

This Present Darkness

by kizzy7

Hermione is forced to consult a bitter Snape on a mysterious potion... Rating is for later chapters. Completely AU.

The Untold Past

Chapter 1 of 14

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Hermione straightened her spine, wincing in pain as her neck and back cracked into position. She allowed herself a brief but luxurious stretch before turning to look for her partner. As usual, she found him flirting shamelessly with a young blonde Auror. Hermione rolled her eyes and shook her head in frustration. Why she had to be paired with the male version of a sixteen-year-old Lavender Brown, she would never know.

"Grayson! Grayson, get back over here!" Hermione was irritable and more than a little upset with her would-be amorous partner. She had just spent three long hours bent over the corpse of the late Catherine Abbott, carefully extracting an unknown substance found in the victim's bloodstream. Dark and viscous, the mysterious liquid possessed an uncanny life of its own, and Hermione was glad and more than a little proud to have successfully bottled the fluid. She presented the beaker to her partner with a flourish, smiling satisfactorily despite her annoyance. No other Auror had been able to capture the similar substance found in the previous three victims.

Grayson took the proffered bottle and smiled sheepishly, risking one last glance at the leggy blonde he had left behind.

"You got it, Granger. Good."

"No thanks to you at all."

He shrugged and ran his fingers through his hair, his blue eyes twinkling. "Ah, come on, you didn't want me anywhere near you. Admit it, Granger. I just slow you down."

In spite of her irritable mood, Hermione found herself smiling slightly.

"Well, you are a bit of a drag, now that you mention it."

Chuckling, Grayson focused his attention on the swirling black liquid in the flask. Thick and dense, the substance apparently moved of its own volition. Grayson studied it for several seconds, his eyebrows furrowed in concentration.

"It's odd," he whispered. "It's almost as if it's trying to get out."

"Yes, well, I've charmed the glass, so it can't." Hermione reached over and grabbed the beaker from him. Looking at it intently, Hermione finally shook her head. "I've never seen anything like it," she finally admitted.

"Do you think it killed those girls?"

Hermione shook her head again. "Whoever administered this to the victims is responsible for their deaths. This... substance is just the method, I suspect.... I'm going to take this to Solomon. Want to come?"

Grayson glanced at his watch before answering. "Sorry, Granger, but I've got dinner plans. Besides that, it's late. I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

Hermione shrugged her shoulders in reply, telling herself that there was no reason to expect her partner to work any more overtime on this case. He had a life, she supposed.

She turned to leave but stopped as Grayson suddenly placed a hand on her shoulder. He squeezed her affectionately.

"Don't drive yourself into the ground over this one, Hermione. Take a break sometime. Relax a bit. It will do you good."

Hermione managed a half-smile. "I just want to catch him, Henry. I don't want... I don't want to see any more victims... any more women, dead." She found herself suddenly blinking back tears. Trisha Thompson, Mikala Greenwater, Noela Plath, and now Catherine Abbott. She thought of them daily. She saw their pale faces and their wide, accusing eyes in her dreams. She should have saved them. That's why she'd become an Auror, Special Investigator, after the war, after so many of her friends died. She owed it to Harry, to Ginny, to Remus and Tonks. To all her friends, dead before their time.

Grayson gently brushed her tears away, his hand surprisingly gentle upon her face. "We will catch the bastard, Hermione. We will."

She nodded at him and attempted to laugh. To her ears, it sounded more like a sob.

"I know we will." She smiled warmly up at him. "Good luck on your date tonight, Grayson."

He smiled good-naturedly back at her. "Thanks, Granger! And you make sure that Solomon doesn't have you working too much."

Hermione watched her partner smile winningly at the blonde before walking out the door, and she again looked down to contemplate the glass flask held tightly in her hands. A shudder ran through her involuntarily. With one last glance at poor Catherine Abbott, she left the mortuary and headed to find her boss.

The Special Investigations Division of the Aurory Department was devoted almost entirely to murder investigation. During the time of Voldemort, the division had merged with the rest of the department out of necessity, seeking only to find Dark Wizards and put them in Azkaban, at the very least. After the fall of the Dark Lord, however, Special Investigations reorganized itself once again into a semi-independent body working within the larger unit. The agents working for Investigations were small in number but extremely talented. It was a very competitive environment.

It was what convinced Hermione to become an Auror in the first place, and her single-minded determination and self-sacrificing sense of purpose had benefited her greatly. At the young age of only twenty-four, she was one of the top agents in the field, and both her peers and her superiors respected and valued her input.

She had been with Investigations since the end of the Great War, six years now; this case was proving to be her most important to date. She was proud when her boss, Solomon Rochester, promoted her and assigned her to work with Henry Grayson, a roguishly handsome man with an intelligence to rival her own, when he decided to actually pay attention to the case he was working on and not the constant gaggle of women surrounding him. Hermione and Henry worked well together precisely because Hermione made it very clear that she was interested in her job and not his twinkling blue eyes or his devilish grin.

Serial murderers were extremely rare in the wizarding world, as most murderers killed using their wands, which were easily traceable. Though it was true that a healthy black market existed, selling unregistered wands and wand parts, the cost alone of such illicit materials made it nearly impossible for most would-be killers to acquire such contraband. This, however, was a different case entirely. This inventive serial murderer, dubbed the "Angel of Death" by the department due to his seemingly divine-like ability to kill without leaving evidence, had successfully murdered four entirely unrelated women within the past year. The victims were all witches between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five. Odder still was that autopsies and magical examinations had failed to reveal a determined cause of death. The mysterious black fluid was presumed to be the killing agent, but no one had yet discovered how it killed. There were no tell-tale signs of poisoning, organ or tissue damage, heart failure, seizure. Even the victims' blood was healthy and bore no signs of wrong-doing, though the fluid was thought to be injected into the bloodstream.

Motive was also a mystery. The women showed no signs of physical abuse, and none of the valuables on their person were found missing. In fact, three of the four women had full identification, wands included, in their pockets, almost as if the killer wished their speedy identification. Rape and theft ruled out, most of the Aurors were left pondering what exactly drove this man to kill.

Hermione did not believe, as most of her colleagues did, that the Angel killed for the pure enjoyment of it. There were no signs of torture. Surely a man possessed to kill for enjoyment would torture his victims or even prolong their deaths. No, there was something else there. Every one of her formidable instincts told her it was so. She just didn't know what.

Only two common threads of evidence had been found at the crime scenes. Each of the women had small puncture wounds on the inside of their arms. Finally, and perhaps most helpfully, a dark, sooty grime was discovered on the victims' shoes and clothing, indicating that the murderer most likely kept his women in a forest or a basement of some type before abandoning the bodies around Hogsmeade and, once, Diagon Alley. The victims revealed no signs of struggle, suggesting that they perhaps knew their killer. This, however, confused every Auror to look at the case, as the victims, as far as they could tell, never knew each other. A frantic investigation into possible joint acquaintances had divulged nothing so far.

Despite these disheartening facts, Hermione felt more confident today than she had in a long time. They finally had captured the black fluid; surely analyzing the potion would lead to more evidence and narrow the suspect field, which now consisted of every wizard in Britain between the ages of twenty-five and fifty.

Though the potion was found in every victim, Aurors were never able to examine it due to the fact that the fluid evaded capture by evaporating once it suspected it was threatened. In response to the seemingly cognizant liquid, Hermione spent two sleepless weeks developing new spells to prevent evaporation, and the results of her work now lay securely bottled in her hands. She would have to explicitly explain to the Potions Department how to handle the oil-like substance. Wouldn't want it to escape again.

Shaking her head, she walked out of the lift as the cool female voice announced she had reached Special Investigations. Walking through the darkened hallway, she strode determinedly towards her boss' door. He would be in, despite the late hour. Hermione's dedication to this case was rivaled only by that of her superior.

Once she reached the end of the hallway, Hermione knocked quietly on a nondescript brown door. She smiled briefly when she heard the gruff voice of her boss sounding in response. To one who didn't know Solomon Rochester, particularly to first-time agents, his harsh voice and his careless manners could prove to be wildly frightening. Hermione had learned, however, that his bark was much worse than his bite.

She opened the door, and Solomon did not even look up from his desk, so intently was he scribbling notes.

"What do you want, Granger? Good news, huh?"

"Of course, sir." Smiling broadly, she held forth the bottle containing the prized dark liquid. "Sir?" she asked quietly when Rochester did not even glance up.

Finally, he put down his quill and, rubbing his forehead, looked up at Hermione. His eyes went wide and he snorted.

"Well, of course I expected nothing less from you, Granger. Have a seat then."

Taking the flask from her grasp, Solomon studied it inquisitively as Hermione moved the papers overflowing on the proffered chair to sit. Finally, a grin broke out across his face, and he ran a hand thoughtfully through his silver hair.

"Excellent job, Hermione."

She attempted unsuccessfully to not appear overly pleased.

"Do you have any idea what this could be? Or how it kills?"

"I'm afraid I don't, sir. I thought we could send it over to Potions? From what I could tell, it most certainly contains properties of the finer, more expensive potions. I am almost positive I smelled moon dust and quite possibly dragon's blood as well. What's odd though, is...and I have run this over and over in my mind...I haven't the slightest idea of what makes the potion... move."

