!"

She had heard what they had said. Both of them. *Oh, lord.* They were fighting over her. She leaned against the door. Her shaky legs gave out and she slid down to the floor. Fear and anger had kept her from thinking as she stood between them. There was nothing to stop the thoughts now. Her heart raced in panic. How could she go back downstairs, knowing?

Fear and anger. She fixed on the last. *Anger.* She had a store of it, stockpiled from years of being called Mudblood, of being ignored when she was the only one with her hand up, of being teased about her hair, her teeth, her clothes, her brains. She added the smoldering remains of her trip to America. The smallest breath would have set the whole lot to burning. Their blustering had caused it to blaze.

She got to her feet. She ripped the brush through her hair, only succeeding in making it wilder. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. This was not the way to do it. She picked up her toiletry bag, rooting through it until she found what she needed, then systematically set about changing her appearance, using only Muggle magic. It had taken a great deal of instruction, and no small investment, but she had learned to use the tools well.

She surveyed the results of her work. It would do. If nothing else, she was calmer than she had been since their voices had stopped her in the hall. Cold realization gripped her. She chased it away with the heat of fury.

The mouse darted out from under her wardrobe, zigzagged across the room and disappeared under her bed. She smiled.

"Thank you again."

Charge

Chapter 6 of 16

The property of matter due to which it attracts or repels.

Severus looked out the window. The garden, once beautiful, had become a haven for weeds, desperate plants choked by creeping vines. Succulent flowers shone, grotesquely illuminated by the setting sun. Poison dripped from their petals, staining the grass.

A soft tread on squeaky stairs. A rustling pause. A soft click. He turned as she entered the kitchen, then swallowed heavily. Her steady look dared him to speak. He dared not. Her hair hung loose, tamed into soft waves. His fingers twitched as he imagined the texture. The rich brown of her eyes was made even more prominent by faint color and darkened lashes. Her lips...

Dropping his gaze did not help. Bare shoulders, the thinnest of straps, silk emphasizing her curves as she walked toward him. The light seemed to gather to her. Each deliberate step revealed a hint of thigh. He gripped the counter behind him, leaning back on his hands. She had not done this for him, could not know what it was doing to him.

"I see you listened," she said, brushing against him as she reached for her coffee. "Even took the initiative." She stepped back, wrapping manicured fingers around the cup.

"It's warm." She took a sip, her eyes not leaving his. "Wonderful. I didn't know you knew how."

"I have some experience brewing things, Hermione."

"Thank you. For this and for last night."

"I see you've recovered."

"Your skills have not suffered for being out of the classroom." Her subtle taunt was deliberate.

If she wished to spar, he would oblige her. "It was never where they were best employed. Surely you realized that?"

"A number of things came to my attention where you were concerned."

"Such as?"

"Your hands the ones you're intent on crushing. I wonder what you're hiding."

Everything. "Nothing."

She laughed. "You expect me to believe you have nothing to hide."

"Nothing that bears discussion."

She raised one perfectly shaped eyebrow. "Ah." She set down her cup. "Perhaps we should avoid talking of secrets. There are so many."

"Not all of them mine." He straightened.

"No." She stepped up beside him. "What should we discuss instead?"

"Your research," he suggested.

"Tomorrow."

"Did you have other plans this evening?" He regretted the question instantly. He did not want the answer.

"I'm as much a prisoner here as you, Severus. More, as I've been instructed to stay until the others return. So I'm left to find ways to amuse myself, and at the moment, research does not appeal."

"How unlike you."

"You don't know what I'm like. You see what everyone else sees a trumped up little know-it-all." She could not hide the bitterness.

"Once," he conceded. "That changed."

"Did it?" She turned to him. "I've seen no indication of that."

"You had no reason to look."

"If I didn't, it was because you never gave me one. So I'll take it now, if you please."

He could not stop himself, did not want to. His hand locked on her elbow, hauling her to him. His other hand held the back of her head as he lowered his lips to hers. She tasted of coffee, and something sweeter. She yielded to him, her hand sliding up his chest. When he broke away, she sighed.

"About bloody time," she said.

His apology stuck in his throat. She stepped back and looked up at him. Her eyes glittered.

"Well, that's done." Her smile was vicious. She turned away from him, hips swaying, head held high.

Unacceptable. He closed the distance silently and wrapped his arms around her. "Not done by far, Hermione." He spun her around and kissed her, harder this time, hands on her back, pressing her to him so she would know what she had set in motion. He was not close to done.

Her fingers grasped his shirt, whether in passion or to keep from falling in those outlandish shoes he did not know. Nor did he care. If she found it too difficult to stand, he would oblige her in her fall. When she moved against him, he groaned into her mouth.

"Much better," she purred when he released her.

"It **was** quite lovely." Sharp clapping shattered the reverie.

Two hands snapped up, wands ready. Sirius tilted his head and laughed. "Are you going to hex me for walking into the kitchen? Though I admit my timing could have been better." He glanced at the table, the counter, the floor, raising his eyes at last to lock on Severus.

"It is but one of your failings." Severus held his wand steady. Hermione lowered hers, face flushed.

"There are so many." Sirius smiled. "It would take a lifetime to catalog them."

"I have better things to do."

"So you've said." Grey eyes raked over Hermione as she stared at the floor. "And so I see."

Her hands trembled. Severus was accustomed to the casual torment. He would not stand for it being loosed on her.

"Leave."

"Abandon her to your... ministrations? I think not."

Hermione's scream rent the air. "I do not need protection." She bit down on each word.

Snape smiled, triumphant.

"From either of you." She fixed them each with baleful glares. She stalked to the door, pushing Sirius aside to walk through. Heels struck with a sharp click as she disappeared up the stairs.

"Put away your wand, Severus. You always did like it a bit too well." The sharp words belied Sirius' casual stance.

"I could kill you where you stand."

"It doesn't seem to stick."

"Yet." He swept past Sirius.

"She set her own wards tonight, Snape. I wonder why that is."

Dark laughter raked down his back like talons. He walked stiffly to his room, closing the door to block out the sound.

Hermione stood in the middle of her room, heart pounding. She slipped the shoes off, running her thumb along the smooth straps. Some of her plan had worked. He had liked the shoes. *And more.* Her stomach clenched. She had thought getting him to admit attraction would be difficult. She had miscalculated, counted on his usual reticence. She would have to adjust for contingency. And for Sirius. They had existed separately for her, but that no longer applied. Their rivalry drew them closer than either would ever admit.

Damn them. They had forced her to tip her hand more than she'd wanted. She hung up her clothes and removed the make-up. Her next move would have to be more subtle.

She flopped onto the bed, disturbing Cookshanks. He glared at her and jumped off the bed, tail stiff. She stared at the canopy, a god-awful green, and considered her options. Crookshanks mewled, looking intently at the wall in the manner of all cats receiving what she assumed were coded messages. She had never heard him make such a quiet sound. His tail flicked back and forth slowly. *The mouse must be in the wall.*

"Leave it be tonight. You can torment it again tomorrow." She scooped up the cat and set him outside the room. He huffed at her and walked away, tail stiff. That was more like him. She settled back onto the bed and lost herself in thought.

Her wards presented a problem. Sirius leaned against the wall, careful to make no noise. If he looked at her again, stretched out with her hands behind her head, wearing nothing but bits of lace, he might well risk triggering the spell. He sighed softly when she banished the cat. He wasn't overly fond of cats.

The secret door was no barrier to her scent. He breathed deeply, drinking it in, a heady mix of anger and desire. *So it's not just on his part.* He'd not expected that, though it made perfect sense. She was, above all else, a creature of intellect. He would have to keep that in mind. He could not play on Severus' field in that regard, but neither was she one-dimensional in her criteria for a lover. And she was most definitely looking for one. *Possibly more.* He could accept that. Social mores aside, humans were animals and not the sort that mated exclusively.

He doubted Severus would be as sanguine about the idea. That could be entertaining, but he would have to proceed with care. The man was wound tight, always had been. Watching that spring uncoil was a delight and very dangerous. Anything could happen.

It was worth the risk. He'd had a suspicion, since looking in the mirror, that the change to his form might not last. Perhaps the other changes would fade, as well. If he was on borrowed time, there was no reason to waste it.

He slipped silently down the hidden corridor and returned to his room. Morning would come soon enough.

Pacing did not help, yet Severus continued. He had to do something, but his choices were few. Unraveling her wards could be done, but it would only fuel her ire. He shook his head. He had no doubt she had been eavesdropping earlier, listening as Sirius revealed things she should not know. *How much did she hear?* Enough that she'd thought she could tease him.

She did. And he had fallen like a school boy with little self-control. He could still feel her hair, smooth under his hand, the way she'd trembled when he'd kissed her. She'd been surprised. He laughed softly. He might have given in, but it was not unwittingly. He knew enough of artifice to pick his moments. He was sure there would have been more, had they not been interrupted.

There was some satisfaction in her fury towards Sirius, less with having to share in it. He could use it either way. She was at her least stable when angry, easier to push in the direction he wanted. For now, he would bide his time.

Tossing his coat over the door of the wardrobe, he sat down at the desk, trying to dislodge from his mind the image of her bent over it. He pulled out the spiral bound notebook he'd taken from her room and began reading her notes. They were faded in places, as if the ink had bled through paper too thin for it, though the page looked unmarred. He tilted his head, reaching for his wand.

"Let us see what you are hiding, Hermione," he whispered. A simple spell revealed pages filled with words, previously invisible under precise calculations and bald facts. Fascinated, he followed each rambling thought. Even her stream of consciousness was complex, layered, brilliant and illuminating. She had told him the truth when she'd said he didn't know her. His chin rested on his hand as he discovered what she had really done on her summer vacation.

It was Snape's fault that she could not sleep. Writing the essay had thrown off her normally strict schedule. *That's not why.* She stomped on the thought, but it would not go away. The anger was fading far too quickly, leaving her only with the memory of his lips, his strong hands, the press of his hips against hers.

She had every intention of beating Sirius with *The Daily Prophet* in the morning. In the meantime, she needed a distraction. Perhaps writing about it would put the night in perspective. She took her robe from the hook and wrapped it around her. It was an absurd thing the costly wrapping for a present she'd not known she was expected to bestow. Burning it had crossed her mind, but it wasn't likely she'd get another silk robe anytime soon. She had earned this one.

She turned to the desk, putting away the makeup, making space to think and write. Her head cleared along with the surface. Everything would be fine. She would figure out how to face them tomorrow. And what to do about them after that.

She went to the bed and slid her hand under the mattress. The notebook was not there. She frowned, looking around the room. Sorting through the desk drawers revealed nothing but a few dried bits of something. She shuddered and hastily closed them. A horrifying thought dawned on her. In the middle of the night, she had gone downstairs to check her notes. In her exhaustion, she must have left the notebook in the library. *Idiot.* She would have to retrieve it. She belted the robe and left the room.

The hall was abandoned. She heaved a sigh of relief. Given the way the evening had gone, she didn't think she could bear running into Sirius, much less Snape. She tiptoed down the stairs, hovering at the door of the library, listening. She heard nothing.

The fire had burned down, the only light in the room provided by glowing coals. The moon was hidden behind dark clouds. She crossed to the desk. No notebook. She checked the drawers and found them blessedly free of desiccated things. Unfortunately, they were also free of poorly bound paper. She went through the stacks of books, though it was obviously not there. Stifling her panic, she turned away from the desk. Silver patterns appeared on the floor as the moon revealed itself. Light glinted off of something. She bent down to see what it was and pulled the notebook from under the desk. She clutched it to her chest and closed her eyes. Disaster averted. She needed to be more careful.

"A notebook, Hermione? How... quaint." His voice dropped over her, trapping her beneath layers of shame. For six years, she had kept her Muggle talismans secret. To have him make the discovery was more than painful.

"It's just notes from my research this summer." At least she was not forced to lie.

"I see."

I doubt that. She kept her back to him, afraid to turn around and see the scorn in his eyes. The room grew warmer, the revived fire casting flickering shadows on the shelves.

"I didn't hear you come in."

"Possibly because I was sitting in the chair when you arrived, though you never were the most observant of pupils."

"For all that, I did well enough even in your class." Her fingers curled around the edges of the notebook, bending it.

"Sneaking off to the library in the middle of the night seems to be a habit of yours."

"I couldn't sleep," she admitted, turning slowly to face him.

"Nor I. Far too many things to contemplate." Long fingers stroked the back of the chair. "Perhaps you would like to share your summer discoveries."

"I thought we'd agreed to discuss research tomorrow." This was steadier ground.

"No," he said, moving toward her. "You put forth the conditions. I agreed to nothing."

She stumbled backwards, bumping against the desk. He plucked the notebook from her hands. It landed behind her with a soft thwap. She resisted the urge to grab it.

"I... I should go to bed. This can wait until morning."

"I think not." He leaned down and kissed her. It was everything the moments in the kitchen had not been cautious, gentle, long. When she caught her breath, she was grateful for the support of the solid desk. She opened her mouth to speak and he claimed it again, stronger, insistent.

"Don't speak," he whispered. "Feel." His hands slid across her waist, loosening the belt. The robe fell open. She shivered, looking away.

"Look at me," he commanded. She met his gaze and froze at the light in his dark eyes. "This ends when you speak."

He was giving her the chance to leave. She knew she should take it. *And then what?* A sleepless night spent dreaming of what she had denied herself. A lifetime of 'what if?' It would drive her mad.

She nodded and was rewarded with another kiss. He wrapped his arms around her, warming her, pulling her closer. She wriggled, pressing against him, the soft cotton of his shirt brushing against her chest as his kisses trailed down her neck. One hand dropped to her thigh, pushing the robe away, sliding up and up. She gasped, hoping desperately that it did not count as speaking. His fingers continued to play, gliding over her hip bone, slipping under the insubstantial lace, exploring. She hardly noticed when the thong disappeared. She arched her back as he stroked her, crying out when he delved into her secrets.

"Lovely," he murmured, slipping another finger inside her. She clenched around them, breathing raggedly. It was not enough. She trailed her hand over his chest, his stomach, lower. His turn to moan. He released her, pushing her hand away.

"Not yet." He lifted her, setting her on the desk, laughing as her eyes widened. The robe slid off her shoulders. He kissed them in turn. He lowered his head and rubbed his cheek over one breast, pausing to kiss the exposed curve before moving on. She reached up to unhook her bra. He grabbed her wrists, pulling them back and down until her back bowed.

"Not. Yet." He kissed her again, harder, demanding. He released her hands and trailed kisses from her neck to her navel. She clutched the edge of the desk as he pressed her legs apart, just a little wider than was comfortable.

Surely now. She tensed, hoping she had not spoken aloud. Desperate, she searched his face. With a satisfied smile, he dropped to his knees. His breath was warm against her thigh. She squirmed as he repeated leisurely kisses on the other side. His dark laugh swirled around her, lingering as his tongue flicked out. *Oh, lord.* She shuddered, a slave to his mouth. Three fingers this time, stretching her. She pushed against them, moaning as he pressed further. They curled inside her and the world exploded.

"Shh." He stood, holding her until the shaking subsided. Then he picked her up and carried her across the room.

"Are you ready to speak?" he asked, setting her on her feet. She shook her head. She could not speak if she'd wanted to. And she most certainly did not.