He nodded his head. "Well, I'll send this over to Potions immediately. There's got to be someone over there who's still here. Someone who can figure this out."

"Yes, sir."

Sighing, he closed his eyes and cradled his head in his hands. Hermione thought he looked oddly vulnerable, and the sight frightened her. Solomon Rochester was a man of unflappable strength and an untiring drive. The fact that this case was so obviously wearing on him unnerved Hermione to a great degree.

"We're running out of time, Granger. It's been two days since Abbott was found.... He'll kill again. And soon. Last time it was only two weeks between the murders."

Hermione reached out tentatively and patted him awkwardly on the hand. Not being one to comfort, she felt distinctly out of place and didn't know what to say. And so the two sat quietly in the darkened room, each lost in their own thoughts of despair and murder.

It was exactly two days later when Hermione awoke from her bed with a start. Disoriented, she was at first unsure what woke her until she heard it again.

"Hermione! Hermione Granger, get in here at once!" She recognized the gruff voice of her boss. Blinking, she glanced at her timepiece. 3:26 in the morning. He must have Floored...it must be important. Had they found another body? Had they finally analyzed the potion? She hurriedly jumped out of bed, throwing her robe on over the oversized jumper she wore for pyjamas, and ran into the living room.

"What is it, sir? What's happened?"

Solomon nodded at her briefly.

"It's about damned time you got here." He gestured vaguely towards the fireplace. "Had to use the emergency Floo network to get here. Sorry about that."

"Has there... has there been another attack?"

"Not yet, thank Merlin. But we've got word back on the potion."

"Well?" she asked impatiently, drumming her fingers against her arm in anxiety.

"Granger, no one knows anything about it. It was as you said, of course. Moon dust and dragon's blood. But as for what it does... what else is in it... they don't know. The two Potions masters working for the department claim that it is too dark a magic for them to know." Solomon sighed deeply. In the wan moonlight streaming through her windows, he looked much older than his sixty-two years.

Dismayed, Hermione remained quiet. She would offer to look at it, of course, but she was currently no expert on Potions. She hadn't studied the subject since Hogwarts.

Solomon opened his mouth again as if to speak, but grimaced and looked down at the floor.

"I really, really hate to ask you this, Hermione," he finally mumbled into the carpet.

"Sir, I'll do anything to help."

"I know, and that is exactly why I didn't want it to come to this."

"Sir?"

Suddenly, he looked up from the floor and straight into her eyes. She saw surprising depths of pain and fear reflected there.

"You... you mean a great deal to me, Granger. I wouldn't ask you to do this if there was any other way. If there was anyone else at all."

Unbidden, a stab of fear tore through Hermione, leaving her distraught and slightly breathless. Surely he wasn't going to ask her to talk to *him*. After all these years, Hermione thought she was finally rid of him. She hadn't really thought of him in months. She was finally past it all.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I'm sorry. But we need outside help. Now, we both know that there is only one existing Potions master with a thorough knowledge of the Dark Arts. You're the only one he'll talk to. I must ask you to go see him. I would do it, but... I think I would kill him." His voice was cold and shockingly bitter.

Hermione was surprised and a bit revolted to find tears rolling down her cheeks. She thought of him briefly...of his long, lanky hair and his acerbic wit and his perfectly tailored black robes. Some strong unidentifiable emotion swept through her with such force that she thought she would faint right then and there on her living room floor.

But of course she would go.

"I... I'll see him, sir." Wiping her tears, she managed a small smile. "And don't worry about it. I'll be fine."

Solomon nodded. "I'm not entirely sure what happened between you and that... that *monster*... but I know this cannot be easy for you. I've arranged it all for tomorrow. Eight in the morning. We can't afford to lose anymore time. You'll be there?"

She nodded her head. Solomon patted her on the back and reached for a handful of Floo powder before stepping into the fireplace.

"Try to get some sleep, Granger," he said before he disappeared in a rush of flames.

Hermione sat down on her couch. Sleep! There would be no more sleep for her tonight. For in a few short hours, she would willingly be in the presence of the man who had plagued her thoughts and her dreams to the edge of insanity.

For in a few short hours, she would be in Azkaban prison to see her former professor, Severus Snape.

Severus Snape, war criminal, Death Eater, and convicted murderer of nine.

A/N Much love to my beta, mgm86, who convinced me to (finally) post this story. It is mostly complete and I will be updating regularly. Also, thanks to the wonderful, hard-working admins at TPP, and all readers and reviewers. Love and coffee (or tea, if you prefer) to you all!

Remembrance

Chapter 2 of 14

Hermione remembers...

Seven Years Earlier

Hermione excitedly straightened her skirt and smoothed her hair, her hands shaking slightly from nerves. She couldn't help it...every time she saw him, she was somehow reduced to this bumbling mass of nervous energy. Her stomach squirmed almost painfully, but she smiled nonetheless. There was a war on, she faced untold horrors ahead of her, hunting for Horcruxes with her two best friends. More and more people were murdered and reported missing everyday, and yet when Hermione saw her Potions professor, she forgot all of this. When she was near him, all she knew was the whisper of his robes, the crease between his eyes when he was concentrating, his deep, commanding, comforting voice. All she knew was him.

It was the summer before her seventh year at Hogwarts, a year that she would regretfully miss. Forgoing her studies to help Harry in his quest, she spent the summer doing what she did best...preparing, researching, thinking ahead whilst her two errant friends spent most their time playing Quidditch and talking about their forthcoming doom. While Hermione indeed recognized the threats they faced, her reaction was completely different than the resigned acceptance of Harry and the juvenile disbelief of Ron. And thus, Hermione had spent the last month reading avidly on Horcruxes and anything else which might prove itself useful. Most of her time, however, was spent in the dungeons of Hogwarts, where she aided Professor Snape in creating the potions...mostly medicinal...that she figured they would require on their quest.

During her time down in the dungeons of Hogwarts, Hermione Granger had come to know Severus Snape as none ever truly had. In him she found an ally, a friend, and a confidant. She knew him to be indescribably brave, steadily loyal, and wickedly witty. From almost the moment she set foot in the dungeons, their easy rapport and humorous banter had resulted in a warm, pleasant feeling that seemed to grow outward from her heart and settle painfully in the pit of her stomach. In short, Hermione Granger was in love.

Though she wanted to see him tonight with an aching intensity, she was loath for the night to end. They would set off tomorrow, Harry, Ron and her. Months of diligent research coupled with nightly meetings with Albus Dumbledore had resulted in a tentative yet tangible plan.

And so tonight was the last night she would see Severus for months, perhaps. The thought scared her, but it also emboldened her to act on the warm feeling in the pit of her stomach. With the help of all the Gryffindor bravery she possessed, Hermione was going to kiss her teacher tonight.

With that last thought, she knocked quietly on the foreboding door to his private potions laboratory.

"Come in, Miss Granger." His voice, deep and silky, acted as a balm to her erratically beating heart.

With one last deep breath, she opened the door.

"Good evening, Professor Snape."

"Miss Granger." He nodded his head slightly in her direction as he walked about his impressive lab, grabbing small phials and placing them gently in a small case.

"I finished processing the last of the dittany this morning, Miss Granger. I put it in here with the rest of the potions." He handed her the inky black case.

"I trust you won't shrink these." It was not a question.

"No, sir. I've charmed a bag of mine to fit..."

"As long as you don't shrink the potions, Miss Granger, I have no desire to hear your endless prattle." His eyes shone with amusement, and Hermione rather suspected he was lying.

"Of course, Professor. I apologize. I'll just return to my room, then?" Her heart thudded in her chest at such an alarming rate that Hermione thought she would faint. If he told her to leave, knowing that she was departing in the morning, then she had sadly misinterpreted the accidental hand grazes and the dark glittering of his eyes when he looked at her.

Watching him carefully, Hermione noted with satisfaction that he appeared flustered and a little panicked. His throat working convulsively, he finally looked at her.

"Leave if you must, Miss Granger. Though you are welcome to stay here, if you wish." His voice was tight.

She smiled brilliantly. "I would love to, sir."

He twisted his lips slightly into a facsimile of a smile, and Hermione's heart literally skipped a beat.

Noticing for the first time that the dungeons were a bit chilly, she shivered slightly. Severus narrowed his eyes.

"Come, Miss Granger. A fire, I think, would be appropriate."

She followed him through a heavily warded door located in the corner of the lab. Odd that she hadn't noticed it before. He stepped aside so she could enter the room. She gasped as she did so. If Hermione Granger had ever had a fantasy, than surely this room was it. A large fireplace commanded attention in the center of the room, and a plush couch along with several squashy armchairs were gathered around it. Almost every single inch of available wall space was covered with gigantic antique bookcases. Hermione fancied that there were perhaps miles of books in the relatively small room.

With a flick of his wand, Snape started a fire, which crackled pleasantly, warming Hermione almost instantly. Her body tingled deliciously.

"Would you care for some tea, Miss Granger?" Her professor was leaning carelessly against the doorframe, his arms crossed firmly across his chest. With a start,

Hermione realized he had taken off his black teaching robes and faced her now in only dark slacks and shirtsleeves. His hair fell across his face, and the flickering firelight played with his angular features with seductively chiaroscuro results. A jolt of desire went through Hermione, and her hands shook slightly at her sides. She had never wanted anyone or anything as badly as she wanted her teacher.

Clearing her throat, she attempted to answer him. "Do... do you have any wine, sir?"

A slow, languid smile spread across his face, and he chuckled darkly.

"I do, my little sprite." His eyes roved over the length of her body, and Hermione positively swooned.

"Have a seat, Miss Granger, before you fall over." Still laughing, he disappeared into an adjoining room.

Hermione sighed heavily and sat on the plush leather couch, wondering where exactly this night was leading and if she had the courage to follow it.

Severus re-entered the room with a bottle of dark red wine and two surprisingly delicate stemmed glasses. Pouring a generous amount into each glass, he offered one to Hermione and took a long drink from his own glass before joining her on the couch. She swallowed heavily...he was so close to her she could feel the tension between them spark, and she wondered hazily if it would perhaps ignite, consuming them both.

Leaning back comfortably into the couch, Hermione allowed her thigh to gently graze her professor's before taking a sip of the wine. She let the drink linger in her mouth, tasting the blend of exotic flavours in ecstasy. She loved wine, and this particular bottle was an excellent blend. Looking at Snape with half-lidded eyes, she wasn't surprised. He accepted nothing but perfection.

Hermione suddenly realized that Snape was talking to her, and she hadn't the slightest idea what he had said.

"... and you are prepared?" he was saying.

Blinking, she shook her head. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't catch that."

He leaned back into the couch as well, settling himself closer to her. Turning his head towards her, he whispered into her ear. Hermione could feel his breath on her skin, so close was he.

"Then perhaps you should pay attention to *me*, Miss Granger, rather than making such erotic little displays over your wine."

She flushed and mumbled an apology. With tremendous effort, she slowed her laboured breathing and turned to face him once again.

"What were you saying, sir?"

Snape briefly closed his eyes and his lips tightened in a scowl.

"Could you perhaps dispense with the 'sirs' and the 'professors,' Hermione? I find it quite tedious."

"What shall I call you then?"

He opened his eyes, and they were black as the night around her. "Severus. Just for tonight," he breathed.

"Just for tonight," she agreed.

"I was asking you about your plans. Potter and Weasley... they do not have your brilliance, Hermione. You do realize that you will be the unsung leader of this unfortunate trio, do you not?"

"Did you just call me brilliant, Severus?" His name tasted delectable on her tongue.

He shook his head darkly. "Now is not the time for games. Though they may not recognize it, Potter and Weasley rely almost completely on you. With not half a brain to share betwixt them, it is no surprise. Do you truly realize what you are up against, Hermione? You are attempting to thwart the most powerful dark wizard in the history of our kind, and you are attempting it armed with only your intelligence, a few healing potions, an ancient sword, and two fatalistic half-wits obsessed with their own impending doom. How do you ever plan to succeed?"

"You do not give Harry and Ron enough credit, Severus. Harry is... he's brave and loyal and would give up his own life without hesitation to kill Voldemort. And, I think, he draws strength from Ron. They may rely on me for research and planning, but I rely on them for their love and bravery. We have enough amongst the three of us to manage, I believe."

Severus managed a crooked smile that looked almost like a grimace. "Promise me something, Hermione," he whispered.

"Anything."

"Don't try to be brave. You focus on surviving this war, and nothing else. Do not sacrifice yourself to any cause, Hermione. There is no greater cause than your survival."

His wine glass trembled in his hands, and Hermione felt almost certain that he must love her. What else could affect him so?

"I can't make that promise and you know it, Severus. No more than you could."

He snorted. "I am supremely unconcerned with my own survival, Hermione. I have known for years that I am to die. The thought of my own death does not bother me. But I can't... I can't stand the thought of yours."

She couldn't be sure, but Hermione was almost certain she saw tears sparkling in his eyes.

He took a steadying breath and continued. "Of all people, Hermione, you deserve to live beyond this war. You deserve to know something good, to live in a world free of fear."

"And you don't deserve that, Severus? You don't deserve to live?"

"I forfeited my chance at a decent life when I took this mark, Hermione." Scowling deeply, he pushed up his sleeve to reveal the Dark Mark.

"Severus Snape! I am sick to death of the never-ending defeatist drivel I hear daily from Harry and Ron. I don't need it from you too. Honestly, sometimes I wonder why we even bother with fighting a war. Why don't we just turn ourselves over to Voldemort and accept that which is apparently our fate? Death, destruction, and all that." She crossed her arms and scowled at him. She knew that he valued his own life very little, and the thought angered her. He deserved more from himself; he deserved more from everyone around him.

"I'll promise you one thing if you'll promise me the same, Severus," she continued. "I promise you that I will do everything I can to survive this war. Promise me the same."

Hardly breathing, she awaited his reply.

Finally, his voice, weary and low, broke the silence. "I've lived long enough, Hermione. There is nothing here for me anymore."

Anger, bright and shiny and righteous, tore through Hermione like a whirlwind, and she thought that this one man could push her to the edge of her sanity with his delusions of his own self-worth.

"If that's what you think, Severus." She reached out and touched his shoulder and tentatively slid her fingers down his arm, lightly caressing the smooth, pale skin of his forearm. "If you think that there is no one in this world who cares for you, who loves you..." She slipped her hand into his, firmly entwining their fingers. "Then I must tell you, you must not be as intelligent as you claim. You are missing what is right in front of you."

Severus was staring avidly at their entwined fingers; his breath was hitching in his throat. Several lifetimes passed in the span of a few seconds.

He looked at her then, the familiar glittering in his dark eyes heightened by her revelation.

"Hermione," he whispered reverently, as if her name was a prayer.

He reached out his hand and gently caressed her face, his fingers tracing the path of her cheekbone. Hermione closed her eyes and leaned into his touch, marvelling in the fact that the slightest touch of his lightly calloused fingers would have her reeling with such strong desire. Suddenly, the tender caress ended and he simultaneously let go of her hand. She felt the loss as painfully as if he had cast the Cruciatus.

Opening her eyes, she found him studying her inquisitively.

"Why did you stop?" Her voice sounded weak and pathetic.

"You should leave, Miss Granger, before this leads to something we will both regret."

"I won't regret it."

"You might not at first. But you will come to regret it. And you will hate me. Of that much I am certain. It would be much kinder for me to deny you now, and ask you to leave."

"I won't regret it, Severus, and I could certainly never hate you. I... I am in love with you." The confession slipped out before she could think properly, but as soon as the words left her lips, she knew they were true.

"Don't say that, Hermione. Not to me. Not now."

Confused and hurt, Hermione stood up unsteadily and made her way to the door. Severus followed her, an unfathomable look upon his face.

"I don't understand," she whispered. "I thought you cared."

"Cared!" His voice was harsh. Grabbing her by the wrist, he whirled her around to face him. "Do you think this is easy for me? Hermione, I care about you with all of my heart and soul, with all of my mind and being. I belong to you completely." And suddenly he was kissing her, a fierce kiss that tasted of loneliness and despair, and he ran his fingers through her wild hair and murmured something into her mouth.

"My life," he growled, his voice deep and husky. "You are my life. And for that, you must leave tonight."

"Don't make me go," she whispered. "Let us have this one night."

With an obvious effort, he drew himself back from her.

"If we both survive this war, Hermione, and this is what you still want, then I will selfishly take you, marry you, and keep you all to myself."

"That's what I want, Severus. It's not going to change. I'm not going to change."

"You say that now, but you will."

She was crying now and made no effort to hide her tears. "I am going to miss you, Severus."

He turned his face from her. "Just go, Hermione. Please."

In the end, it wasn't his words that convinced her to leave. It was his tone. She had never heard it from him before...quiet, pleading. She vowed to wait for him for all eternity, if necessary.

Later that night, Hermione lay alone in her bed, tears drying stiff on her cheeks. Her last thought before slipping into a deep, dreamless sleep was that she was completely and irrevocably in love with her professor.

Harry woke her with a loud, insistent knocking the next morning. Not waiting for her response, he entered her bedroom before Hermione even had a chance to throw on her robe.

"Come on," he whispered in the early morning light. "It's time to leave." He looked strangely young to her.

It wasn't until later, after they were on their brooms, Disillusioned and flying to the Ministry, when Harry told her.

Severus Snape had been captured earlier in the morning and was currently in Azkaban. He had killed nine people, four members of the Order of the Phoenix and five civilians, two of them children. Harry's face filled with rage and hatred at the last, and Ron muttered under his breath about "the greasy bastard." Hermione almost fell off her broom until she saw Severus so clearly in her mind that he might have been flying next to her. He was innocent. It was a set-up.

She believed this as they hunted and killed Horcruxes. She believed this as she watched Harry knowingly walk to his death, willing to die in order to rid the world of Voldemort. She believed this as Dumbledore looked her calmly in the eye and told her in a cracking voice that he had been mistaken about Snape.

It wasn't until after the war, when she had spent untold hours poring over his case file, that she stopped believing in him. His wand had indeed fired the nine Killing Curses. Needing more proof, she delved into the official Pensieve of his case and witnessed his own confession.

"Do you, Severus Tobias Snape, admit to murdering the nine aforementioned victims with the killing curse?"