"Good girl." With a flick of his fingers, he unhooked her bra and dropped it on the floor. He sat on the couch and pulled her to him. Her legs trembled as he took her nipple into his mouth, tongue running in circles until it stood at attention.

"Trouble standing? That won't do." He pulled her closer, keeping his knees together so she would have to part her legs. His hands dropped to her waist, supporting her as she straddled him. He was hard against her. She slid back on his thighs and reached a tentative hand to stroke him through the cloth. He did not stop her this time, shaking as she opened his trousers and wrapped her hand around him. His fingers gripped her hips as he raised her up, then slowly uncurled. His eyes held a question. She lowered herself in answer, letting him fill her, stretch her, possess her.

Her hands gripped his shoulders as he moved inside her, maddeningly slow. He kept his eyes locked on hers, conveying what he would not say aloud. She kissed her understanding, fingers straying to lay against his chest. He quickened the pace until it was a heartbeat. Hers, his there was no distinction. She tightened around him, struggling to postpone her release. He groaned, holding her still.

Her turn. She pushed his hands away, leaning to drive him deeper into her, then sliding back. When he threw his head back, she kissed his neck, sucking gently at the spot where it joined the shoulder. His hands came back to her hips, the look he gave her saying more than words that he would not be denied. She smiled at him, raising up on her knees, challenging. He returned the smile and slammed her back down. She leaned into him and did it again. And again.

"You will not win," he ground out, controlling their movement. Faster, frantic.

She kissed him, fierce, desperate, wanting. And then she whispered, "I already have."

It ended when she spoke, her voice bringing his release.

Induction

Chapter 7 of 16

Induction: Charging of an object without direct contact.

Hermione lay with her eyes closed, reveling in the slide of the sheet against her skin. Stretching, she looked up. Not even the ugly canopy could dampen her spirits. Dust motes danced in the morning light. She picked up her wand and removed the dirt from the window, flooding the room with sunlight. Glorious morning had followed glorious night. She slid out of bed, catching a glimpse of her naked body in the mirror. For the first time in weeks, she did not look away. There was nothing wrong with her.

She left the robe hanging on the hook. Her hair was still slightly damp from the late night bath. She twisted it into a knot, securing it with pins. When the urge for coffee outweighed her reluctance to dress, she grabbed the nearest thing from the wardrobe. She generally avoided dresses, but her attention to laundry had suffered in favor of research, and this dress was almost as soft as the sheets.

The lower level was abandoned. Not just unoccupied, but empty. The lack of energy grated on her. There was no point in looking for either one of her housemates; their absence was everywhere. She slumped into the kitchen to begin her morning ritual.

The mouse was in the middle of the room, happily eating. Crumbs scattered the area from the counter to the table. She ground her teeth. Carelessness had drawn it from the safety of its hole. It glanced up at her, unafraid, then went back to nibbling. She let it be. Crookshanks was nowhere in sight. She was alone.

She took the time to brew an entire pot of coffee, anticipating a whole day spent on research. At least she would be undisturbed. Her head was in the cupboard, rummaging around for a broom, when she heard a triumphant growl. Crookshanks barreled around the corner, headed straight for the mouse. It froze for a split second, then began racing across the kitchen, away from its hiding place. The cat was rapidly gaining on it. She waited until Crookshanks was almost to her before stepping directly into his path. He slammed against her leg. She lost her balance and twisted, reaching out for the cupboard door. She missed, landing in a heap on top of the furious cat. He yowled and scratched her, then wriggled away.

"Oh, Crookshanks! I'm so sorry. Are you okay?" She almost expected him to answer, and he did, in his way. He narrowed his eyes and hissed at her. Turning his back, he stalked away, tail lashing. The mouse had escaped.

Pain shot through her ankle when she tried to stand. She scooted across the floor, grabbed the cupboard door and hauled herself upright. Holding onto the counter, she made her way to the coffee pot and poured a cup, leaning to take the weight off her foot. She eyed the table, then her cup. Hopping was not an option. The counter supported her weight as she sipped her coffee.

The view out the window startled her. The garden had transformed overnight. Weeds shrunk back, wilting. Flowers, the normal sort, stood taller, leaves tipped to the sun. She pushed the window open and was rewarded by a delightful mix of smells, sweet, spicy, delicate, rich. She took several deep breaths. *Perfection*. Only her mother's garden came close to that bouquet, and it was far more pedestrian. For the first time since her arrival, the kitchen smelled like home. She drank it in, coffee forgotten.

The air changed slightly, bringing more smells. *Heather*. She turned to find Sirius leaning against the garden door, watching her. She still had difficulty reconciling his youth with the man she had known but briefly. His refusal to wear a shirt didn't help. It occurred to her that she should be angry with him, but she couldn't find it in herself to hold a grudge, especially considering how things had turned out the night before. She blushed, turning her head quickly in the hope that he wouldn't notice or deduce the reason.

"Do you like it?" he asked, coming up behind her. He had no notion of personal space.

She fought to keep from stuttering. "Like what?"

"The garden."

Oh! She breathed a sigh of relief. She had given nothing away. "Yes, very much."

"I thought you might. It is rather amazing, don't you think?" He reached around her to open the window further.

Her heart hammered at the brief touch of his arm on hers. *Shameless*. She tilted her head, examining the truth of her thought. She had no shame at all, no reason for it. Something inside her uncoiled.

"What happened?" She motioned toward the garden with her cup.

"I did. I couldn't sleep last night, so I thought I would make myself useful while you... rested."

She was uncertain if the pause was intentional. *I will not blush*. "How did you do it?"

"I had thought to keep it a secret, but your current predicament makes that impossible."

"My what?" Caution kept her from saying more.

"Your ankle, Hermione. You aren't putting weight on it."

"Oh. Yes. I tripped over my cat." She fixed him with a look. "Not one word about grace."

"I hadn't planned on it." He tilted his head. "Though grace might explain certain things."

"Thank you so much for refraining for all of two seconds. I thought derision was Snape's specialty." She set the cup down with more force than she'd intended.

"I'm surprised you thought him the only one capable. No matter. I wasn't speaking of your ankle, though it does apply, in a way."

"What are you on about?" Pain made her tone more strident than she'd intended. He didn't seem to notice.

"It's sooner than I'd expected," he mused, "but as the situation presents itself, I will show you." He knelt down in front of her, concentrating. Then he relaxed and cupped his hands around her ankle, careful not to touch it.

The pain dissolved. She gasped, looking down at him.

He sat back. "Put your foot down. Your lovely ankle is fine." Grey eyes dared her to deny it.

She gingerly lowered her foot to the floor. No pain. She put a bit of weight on it. No pain. He stared up at her, his smile brilliant. She took a tentative step to the side, holding onto the counter. No pain. Her mouth dropped open and his laughter filled the room.

"How..." She swallowed. "How did you do that?"

"I don't know. Perhaps it is grace, a gift from those who denied me my sanctuary beyond the veil." Bitterness tainted his voice.

"Is it so bad here?" she asked softly.

"No." He stood. "Not nearly as bad as it once was."

"Then why do you sound so sad?" *And angry.*

"I don't belong here."

"You can leave now that you've healed."

"And where could I hide that they would not seek me? Especially when they determine that I am too dangerous to let roam." He moved around the room, restless.

She furrowed her brow. "More dangerous than you were before?"

"In a way. This " He pointed to the garden. "Is not something for which they have rules. No precedent or traditions. No way to control it. Trust me, Hermione, the Ministry does not like things beyond its control." His bark of laughter made her shiver. "Threatening to take away my wand would be futile as I no longer need one."

"You don't have to tell them."

"They will know, the same way they know when underage wizards and witches use magic outside of school. Magic has a signature, and they have a host of people whose sole job it is to look for its unauthorized use. You know that."

"So why did you do it?"

He shrugged. "Because it needed doing. Both the garden and making you whole."

"Then they'll be on their way here." Panic threaded through her words.

"Not yet. They won't have any idea what they've sensed, and great leeway is given to things that go on at the headquarters of the Order, though none of it official."

She took a deep breath. "But soon."

"Yes." He stared out the garden door.

She walked up behind him. "Where will you go?"

"It would be best if I don't say."

"I wouldn't tell them." She wrapped her arms around his waist.

He laid his arms over hers. "Not of your own accord. One dose of Veritaserum and you would have no choice."

"Oh, Sirius!" She lay her cheek on his back and was startled to find him completely relaxed.

"I'll be fine, love. I'm rather good at running, remember?"

"But you said they would find you."

"Eventually." He gently removed her arms, then turned to face her. "But I will lead them a merry chase and perhaps do some good along the way. I believe Severus was right when he told me I ought put my life to better use this time."

"You don't owe the world anything. You paid enough for doing good last time."

"Such cynicism," he teased. "And in one so young."

"I've seen what the Ministry permits and how hard the Order has to fight to do the right thing."

"Espionage is a dirty business, but necessary. We all knew what we were getting into and what was at stake. That hasn't changed. If I can't help here, I will find another way. For now, I think I shall take a stroll through the garden. Will you join me?" He held out his hand. She took it and followed him into the fragrant sunshine.

She could feel the residue of the magic he had used. It hummed, barely discernable. Normal magic crackled. She said as much.

He stepped away from her, wary. "You can tell the difference."

"Why do I feel as though you're accusing me of something?"

"Very few people can make such a distinction. Most of them are employed by the Ministry."

"Well, I certainly am not!" She folded her arms.

"Not yet. How long have you known how to do that?"

"Forever. Long before I got my letter, I felt the difference in energy. I assumed everyone could, until I got to Hogwarts. My friends looked at me like I was insane when I mentioned it, so I stopped telling them."

"Take care not to reveal that. One of your classmates may remember, but if they don't, you're safe."

"Safe from what?"

"Do you think all those who spend every waking moment looking for magical infraction **wanted** to work at the Ministry?" He shook his head. "Perhaps you're not cynical enough."

"So we must both hide."

"In our way. I'm not certain how they test for that, but be careful when dealing with them."

"I learned that well enough last year." She thought for a moment, grateful that he always gave her time to do that. "If all magic has a signature, then there must be a way to change it."

"None that I've heard of."

"Nor has anyone. Yet."

"I know that tone. It screams of mischief."

"Mischief, certainly, if not yet managed." She smiled at him, feeling lighter than she had in weeks. "Come with me to the library."

She turned on her heel, expecting him to follow. He took a deep breath, drawing in the scents, holding them in his mind in the hope that it would help. He did not want to go into that room. It smelled of passion. Snape had cleaned the room in an attempt to wipe away any traces of their tryst, a gentlemanly thing to do. He simply was not thorough enough to confound Sirius' nose.

Jealousy had no part in his hesitation. In fact, he was pleased at how well she had managed to get what she'd wanted. Unfortunately, passion was contagious for an animal like him, and her obvious attraction to him would make it too easy to push where he should not. He sighed, resigning himself to a fight against his nature, and followed her inside.

Frame of Reference

Chapter 8 of 16

The world appears a different place when frames of reference shift.

A/N: As ever and always, my gratitude to the conspiracy of ladies who asked for a story - if not this exact one.

Hermione opened her folio, spreading the imperfect sketches on the desk. She was on the right track, but something eluded her. She had good reason to determine what it was and no more notion than she'd had the day before. She chewed on her lip.

She looked up from her pages when Sirius entered the room. His casual stroll belied a deeper tension. Energy poured from him, prickling over her skin. It reminded her of the day she'd toured MIT, though not nearly as crippling. When she'd asked if there was a particle accelerator or fusion reactor nearby, they'd responded with a history lesson about canceled government funding and future plans for renewable energy, none of which had answered the question. Something large was going on and either they had not known or would not say.

"What is it?" Sirius stopped moving.

She had never been good with a quick lie. She hesitated, then settled on the truth. "You're leaking energy, quite a lot. It stings."

"Ah. I was afraid of that."

"You knew?"

"I can hardly avoid knowing. The more I use my magic, the harder it pushes to be used. If I feed it into something large, like the garden, then it fades, sated. I suspect it will outgrow my ability to control it one day."

"What will happen?"

He shrugged. "It's anyone's guess. I suppose I will have to find bigger and bigger projects to dump it into."

"Which will alert the Ministry."

"Or its counterpart, should I travel."

"Can't you control it?" she asked.

"I have no idea how, but I'll have to find a way if I wish to remain alive."

"You mean free."

"It's the same thing, Hermione. Dying is preferable to imprisonment." A flash of madness in his eyes, so fast she almost missed it.

"I could try something. To redirect it, I mean."

He smiled. "What's the worst that could happen?"

If she told him, she would have to admit to her own madness. Providing, of course, she could even explain her idea. For once, she allowed herself to move forward blindly.

"Kiss me."

"Gladly." He put his hand on her waist.

His touch seared her until she thought her skin would burst into flame. His kiss was cool by comparison, comforting. She drew as much energy from him as she could, then stepped back. She channeled the excess through her wand, toward the fireplace. A ball of fire erupted, too large to be contained. She smothered it with another spell.

He threw back his head and laughed. "That is by far the most interesting way a woman has tried to seduce me."

She blushed, whether due to his words or her failure to perform a simple spell properly she didn't know.

She stared at the fireplace, frowning. "That's not how it was supposed to happen."

"Do you think we could try that without burning down the house?" He pulled her to him, not waiting for an answer. This time, his kiss made her shiver. She gave into it completely, wrapping her arms around his neck, his heart beating against hers, his hand on her back, claiming her. She explored his skin, hands flat on his shoulders, his back, his waist. He hardened against her. His hands moved to her hips and only when he broke the kiss did she realize he was holding her away. She stared into his eyes, reading pain, longing, reluctance. He looked away.

"If you don't want me, I understand." She looked down and sighed, hoping she could bury her loss in research.

"You really are no good at lying." He reached for her, folding his arms around her.

"Leave me a little dignity in your rejection," she said, trying to push him away.

He did not let go. "Foolish woman. Haven't I made my desire obvious?"

"Then why?"

"Because, love, Severus has overcome his hesitation at what he might find, having left us alone together, and is at this very moment opening the front door."

"Damn." It covered everything and more. "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. My hearing is just as acute as my sense of smell." He let her loose. "Let's discuss your research, shall we?"

She nodded, looking at the carpet. By the time she made it around the desk, he had put on a shirt. His silent magic unnerved her as much as the trickle of energy creeping over her skin. He pulled a chair over to the table and picked up a sheet of parchment.

"Be careful, Sirius." The warning was two-fold.

He winked at her, nodding to the empty doorway. "Welcome back, Snape." Sirius placed the parchment on the desk.

"Caution is not his strong point," Severus said, entering the room. In his hands were two books. He handed them to Hermione.

"What are these?"

"Books, Miss Granger."

She ignored his taunt, seeing it for what it was. She opened the larger of the tomes, frowning.

"Where did you get them?"

"The Bodleian Library."

Her head snapped up. "You went to Oxford?"

"Unless you know of another Bodleian Library, I believe that's a safe assumption."

"Why?"

"Because, dear girl, your few years at Hogwarts have not kept part of your brain from operating like a Muggle. I believe you will find what you seek in those books."

Sirius leaned forward, frowned, and turned to regard Severus. "Quantum theory?"

"And chaos theory. Both, I think, applicable to the insanity Miss Granger insists on pursuing."

"Did you expect to bore her to death?" Sirius leaned back, stretching his legs. "It would be like you."

Severus ignored him. "Are you familiar with the ideas?"

She looked past him to where Sirius lounged, deceptively relaxed. "I believe he intends to insult me into giving up on this project." She looked up at Severus. "But it won't work. Yes, I am familiar with them, though not well-versed. I believe that would take a lifetime."

"Then I suggest you read quickly." The corners of his mouth tipped up slightly.

"Very quickly," Sirius said, rising. "I will leave you to it. I know how you hate to be disturbed when you're working through a problem."

She wanted to tell him to stay, but one look at Severus and she rejected the notion. The tension between the two would be distracting, at best. At worst, she would end up throwing things at them. Neither scenario appealed. Despite looking in different directions, they were facing off even now. Before either of them could do something stupidly male, she got up and walked past them. She had left her coffee cup in the kitchen. If she had to spend the day wrapping her brain around theoretical science and math, she was going to need that cup. Perhaps when she returned they would both have left the room so she could think in peace.

Severus looked at the charred mantle, then slowly turned to Sirius. "What have you been up to?"

"Gardening, mostly."

Severus regarded him steadily. "Gardening."

"You must admit it was in dire need of care." Sirius' smile was unsettling.

"I'm surprised you dirtied your hands."

"Who better than I to tend to things abandoned? Besides, there was no one else here. I made quite a bit of progress this morning and had only just stopped before your return."

"And this?" Severus waved at the fireplace.

"Hermione's doing. I think she miscalculated." Sirius tilted his head. "You don't honestly think I could or would set a fire that large without a wand."

"No, I suppose not." Severus frowned. For all his railing at Hermione, he knew she was careful. Normally. Nothing about her was normal lately. *Which worked to my distinct advantage.* He let the thought go. Sirius was too good at reading him.

"I doubt she would appreciate you asking about it, but if you feel you must, she would likely explain exactly what she did wrong." Sirius strolled to the door. "And, as I suspect you will not be able to resist, I will go take a bath. If I'm neck-deep in water, I'm more likely to survive the firestorm that will follow."

"Take your time," Severus muttered to his retreating back.

"I plan to," Sirius replied from the hall.

Damn his hearing. Severus froze. He'd not thought to cast *Muffliato* the night before. He'd not been thinking at all. It irritated him that she had that affect on him, more that Sirius knew what had gone on. He wondered why the dog had not tried harder to provoke him. It was not fear. No, never that from Sirius. He was reckless beyond reason.

Reckless. Insane. Severus picked up one of the sketches and studied it. Sirius had seemed somewhat invested in Hermione's research. There must be a reason beyond mere curiosity for his sudden interest. His popularity at school had been as much due to his intelligence as his good looks, though he'd worked hard to hide the former when it had suited his purpose. As it did now. He was hiding something. Severus did not like other people's secrets unless he knew what they were. He scanned the page again. The changes to the formulae were miniscule; starting with an unstable spell ensured the results would not be. He set the page down and left the room.

Hermione closed the book and set it on the table next to her cold coffee. She stretched her legs in an attempt to rid herself of the tingling in her right foot. Now that she was taking stock, she realized her hand ached from holding the heavy tome and there was a knot in her lower back that would make sleeping unlikely. Sirius would take care of it with a wave of his hand, but she wasn't sure she could handle the aftershock. Not that she was done reading for the night. She still had to tackle quantum theory.

Her stomach gurgled, reminding her that she hadn't eaten. She stood, wobbling just a bit as more blood rushed into her foot. She waited until she was sure there would be no repeating of the morning's fall. Smells drifted from the kitchen. Her stomach practically roared.

Severus at the stove was as incongruous an image as she had ever seen. He moved with practiced skill, efficient and strangely fluid. She stood in the doorway, memorizing the scene.

When Sirius put his hands on her hips, she practically jumped out of her skin. She glared at him. He smiled in return, then placed one finger on his lips. He kneaded her shoulders, no magic necessary to make the muscles relax.

"Are you hungry?" Severus didn't turn.

"Starving," Sirius answered, stepping further into the room.

"Then I suggest you make yourself useful. Both of you."

They pulled out bowls, filling them with a fragrant stew.

"What's in this?" Hermione asked.

"Rabbit." Snape looked past her to where Sirius stood. "I found them dressed and waiting in the ice box."

Sirius shrugged. "I had a long night and thought it best to be productive."

"Thank you both." She sat down, not waiting for them to join her before starting.

"Manners," they said simultaneously. She almost shot stew through her nose.

"Sorry. I forgot to eat today."

"You should have said. I would have brought you something to repay you for all the meals you brought me, though I would have been kinder and made it a bit more palatable," Sirius teased.

"I was following orders," she protested.

He laughed. "So was I. Severus thought you should be undisturbed. Otherwise I'd have been much more attentive."

"Which is why I asked you to leave her alone." Severus glowered at Sirius, who seemed entirely unaffected by it.

"Don't look so sullen, Severus. I did as you requested."

"For once."

"This was not the only time." A look passed between them that she couldn't read.

The rest of the meal was spent in silence. When it was done, Hermione cleared the table, set the dishes to washing, and returned to the library, wanting nothing to do with what was obviously a pissing contest between the two men.

Several hours later, she was at the desk, quills laid out in precise order, knowing it didn't matter. *How could he have known I would need those books?* She rubbed her eyes. She ought to wait until morning, but there was too much at stake to risk losing time to sleep. Taking a deep breath, she drew the first vector in blue. Concentrating on the page, she reached for the second quill, dipped it in the ink, and placed the tip at the precise center of the arc, tracing the curve to the top point. Her eyes widened as she looked down at the line blue-green, not purple. She lifted the quill carefully lest her hand shake. Nothing happened. She pursed her lips, inhaled deeply through her nose, and repeated the action from the center to the low point. Nothing happened. Her heart pounded as she picked up the third quill and dipped it in the red ink. She kept her hand steady as she went over the line, this time marking it by quarters. As soon as she had finished, the lines began to move of their own accord, coming to rest almost exactly as she had drawn them. She stared at it. It glowed briefly, then settled into the parchment. The colors had separated instead of blending, creating a mottled line. She sat perfectly still, waiting. Nothing happened.

"Yes!" She'd thought to yell, but it came out as a whisper. She began to laugh, sounding a bit mad, even to herself.

"That's the sound of success." Sirius stepped into the room but came no further.

She tore her eyes away from the page and looked up at him. "One part is done. If I can get the other two to work..."

"Then you will have made great strides toward destroying our world," he said quietly.

"Not you, too! I knew I shouldn't have left you alone with Severus."

He gave her a withering look. "I didn't need his help to figure it out."

"It's not as dangerous as you think."

"Rather more dangerous than you imagine." Tension bled from him as magic had earlier.

"How so?"

"In order to change the signature of magic, you would have to undo it at the moment it starts."

"Which is why it doesn't work. You can't undo something that hasn't been done yet." She knew the arguments well.

"What happens instead?" he asked softly.

"You change it into something else, which is then done. The original magic is transformed, therefore defeating the paradox."

"The intent is changed, even if the result is the same, but masked." He paced across the room.

"Exactly." She beamed.

"Tell me, outside of the task you **intend** this to perform, what use would this spell be?"

"I don't know. No one has ever done it."

He stopped moving. "And you've never wondered why?"

"No. Why would I? The notes all say this part of the spell has never worked."

"Read it again." He waited while she checked the book.

"Does not work." She looked up at him, puzzled.

"You've got your tenses wrong. Understandable, as it's spelled to look that way under casual review." He took the book from her, stared at it for a moment, and showed her the passage.

"Do not work." She paled. "It's not a note on the effectiveness of the spell."

"No, love. It's a warning."

Resonance

Chapter 9 of 16

Marked increase in vibration of vibrating body when subjected to periodic forces that matches its natural frequency.

"I can't stop," Hermione said. "Not now. There's too much at stake."

"The fate of the world?" Sirius tried to make it a joke.

"Your fate. Mine." She looked across the room. "His."

Severus strode in. "I seem to have missed the context."

"Hermione has perfected the first part of the spell," Sirius explained, gesturing to the parchment.

"How?" From his lips, the word was an indictment.

"By accident," she snapped.

"No," Sirius corrected, "by changing the order in which things were done." His look warned her to proceed with caution.

"I suppose I should be grateful to be alive." Severus ground his teeth, obviously holding back his true feelings on the matter.

"One should always be grateful to be alive," Sirius said softly.

Hermione could not stand to witness another sparring match between them. "Getting this part right is irrelevant."

Both men stared at her as if she'd gone barmy.

"I won't be able to do this again because there is no way to make the same mistake twice," she explained.

"Clearly, you were not paying attention at school. The same mistake is repeated constantly." Severus paused. "Except by you."

"No, statistically similar mistakes occur at regular intervals. But making the exact same mistake is impossible. You can't control every contributing factor."

They spoke no words, but twin frowns told her she had lost them. They would never admit it.

She sighed. "It may not have been the order of the colors. It could have been the hour, the phase of the moon, Sirius walking into the room at that precise moment. But were we able to stage everything the exact same way, it still would not work because I know what needs to be done now, which I did not when I started."

"So you're saying that not only will you not be able to do that again, but no one will?" Sirius crossed his arms, doubt evident.

"Yes."

"And you are wrong." Severus closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Just as you cannot expect to repeat the same actions, you cannot guarantee that you or someone else will not make similar enough actions to cause the same result."

"But the odds against it are astronomical," she pointed out.

"Which does not change the fact that it is possible," Severus insisted.

"Fine. You're right. It is possible. But for my purpose, it is highly unlikely. And as there is no record of anyone else ever having made the bloody thing work before, I think it's a safe assumption that doing this spell won't suddenly become all the rage."

Sirius shook his head. "I'll leave you two to argue statistics and theory. It's more than I care to do on a full stomach."

She nodded at him. The conversation was not driving him out. His magic had been crawling up her skin, pushing. If Sirius did not leave soon, Severus would be affected.

He might believe it was the spell, convincing him further of its inherent danger. Or he might realize it was something else and set out to discover what. Both situations were best avoided. Sirius slipped from the room.

Severus frowned, reaching for the parchment. He hesitated. "May I?"

"Please." She swallowed her fear that he would destroy it.

He held the page gingerly. "This is remarkable."

"I believe we've established that," she said dryly.

"Indeed." He shifted his gaze to her. "But a thing of beauty should be appreciated, especially when it has the power to annihilate." He set the page on the desk and stepped back. "I rarely take such risks unless I know the rewards will be worth it."

"No, I don't imagine you do."

"You should stop now, Hermione, before you get hurt."

"I can't."

"If I asked it of you?"

"No. And you wouldn't. You want just as much as I to see how it works out."

"More," he said. "But I would rather it not be done in haste."

"Time is of the essence," she said. "The summer is almost over, and I will never be allowed to follow this path once I'm back at Hogwarts."

"Nor should you be," he said softly. He walked slowly from the room. A few moments later, his door closed. She could feel the magic flare above her. He had set wards.

Sirius knelt in the dirt, digging out weeds. He could have used magic, but it wouldn't have been as satisfying. The magic pressed on him, seeking a way out. He fought it, wanting to save it for beauty. If Hermione's spell kept the authorities at bay, he could spend the rest of his time repairing the damage Muggles insisted on doing to their world. He wondered if they would notice.

When the magic would no longer be denied, he used it to prune the big tree at the back of the yard. He could feel its relief, though he'd no idea how. He looked at the pile of dead branches and concentrated. They transformed into a wide bench. Fallen leaves and weeds became a thick cushion. He pruned a bush into the shape of a wolf and used the detritus to make a table. It would be a lovely spot to read. He used the last of the magic to clean the dirt from him. He stretched out on the cushion, welcoming the aches from the manual labor. They made him feel more alive, more real. He wasn't convinced he was either.

Her scent arrived first, lavender and ink this time, laced through with agitation. The taste of it settled on his tongue. He sat up, stretching, and waited for her to cross the garden. She hesitated at the edge of the area he'd just cleared.

"You can still feel it," he said quietly.

"Yes. The residue hums, as if it's looking for somewhere else to go."

"Does it bother you?" he asked.

"The magic, or how you do it?"

"Both."

"Some." She sighed and sat next to him. "Not as much as my magic bothers you."

"They are both dangerous."

"Magic is," she said dryly. She turned to him. "Have you found any limits to yours?"

"So far, it works the same as wand magic."

"Not exactly the same." She shook her head.

"More theory?" he teased.

"No. I've had enough of that this evening. It was the healing that made me notice the difference. It was... softer somehow, as if my body was convinced to heal itself rather than manipulated from the outside."

"Perhaps that's why I didn't notice during my recovery. It was focused on me because it **was** me. And now that it's finished, it wants a new task."

"Or perhaps it couldn't manifest until you were healed and the process was completely natural. There's too much we don't know. I'm not experienced enough to separate it out." She frowned.

"I don't think I would care to be studied by anyone who was. Best to leave this a mystery. It will give some young woman two hundred years in the future something to occupy her when she's stuck in a house during summer break."

She laughed. "It would be kind to leave something for that future girl to discover."

He thought she would leave it after that. They sat in companionable silence, looking at stars revealed by an unusually clear night sky. He put his arm around her as she leaned her head on his shoulder.

"You don't need my spell," she said.

"No?"

"You could simply use your magic to convince people that they didn't want to find you. They wouldn't know you'd done it because it would seem completely natural. And as your magic will read differently, there would be no way to detect it."

He pushed her away gently. "What part of that would not be Unforgivable?" he whispered. "I'll have no part in circumventing free will."

"Isn't that what my spell does... will do, if I ever get it figured out?"

"Yes."

"But you'll accept that?"

"I would be asking you to cast it on me, requesting the changes it will make, helping you skew the intent. I trust you. What would happen if your spell got out and anyone could use it?"

She shivered. "Voldemort."

"Or Bella. Or any one of the other Death Eaters. There would be no war, only surrender, everyone convinced it was what they'd intended." He waited as her eyes filled with horror. "Do you see now why Severus is so afraid? Why I am? **You** have a conscience." The list of people who did not had been running through his head all evening, and he'd not run out of names. Not all of them presented as evil.

"You want me to stop, too." She scuffed her feet.

"No. I'm selfish. That hasn't changed. I need you to continue, for both our sakes, but you must destroy your research when it's done."

"That suggestion did come from Snape," she said.

"Yes. He has been known to be right on more than one occasion. Promise me you will burn every note you have on this when all is done."

She stared into the dark, silent, her resistance an acrid wave. She sighed, squaring her shoulders. "I will."

"Thank you." He hugged her to him, kissing the top of her head.

"Don't thank me yet. If the other two pieces don't come together perfectly, on that same page, there may be little to destroy."

"Then we've only one chance." He tilted her chin up. "I have faith."

"We're running out of time."

"Best to use what's left to us then." He kissed her.

Severus sat at the desk, rereading her notes. He'd have thought she would be more careful with her precious notebook after the first incident. He sometimes found it hard to remember she was still a student. *Not yours*. He needed to stop thinking of her that way almost as much as he needed to convince himself she was not his. *Not yet*. He was reasonably sure she was proving it at that very moment. Jealousy flared and was tamped down by reason.