"I do."

"Do you care to tell the court why you killed them?"

He looked straight at the investigator, his eyes glinting steel. "Because I wanted to."

At that, Hermione had to run for the loo, where she vomited until she cried.

A/N Once again, my undying love and gratitude to my beta, mgm86, and the fabulous admins at TPP. Readers and reviewers...ya'll make my day.

Confrontation

Chapter 3 of 14

Hermione meets with Snape in Azkaban.

Hermione stood unsteadily before her deliberately non-magical full-length mirror, studying herself critically. She wore the dark blue robes of the Special Investigations Division. Her hair was knotted firmly in a bun on the back of her head. She had intentionally omitted her makeup and perfume regime from her morning routine, wanting to appear as impersonal as possible.

Because this is not a personal visit, she reminded herself again. I am going as a favour to Solomon. Purely professional. And make sure he knows that. Knows that I am not there for him.

Her steady internal monologue did little to relieve her nerves. She had not seen Severus Snape since that night in his office, so long ago. When he'd kissed her, and she'd told him she loved him.

In the years following Snape's arrest and conviction, Hermione had concluded that he must have cared something for her. She would have willingly and eagerly gone to bed with him that night, but he'd denied her, forcing her from his rooms. He had known at the time he was talking to her, at the time he was kissing her, that he was going to murder nine innocent people that night. What had he said to her?

You will come to regret it.

She hadn't believed him then, but she did now. Had she slept with him, it would have driven her mad. He had spared her, she imagined, due to some misguided feelings he had for her.

Hermione shook her head, and the stern, unforgiving woman in the mirror shook her head. She looked forbidding enough, she supposed. As long as she didn't cry when she saw him.

All too soon, her timepiece read 7:50. Ten minutes separated her from the man who had condemned her to a life of lonely, solitary existence.

Hermione Granger, strong-willed, loyal, and driven by thoughts of perfection, did not fall in love lightly. She did not fall out of love lightly either. It had taken her five years before she could think of him without her heart aching.

Despite the fact that Severus Snape was a heartless murderer who deserved his life sentence in Azkaban, Hermione found that she still judged every man she ever met by him. And in the years since she had fallen in love with him, no one had even come close.

With one last glance at the woman in the mirror, Hermione Apparated to the appropriate Azkaban Apparition point.

"You'll need to check your wand, ma'am."

Hermione stared at the guard blankly. It was bad enough she had to see Snape again, but to see him wandless? Impossible.

"Is that necessary?"

"I'm afraid it is. New Ministry standards, after Draco Malfoy broke his father out of here. About a year ago, that was. You'll have read about it in the papers." The guard's voice was apologetic. "Snape doesn't have a wand, either, ma'am. Of course."

"Fine. I'll check my wand. Has... Have you cleared the area of Dementors?"

The guard nodded, his baby-fine hair gleaming unnaturally in the aberrant lighting of the prison. After the Great War, in which Dementors sided and fought with Voldemort, the Ministry of Magic reorganized its only wizarding prison to assure the law-abiding citizens that there would not be another mass break-out. Only a handful of Dementors now guarded the imposing structure, and they were there mostly to ensure that none of the prisoners became too happy. Human prison guards were appointed in the Dementors' stead. It was normal procedure to clear the area of Dementors when prisoners were visited or interrogated, but Hermione wanted to be sure. She had no desire to relive her worst memories in such a place as this.

After checking her wand at the front desk, Hermione followed the guard into Azkaban. Having never been in the prison before, her natural curiosity overcame her fear and trepidation. She tried to see where she was and where she was going, but she only received a vague impression of darkness and cold. At one point, she thought that she heard someone screaming uncontrollably. The air smelled of sweat, mildew, and fear. The ground oozed uncomfortably beneath her feet. She felt disoriented and wondered briefly what sort of magic was at work in this forsaken place.

"It's a powerful charm, ma'am," the guard whispered, as if reading her thoughts. "That's why you can't really see where you are. It's to prevent the prisoners from escaping, you see, and from others helping them out. Also a new Ministry standard."

His voice dropped in volume, and Hermione realized he was trying to sound mysterious.

"If you, for example, ma'am, and not that you would do such a thing... but if you were to break into Azkaban with the intentions of smuggling out a loved one...not that you have loved ones in here, ma'am, I didn't mean that. But if you did... you would wander in the dark and the fog for days until you went mad from it all."

Hermione shivered. "How can you find where you are going, then?"

His chest puffed out with pride. "You can get a security clearance to work around the magic. I've got one." He smiled smugly.

At last, they reached a dark corridor. The guard took his wand and undid the powerful wards surrounding a locked door. With an ominous creak, the door came open.

"He's right in through there, ma'am. Now, don't be worried. He'll still be behind bars, where he belongs."

With a sweep of his hand, he urged her to go through the door.

"My name's Isaac, ma'am. Isaac Asril. Push the button when you're ready to leave, and I'll come get you."

Hermione nodded at him and, with a shaky breath, stepped through the door.

Her first thought as she saw him standing so impossibly near her was that he really should eat more, for the sake of his health. Severus Snape had always been lean, but the years in Azkaban had whittled him away to a speck of the man he used to be. The standard issue gray prison suit hung off his body loosely, revealing an expanse of his pale chest and the sickly hue of his skin. His black hair was now shoulder-length, and the stubble on his cheeks suggested it had been at least a week since his last shower. Hermione quickly compared him to the image of him she had in her mind. He looked smaller, weaker. A flash of pity surged through her. She closed her eyes and forced herself to think of the two small children he had killed.

"Miss Granger." His voice was raspy and hoarse from lack of use.

"Professor Snape," she said levelly.

"Please, have a seat." He gestured towards a small chair located in front of his cage. "I believe Isaac brought this in here earlier. Thoughtful of him, really."

She nervously brushed a strand of hair behind her ear and sat down. Nodding at her, Snape sat on the floor of his cell, curling his legs under him.

"Now. It has been a while, *Hermione*. I must confess I am a bit disappointed in you."

She winced at the sound of her name. "And why is that, Professor?"

"You never stormed in here full of your righteous anger, demanding to know why I did what I did." His voice was tinged with hints of amusement, but behind his casual demeanour, Hermione sensed an honest question. He wanted to know why she never came to see him, demanding an explanation. Interesting.

"I viewed the Pensieve for your case, Professor. I am quite aware why you killed those people."

His eyes gleamed. "Of course you are, Hermione. I expected nothing less from my best and brightest student."

He leaned forward suddenly, his face coming disturbingly close to hers. She pushed her chair back.

He laughed darkly. "So. Why have you come here, then?" He closed his eyes, and a smile played on his lips. "I believe you told me once that if we both survived the War, then I could take you and keep you as my own. Is that why you are here, Hermione? Did you come here so I could make you mine?"

She exhaled sharply. "No," she whispered, and though she intended the word to be fierce and angry, it sounded weak and sad to her ears.

"Ah. I expect that particular promise of yours died with those nine people all these years ago."

"It did." At that moment, Hermione realized that she must have never truly known her professor. He sat there, so calm and quiet and not the least bit remorseful.

"Then I'll ask you again. Why are you here, Hermione? What do you want?"

Hermione, if she was at all honest with herself, wanted to scream and yell at him, to tell him she wanted nothing more than to rewind time so she could make him stay with her that night, so he never would have killed those people, so she could marry him and love him and take him away from this awful place.

"I need your help."

"The inestimable Miss Granger needs my help. Interesting. Oh, I forgot to ask. It is still 'Miss Granger,' is it not? Or have you gone and married the Weasley boy?" His eyes narrowed, and Hermione noticed that his fists were clenched tightly at his sides. As if he still had the *right* to care about her.

"No, it's still Miss Granger. Or Auror Granger, if you prefer."

He glanced quickly at the insignia on the front of her robes.

"You work for the Ministry, Hermione," he stated. "In all of the scenarios I have imagined, never did I dream that you would be working for the Ministry. And how do you like it?"

"It suits me."

"And that is why you are here? Need some help with a case, I see."

Hermione sighed. "Yes, I need help with a case." She reached into her pocket and withdrew the small flask with the mysterious black potion. Solomon had given it to her this morning.

"I assume you've heard of the recent serial murders. The 'Angel of Death' case."

He shook his head. "I no longer concern myself with the outside world. It makes no difference to me, in here."

Hermione widened her eyes in surprise. A Severus Snape who was not semi-omniscient and cockily confident in his knowledge was... unsettling.

"I'll bring you the case file, if you like. Later. For now, I would like you to take a look at this." She carefully handed him the flask, taking time to ensure her hand did not accidentally touch his.

He examined the bottle thoughtfully, his eyebrows furrowing in concentration. Hermione noticed with a pang the crease between his eyes, and for a moment she couldn't think. She had always loved that about him.

"Where did you get this? What is it?"

Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, she answered him.

"Four women have been murdered within the last year, Professor. That was found in their bloodstream. At this point, we are assuming that it kills them, though we don't know how. And we don't know what it is. The Potions Department analyzed it. I have their report if you're interested."

"Give it to me."

He grabbed the file from her through the bars and scanned it briefly.

"The Potions masters working for the Department. What are their names?"

"Oh. Uh, Arcadius Newblood and Sabina Clemenson."