She needed Sirius. He represented everything the awful boy in America had failed to show her. Or so she thought. The dog only looked young; underneath, he was all the things he'd always been cocky, cavalier and self-serving. Severus grudgingly added optimistic, caring, loyal, and brave to the list, hoping desperately that was the side he would show her. She needed a summer fling that could restore her confidence, and he was the wrong person for that. He closed his eyes, praying that Sirius would realize her vulnerability and not break her further.

If he failed her, the dog would be hunted down and no promise to her would save him. A small smile formed on his lips as he returned to reading her notes.

Moonlight poured over tender kisses. Hands explored, tentative, needing to feel, to know. Her desire washed over him, awakening the magic. She gasped as it wrapped around them.

"Let it be, love. You're in no danger from me." He lay back on the bench, taking her with him, her head coming to rest on his chest.

"I..." she swallowed, hesitant. "I have a confession to make."

"I am no priest." He laughed, low and dark.

She gathered her courage. "Last night..." Courage failed.

"I know."

"It doesn't bother you?"

"Where do you want to be, Hermione? Right now."

"Exactly where I am," she answered.

"That's all I need to know." He pulled her up, silencing her doubt with a kiss. His hand stroked her leg, pushing up the demure dress until his fingers found what he sought. She writhed against him, slick heat parting as he explored her.

"And what do you want?"

"This."

"Just this?" His fingers stilled.

"More." Her hand, flat on his chest, moving lower, testing, discovering desire rampant. "Your eyes turn silver when you want me," she murmured.

"Do they?" He kissed her, trembling as she wrapped her fingers around him. "What color are they now?"

"Platinum," she said, smiling wickedly as she stroked him. "And smoke."

With a flick of his hand, their clothes vanished. "Better," he said, bearing her down and suckling one moon-dappled breast. She moaned, releasing him. He lifted her legs onto the bench, parting them as he took the other nipple into his mouth. Her breath quickened as he pushed against her, then stopped.

"More?" he asked. She nodded, lifting her hips to receive him. He entered her, reveling in her willingness. Her desire mingled with the magic, trailing over his skin as he moved inside her, slow, deliberate. He kissed her as he slid home, holding her still, savoring the way she fit him.

"More!" she commanded, tightening around him.

"As you desire." He nipped at her shoulder as she wriggled beneath him. He fastened his teeth on her neck, increasing pressure as she struggled, careful not to hurt her. Threads of fear inflamed need. She dug her fingers into his arms, twisting to meet him as the tempo increased. Feathered kisses soothed away the marks on her neck. Her

nails bit into his shoulders, a reward for pleasure. He let loose his beast, growling as he pounded into her, driven on by broken cries for more, always more.

No. He fought instinct, willing his breath to deepen, the pace to slow.

"Don't stop!" She pummeled his back. He welcomed the bruises.

"I have to." He could barely choke out the words.

"Not now. Please." Her eyes were almost black in the moonlight.

"I don't want to hurt you." He pleaded with her to understand.

"Hurt me. Take me. Fill me." Her demands cracked his resolve.

He threw his head back, driving into her. She raked her nails down his back. He grabbed her arms, hands locking on her wrists to keep her from tearing at him. She did not know what she asked, what she had done. He could not stop it now. Seizing her mouth with a searing kiss, he poured his magic into her, filling her as she convulsed against him, muffling her screams. He rolled to the side, wrapping her in his arms, spent.

"Now you are stronger than all of them," he whispered, stroking her hair as she cried into his shoulder.

Impulse

Chapter 10 of 16

The product of force and the time the force acts on it; impulse causes a change in momentum.

"What did you do?" Hermione whispered.

"I'm sorry."

She regarded Sirius, a sickening thought forming. "For what?" A hiccup robbed her tone of vehemence.

"You know what." He closed his eyes. "You can feel it."

Taking a deep breath, she stilled her thoughts. "You gave me your magic." Fear warred with excitement.

"I don't think it will work the same way, but you're welcome to try it."

"On what?" She sat up, unable to focus on anything save him.

"Anything. The trees, retrieving our clothing." He swallowed. "Punishing me."

"If you plan to act the martyr after giving me one of the most amazing experiences of my life, I may well do that. And if you remembered our encounter in the library, you wouldn't be so quick to suggest it." She worked herself into a good lather. "I know you "

"I remember every time you've spoken to me, everything you've said to others while in this house, your scent as you drew near, the way you felt under my hands. I remember everything, Hermione. I always will." He opened his eyes, still shining silver. "And none of that excuses what I just did to you."

Oh, good lord! She stared at him, then slowly shook her head. "What **is** it with men? You all have this absurd idea that **you** are the ones controlling things and that **all** I can do is react. And for some reason, both you and Severus seem to think I'm easily broken, despite all evidence to the contrary, laid out before you, leading to the screamingly obvious conclusion that I am quite capable of taking care of myself."

With a huff, she flicked her hand, intending to retrieve their clothes. Nothing happened. She reached down for her wand, wondering again why they never Vanished, even when tucked in pockets. She carefully cast the spell, though she supposed the worst that could happen was that their clothes would arrive with more force than necessary.

Which was exactly what did happen.

Hermione held up the remnants of her dress. Sirius' trousers were whole. *Of course. The animagus gets clothes.*

"You're stronger now, love. It will take some getting used to."

"I am also naked!" she fumed. The full meaning of that hit her, and her mouth fell open. She would have to return to the house completely bare. With her luck, Snape would choose that particular moment to come out of his room. She covered her face with her hands.

"I think you're lovely this way," he said.

She turned to glare at him just as he threw his shirt at her. She caught it full in the face.

"It was hanging on the tree. I took it off before working. And if I never wear another one, I'll be pleased."

She dropped the shirt over her head. It covered her enough for decency, if barely. "You'll stand out if you insist on going without a shirt, especially in winter."

"Then I shall have to move to the tropics," he said lightly.

The truth behind his words sank in. "You'll have to go, after," she said softly.

"Yes." He wrapped his arms around her, tentative at first. She laid her head on his chest. "If there is an after." He laughed as if not caring that he spoke of his possible death.

"That's not funny."

"After the lives I've had, almost everything is humorous." He kissed the top of her head. "Now let's see if I can sneak you into the house without alerting Severus. Unless, of course, you want to be seen like this?" He slipped his hand under the shirt and caressed her bottom.

She shoved him away. "No. I will be remaining in the area, which greatly increases my chance of running into him. He knows enough about me as it is." She flinched inwardly at the allusion and stared intently at her feet.

"He's a fool if he doesn't seek to know more," he said quietly.

Her head snapped up. "You want him to..." She couldn't finish.

"I don't think I've ever wished happiness on him, but it's all I want for you. I'll be glad if you find it, whether it comes in the classroom or someone else's arms, even his." He pulled him to her. "But I hope you find a bit of it in mine."

She didn't resist when he kissed her. The only magic came from his lips.

Sirius entered the house first, motioning to Hermione when he found the kitchen empty. She had considered Apparating into her room until he reminded her that it might go badly. In time, she should adjust to the extra power, providing it didn't dissipate entirely. There was no telling what would happen. He cursed himself again for his weakness, despite her assurances that she was perfectly fine. It was best to let her think that, whether or not it was true. He took her hand, leading her into the abandoned hall.

A shriek rent the air, bloodcurdling, familiar. He flinched from his mother's voice. "Whore! Filthy, stinking whore! Defiler! Mudblood trollop!" The curses devolved from there.

Hermione stood, frozen, her face a crimson mask, gaze riveted on the staircase. Sirius transfigured the shirt to a dress, as similar to the one she had been wearing as he could manage. She shuddered before dashing into the library, her hands clapped to her ears.

"As if you ever cared what I did or with whom," he said to the portrait. He wrenched it off the wall and raced up the stairs, not stopping until he reached the attic. His mother screamed at him the entire time, filling the air with imagined details sicker things than he had ever envisioned shredding his choices, damning him as she had in life. He lit and silenced the room with a thought, striding over to the alcove made by the chimney.

"You deserve worse," he said to her as he hung her portrait in the darkest place in the entire house. "And I will tell the others that I am perfectly happy to remove any picture into which you wander." He stalked across the room. With a backward glance, he said the worst thing his mother could hear. "She is better than any Pureblood spawned of this house."

"You are no son of mine!" she howled as he closed the door, extinguishing the light.

"Thank all the stars in the heavens for that," he muttered. It was not until he reached the library door that he realized he'd cast two spells at once.

Severus stood, clenching the back of the desk chair to keep from opening his door. Sirius pounded up the stairs, vitriol pouring from the harpy. The foul confirmation of his assumptions burned into his mind, accompanied by things he wished not to consider. Things he had tried to forget. All thought of the usefulness of their presumed tryst fled, leaving only rage. And the only one at whom he could direct it was himself.

The silence was a relief. He took a deep breath, then another. Mrs. Black's portrait had lied. It frequently did. He had heard it say worse things about, and to, Hermione. If she and Sirius had been intimate he ground his teeth at the thought it would have been nothing like the depraved ramblings of an insane picture. *It would have been beautiful.* A bitter taste filled his mouth at the admission.

He waited until Sirius' steps had faded. They would be in the library. He checked the hall to be certain, then slipped into Hermione's room to replace the notebook. Knowing he should not, he took one final look, revealing her most recent invisible entry.

The most remarkable thing has happened. Severus and I

He read no further. Letting the words fade away, he closed the notebook and put it under her mattress. He would not look at it again. When she was ready, she could tell him what she felt for him. No matter how long that took, it would be worth the wait.

The gargoyle chair dwarfed her. She was bent over her research, her hair falling in tangles to brush the desk, dressed in jeans and a rumpled button down shirt with the sleeves rolled up. She had either transfigured the dress or, more likely, conjured the clothes from her room. Had she gone up, she would have run into Snape, just now returning to his quarters. Sirius considered using the secret passage to discover why but decided against it. He had nothing to gain.

She looked up as he approached, unconsciously tucking her hair behind her ear. He plucked a leaf from it, transforming it into a flower before laying it on the desk. She left it there. He sighed. This was not at all how he'd wanted things to go.

"Hermione, I..."

She cut him off. "Did you destroy it?"

"No. I left her in the dark she loved so well." More than she had loved him.

"Good." Her jaw was set as she slid a page over to him. "I think I've figured out the second part."

He looked down at the sketch. It meant nothing to him. It represented everything.

"Chaos. That's what it needed. And you gave it to me." She would not meet his eyes.

"I'm not following." He frowned.

"Your magic. In me, it's chaotic, unpredictable. This is how it manifests." She gestured to the page. "That sketch came out perfectly. I can do it again."

"But if the magic is chaotic, you can't be sure it will work the same way twice. Isn't that what you were arguing earlier?"

She shook her head. "This part is different. It's pure math. Arithmancy, if you prefer. The chaos doesn't affect the component, it affects **me**. All I have to do is reproduce this piece, on the same page, and the spell is two-thirds done."

"Then why haven't you?" He kept his tone neutral.

"Because as soon as I do, you'll be one step closer to leaving." She looked up at him. "And this is not how I want it to end."

"You cannot want a repeat of this evening."

"Why can't I? Because it frightens you? Or because you'll want to keep me around if I can take it?"

He stepped away at the intensity of her gaze. "Because I don't know if I can control whatever it is I did to you."

"The magic, or the lovemaking?"

"They seem to be connected." This was dangerous ground. "I don't want to hurt you." He grimaced. She had heard that before.

"Which part of you leaving do you think will not cause me pain?" She stood slowly, leaning towards him, hands flat on the desk.

"You know I can't stay any more than you can leave," he said.

"I am not constrained, Sirius. I could disappear right now. My friends would worry, wonder what had happened to me, but they would move on. They have other things on their minds, if you'll recall."

"I won't be responsible for you leaving behind everything you care about."

"Not everything." She came around the desk to stand before him.

The magic stirred, reaching for her. He would have to be very careful. He took a deep breath and blew it out. The bench in the garden collapsed with a crash.

"Do you honestly believe that if we both disappeared at the same time, there would not be a hunt for us? The notorious Sirius Black, returned from the dead by who knows what dark machinations, making off in the night with Hogwarts' star pupil, one of the best friends of Harry Potter? They would not rest until you had been rescued from my evil clutches."

She stopped. "... I hadn't thought of that."

"Why would you?" He reached for her hand, drawing her closer. "Were we both free, I would take you with me, show you such things as you can hardly imagine." He tilted her chin up and brushed a kiss over her lips.

"We are," she protested.

"No, love. You are free. I am a prisoner of expectations." He held her to him. *Yours more than anyone else's.* She would not see it.

"Then there's nothing for it." She spoke into his chest.

"Finish what you've started tonight," he said.

"If you will," she challenged.

He nodded. "You know where to find me." He kissed her and left the room.

I will always know where to find you. She dared not say it aloud. When she heard the door close, she released the tension she had held since he'd taken her in the garden. The spell would work, but not as he thought. She only prayed he wouldn't notice until it was done.

She went back to the desk, dragging the awful chair closer, and invested hope in chaos.

Position

Chapter 11 of 16

The place a given thing is located at a given time. The location of something relative to something else.

Summer rain, light and only slightly chilly, struck the two, drops gathering to form rivulets running down dirt-streaked arms. Movement stilled as if to ward off morning, they stared at what they had done in confused wonder.

"There's one more," she said, yawning.

"Leave it. I have plans." His neck popped as he rolled his head.

"I suppose we should go in." She made no move to rise.

"I suppose we should." He sat where he was.

Thigh next to thigh, knee to knee, they watched as the night faded. They were still there, soaked and tired, when the first bird sang.

She was not in the library. Books lay open on the table, the floor, the chair random tomes, their purpose obscure. Severus approached the desk, reluctant yet unable to keep from looking. It was the only clean surface in the room, and in the center was a single page. Severus stared down at it, hand hovering, then withdrawing. He closed his eyes against the evidence before him. She was almost done. He gave a nod to the inevitable, picked up her cold cup, and went to discover the truth.

They were not in the kitchen. Neither had been in their rooms the night before. He'd been awake half the night, debating on whether or not to take a sleeping draught until it had been too late. He set the cup in the sink and looked out onto the venomous garden. Fingers gripping the counter, he wondered briefly if he would be sick. A damp breeze brought fragrance the like of which he had not smelled in years. He shook with remembering.

He stepped onto the walk, cleared of weed and vine. He focused on the brick path, not wanting to see the beauty around him, alarmed by what it meant. He had been twice a fool. He stopped, carefully taking in perfection masked as the disorder of a cottage garden, broken here and there by orderly beds of herbs, some he'd had great trouble locating. *How could I have been so blind?* Steeling himself for what he might find, he took the final turn.

They were like statues. Mud-encrusted, barely touching, they looked out, failing to note his arrival. It was not at all what he had expected, but in many ways it was far worse. He cleared his throat. As one, their heads turned. His image reflected in eyes red and glazed, he broke their trance.

"The last one is for you." Sirius spoke as if from a distance.

"Oh." Hermione tilted her head. "That makes sense."

Severus turned slowly, following her gaze. Against the high wall were three topiaries wolf, stag, and dog. The last hedge remained untrimmed.

"You'll want to step back, to keep me where you can see me," Sirius said. There was no threat in it. Severus did as he was bade. Without word or gesture, the hedge took shape, leaves and branches falling until it resembled a hawk.

"You did all this?" Severus asked.

"She helped."

"In one night?"

"Two, actually." Sirius shrugged.

"And I did not notice."

"You were busy." Sirius turned to Hermione. "Coffee or bed?"

"Bath," she announced, standing and stretching. "Then bed." She wandered down the path and disappeared around the corner.

Sirius sat with his hands on his knees, purposely keeping them where they could be seen, a throwback to the rules of combat. Rules which obviously no longer applied. "You needed to see it for yourself."

"I'm uncertain as to what I witnessed, aside from an admirable display of landscape artistry."

Sirius glanced up at him. "You were always better at that than I was."

"At what?"

"Finding a way to not say what you know to be true."

Severus smiled bitterly. "It keeps me alive."

"Hermione knowing the truth will hasten my death." Their eyes locked.

"Yes." Severus looked away first. *And hers.* He did not need to say it aloud.

"I've given you no reason to like me, and I doubt that will ever change," Sirius said. "Though it ought to have, and long ago."

Severus grew still. "We would be best served by not discussing the past."

Sirius continued as if he had not spoken. "You've no reason to help me now."

"I have very good reason." He glanced down the path. "But I doubt there is any way I can."

"You are the only one who can, the only one I am sure will do what is necessary."

"We will not play this game again," Severus growled. "Tell me clearly what it is you want."

"If I am unable to control this," Sirius waved at the garden, "I must be stopped." He looked up, haunted by possibility.

"And you expect me to do it. Why?"

"Because you dislike me." Sirius looked up. "Though you can't bring yourself to hate me, try as you might."

"I did hate you."

Sirius ignored the confession. "And you don't fear me. Few with the strength will have that unique combination."

"That is not enough for me to agree to this."

"Then do it for Hermione. She thinks to keep ties on me. You cannot allow it."

"It is difficult to convince her to change her mind when she believes she's right. Her insistence on continuing with the spell should have demonstrated that enough so even you would notice."

"Then don't bother trying to sway her. Just do what needs doing."

"Your bloodline is showing," Severus warned.

"Wickedness in the service of good is not beyond either of us, Snape."

"And I suppose you have devised a plan that will keep her from finding you?"

"She designed it herself. I will simply pervert her desire." The casual admission proved again that he had not changed.

"She will hate me for my role in it. Is that part of your plan as well?"

"No, though it did occur to me. I will ensure she does not blame you. In time, she'll see the wisdom of it. For now, she's blinded by hope. That will pass, and though I will be sorry for the loss of it, you should benefit."

"That is hardly a given."

Sirius sighed. "It's a possibility. She's loved you far longer than you know. Someday, she'll admit it."

"Perhaps." He kept his tone even, almost disinterested. "I am more concerned with the present."

"I'm asking more of you than I've any right to, and you have grounds to refuse."

"Are you certain this is what you want?"

"No. I'm certain it's what is right. And so are you. If I am to die, I'd rather it be by your hand." He quirked a smile. "Someone should find pleasure in it."

Severus swallowed, closing his eyes. "Why a hawk?"

"It's how I see you." Sirius stood.

"I will do as you ask." The words fell from his lips and were washed away by the rain.

"Thank you."

"Don't." He turned and walked back down the path.

Hermione resisted the urge to soak in the big tub. There was no time to waste. She could not risk completing the spell while exhausted, but a nap should refresh her enough. Muscles complaining, she got out, wrapping her hair in a towel. She resisted a lifetime of her parents' admonishments to do simple things without magic and spelled herself dry. Wrapping herself in the silk robe, she returned to her quarters. The garden door banged shut as sleep overtook her.

Steam hung in clouds when Sirius stepped into the tub. Hermione's scent suffused the room, mixed with lavender soap. She must have considered the irony of choosing that fragrance. Water stung the scratches she had given him. He smiled, sinking lower. Under the guise of caution, he'd dissuaded her from healing the welts. He regretted that none were deep enough to scar. His skin was all together too unmarred, like wearing a set of robes that belonged to someone else. She had broken him in, but there would be no evidence of that.

Evidence. He sat up, water splashing over the rim. She would have to explain the garden. He could not undo it. Would not. He needed to leave her something and he'd precious little of worth. He would not drape her in the trinkets of a cursed family, and she would refuse if he tried. A good story could be created to account for the changes in the yard. Something she would be able to tell without that delightful blush, just around the ears, that accompanied her absurd attempts to lie. She could manage when pressed, and he could think of nothing more pressing than his current predicament. He finished his bath, listening to Severus move around the kitchen. It was strangely soothing.

A cauldron bubbled on the stove. Vials lined up on the counter, some empty, bore testament to a complex potion. He had never been good at Potions.

"Keep your distance," Severus warned, coming in from the garden. He held up freshly cut herbs, tied in neat bundles. "You did this for me." It was an accusation. He set the herbs on the table and went to the stove to stir the mixture.

"Yes."

"Why? You could not have known my answer."

"I didn't even know I would ask the boon. Not everything I do is calculated, Severus. Sometimes, I'm just considerate."

"Then you've changed."

"Hadn't you noticed?" Sirius chuckled.

"Rather hard to miss you looking as you did then," Severus drawled.

"I thought the past wasn't a matter for discussion."

"It is not. I was merely making an observation."

"Nothing with you is that straightforward."

"Not as a rule, so listen carefully. You need to sleep before she finishes that blasted spell." He added a green liquid to the potion. "I believe you know the way."

"You aren't suggesting..."

Severus spun on him. "If you speak another word, I will not wait to kill you." He closed his eyes. "This will be your last chance. Go."

She awoke when Sirius got into her bed, his hand warm on her back. She turned her head, opening one eye. "Mmpf?" she said into the pillow.

"Hush, love. Let me tend you." He soothed her aches without magic, fingers unraveling knots in her shoulders. She settled back, memorizing the feel of his hands as they caressed away her pain. She looked up at him when he stopped. Tenderness warred with sorrow, his eyes almost black.

"Let me hold you." She reached for him as he lay back on the pillows.

He pulled away, eyes fixed on the canopy. "He sent me to you."

She sighed. "He insists on torturing himself."

"He loves you."

"Which, I believe, proves my point. He'll not let me love him back until he gives in. And I suspect that will take a long time."

"I should go."

"Because emulating him in self-inflicted suffering is such a good idea," she said wryly. "Don't be an ass."

"But I'm so good at it." He smiled at her.

"You were. New life, new choices. If you don't want to be here with me, then get up." She wriggled closer. "Or else accept the odd circumstances and make love to me for what will likely be the last time."

He gathered her to him, kissing the top of her head. "You're a remarkable young woman," he murmured.

"I am a lunatic," she muttered into his shoulder.

He laughed. "That, too."

Hands slid over smooth skin, heat transferring, changing. The magic lay dormant as she ran her hands over his arms and chest. She kissed him, losing herself in the sweetness of his mouth, laughing as his eyes shone.

"*Muffliato*." He hadn't needed the word.

"You're a better man than you want people to believe," she said.

"No need to be cruel. Especially as I expect to make you scream."

"Do you? How very cocky." She kissed her way from his chest to his stomach as her hand moved lower. His shiver brought a smile. His fingers laced through her hair as she ran her tongue up the length of him, but he made no move to control her. She took him in her mouth, relishing his soft moans. She savored the feel of him, the taste, the way he fought, whether his own reaction or the magic did not matter. She lifted her head, satisfied that he knew she was in command.

"Not so full of yourself now, are you?"

He growled, pulling her up until she lay atop him, his breath ragged. She rose up on her knees, hands on his chest, and dropped back until he pressed against her.

"More?" she teased, lowering herself slowly when he nodded. He shuddered, still resisting the pull. "I'll take it," she whispered, "as much as you give me and more." She pushed on his chest until he was buried inside her. She rose up, just as slowly, then plunged down.

He howled as the magic burst forth, swirling around them. "Damn you!" He rolled her under him, pinning her shoulders, his kiss fierce as he thrust into her. She opened herself, taking him deeper, twisting to meet him, writhing as he forced her down.

"Give me everything," she cried.

"No," he ground out, slowing. The magic ebbed. "Only this. Only me."

She wrapped her legs around him, giving way, her hands moving over his back, his arms, his chest.

"You have always been enough." It was a benediction. He covered her mouth, his tears falling on her cheeks as he spilled into her. The magic covered them like a blanket, still and comforting as he fell asleep.

"And now you can control it," she whispered, drifting off.

Random

Chapter 12 of 16

A cause and effect relationship with no way to predict the outcome.

Severus sat at the table, reading *The Daily Prophet*. There was little of interest to him, most of the articles full of nothing more than speculation and gossip. His eye fell on the bottom of the page where a box showed the real-time outcome of the World Cup. It was coming to an end.

The third stair from the top gave its usual creak, softly enough that he knew who descended. He picked up his wand and flicked it towards the counter, starting the noxious brew. He had no idea how she could stand the stuff. He pretended to read as Hermione entered the kitchen. She came to a halt, staring at the floor.

"It was you," she said.

He looked up. "You might try elaborating if you wish to make sense."

She pointed at the floor. "You're feeding the mouse!"

"Don't be absurd." He took a bite of his toast.

"I spent years in the dining hall with you, and never once did your fastidious manners result in a pile of crumbs on the floor."

"Were you watching so carefully that you would have noticed something so small?" He pinned her with a stare.

"Were you so unaware of me that you missed it?" she shot back.

"There were hundreds of students in the Great Hall." He reached for his tea.

"There was only one of you," she said, stalking across the room. She banged her cup down on the counter.

"Why would I feed a rodent?" He tried to distract her.

The mouse picked that moment to poke its nose out, whiskers wiggling furiously as it tried to locate its breakfast. She swept the crumbs, and a fairly sizable corner of toast by one chair leg, into her hand and deposited them in front of the hole. She retrieved her cup and took the seat across from him, gaze full of accusations. He suspected none of them had to do with the mouse.

"I have no idea why you do half of what you do, but I'm sure there's a reason."

"Only half?" He could not stop himself from smiling.

"So far. I plan to reduce that percentage in the future."

"You will have a difficult time doing that from Hogwarts."

"Then I'll have to make good use of the time remaining to us this summer." Her eyes did not leave him as she sipped her coffee.

He slid the paper across the table. "There is not much time left."

She glanced down, found the score box, and paled. "Damn."

"Succinct," he said. "I approve."

"You know what this means." Her hand shook as she set down her cup.

He nodded to her, and rose from the table. "I will be in the library, should you need me." He knew she would follow.

They read in silence, she lost in the intricacies of chaos theory, he trying to ignore the way she lounged on the couch, knees drawn up to support her book. *Madness*. He turned the page, having no idea what he'd just read. She closed her book, arching her back and swinging her feet to the floor. She set the book on the table beside him and went to the desk.

He waited for the scraping of the heavy chair across the floor. When he did not hear it, he turned his head. She had moved it without a sound. He used the excuse to shift his position so he could observe her, but not enough that she would notice. She stared at the page, her hand fluttering over the quills, then coming to rest in her lap. He considered offering to retrieve her notebook but dismissed the petty cruelty. There was too much at stake now.

He gave up any pretense of reading, quietly closing his book and setting it next to hers. With her head bowed over the page, he was free to watch her. She had always focused to the exclusion of things around her, sometimes to her detriment. In this case, it was necessary. She turned the page sideways and, jaw stubbornly set, picked up a quill.

She will not succeed. He did not believe it, though he badly wanted to. The house was perfectly still, as if even the portraits held their breaths. She set the quill to the page, lifted the tip and repeated the action. He could see no evidence of her breathing. She reached out for another quill, then stopped. Closing her eyes, she let her hand fall. He was relieved when she opened them before setting the quill to the page. She drew quickly, turning the parchment slightly with each stroke. When she had finished, she sat back, meeting his gaze. Neither spoke.

She did not look at the parchment. Failure was written on her face. In all his years teaching her, he had never hoped to see it more. Or less. He rose and walked slowly to the edge of the desk. Looking down, he noted a tiny drop of ink on the corner of the page. He stilled his features so she would not see his fear and lifted his wand.

Precision usually reserved for potions sharpened his focus until he saw only that small, blue dot. He placed the tip of his wand above it and carefully removed the ink. The three pieces of the spell instantly flared, shifted position, and locked into place.

"It was you," she whispered, eyes wide.

"This is not my doing," he protested. "I merely removed the flaw."

"That's not what I meant." She licked her lips, staring at the page. "You were right. This isn't science; it's magic. Do you know what this symbol means?"

"Obviously not in its current form."

"Shall I tell you?" Sirius stood in the doorway. When he received no answer, he walked carefully to the desk. Hermione looked up at him, desperately afraid. He ignored the obvious plea in the small shake of her head.

"You thought to combine chaos, catalyst, and silence, but that's not how it worked out, is it?"

"No." Her voice held tears unshed.

"It changed, just a little bit." Sirius pressed. "Tell him how it reads now, Hermione."

She shook, her voice thin and small. "Power, intellect, and love."

"But the greatest of these is love," Sirius said softly.

Her head jerked up at the Biblical reference. "How do you know that?"

"I've been too much in the world, and too much out of it. Truth is truth, no matter where it's found."

Severus kept his eyes on the page, unable to move. Like Sirius, he had seen where she was going with the spell. Never would he have imagined where she had taken it. He closed his eyes, reaching for denial. Love was ephemeral, subjective. *It could mean anything.*

He recognized the lie. "What have you done?"

"I've saved us all."

"Or damned us," he whispered.

"For you and I, that would be rote," Sirius said. "This is no worse than what we've seen, what we've done."

Hermione pulled the parchment to her. "For good or ill, I've joined you both. There's no going back now."

Sirius stepped back. "You don't have to cast it."

"You should destroy it," Severus said at the same time.

She lifted her gaze to the ceiling. "I don't **have** to do anything except breathe, and even that's optional for short periods of time." She looked at them in turn, eyes hard. "I spent years doing things I **should** do and this entire summer doing things I should not. I leave it to you to deduce which I prefer." She stood, sliding the page into her folio. "What I am going to do is cast the bloody spell, so I don't spend the rest of my life worrying about something I could have changed. **Then** I will destroy it and all my research."

She looked at Sirius. "If you don't want me to cast it on you, say so. Otherwise, stop trying to protect an innocence we're all fairly clear is gone."

Severus steeled himself when she focused on him. "Once I've burned the research, the spell will exist only in my head. If you're so worried about it getting out, you could try to destroy me, but I wouldn't suggest it."

"I doubt it will come to that, as I suspect the spell will not work." His voice was even, almost bored. He recognized false confidence.

"And if it does?" Her features softened. "It could work for you, too, free you from having to answer to anyone."

"You seek to save me?" His laugh, sharp and bitter, struck at her. She stepped back. "No, Hermione. There is no saving me, nor would I ask for it. I have made my bargains with fate."

She nodded, features set. "And you?" She glanced at Sirius.

"If this is the price of freedom, I'll pay it. I won't spend what's left of my time here in the clutches of any institution." His eyes grew dark with the spectre of Azkaban.

"When?" She was leaving to them to decide.

"Tonight," they answered in concert.

"I suggest we do the spell in the garden, just in case," Sirius said.