He snorted. "I should have known. Fools, the both of them." He leaned back against the smooth concrete wall of his cell, his eyes glinting in the abnormal light. "I believe I can help you, Hermione. "

"That would be wonderful, sir. I..."

He held up a hand, cutting her off. "I believe you are getting ahead of yourself. I will help you, but I have my conditions. Consider this a... quid pro quo situation. I do this for you, you do something for me." His lips curled upward.

Hermione gasped as she felt a sudden hot longing in the pit of her stomach. Certainly he could not mean *that*! That would be... unethical. Immoral. She would hate herself for the rest of her life.

Snape started chuckling. "Oh, Hermione. Not that. As... attractive as you are, I have no desire to rob you of your feelings of self-worth. No, I want something else."

She flushed with embarrassment but did not look away from him. Her heart pounded in her chest. "What do you want?"

"I want you to get me out of here."

She opened her mouth to explain the impossibility of that, but he cut her off.

"Allow me to clarify, since you are having difficulties understanding what I am saying to you. I want you to find a way for me to get out of Azkaban whilst I work on this potion. Get me a lab somewhere, some books, some real food. And no Dementors. After I figure out what this is...and I will...you can take me back to this loathsome cell. That is all I ask. I will say no more until you fulfil my terms."

Severus Snape was one of the most hated Dark Wizards in Azkaban. She didn't know how her superiors would react to her request that he be released.

"I will see what I can do, sir."

"No, you will do it, Hermione. Hermione, look at me."

She complied, and the sheer force of his gaze made her shudder.

"You will do what I ask, Hermione, because you, my dear, can do anything you set your mind to."

She stared at him for the span of several heartbeats. Deciding it would be best if she left, she reached out for the large red button on the wall. Her fingers paused over it. Hating herself for her weakness, she turned back to him.

"Why did you do it, sir? Why did you ruin everything?" Her voice cracked, and she winced.

Snape leaned his head against the concrete behind him. His hair fell from his face, and she saw that he was frowning.

"Hermione. You should have asked me this years ago, you foolish girl."

When she felt the prickle of tears start behind her eyes, she pushed the button.

Severus watched her leave his cell with a languid interest. Seven years, it had been, since he had last seen her. He had long ago given up that she would ever visit him. But now here she was. Intriguing.

Also intriguing, he felt no desire to reach through the bars and strangle the life from her. Make her suffer one-tenth of what he had been through. No, all he felt for her was an empty sort of pity. She looked so... *patented* in her dark blue uniform. He did not listen to the part of his mind that insisted she also looked damnably lovely. Every bit as lovely as he remembered in his dreams.

She looked a bit miserable as well, he mused. Perhaps she had been affected.

If she managed to get him out of this place, he would help her. He could help her without becoming again affected by her warm, expressive eyes or her unrivalled intelligence. He could help her without falling in love with her again.

Severus never thought to ask himself if he had ever fallen out of love with her.

A/N As always, thanks to my lovely beta and the admins at TPP. Thanks also to my brilliant reviewers...I love hearing what ya'll think.

At Home

Chapter 4 of 14

Hermione gets Severus out of Azkaban.

He read in some trashy tabloid the other day that they called him the 'Angel of Death.' Interesting, that. Perhaps not what he would have chosen for himself, but it would do. It would do.

He focused his attention on the potion bubbling in the black cauldron. Delicately, he sniffed it.

"Oh, yesss..."

Perfect.

"Just a bit longer, my sweet." He glanced affectionately at a pile of clothes and decomposing body parts lovingly arranged on his couch.

"My love," he whispered as he closed his eyes. "My life."

The fifth girl would have to be special. He knew this. She would be the final one.

He could think of no other witch who would complete his Dark Magic better than her.

Hermione Granger.

And it was rather poetic that she was the Auror heading up his investigation.

Closing his eyes, he pictured her in his mind. Small, heart-shaped face framed rather dramatically by that fuzz of hair. She tightly wrapped her righteous beliefs of justice and evil around her as if they were armour. Shuddering slightly, he wondered what it would take to break that armour.

He shook his head. He had no time for games. He had important work to do.

Hermione couldn't help it. She started tugging at her lip with her teeth. If he saw it as a sign of weakness...which it was not...then that was his problem. She needed to do something to relieve the overwhelming feelings of tension building up in her chest.

She glanced surreptitiously at her timepiece. It was almost ten o'clock at night. She wondered briefly if he would ever finish reading the proposal.

After leaving Snape's cell earlier that day, she had immediately contacted Solomon and told him Snape's request. She had waited agonizing hours for her superiors to write up an appropriate proposal, and now she was again sitting surreally close to Severus Snape, waiting for his response.

Wordlessly, he handed the papers back to her through the slim opening of the bars.

"This was the best you could do, Miss Granger? Tut, tut. A bit... under par, wouldn't you say?" His biting sarcasm reminded her strongly of the dungeons of Hogwarts.

"Sir, you are a convicted murderer of nine. It was the best I could do, given the circumstances."

He lightly stood up in his cell. His ill-fitting prison garb shifted restlessly on his skin.

"What would you like me to do, Hermione? Would you like me to accept this? Does some part of you wish for me to ... how did they put it? 'Remain under your supervision?'"

Hermione was suddenly very tired of this unending game he played with her. "Just tell me your answer, Severus."

He stilled in his cell, and Hermione realized her mistake.

"I'll do it." His voice was very quiet.

"Fine."

Rising, she walked outside the door to find Solomon pacing restlessly in the darkened hallway. Her boss had insisted that he be the one to perform the Constrictus spell. When she had questioned him further, his eyes had flashed, and he had told her she needed protection.

"Granger. Don't toy with me. Is he going to do it?"

She nodded her head. "Yes. Do you want to come in?"

"Hermione. I'll need to perform the Constrictus ceremony immediately. Will you... will you be alright?"

"Yes. As long as he helps us, I'll be fine."

With a quick touch to her cheek, Solomon entered the cell, gesturing for Hermione to follow him.

Severus was still standing in his cell, his arms crossed and a look of sheer boredom upon his face.

"And you are?" he drawled, sparing Solomon but a glance.

Hermione wondered if this was all an act for her sake. Or maybe his sake.

"Solomon. I'll be performing the ceremony, Snape, just as soon as you are ready." Solomon's voice was positively burning with hatred, and Hermione suddenly felt a flash of strong emotion for her boss. This couldn't be easy for him.

Snape snorted. "Get on with it, then."

The Constrictus binding was ancient magic, and many considered it Dark as well. It was, however, the only thing the department could think of in a situation such as this. Snape's help was imperative, and they were quite simply running out of time. Basically, the purpose of the Constrictus was to effectively bind one person to another. As the history of this particular spell was one of abuse, all Constrictus bindings were monitored and overseen by the Ministry.

After the ceremony was complete, Severus would not be able to even move without Hermione's permission. And if he tried to fight it, as Hermione feared he might, he would die slowly and painfully.

Severus felt... odd. His skin tingled painfully, and his eyes burned. He wanted to sit but knew instinctively that he might die if he attempted it. He had only ever read about the effects of the Constrictus binding, and he saw now that mere words in books could never capture this feeling of painful helplessness. He tried to raise his right hand to rub away the sharp stinging in his eyes, but at the movement his hand became so hot he thought it would burst into flame.

"Severus." He heard Hermione's voice but couldn't register the words she was saying.

"Severus. You can open your eyes."

And suddenly, the pain subsided, and he opened his eyes to find that the bars that had surrounded him for the last seven years were gone. Vanished. Hermione stood but a few feet away from him. He could reach out and touch her, if she would but permit it.

"I give you my permission to move, Severus. And talk."

"Took you long enough, you foolish witch!"

At that, Solomon glared sharply at him. "That's enough, Snape. We're leaving now."

"Come along, Severus. You can walk." Hermione's voice was surprisingly gentle.

"Of course I can walk! I'm no child, you bloody twit!"

He overheard Solomon whispering in his protégé's ear, and Hermione mumbled back.

"It's alright, sir. He's obviously upset. He doesn't like the feeling of losing his self-control." After a moment, she added, "I wouldn't like that either."

Once the guard arrived, Severus found himself being shuffled out of the room as if he were a firstie at Hogwarts. Strong flashes of anger coursed through him, and he was sorely tempted to test the limits of the Constrictus. Bloody fucking hell! Even during the long, dark years in Azkaban, years which ran together in a blur of cold and hunger, he had considered himself a powerful wizard in charge of his own physical and mental capabilities. He clung to that knowledge as if his life depended on it.

This was almost worse than Azkaban. This feeling of utter helplessness...he couldn't do anything without her permission. Would she lord that over him? But before he even fully formed that question in his mind, Severus knew the answer. She wouldn't. In all of her blasted Gryffindorian ideas of right and wrong, Hermione Granger would manage to treat him with dignity throughout this godforsaken ordeal. She was why he had agreed to this foolhardy plan in the first place.

They reached the outside of the prison with a suddenness that Severus found alarming. The moonlight seemed piercingly bright to his eyes, and the light breeze that whispered through the trees was utterly intoxicating. Somehow, he had forgotten what wind felt like.

He closed his eyes and focused on breathing in the fresh air. It smelled salty, crisp, and absolutely wonderful. Severus had never been one for poetry, but he felt that if someone were to hand him a quill and a bit of parchment, he could compose an entire sonnet dedicated to the wind and the waves. He snorted.

Apparently, he was getting rather soft in his old age. How dreadful.

Scowling deeply, he turned to find Hermione, his simultaneous rescuer and captor. She was in conversation with the silver-haired man. The man looked maddeningly familiar for some reason.

Severus felt a stab of jealousy at the sight of their easy camaraderie. But surely he was too old for her.

Then again, she did have an odd penchant for older men, he reminded himself.

Solomon nodded his head and, with a final hateful glare at Severus, Disapparated with a pop. Hermione turned to look at him. Her expression was wary.

"I'm taking you to my home. Hold onto me." At his obvious reluctance to touch her, she sighed and put an arm around his waist.

"Hold onto me. It's okay. I give you permission."

He tentatively put his arms around her shoulders. She was tiny, lithe...just as he remembered. He wanted nothing more than to bury his face in her hair.

"Here goes," she whispered, and Severus thought her voice trembled.

He felt his insides twist and his body compress unpleasantly as she Disapparated them both. He focused on the feel of Hermione's robes beneath his hands.

They arrived unceremoniously in a small flat. Hermione let go of him immediately, and Severus stepped rather reluctantly from her embrace. It had been awhile since he had held a woman.

"Okay," she said. He noted with amusement that she was avoiding his gaze. She wouldn't look him in the eyes.

"So this is my flat. This is the sitting room. Through there is my bedroom. That, as you can see, is the kitchen, where I set up our temporary lab. If you'll come with me, I'll show you to your room."

"Are you going to give me permission, Hermione?"

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, yes. Severus, you are from now on allowed everywhere in this flat excepting my bedroom. I don't want to waste any more time on this nonsense, so I give you permission to do anything you like here, providing it isn't harmful. Does that suit you?"

He nodded his head.

"Right. So I'll show you your quarters then. I sent for some of your things earlier today. They should be in your room."

He followed her obediently into a small room containing a single twin bed and one desk with an ancient lamp. Unsurprisingly, he saw a large bundle on the bed. With a pang, he recognized his teaching robes from Hogwarts and several of his books. His old life, bundled neatly before him as if just waiting for his return.

Her voice, quiet and sullen, interrupted his nostalgia. "If you want to take a shower or fix something to eat, go ahead. I imagine you'll want to get out of your... prison clothes. I'm going to bed."

He stared at her as he left his bedroom. "Goodnight, Hermione."

She didn't turn around. "Goodnight."

She needed a cuppa, and badly. She could hear the water running, and she had to do something other than lay in bed imagining Severus in the shower. It was too much for her to take.

Sighing resignedly, Hermione grabbed her robe and padded towards the kitchen. After putting the teakettle on, she slumped on a table chair and sighed again. When Solomon had first suggested that Severus live with her, she had balked. There was no way. It was one thing to see him occasionally in Azkaban, safe and untouchable behind the thick steel bars. It was another thing entirely to have him staying in her guest room, mere steps away from her own bedroom. But she had acknowledged that he would have refused to be bound to any other witch or wizard.

The teakettle began to whistle, and she took it off the fire and poured herself a large mug of hot water. Adding the tea bag, she noticed that the shower had stopped

running. Good. He was out of the shower. Now she could stop thinking about Severus naked, running his hands over his lean torso as he soaped his body clean....

She shook her head. Not only were those thoughts inappropriate, they were morally wrong. And she would do well to remember that.

She looked around her kitchen and finally nodded her head in approval at the makeshift potions laboratory she and several other Ministry employees had constructed earlier. It was no Hogwarts lab, and Hermione rather suspected that Severus would disapprove of the haphazard collection of cauldrons and burners, but he would just have to deal with it. And hopefully in the process he could solve the mystery of the potion, and they could catch the Angel before he killed again.

"I thought you were asleep, Miss Granger."

She jumped in her seat, spilling her hot tea on her hand.

"Ouch! Bloody hell, Severus, don't sneak up on me like that!"

"Let me see it." He grasped her hand with his before she could give her consent. Hermione gaped at him in surprise, and it was then that she noticed his appearance. What he was wearing. And what he wasn't.

His hair was still wet from the shower and hung in damp clumps around his head. He was freshly shaven and smelled of her bar soap. Hermione, however, was focused on one thing.

Oh, bloody hell! He's not wearing a shirt.

And she couldn't keep her eyes off of his pale chest.

True, he was almost painfully thin, but his flat stomach and his wiry biceps hinted at untold strength. Several long, white scars crisscrossed his chest, and Hermione wanted to touch him so badly that her hand trembled in his. She caught but a peek of the alluring Dark Mark on his left forearm. Apparently, despite rumours to the contrary, they had not vanished at the moment of Voldemort's demise.

Hermione realized with a flush of embarrassment that she was staring, and staring rather obviously. Mortified, she felt her cheeks turning pink.

Beside her, Severus chuckled deeply and briefly squeezed her hand.

"You'll live, I think," he said with a smirk. "Now. Would you like me to perhaps put on a shirt? Or would you rather continue staring at me like some wanton harlot?"

"I...I was not staring at you! I...just...never mind!" Hermione realized that perhaps that particular defence was not her most brilliant, but it was the best she could do given the very distracting circumstances.

"Hermione. You didn't answer me. Should I change into more proper attire?"

Part of her, the rational part of her that was currently reminding her that she should most definitely not be lusting after a convicted criminal, wanted him to put on clothes. But there was another part of her that very much wanted to rip off the rest of his clothes and force him into her bedroom. She could show him exactly what he had been missing these last seven years.

And it was the latter that scared Hermione. She needed to control herself. The next two days required that she control herself and her emotions, both physical and mental.

"Do what ever you want, Severus. I certainly don't care." There. Her voice hadn't even shook.

"Very well. I'll join you for tea then. I do hope you made enough."

He poured himself a cup and sat down in the chair next to her. Taking a sip of his tea, he studied her intently over the rim of the mug. Leery of his scrutiny, Hermione shifted restlessly in her seat.

"What is it, Severus?"

His lips curled upward. "I was just contemplating the Fates. What else but Fate could bring me out of Azkaban and into your kitchen?"

She stiffened. "There certainly is nothing fateful about you being here tonight. We are on official business here. Nothing else."

"Nothing else?" he said sharply. "Then tell me, Hermione. Why is it you can't look me in the eye? Why is it that your hand trembled in mine just now?"

Hermione, for the second time that day, forced herself to think of the two children he had murdered seven years ago. A little boy named Thomas, age six, and his older sister Isabella. She was ten. She closed her eyes and thought of them until she felt nothing for the man sitting next to her but a slowly burning hatred.

Suddenly, she looked at him straight in his eyes. "I'm going to bed now, Severus. Put the tea things away when you're done."

Determinedly, she left the kitchen and went to her bedroom. She felt the stinging of tears behind her eyes, and all she knew was that she was so tired of crying over him...over the past that just wouldn't leave her alone. She had finally made a life for herself. She had finally stopped thinking of him for at least thirty seconds of every day. And now here he was, impossibly living in her house. She had once dreamed of them living together. Never had she imagined *this*.

Hermione sat on the side of her bed, her hands grasping the metal frame for support. A light tapping on her door startled her from her internal reverie.

"Hermione. Hermione, say I can come in." His voice was quiet.

"Just let me be, Severus."

"Hermione. Please. Just this once." He sounded as if he were pleading, and Hermione was strongly reminded of that night so long ago, when he had pleaded with her to leave his rooms.

"Fine. You can come in, but just this once."

She avidly studied the carpet as he opened the door and stepped into her room. It wasn't until she felt his weight settle into the bed beside her that she looked at him. She blinked. He had put on a shirt, and somehow that act was significant to her.

Severus was scrutinizing the wall in front of him and didn't look at her when he began talking.

"Hermione, I don't have much... experience with matters such as these. So I simply wanted to say that I... I'm sorry."

She sighed. "We do need to work together somewhat amicably, you know. I just never thought it would be this difficult."

He nodded in agreement. "Perhaps we should make a bargain?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "What sort of bargain?"

"As you said, we must work together for these next two Ministry-allotted days. If you can, just for now, attempt to forget any grievances you may have against me, then I will attempt to forget the fact that you never visited me after my unfortunate incarceration."

She stared at him incredulously. "You do realize that you are asking me to forget that you are a murderer and a Death Eater while you forget that I didn't pop in for a chat after you were convicted?" She rubbed her forehead. She could feel the beginning twinges of a headache.

"Just give me an answer, Hermione." His voice was sharp and unremorseful.

"Fine. I'll do it. We'll start with a blank slate tomorrow, alright?"

He nodded his head and left her room without another word.

Hours later, Hermione lay restlessly in her bed. She needed to get to sleep, but all she could focus on was Severus' words.

I will attempt to forget the fact that you never visited me after my unfortunate incarceration

She turned on her side and scrunched up one of her pillows. Why hadn't she visited him? Why had she relied solely on the Pensieve? Why hadn't she needed an explanation from his own lips?

"Because I saw it in his eyes," she whispered into the dark. "I saw the guilt. And I hated myself for loving him even then."