"A few meters of space will not make a difference, should it go awry," Severus said.

"It won't." Hermione picked up the folio and walked out of the room.

Severus waited for Sirius to follow her out, but the other man remained. They looked at each other, bound yet distant.

"The garden?" Severus raised one eyebrow.

"Magic of that magnitude and nature shouldn't be done in this room." Sirius glanced at the bookshelves, then away.

"Indeed. But that is not why you suggested it."

"Not entirely." Sirius rubbed his hands on his trousers. "I'll be leaving as soon as it's done."

"Giving her no chance for a farewell." Severus paused. "I wonder, do you do it for her or for yourself?"

"She'll be torn enough when she realizes what's happened."

"What she will be is furious," Severus said. "I hadn't thought you a coward."

"Believe what you will. The sooner I leave, the safer you both are, whether her spell works or not."

"And thus you become the noble martyr while I fill the familiar role of deceiver. Well played."

"You underestimate her. She sees very well what we are. And she loves you anyway. My leaving gives you the chance to do something about that."

"She has no idea what love is," Severus growled.

"Is your expertise in the matter so great?" Sirius snarled back. "She knows what she feels for you, and you can't take that from her, though you're perfectly capable of dissuading her."

"I am far more of a danger to her than she can imagine."

"No, you can't imagine that she knows the danger and doesn't care. I'm providing you enough rope to climb out of your hole. For once in your life, don't hang yourself with it." Sirius withdrew. A few moments later, the door to the garden banged shut.

Third time's the charm. Severus closed his eyes against possibility. It would not turn out as Sirius described. Despite the enormity of what they were about to do, this night would fit neatly into the narrative of his life. One more danger faced for someone he despised. One more loss of the woman he loved.

He shook his head. Nothing was gained by dwelling on the inevitable. There were more important things to do than contemplate a broken heart, regardless of whose it might be. He returned to his room to study his own notes. If something went wrong, she would blame herself. And he would have to find the fortitude to reveal the truth.

Simultaneity

Chapter 13 of 16

The occurrence of two or more events at the same time.

Hermione leaned against the counter, sipping at courage. Some would have chosen alcohol, but it had never been to her taste. She fortified herself with caffeine and the sometimes elusive belief that she was competent enough to do the impossible. *I can't let it slip away.* It occurred to her she had no idea to which *it* she referred.

Sirius had blown through the kitchen like an ill-wind. She closed the window to the garden, not wanting to feel whatever it was he needed to work out. Several moments later, Severus climbed the stairs. *It will all be over soon.* The summer seemed too short for her to have learned so much. She couldn't fathom what it would be like to return to Hogwarts knowing she kept desperate secrets. Yet that was exactly what she would do, what she had to do. She had no idea how she'd manage it. The coffee didn't help; she was suddenly tired.

She set down her cup and pushed off the counter, careful not to disturb Crookshanks, who seemed blissfully unaware of his human housemates. It was odd to not hear Mrs. Black screaming at her as she crossed the hall into the library. She picked up all the books and put each in its proper place, then cleaned her quills and closed the case. She could return it to her room later.

Movement restored wakefulness, and with it the ability to think. She'd done precious little of it in the past few days. Outside of research, anyway. She paced the room, trying to identify the source of a persistent question that would not form. Something was off in this cozy little arrangement with two men who could barely stand to be in the same room. *They fight like cats and dogs.* She came to a halt, hardly able to breathe. *Like a cat and a dog.* She blinked, her focus blinding her to her surroundings. She had been the mouse for too long. Only now the mouse was enormous, and neither one of them knew what to do about it. She smiled. There would be no more hiding.

The door flew open, banging against the wall. Severus spun in the chair, wand raised.

"Put it away." Hermione kicked the door shut and strode toward him.

"What do you think you're doing?" He pushed his notes to the edge of the desk.

"I came for a little chat," she said, "on the off chance I could get some answers. Better to do that before I change the world, don't you think?"

"That would depend on the answers you seek." He rose, desperate to keep her from reaching the desk.

She moved around him. "Oh, no, don't stand on my account. This won't take long." She leaned against the desk, gaze locked on him as he sat.

"You had a question?" he asked in the same tone he'd used for years to keep students in line.

"Perhaps I phrased that badly. Mere answers won't do. I want the truth." She folded her arms and tilted her head.

"About what?" He kept his tone even.

She glanced at his notes and narrowed her eyes. She turned, leaning across the desk to pick up a page. "Why don't we start with this?" She dropped it in front of him, her hands flat on the desk, face even with his.

"What about my notes is unclear to you?" He sat back.

"How you made them from my research, for starters," she said, quiet. Deadly.

"I have spent most of my adult life as a spy. I remember things I see." He was having trouble seeing anything but her, bent over his desk. He shifted his eyes to the parchment, pushing it away. This was no time to lose focus.

"And you gleaned all of this from our... talks in the library?"

"You were not particularly cautious while researching. Finding the same books you used was not difficult, especially as you tend to leave them lying about." He raised one eyebrow, challenging her to deny it. "You should be more careful."

"I'm not usually so closely watched when I study."

"So you believe." The smallest of smiles. She tensed in delightful ways, shocked and unsure what to say. He rather liked the effect. "You did not come here to discuss your research."

"No, but you've managed to distract me. Again." She straightened.

"A feat on my part. I thought you single-minded when it came to your studies."

"I'd have expected a great spy to notice that had recently changed."

Expecting her to strike made it no less painful. "Pray get to your point."

"What were you thinking this morning?"

"I fail to see how it matters."

"I doubt that. Is it so difficult to tell me?"

"You didn't come here looking for answers, Hermione. You came looking for affirmation. I have none to give you."

"I see." She tapped one finger on her lips. "I will make you a bargain, then. All the research, your copies included, will be destroyed when you truthfully answer one question of my choosing."

"I hardly see how that benefits me personally," he countered.

"If your concern over the existence of this spell has changed, then I've nothing to bargain with." She turned away.

"I did not say that."

She faced him. "Then name your terms."

"I will give you an honest answer to one question, in exchange for the same, at a time of my choosing. And I am the only person for whom you will answer that question with the complete truth."

"How will you know I've kept to my end of the bargain?"

"Because you will be under a geis. Providing, of course, that you agree to it." He waited for her refusal.

"Done."

You foolish girl.

She opened the door, then paused. "Did I mention that you will have to cast the spell to cloak Sirius? I can't drop my focus once it's begun."

The muscles in his shoulders corded with the effort to keep from strangling her. "I will need to know it."

"The physical spell will do the work. That's why I need to concentrate. The words are 'hide traces.' In Latin, of course." She gave him a brilliant smile.

He did not return it. "Of course." He took a deep breath when she walked out. *Clever girl.* She would be free to cast whatever it was she planned, thinking them none the wiser. Dealing with the aftermath of their betrayal of her intent would be difficult, at best.

He gathered his notes in a neat stack. It was time.

Sirius prowled the garden. It was easier to resist the magic when he gave himself over to his dog form. Easier to stop thinking. And if the Ministry had found a way into his warded demesne, he could sniff it out. He found nothing but plants and frightened rabbits. He shimmered back to his natural form and dressed completely as a courtesy to

Snape. He glanced down the path. They would arrive soon. And he would be alone in the world again. *Some fates are inescapable.* He shook off the thought and turned to his last project. It would not take much out of him.

Hermione clutched the folio to her chest, robes swirling around her feet. She made her way through the garden, alert for the feel of Sirius' magic. It was strangely quiet. Sirius stood in the clearing, head tilted back. She glanced up. A storm was coming. She stopped as he looked at her, eyes still distant. His magic flared, directionless.

She stumbled backwards. Severus caught her and drew her closer, one hand closed tightly around his wand. She leaned against him, feeling safer than she'd any reason to.

"Is it often like this?" he whispered in her ear. She nodded.

"Quite often," Sirius said, staying perfectly still. "Though I seem to be getting better at controlling it."

"You had best be," Severus warned.

She stepped between them. "If we are to do this, we need to start now." She turned to Severus. "You don't have to stay. I can manage it."

"You know that is not true." His eyes were hard.

"Three parts, Hermione," Sirius said. "You made it this way."

"I didn't mean to."

"How reassuring," Severus drawled. "Spell craft by accident."

"Leave it, Snape," Sirius growled, "or leave us to what we can make of it."

"I do not think that is an option." They stared at each other until Sirius gave a slight nod.

Hermione drew herself up. "Stand there." She pointed to a stone lightened by chalk. Severus shifted until she held up her hand. Sirius stepped back to a similarly marked spot. Hermione drew out the parchment and set it in the center before moving back to the third stone. She closed her eyes and sent up a silent prayer.

She took a deep breath and nodded to them, then pointed her wand at the parchment. "*Fio Unus.*" The symbol folded into itself, lifting from the page, growing larger. Light flared along the edge, then shot out to each of them. As it wrapped around them, sinking into flesh, the world fell away.

Her body was on fire, mouth open in a wordless roar, light pouring out. The two men were rigid, heads thrown back as the same horror befell them. The columns of light joined, forming a pyramid with the floating spell as its base.

They were released. Desperate to breathe, they gasped and drew in more magic, skin aglow. Almost in concert, they spoke.

"*Velieris Vestigium.*" Snape directed the spell at Sirius, veiling all traces of his magical signature.

"*Locus Eternus,*" Hermione barely whispered, sending out her borrowed magic. Sirius' heartbeat sang in her blood. She would be able to find him forever. And on the edge of sensation, Severus' power resonated. She would know it, too.

"*Muto Contradictio.*" Sirius wrapped his magic around her awareness of him, pulling it from her and deflecting it to Snape. She gasped as it was ripped away. He had taken her intent and changed it, just a little bit. She could still feel his magic, but she could not recognize it.

She tried desperately to stay still, to finish. "*Unos in Trio.*" The symbol unfurled, sucking the light into it until only the edges glowed. It sank until it lay flat on the page in three parts, the configuration altered. She staggered back from it, sickness washing over her.

"Why?" she cried, unable to stop the tears.

"For you, love." Sirius walked toward her. "For all of us."

"Why?" She had no other words.

"Because I must." He tilted her chin up, sorrow reflected in his storm colored eyes. He kissed her on the forehead and turned away.

She looked at Severus, certain she would find anger. His dark eyes held the same sorrow, all for her. Sirius bent to retrieve the parchment, whispering something she could not make out. He held it out, careful not to touch her as she took it from him. He put his fingers on his lips, as if to blow her a kiss, and Disappeared.

Severus took the spell from her trembling hands as the first raindrops fell. Tucking it safely in the folio, he took her hand and led her back to the house. He set the folio on the table, pulled out a chair and pressed her down gently. In the center of the table was a vase with a single flower. Her hand went to her hair, then dropped to her lap.

He set a cup before her and sat. She picked it up and took a sip, not looking. Mint and lavender merged with a hint of citrus. Her stomach unclenched for the first time since her plan had gone wrong. Severus watched her carefully, hands wrapped around his cup.

"There's something in this I don't recognize," she said, grasping for some shred of normalcy.

"Vervaine, a rather good quality." He didn't need to say where he'd gotten it. The clumps of herbs hung in the corner.

"Another gift." She sighed, closing her eyes.

"He knew what he was about."

Her eyes flew open. "Did you?"

"Yes," he admitted, no regret apparent.

"Yet you chose not to warn me."

"Would you have listened? Or would you have assumed I would lie in an attempt to discredit him?"

She had no answer.

"Apply the same standard to him as you do to me, at the very least." The sharp edge of his voice told her he expected she found him wanting.

"You're right, of course. I should have seen this coming." She slumped back in her chair. "Stupidity has defined my summer."

"Naïveté, perhaps. I would hardly use the word stupid to describe the woman who made a 300-year old spell work for the first time, however much I might have wished she had not."

"Why did he do that? Why you and not me?"

"Is that the question to which you want an honest answer?" He held himself rigid.

"No."

"Then we will not discuss his reasons." He drained his cup and rose. "Do you want your answer before or after we destroy the evidence?"

"Before. That was the deal." She stood.

"Then ask. Time grows short and I may be called away." He stepped away from her.

She swallowed, afraid to hear his answer, to know for certain what he intended. More than anything, she wanted to believe in him. He waited, cautious, silent.

"How are you going to help Harry destroy Voldemort?" The question hung in the air.

He drew it in with a sharp breath. "That was not what I expected."

"I know." She stood, wavering between closing the space between them or backing away. "I'll have my answer now."

Anger poured off him in waves. "There are an infinite number of variables in play, and the situation is constantly evolving." He held up his hand when she narrowed her eyes at him. "Being privy to the workings of both sides, I intend to improvise." The words were torn from his lips.

"But..." she began. He silenced her with a look.

"I have answered your question." He turned and left the room.

She had heard what she needed, what she knew in her heart to be true, but the price for that question would be far higher than destroying the research she now hated. He had expected her to ask if he loved her. She knew the answer to that. Or had. If the smallest shift could incite a change in the very essence of magic, there was no way to guess the outcome of pushing him to admit that he was essentially good.

Fulcrum

Chapter 14 of 16

The support, or point of rest, on which a lever turns in moving a body. It can be in the middle, near the end, or at the end.

She was standing by the fireplace when he entered the library, her notes stacked neatly on the end table. Staring into the fire, she did not seem to notice his arrival. Shock still edged her features as she held herself still, as if normal movement would cause her to shatter. He wasn't sure it would not.

"I won't burn the books." Her voice was brittle.

"That won't be necessary. They were never the danger."

She relaxed slightly. Picking up the page at the top of the pile, she threw it in. "Ashes, ashes, we all fall down," she whispered. The parchment curled on itself, remnants settling onto the logs. He added the first of his notes, saying nothing.

Her breathing deepened, her touch on the paper almost reverent before she consigned it to the flames. His fingers did not want to release observations so dearly bought. Like dealing cards in a game of death, they alternated burning their pages, each sacrifice bringing them closer together until they almost touched. The fire consumed all with indiscriminate ease.

She slid the finished spell from the folio and held it out reluctantly. "Do you want the honors?"

He shook his head. "It is not mine to do."

"Very well." She took a deep breath and tossed the parchment almost casually into the flames. For a moment, it stayed as it was, the flames licking around it. Shoulder to shoulder, they tensed, staring until the edges caught.

"It's done." She turned her back on the fire, shaking as she walked away. He reached out to touch her, then let his hand fall. He could offer no comfort, only bear witness to her suffering, outlined as the blaze obliterated the proof of her brilliance.

A flash of light. She stumbled, hands reaching out for support but finding none. He lunged for her, catching her as she fell screaming. The light was everywhere, blinding. He closed his eyes against it, lowering them both to the floor. She thrashed, howling wordlessly. The light faded. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her closer.

"Oh, God, it hurts!" she cried. The fire burned low, its purpose fulfilled.

"*Lumos*." He lit every lamp in the room. Holding her shoulders down, he searched for the source of her agony. When he found it, he swore, jerking away from her. She lay on the floor, panting, tears running into her hair. He did not want to see it yet could not look away. Bile rose in his throat.

In the hollow behind her ankle, the perfectly formed spell swirled, settling finally into a warped version of itself, edges curled, tiny, beautiful and deadly.