Hermione finally slipped into a fitful sleep. She dreamed of the cells in Azkaban and Severus' lips upon her skin.

A/N: As always, thanks to my beta, mgm86, and the admins at TPP. Thanks also to reviewers; I love hearing your theories!

Conversations

Chapter 5 of 14

Severus and Hermione research and receive an unexpected visitor.

"So," Severus began casually as he carefully uncorked the phial. "Talk."

She raised her eyebrows. "Talk."

"Yes, talk. Words. Conversation." His tone reminded her of Neville Longbottom, shaking with fear in the dungeons.

"Okay," she said hesitantly, but she remained silent, watching him avidly as he poured the liquid into a silver cauldron.

After several moments of silence, he looked up at her, his annoyance written plainly across his face. "Surely, Miss Granger, the years have not addled your brains so much so that you have forgotten how to hold a simple conversation."

She handed him a stirring rod and rolled her eyes. "I don't know what you want me to say."

He leaned close to the cauldron and sniffed delicately. "Tell me how you have been these last seven years."

"Oh. I've been... fine. I've managed just fine."

"Thank you for explaining yourself so fully, Miss Granger. As always, you have such a gift with words."

She sighed. "Do you really want to know how I have been?"

He didn't look up from the cauldron. "Well, I did ask. Would you like me to repeat the question?"

She grabbed a small, sharp knife and began cutting the ingredients he had laid out for her. "Really, Severus, I've been fine. Not great, but fine. I love my job. I work quite a bit, and I have very few friends. I admire my boss. I still miss Harry every day of my life, and I see Ron only occasionally. Usually holidays. That's it."

He ladled out the potion and brought it to the level of his eyes.

"Ah, Mr. Weasley. I assumed you two would have married by now."

"I don't know what ever gave you that idea. Ron and I fought so much that I sometimes imagine we were only friends because of Harry. I suppose that's why we don't see each other very much anymore. Harry's not around to keep the peace. Besides that, Ron's married with three children and another on the way."

"Indeed? And who is the *lucky* woman to have captured his heart? Anyone I should send my condolences to?"

"Really, Severus, childish petulance does not become you. And he married Luna. Luna Lovegood."

"That addled Ravenclaw? Perhaps I should send Mr. Weasley the condolences."

"Oh, shut it. They're a good match."

"I'm sure," he mumbled. "Hermione, hand me that book over there." He gestured to a pile of books sitting on her kitchen counter.

"Which one?"

"The big black one, you foolish girl. And hurry."

Grabbing the book hurriedly from the pile, Hermione became a bit worried when the book started growling at her. She glanced at the title. *Dangerous Droughts and Evil Elixirs*.

"Here."

"Thank you. I have to cross-reference something." He began flipping through the book and muttering under his breath.

"Severus? Can I ask you what you are doing?"

"No."

"Can I help at all?"

"Just finish chopping those ingredients. And for Merlin's sake, stop pulverizing the blood stone."

"I think I could be of some use, if you'll allow it. As I recall, my Potions scores were always top-notch."

"Well, as I recall, your scores were mediocre at best, and your potions were barely above average."

"That is not true, and you know it, Severus Snape. I was your best student, and it would just kill you to admit it, now wouldn't it?"

He glared at her. "Quiet, woman. I'm trying to work here."

Hermione glared back at him, allowing herself to feel a tiny surge of victory. She felt that she had somehow won that round.

And it didn't disturb her in the least how quickly she and Severus had settled back into their old routine of witty repartee and barbed insults.

"But seriously, Severus, I need to know what you are doing. Technically speaking, I am in charge here, and I need to report in to Solomon tonight. Tell him about our progress."

He tensed. "The man who bound us, yes?"

"Yes. He's my boss, as I believe I said before."

"I didn't like him."

Hermione snorted. "Well, I'm sure he didn't like you either."

"Is he married?" he asked nonchalantly while he poured a sample of the potion into a small Petri dish.

Hermione stopped chopping. "No, he's not. I believe he was married once before, but he never talks about it. I've always got the impression that something horrible happened to her."

"Interesting," he murmured as he added a drop of some clear liquid to the Petri dish.

"So? Tell me what you are doing, exactly."

He huffed. "Fine. If only so I can get you to shut up."

"You were the one who started this whole conversation, Severus. Can you please just tell me what you're doing?"

He flipped to a different page in the dark book and read quietly before answering her. "I am doing the same thing those dunderheads at the Ministry attempted to do, except I am going to succeed."

"You're trying to figure out what the potion is made of."

He nodded. "Potions are simply the sum of their parts, Miss Granger," he said in his best Snape lecture tone. "Once I identify each separate ingredient and characterize their possible reactions to each other, I can then discover why exactly this potion moves. And how it kills."

"Fascinating, I'm sure. But how are you doing it?"

"At the moment, I am not doing anything because of your incessant questioning, you annoying little harpy!"

Hermione smiled at the strange endearment. "I'm sorry. I'll let you alone after you tell me."

He let out a long-suffering sigh and closed his eyes. "I've already identified four ingredients...dragon's blood, moondundust, gillyweed, and lacewing flies."

"How?"

"By smell, Miss Granger."

"Interesting. I only recognized the moondundust and the blood."

"It is not my problem that your olfactory powers are substandard, Miss Granger."

"I do not have substandard olfactory powers!"

He smirked but said nothing. Really, he could irritate her to no end. Hermione was thoroughly enjoying herself.

"What else have you accomplished?"

"Breaking down the anatomy...so to speak...of a potion is not easy, Miss Granger. I've heated the potion in hopes that some of the ingredients will separate. All of the ingredients I've discovered so far are fairly innocuous, if somewhat expensive. What I'm really looking for at this point is the potion's base, Miss Granger. The most essential and powerful element. I've consulted some of my Dark texts to no avail. The bases of the Darkest potions consist of, oh, your intended victim's blood, for example. Or perhaps the innards of a slaughtered animal. A Dark potion, especially if it's intended to kill, is more potent if a violent act procured its base. Essentially, evil must be brewed into the potion. Do you understand?"

Hermione nodded her head and shivered. Severus had never taught the art of making Dark potions at Hogwarts.

"However," he continued. "I am beginning to fear that this Angel of yours has created a new potion entirely. You are looking for someone with a high degree of intelligence,

Miss Granger. If not a Potions master, than at least an apprentice. He has studied Potions extensively, and, it seems, he has an aptitude for the Dark Arts. I wonder where he was during the War...."

"Do you know anyone who could do this, Severus? Any of the Death Eaters, I mean. Or Voldemort's followers?"

He looked at her then, and his lips curved into a half-smile. "I believe you know my answer, Hermione. I could do this."

Hermione started. She had been enjoying their dialogue so much that she had almost forgotten who she was talking to.

Severus raised an eyebrow as he regarded her. "Close your mouth, Hermione. I assure you that I did not create this potion, nor did I kill those witches."

Though Hermione knew logically that he hadn't anything to do with the Angel case, she breathed a sigh of relief nevertheless.

"I knew that..."

She was interrupted mid-sentence by a loud, insistent knocking on her front door. Surprised, she abruptly stood up, knocking over an empty cauldron that clattered loudly on the floor.

Severus snorted.

"Are you going to answer that, Hermione? Or would you rather I take care of your pesky visitor?"

"No! I'll get it." She wanted as few people as possible to know that Severus was currently staying with her. If Ron found out, he would be furious.

She quickly made her way to the door and cracked it open.

"Grayson!"

"Granger!"

"What are you doing here?"

Her partner smiled, and Hermione couldn't help herself. Despite all of her solid resolutions to remain unaffected by the womanizing partner of hers, his smile got her every time.

"I missed you, Hermione. They've put me on background duty, and I'm going to kill myself. Or Solomon. Haven't quite decided yet."

"Ah, so you're following the paper trail."

"Until you get back, yes. Which reminds me. When *are* you getting back?"

"The Ministry gave us an allotment of two days before Severus will go back to Azkaban."

"So you'll be back on Friday then?"

"I should be. If all goes to plan."

"It better," he muttered darkly. "I find that I am completely lost without my brilliant, beautiful partner."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Like you haven't already tried that on me, Grayson."

He shrugged. "I keep hoping I'll get lucky."

She laughed. As if in response, she heard something smash in her kitchen.

Grayson jumped at the noise and tried to peer around her shoulder.

"Is he... Is he in there?"

"Yes."

"Can I come in?"

"You want to see him?" she asked incredulously. "Henry, grow up. He's just a man, not some...*sideshow*."

"Well, he kind of is." At her steadily darkening features, he quickly added, "He's *Severus Snape*. He killed nine people, Hermione. It's not everyday that you meet a person capable of that kind of... evil."

Later, Hermione would not really admit to herself why she'd agreed to let Henry in. Because truthfully, Hermione wanted to make Severus a bit jealous.

"Fine. But you can't stay long. And don't be rude!"

"Don't worry. My lunch break is almost up anyways."

Her stomach twisted unpleasantly as she led Grayson through to her makeshift laboratory. This was more than likely not the best plan she ever had.

"Severus. I would like you to meet someone."

He was stirring the black potion, now bubbling, with a long wooden ladle. Ignoring her words, he held out a hand.

"Hush. Don't interrupt me."