His mind raced. The power of the spell made attempting to eradicate it far too dangerous. He knew what he was looking at, but he did not want to believe it. He bore its like, a mark that could not be removed. *She could not have done this.*

She struggled to sit up, weakened by her ordeal. Without thinking, he moved to help her, drawing her into his lap. She buried her face in his shirt, hiccupping as she clung

to him. He smoothed her hair.

"What happened?" she mumbled into his chest.

"I don't know." He could not bring himself to admit his suspicion. She turned, leaning her back against him as she drew her knees up. When she stiffened, he knew she had seen it.

"No," she moaned.

He wrapped his arms around her as tremors rocked her body. She slumped back, hair covering her face as her head dropped to her knees. He turned her, slipping one arm under her legs, and stood. She looked up at him, confused and frightened.

"I didn't know it would do this. I swear I didn't." She thought he blamed her.

"This was not your doing," he growled. "We can discuss it later, after you've rested." He had no idea what he would say.

"I can walk."

He ignored the lie as he carried her up the stairs. He paused at the top, then moved toward her room.

"Please." Her hand tightened around his shirt. "Not there."

He nodded. He kicked open his door and brought her to the bed. He had to pry her fingers from his shirt when he laid her down. He stepped away.

"Don't leave me alone," she whispered.

"I was merely retrieving a salve to ease the pain."

She waited until he returned. "Is that really my spell?" She pointed to her ankle.

"It would appear so." He lifted her foot, gently applying the salve.

"Out there for anyone to see." She used anger to hide her alarm.

"Who would recognize it? The spell was unique." He hoped she would accept that. "And to the common eye, it looks a great deal like a Celtic triskele tattoo. No one would look twice at it."

He applied the salve to her ankle. She shuddered, biting her lip to keep from crying out. He touched her no more than was necessary for the treatment - whether out of concern for her pain or his aversion to the tattoo, he was not sure. As the analgesic took affect, she relaxed. He did not stop, telling himself that he needed to continue to prevent scarring, ignoring the fact that the design was, in essence, a permanent scar. She sighed as he rubbed the last of the salve into her skin.

"Thank you. That feels much better." Her breathing was returning to normal. "I don't suppose you have something that will make me feel like a normal person."

His breath caught at her smile. "If I had such a potion, I would not use it. You have never been normal." His fingers had moved to her calf, massaging the tension away.

"I'm not sure if that's a compliment or an insult." She tilted her head.

"Take it whichever way pleases you," he said, releasing her leg. He closed the jar and stood.

"You can't leave."

He looked down at her, features schooled to cool indifference. "Why not?"

"Because you aren't done with me." Her face was all innocence. Her eyes belied it. "Even basic healing recommends a balance." She lifted her other leg, foot making circles in the air.

"How careless of me." He reached across the bed and wrapped his fingers around her unmarked ankle.

She bent her other knee. "There, now you have room to sit."

He did as she asked, resting her legs on his lap as his fingers found knots and unraveled them. Her head dropped back, hair spilling over his pillows. He tore his gaze away and focused on her calf or tried to. Her robes had been pushed to her knees. He resisted the urge to push them up further.

"I like the way you touch me," she murmured.

"Do you?"

"Mmm. You can do that as long as you'd like." She wiggled closer.

His hand slid further up her leg, stroking the tension from her thigh. She sighed. He dutifully massaged the other one. She relaxed under his hands. His gaze traveled up her legs to where her robes bunched, just above the knee. He clenched his jaw and turned his head sharply.

His eyes strayed to the vile shape imprinted on her Achilles heel. It was no safer to look down than up. Or perhaps it was. He turned to speak to her but found words failed. Her eyes were closed, mouth parted slightly as her tongue ran over her bottom lip. The swiftness of his reaction surprised him. He shifted her leg so she would not know.

"There's something I can't figure out," she said softly.

"What is that?"

"Why you haven't kissed me yet."

His hands stilled.

"I would understand." She licked her lips again, hesitant. "If you didn't want me." Tension sprang back into her legs, undoing all his work. He dug his fingers in, a little more roughly than necessary. She groaned, hips tilting slightly, a different tension rising.

"Perhaps it is not yet time for such things." He went back to massaging her thighs.

"There's not much time left," she pointed out.

"I told you I would prefer it not be done in haste."

"I thought you were talking about the spell."

He smiled. "Did you? I thought you were brighter than that." His hands slid further up, gratified by her sharp intake of breath. "So, am I to understand that you want me to kiss you?"

"Of course I do."

"How long?" His fingers trailed down her thighs, stopping just short of her ankles.

"How long do I want you to kiss me?" She frowned.

"How long have you wanted me to?"

"Oh!" She blushed. "Since I figured out you weren't a bad man."

A low, dark laugh escaped him. "But I am, Hermione. You know that." He grabbed her legs and pulled her further down. "You find it exciting." He slipped his hand under her robes to find the truth of his assertion.

She gasped at the onslaught of his fingers and again when he stopped. He moved her legs off his lap and reached up, slowly unfastening her robes, pushing them aside to puddle around her. Her breathing quickened when he ran a thumb over the thin lace of her bra, her nipples puckering. He stood, holding her gaze as he unbuttoned his shirt and threw it on the chair. She freed her arms from her robes with a series of delightful wriggles, entirely without grace. He reached down and yanked them from under her, flipping her over in the process. He pressed her down when she tried to roll back.

"Stay there," he commanded. She nodded into the pillow.

He finished undressing and climbed onto the bed. She trembled slightly when he ran his hands over her back. "Isn't this the part where you say you should go?" he whispered.

She turned her head, looking at him out of the corner of her eye. "I don't want to."

"Don't want to what? Go?" He pushed her legs apart with his knee. "Or stay?"

"I want to... I want you to..." She swallowed.

He pressed against her. "I know you do. Say it."

"I want you. Please."

He traced her curves, hooking his fingers on her knickers and sliding them off. He pulled her to her knees, slipping his hand between her legs, exploring. He played her like an instrument, her low moans musical as she pushed back against him. He unhooked her bra, leaving her to discard it as he cupped her breasts in turn, nipples taut against his palm. When he withdrew his hand, she whimpered in protest.

He had thought it would be sufficient to know she would obey him. He needed more from her than submission, more than the joining of bodies. He lowered her to the bed.

She rolled over, eyes wide, trying very hard to control her breath. She was afraid not of what he might do, but that he might not do anything at all. He smiled.

"Now it is time." He lowered himself, capturing her mouth as he filled her. Her kiss was hungry, desperate. She grabbed his shoulders and arched against him. He broke the kiss and chuckled as she pulled his head down for more. He lost himself in the feel of her soft mouth, the way she ground her hips against him, demanding. He lifted his head and was amused by the petulant thrust of her lower lip.

One hand trailed over her breasts and down her stomach. With a frustrated growl, she bent her knees, feet flat, and thrust up against him. He pressed her back down into the mattress. She writhed underneath him, her frustration deepening to anger as he pulled back. As her eyes grew dark and fierce, he smiled.

"And now." He plunged into her, driven on by guttural cries, half-formed words pleading. For him. For release. For completion. He slid his hands under her and lifted her to meet his thrusts. Fingers locked on his arms, she opened herself fully. Desire, insistence, surrender all for him. It was finally enough. He brought her to the edge, holding her against him as she went over, crying out his name.

He rocked inside her, kissing her gently as her shaking subsided. She pushed against him, tentative. He responded in kind, relishing the feel of her warm, pliant, strong wanting to hold on to the moment forever, knowing he could not. She kissed him, wrapping her arms around his neck as he came undone.

"I love you." It was the barest whisper, little more than a thought. She wondered if she'd spoken aloud.

"You don't mean that." He lay curled around her. His words stirred her hair.

She stroked his arm. "I do. There's nothing you can do except endure it."

"It is too dangerous."

"All love is dangerous, or it would hardly be worth the trouble."

"You know what I mean."

"Yes, I just don't agree with you."

"At least that is familiar." He chuckled.

"What are we going to do?" She closed her eyes, afraid to hear his answer.

"Endure." He pulled her closer. "And rest."

She sighed, relaxing against him, and fell asleep.

Resultant

Chapter 15 of 16

An object pulled from three different ways does not disintegrate but is pulled in one direction depending on the strength by which it is pulled.

□

Hermione awoke alone, blinking several times until she remembered where she was. She was grateful he was not there to see her blush. She stretched, got out of bed, and briefly contemplated walking back to her room naked. It was absurd to be embarrassed at this point, but propriety won out. Casting around for her clothes, she found them piled neatly on the chair. When she got downstairs, Severus was at the table, reading. A sense of comfort and normalcy swept over her. *This is how it's supposed to be.* The chances of things working out as they should were slim. She made coffee, then leaned against the counter, watching him while it brewed.

Going back to school and pretending her life had not changed drastically would be difficult. There was another option, one both Ron and Harry had encouraged her to take before they left for the World Cup. She closed her eyes and sighed, desire giving way to practicality. She would not be returning to Hogwarts after all.

Crookshanks sauntered in and rubbed against her leg. She reached down to pet him and froze. Hanging from his mouth was a mouse tail. She stared at it in horror. The tail twitched. She reached for the cat, but he dodged, leaving her with a clump of fur in her hand. She lunged after him. As Crookshanks raced past the table, Severus reached down and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck. Severus smacked the cat on the back of the head. Crookshanks yowled, and the mouse popped out. Hermione dove for it as Severus carried a hissing Crookshanks to the door and tossed him out into the garden.

Hermione let the mouse up. He seemed to be unharmed, though he shook uncontrollably. She sympathized. She reached up to the table without looking, found a slice of toast and dropped pieces of it in a trail back to the hole in the wall. The mouse cautiously picked up the first piece, then continued to stuff his mouth full as he staggered back to safety.

Hermione turned to Severus. "Thank you."

"For interrupting the course of nature?" He left out anything else for which she might thank him.

"It's silly, but I've grown fond of that mouse."

"I have noticed." The barest smile graced his lips. She leaned in and kissed him lightly. His response was less chaste, leaving her breathless, hands clutching his shirt.

He uncurled her fingers and stepped away. "It seems I've finished my breakfast." The table was a mess of crumbs and egg.

"Sorry about that. I'll make you more."

"Don't bother. When you've ingested enough of that vile brew, join me in the library. We've one more thing to accomplish before I leave."

"You're going today?" Her voice pitched higher than usual. He slid the paper across the table. The World Cup was in its final match.

"It seems I must."

"You're holding me to the bargain, then?" She had hoped he would let it go.

"It is necessary." He left her to clean up.

Severus sat at the desk, tracing a pattern on the polished surface. He rubbed it out with his sleeve when Hermione walked in, clutching her coffee cup like a talisman.

"Have a seat, Miss Granger." He was once again the professor.

She arched an eyebrow. "A bit formal, all things considered."

"As it will be from now on."

"Forever?"

"I doubt we will get the chance to test forever. All things considered."

"You never know. Some things endure." A chair moved across the room, coming to rest behind her. She sat, waiting for him to say something.

"I see you don't need my instruction after all." There was a thread of anger under his calm words.

"I rather imagine you have a great deal to teach me." She set her cup on the desk.

"Should I get the chance." The escalating war hung between them, another obstacle to what might be.

"Well then, you can start by counseling me on this." She pulled her knee up, setting her foot on the edge of the large chair.

He could not avoid looking at the spell. Not even her shapely legs could distract him. He remained silent.

"This is where you show me your vast knowledge," she prompted. "And tell me what I'm supposed to do with an incredibly dangerous spell boldly displayed on my flesh."

"Nothing."

"I'm sorry. I don't think I heard you properly." The barest trace of anger escaped her attempt at control.

"There is nothing you can do. The spell is too dangerous to remove and apparently unwilling to be destroyed." He kept his suspicions on why that was to himself.

"It doesn't have a will of its own." An undertone of fear crept in.

"It would seem you are mistaken." He could give her no clues, no hope. Under his gaze, her attempts to remain calm frayed.

"So you can't do anything about it." She hugged her knee.

"No. Nor would I try." His gentle tone could not soften the truth.

"So I'm stuck with this **thing** that you fear could destroy our world."

"As I said before, it is unlikely to be recognized for what it is. The spell is unknown, and the sketch you made to bind the parts has warped into its current shape." He didn't know what the changes meant, but he was hardly going to admit that.

"Someone will notice it. What do I do then?"

"I suggest you lie." A smile threatened.

"That's it? That's your wise counsel?" She looked at him, eyes hard. "I am known to be one of the worst liars in the history of liars. How do you propose I keep my mouth shut about something I can't escape?"

"On closer inspection, it appears to be Odin's horns. You could suggest you got it while drunk."

Her only reply was an indelicate snort.

"If not that, then find a more appealing tale. I am sure you can devise one."

"Oh, well, that's all right then." She rolled her eyes. "If you're sure, it can't be any other way."

"Have I ever expressed confidence in your ability to do anything?"

"Not that I can remember."

"Then perhaps you might find it in yourself to believe you are capable of doing this." He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "Especially as you will be in mortal danger if you tell anyone the real story, and you will damn them in the process."

"Lovely." She ground her teeth. "I can't lie, and I can't tell the truth. The only way I can think to avoid questions is to go off on my own, like Sirius did."

A chill ran down his spine. "That would not be advisable. You possess neither his power nor his skill. He is experienced at running away. You avoid it at all costs."

"At least I know you still think me inept in most areas. That's comfortingly familiar. So my only option is to pretend that this is nothing more than a simple tattoo."

"Until such time as I or you devise a way to remove it, yes."

"Bloody hell," she muttered. "And if I am unable to do that?"

"Then I expect that the hunt for you will begin immediately and end swiftly. You are still an underage witch "

She cut him off. "Which, as we know, is little deterrence." She let the words hang for a moment, her eyes steady on his. "Providing I am willing to risk expulsion. And I proved that I am by doing the spell in the first place."

"My point, Miss Granger, is that you are easily found. It was not your magic that was masked. What we did in the garden was too strong for them to have picked out your signature, so you were in no danger of expulsion. Running about using your magic alone would be incredibly stupid, something I have never thought you to be. There are those, even within the Ministry, who would delight in capturing you for any number of reasons."

His implication was not lost on her. She swallowed heavily. "I thought you would be able to help me."

"I will do what I can, but the safest course of action is for you to return to Hogwarts. You will be protected there."

"Like I have been from the beginning? From trolls and basilisks? From evil wizards and small-minded bigots who would like nothing more than to kill the little Mudblood?" she spat. "From the Ministry itself? Oh, yes, Hogwarts is so very safe. I wonder that I ever believed it."

"Safer than being on your own, with no protective spells, no teachers to watch out for you, no friends to come to your aid." His patience was slipping. "You have no idea the sort of people you would face, never knowing if the kind old woman who offers you aid will hex you, bind you, deliver you to your enemies."

"No matter what I do, I am well and truly fucked," she growled.

He started at her uncharacteristic language. "We will find a solution. But in order to do that, you need to go back to Hogwarts. I will need to know where you are."

"Wasted that spell on Sirius, didn't we?"

"What do you mean?" He grew quiet.

"Did you think it only worked one way?" Her laugh was sharp, bitter. "I'm too clever for that, Severus. Just as you can find Sirius no matter where he is, he can find you. That's what you did when you two decided I was too young to know what I was about."

"Were you planning to tell me?" he asked, hands stiff on the arms of the chair.

"Yes, which is more courtesy than either of you showed me. You thought you knew what was best, despite having no bloody idea what I intended. If you'd left well enough alone, I would have been able to find you both, and you would have been able to find me. It would have been stronger with him, because I thought he needed me to help him control the magic, fool that I was." She snorted. "But I would have been able to locate you, as well. It would have been far harder, only a residual signature instead of a beacon, but it would have been possible. And it would have been mutual."

"Blast it all!" he roared. "Why did you not tell us?"

"Because I was afraid you would act exactly as you did." She shook her head. "You're right. There's nothing to be done about any of it." She rose. "I'm going to go pack." She took a single step.

"Stop!" The word was cracked like a whip.

She turned to regard him. "I have to get ready for school. You wouldn't want me to be unprepared, would you?" Her reply sank into him like acid.

"There is the little matter of our bargain."

"You haven't punished me enough?"

"I hardly think it punishment, though that can be arranged." There was nothing but darkness in his tone.

She blinked, then straightened under his glare. "I'll pass," she said.

"Wise choice." He was secretly impressed with both her attempt to escape their agreement and her willingness to stand against him. *There is hope for her yet.* "Sit. This won't take long."

She obeyed, albeit grudgingly. "Is it going to hurt?"

"No, but it may cause some discomfort." He expected she would find that out as soon as her friends returned.

"All right, then. Let's get to it. What do I need to do?"

"Listen." He waited until she met his gaze. "I will tell you the question. You will say absolutely nothing until I have finished. You will not answer it until I ask it again, at a time of my choosing. Are you prepared to do that?"

She nodded.

"What did you do on your summer break?"

The color drained from her face. Her lips parted as if to speak, then closed again as he glowered at her.

"You will answer anyone else who asks you this question with vague generalities. You will never mention what has gone on this week, save to say that Sirius left and you don't know where he went. That much is true." He knew the cruelty of that statement, used it to harden her further against the men who had stolen her youth. "And when you answer me, it will be with the complete truth. Do you understand and agree?"

She nodded, her mouth set with anger.

He lifted his wand. "*Narro verum illae tantum volo.* Speak the truth of this only to me."

She flinched as the geis took hold, but she did not look away from him.

He sat back. "You may speak."

"You bastard!" She shoved the chair back as she stood.

"Did you expect anything less of me? You agreed to the terms of our bargain."

"I didn't expect you to insult me." She crossed her arms over her chest.

He said nothing.

"Translating? Really, Severus, that was uncalled for."

He tried very hard not to laugh but failed. Her eyes narrowed. He had a second to realize that she didn't need a wand before a crystal vase flew at his head. He flicked his wand to deflect it, letting it shatter against the wall.

"A bit childish, don't you think?"

"An appropriate response, all things considered." She turned and stomped out. He waited until he heard the garden door slam before repairing the damage done as much of it as could be repaired with a spell. He would have to live with the rest.

Hermione stalked through the garden. She knew why he had done it. She really was a terrible liar. The geis would protect them all, and no one would be the wiser. Only she would know everything that had happened in that dreadful house. She stopped, hand clasped over her mouth so she did not scream at the ramifications of his question. Only she would know until she told him absolutely everything. She had ended the summer the way she had begun it. *A complete idiot.*

Equilibrium

Chapter 16 of 16

The condition where the net force on an object is zero. The state where all involved aspects are balanced. Equalization, Osmosis. Harmony, perhaps.

Hermione had no idea how long she wandered through the garden. Her head was full of white noise. She found herself back in the clearing, the last place she wanted to be. It was obvious Severus was not going to come after her. *I don't want him to.* She shook her head at the thought. She couldn't even lie to herself.

As she turned, determined to go back to the house and have the argument she should have had the courage to start earlier, she glanced down. On the table by the bench was a small, wooden mouse, tail curled around its feet. She picked it up, caressing the perfect smoothness which for the briefest moment felt like fur. *Another gift.* She tucked it in her pocket and walked slowly back down the path.

Hurling the vase at Severus had used up the rest of her borrowed magic. She could feel its loss. She was no longer a vessel for Sirius' magic. She would not be the whipping girl for Severus's doubt, either. She was just Hermione, and that would have to do.

She stood in the kitchen, empty of all signs of him. Even the mouse hole was gone. Crookshanks paced back and forth, stopping at the place the hole should have been. She smiled sadly at the final gift. She sat at the table, head resting on her arms. The time for reflection had passed. It would come again later.

The front door burst open, spilling far too many people into the house, all talking at once. The older members of the Order filtered into the library and closed the door. Hermione straightened, plastering a smile on her face as she turned to greet her friends.

"Hermione!" Ginny rushed in, pulling her up and wrapping her in a huge hug. "Oh, it's good to see you. I can't believe you left me to deal with those boys alone."

"I knew you could manage," Hermione said, noting how Harry had not taken his eyes off of Ginny. *He hasn't told her he's leaving.*

"Didn't die of boredom, I see." Harry smiled at her, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"No. I kept myself busy." The first half-truth slipped from her lips easily.

"Doing what?" Ron asked, looking around.

"Research, mostly. I spent some time fixing up the garden. It wasn't so bad here." The second set of evasions was easier. "Not nearly as much fun as you lot had, I'll bet."

They launched into the retelling of every match. Hermione let the words flow over her, nodding in the right places. It was effortless; she'd been doing it for years. She sensed the tension they were trying to hide. Things would be hard enough for them soon. A few moments of pure childish joy were warranted.

"Now all we have is the dreadful wedding, and then back to school," Ginny whispered.

Hermione nodded. "It could be worse," she whispered back. The boys were arguing about a referee call and did not hear the exchange.

Ginny slipped away, taking her things to the room they would share. Hermione followed, having no desire to watch Harry and Ron come to blows, but made it only as far as the hall. Arthur Weasley motioned to her.

"A word, Hermione?"

She followed him down the hall and into an empty room.

"How is Sirius?" He kept his voice low.

"Gone." It may have been the shortest answer she'd ever given an adult.

"Gone? Gone where?" Arthur shifted nervously.

"I have no idea."

"But..." He looked about wildly, as if something in the room could help him understand. "Oh dear. They won't like that."

"Who won't?" She tensed.

"Those who know of his return." Arthur focused on her. "Was he... was he well? How did he look?"

"Much like he used to, I suppose. I didn't really know him that well before, so I couldn't say." She hid her shock at how natural it felt to tell the truth and yet say nothing.

"Did he tell you why he was leaving?"

"Yes." She swallowed for a moment, glad for the dimness of the room. "He said 'Because I must.' I didn't really understand it. Was I supposed to stop him? I wasn't told to keep him here, just to see to his needs." *I did that, at least.* She dropped her head to hide her unexpected smile.

"No, no. We should have left someone more experienced to keep you company."

Had that; didn't help. She was approaching hysterical laughter. She covered her face with her hands to silence it, her shoulders shaking.

He patted her shoulder. "Don't be so hard on yourself, my dear."

"I'm sorry I let him go. Truly, I am. He said it was necessary." She let him think she still spoke of Sirius. She lifted her head, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

"It's not your fault." He sighed. "There's nothing to be done for it."

She nodded, wanting nothing more than to escape the room and the house full of memories.

Arthur paused, hand on the doorknob. "You won't say a word to Harry? About Sirius, I mean."

"I won't tell him anything he shouldn't know," she promised.

"There's a good girl." Arthur smiled at her. "You'd best rest up. We've still got the wedding before you return to Hogwarts."

"Mr. Weasley? Do you suppose I'll have time to get Bill and Fleur a gift?"

"I'm not sure. There's not much time. What were you thinking?"

"I thought I'd buy a French Press. It's a Muggle device to make coffee. I learned about it in America of all places." She laughed. "There's a shop I know. It wouldn't take more than a few minutes, I promise."

"What a delightful idea! I'm sure they would love it. I'll just mention the need for a side trip to the others." Arthur wandered back down the hall and disappeared into the library.

Hermione sagged against the wall. She had passed the first real test. She took a few moments to gather her wits.

"I think it will stand by itself," Ron said from the doorway, keeping a comfortable distance between them.

"I should go pack." She pushed off the wall.

"Hermione?" He paused, licking his lips. "We're all right, yeah?"

"We're fine, Ron." She dropped her voice. "As fine as we will be until they figure out what we're about."

"Still planning to go back to Hogwarts first?"

"I wanted to, but I don't think I could get away if I did. We can talk about it once we're back in The Burrow."

He nodded and left.

She climbed the stairs, anxious about what she would find. She had no idea in what state she'd left the room.

The door was open. Hermione gaped at the perfectly neat bed, the tidy stack of clothes, the tightly closed wardrobe. A house-elf could not have done a better job. Severus had removed all trace of her time there, an intimate act resulting in absence. She wondered how much that had cost him.

Ginny was at the dressing table, looking through the makeup bag. She jumped when Hermione came in.

"Oh! I didn't mean to..." Ginny blushed. "Sorry. I shouldn't have gone through your bag, but it was open and, well, it's just so interesting."

"Feel free. I doubt I'll have much use for it after the wedding. It takes so long to get it right, and I've no patience for it. I don't know how American girls manage."

"There are plenty of witches who use the stuff," Ginny said, "though I've never seen quite so much in one place."

"We had a little shopping trip in Boston, a sort of welcome to America party." Hermione shrugged. "I have all sorts of things I never thought I'd use."

Ginny slapped her forehead. "Some friends we are! Didn't even ask how your trip was. Will you tell me all about it?"

"It's a fairly long and dreadful story. Can I save it until the wedding madness is over? I doubt either one of us will have the time once we get back to The Burrow." Hermione flopped on the bed.

"Ugh. Don't remind me." Ginny grimaced. "At least tell me if you had a good time."

"There were moments. I learned a few things mostly that I don't want to study in America." Hermione grinned.

Ginny's eyes opened wide. "Is that a **tattoo**?"

Stifling a curse, Hermione sat up. "It was a spur of the moment thing. I shouldn't have gotten it."

"I think it's beautiful."

"So did I, but now I have to live with it for the rest of my life. I suppose regret is common after doing something reckless." Hermione looked at the design that lay twisted and quiet on her ankle. "I'll get used to it in time."

"It's amazing the things you can get used to." Ginny smiled.

"It really is," Hermione said softly, her fingers running over the wooden mouse in her pocket. "Now tell me about what **you** did this week."

Late into the night, Ginny told Hermione all the things she had discovered about love and the difficulties of dealing with two boys in the same tent.

Clouds scuttled across the moon, making the night dimmer. Sirius waited, leaning against the crumbling brick wall. His new motorcycle was little more than a shadow, black against the black night. He wanted nothing more than to get on it and disappear, but there was no point in starting a chase that could end only one way.

A slight crack accompanied a subtle change in the air. Most people would have missed it. Severus had always been good at approaching quietly. Sirius stood, hands in his pockets, no need for useless gestures.

"That didn't take long."

"You made sure of that," Severus said, maintaining his distance.

"I'd thought it would take you a bit longer to figure it out. My mistake, underestimating you."

"An error that could cost you your life."

"Are you here to kill me?" The clouds parted, bathing them in silver light. "It's not quite time."

"I came for an explanation, which you will give me. Now."

"What shall I explain to you?" Sirius smiled.

"No more games," Severus growled.

"They're all I have, or hadn't you realized that?"

"She is not one of your toys."

"No," Sirius said softly, "she never was."

"And yet you play with her very life. Do you know what will happen to her, to all of us, if she is captured with that **thing** emblazoned on her flesh?"

"So that's how it happened," Sirius mused. "I suppose that makes sense."

Severus advanced, wand clutched tightly in his fist. "You made her a target."

"She was already in their sights. She's been Harry's friend since they met, his fierce defender and protector, even when she thought he was being an ass. She is the quintessential brave and foolish Gryffindor."

"You made her more valuable to them. If they capture her, they will torture her, and she will reveal the spell."

"There was always a chance they would find her and do as you said. If that happens, she will need that spell to bargain her way to safety."

Severus ground his teeth. "If she gives it to them, they will kill her, and the war will be lost in a single stroke."

"Ah, there's where you're wrong. She's the only one who truly understands that spell. They'll need her to do it. I'm sure you'll try to aid her. Knowing something of the spell will help. That will fill two of the necessary three parts."

"And you will ride to the rescue to fill the third position, sacrificing yourself and dooming the world in the process. How very noble and stupid of you."

"If I were to do that, I would release all my magic at once, and we would all die. Hardly an appealing scenario, though as a last resort it does have dramatic appeal." Sirius grinned, then shook his head. "It won't matter who holds the third spot. Well, it won't matter to you or Hermione, at least."

Severus raised one eyebrow. "And why is that?"

"Did the spell change shape and alignment?" Sirius asked.

"Yes." Severus frowned. "I believe the attempt to destroy it warped it somehow."

"Logical, but false. I changed the spell, just a little bit."

"In what way?"

"I have left love to you, Severus. And despite our knowledge and experience, intellect was always Hermione's. The greatest of the three elements in the spell is now power." Magic bled from Sirius as he spoke. With an irritated shrug, he tamped it down.

"I fail to see how that protects us."

"The power in that spell is based on chaos the sort that defines me now. It's tuned to me. I will know the moment it awakens. I will swallow it whole, and in the process destroy whoever sought to wield it. It will be up to you to get her out of there before the backlash hits." Sirius paused. "The war will end in one stroke, but not the way they expect. I would rather neither of you be there when that happens."

"If I am not there to assist her, what then?"

"Then love will not protect whoever holds the second place, and she will have to find her own way out. I suggest you tell her that. You might also consider telling her that you love her, or at the very least admit it to yourself. It will be stronger if you both know the truth."

"This is madness," Severus protested. "You have no way of knowing it will work."

"Yes, I do." Sirius closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. "It's why they sent me back. If Harry is unable to do what is necessary, I was to be the failsafe." When he opened his eyes, they were almost black.

Severus stepped back. "Your magic would destroy you in the process."

"Yes. And everything in its path."

"You could not have known she would create the spell."

"No, but I knew its true purpose as soon as she finished it. It is my end, for good this time."

"And if she remains free, and Potter is able to triumph on his own?"

"Then I am also free. Until they find a way to send me back beyond the veil. Trust me, they will find a way. I've known from the beginning that I'm living on borrowed time. I'm too dangerous to be left to my own devices for very long."

"Which is why you made me your failsafe."

Sirius nodded.

"So I take it you will not be going far."

"Not until this war ends, one way or another." Sirius tilted his head, smiling. "Don't worry that I'll interfere with Harry. I wouldn't make him suffer losing me twice. Nor Hermione. Only you will have that pleasure."

"Which I shall take willingly."

Sirius laughed. "I don't believe that, and neither do you. After all, when I'm gone, who will be left for you to hate?" Sirius swung his leg over the bike, gunned the engine, and roared off, as free as he would ever be.

"Only myself," Severus whispered. "And I shall simply have to get over that." He could think of only one way he might manage it and wondered if she would consent. He turned on his heel and walked down the street, embracing hope for the first time in his life.

A/N: At last, we come to an end. Thanks to the ladies who pushed me down this path and all those who have come with me.

The end of this story dovetails into DH, ignoring the flight of the many Harrys and going straight to the wedding preparations.