"Hmmm," Grayson whispered in her ear. "Not the politest of murdering psychopaths, now is he?"

Hermione stifled a giggle and waited for Severus to finish.

"Ah," Severus said. "Crushed silkstone. I should have known. Combined with the dragon's blood and the elderflower... Undoubtedly, the reaction would be volatile. I wonder how he achieved stabilisation?"

Grayson continued his observations. "He's also a bit daft, carrying on entire conversations with himself."

"Stop, Grayson. Just stop. He's brilliant, you know. And he's doing our job better than we could have done it." She tried unsuccessfully to prevent admiration from sneaking into her tone.

Severus finally set his ladle down on the table and turned to regard Hermione and her partner.

"You wanted me to meet someone, Miss Granger," he said coolly.

"Yes, yes, I did. I do, that is." She wiped her sweaty palms on the front of her robes, hoping that this little introduction went smoothly.

"This is my Investigations partner, Henry Grayson. Grayson, meet Severus Snape, my... old professor."

Smiling and holding his hand out in greeting, Grayson stepped confidently towards Severus.

"Snape. You look *exactly* how I always imagined."

In response, Severus crossed his arms and glared at Grayson's outstretched hand.

"Quite coincidentally, Mr. Grayson, so do you." Severus' voice was infused with cold steel, and Hermione felt a thrill of foreboding.

"Henry, I think you should leave..."

"Not yet, Hermione." Grayson dropped his hand. "What exactly do you mean by that, Snape?"

Severus sneered at him. "The patented wavy blond locks, the shit-faced grin, and the designer-imposter robes. Let me guess, Mr. Grayson. You fill your bed with a different woman every night, and you tell yourself you like it that way. When in reality, you are too afraid to commit to one woman because she would recognize you for what you really are...an empty suit who likes his women loose and his alcohol cheap. At work, you ride off the intelligence of others and take the credit for work you never thought of doing. And people put up with it because of your *dashing* smile and your good sense of humour. But behind it all, behind this cheap façade you have so meticulously crafted, you have nothing more than an empty apartment and a long list of women who don't even remember your name."

Hermione gasped. Grayson was positively fuming, and before she could really register what was happening, Grayson had pinned Severus to the wall. Henry had drawn his wand and was currently digging it into Severus' throat.

"You don't know me," Grayson growled.

"Oh, but I do, Mr. Grayson. I do."

"You murdering bastard, Snape! I should kill you right now."

Impossibly, Severus actually smiled, his dark eyes dancing with amusement. "Go ahead, Henry. Kill me."

Hermione shrieked and threw herself towards the two men. With a strength she didn't know she possessed, she managed to tear Grayson off of Severus, though the blond Auror still trained his wand on her erstwhile Potions professor.

"Henry? Henry, come on. It's time for you to go."

"I'm going to kill him, Hermione," he growled.

"No, you're not. Come on, let's go." She steadily backed him out of the kitchen, towards her front door. He never took his eyes or his wand off of Severus.

Once they were outside, Grayson turned to her with his eyes flashing.

"Granger! How can you stand working with him? That man belongs in Azkaban. Why hasn't he been Kissed? I am going to recommend that he be Kissed. I'll file a petition or something."

"Which would be ignored due to personal grievances, Henry. You know that Severus wasn't Kissed because he gave up several Death Eaters after the War."

"That man doesn't deserve to live, Hermione."

Hermione knew Severus' faults and his sins better than anyone, but she still felt a stab of anger at her partner for his quick dismissal of Severus' worth. Severus valued his own life so little that it pained her to see that the rest of the wizarding world likely agreed with him. Someone, she thought, should at least allow Severus the benefit of life. It was rather ironic that this burden fell on her, the one person whom he had hurt the most.

"Henry, you're just saying that because he insulted you, and you couldn't think of anything to say."

"Are you... are you siding with him, Hermione?"

"No. I'm just pointing out the facts. Now, it would be best if you left. Go back to work."

She turned to leave but stopped as Grayson grabbed her wrist in a loose grip.

"Wait," he said softly.

She turned around, curious. "What is it?"

Grayson swallowed heavily. "It's not true what he said... is it?"

Hermione's eyes widened in sympathy. "Oh, Henry. No, it's not true. Not completely true, anyways."

He looked down at the pavement beneath his feet. He laughed bitterly. "But it's mostly true."

Hermione didn't know what to say, and so she remained silent.

Finally, her partner looked at her.

"Hermione, would you please do me the honour of having dinner with me tonight? I'll take you somewhere special."

Again, Hermione didn't know what to say. He looked so sad, so forlorn, after what Severus had told him.

"Grayson, I have work to do. The autopsy is later this afternoon. I have to be there."

"The autopsy! Completely forgot. I doubt we'll find anything different from the other four."

Hermione shifted. "Are you going to be there?" she asked, her voice slightly amused. Henry avoided autopsies whenever he could. His last excuse had consisted of the mumbled words "my aunt" and "babysitting."

"Are you bringing Snape?" he finally asked.

"Of course. He'll most likely add insight into the crimes, Henry."

"Then I'll be there."

"Okay then," she said.

Henry smiled at her. "Well? Are you free afterwards? When's the last time you really took time off for yourself, huh? I promise you, it'll be fun."

She shifted uncertainly. "I don't know, Henry. I don't know."

"Come on. Just as friends, I swear. I know better than to try anything with you!"

She smiled. "Fine. But I can't stay too long."

He grinned back at her. "That's great."

"We'll talk about it later, okay?"

Grayson suddenly pulled her in for a hug, and he brought his lips quite close to her ear. "Thank you, Hermione. You mean... you mean the world to me. I hope you know that."

Hermione couldn't help but smile as she closed the door on her partner. Henry was a good guy who was perhaps, thanks to Severus, just now beginning to discover he had faults. She thought he would be a much better person for it. And she would enjoy dinner tonight.

Now, however, she had to deal with Severus. She entered the kitchen with trepidation.

"Severus?"

He was sitting on a chair, sipping from a large mug of tea.

"Yes?"

"Oh. Well, you stopped working."

"Hmmm," he murmured.

"Look," Hermione said, slightly exasperated. "I shouldn't have brought Henry in here. Clearly, I wasn't thinking."

He chuckled before taking another sip of tea. "Miss Granger. There is no need to apologize. I quite enjoyed meeting him. Do be sure to send him my regards."

Her brow furrowed in frustration. "There was no need to be mean, Severus. He never did anything to you. He... he's a good guy."

Severus raised a sceptical eyebrow.

"He is," Hermione insisted. "Actually, I'm going to dinner with him tonight. Hope you don't mind staying here alone for a few hours." Her stomach fluttered nervously, fearing his reaction. She knew that she shouldn't care what Severus thought. He was going back to Azkaban on Friday. Two days. And she was slightly annoyed with herself...despite seven years of resentment and misery, she apparently had absolutely no control over her thoughts and emotions where Severus was concerned.

"Dinner," he said, his voice low and steady. "I'm sure you'll enjoy yourself," he continued, though his lips curled into a smirk.

"I will. I plan on enjoying myself *very* much," Hermione countered, hoping to antagonize him into some sort of reaction. She watched him closely.

His eyes darkened, and Hermione felt a thrill of pleasure that sent shivers up and down her spine.

He turned from her and calmly set his teacup on the counter. With a slight frown, he slowly stood up and once again turned to face her, a predatory gleam upon his face, and Hermione forgot how to breathe. He brushed a strand of his dark hair from his face and started walking towards her. Hermione thought that he looked eerily like an animal hunting its prey. And she felt decidedly like the prey.

Gasping, she steadily backed up until she collided with the wall. Severus half-smiled at her then and continued his advance. Hermione's heart was pounding fast, and the tension between them was so strong and tangible she felt that she could reach out and touch it. He was but mere inches from her, and suddenly she wanted nothing more than to press her body against his and tangle her fingers in his hair. He smelled of smoke and tea and books. She was quite simply overwhelmed.

"Hermione," he whispered, and he placed his arms on either side of her, effectively pinning her against the wall. "It's been so long since I've had you this close. Much too long." He brought his lips to her cheek and caressed her skin lightly. His lips were dry.

"You smell good," she sighed into his hair.

"Mmmm," he muttered. Drawing back from her only slightly, he placed his right hand flat on her chest, trailing a lazy finger across her collarbone. His eyes glittered intensely, and Hermione did not have the willpower to stop him.

He dipped his fingers lower, caressing the swell of her breasts, and she gasped again.

"Now," he said softly as he nibbled at her ear. "Why is it you are leaving me tonight?"

"Ohhhh," she moaned when he gently cupped a breast and squeezed.

"I'm flattered, but that's not what I asked, Hermione." He took her nipple between two talented fingers and squeezed until pleasure blossomed into pain. Hermione was almost past the point of reason.

"Stay with *me* tonight, Hermione." And he pressed his body urgently against her, grinding his erection into her stomach. She whimpered.

"Do you want me to stop?" he asked, his voice rough and unsteady. "Because I will take you here and now, against your kitchen wall, so help me."

Hermione couldn't register the words he was saying.

His eyes gleamed as he slowly lowered his lips to hers, and she realized that he was going to kiss her. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the wall. She could feel his breath hot on her face.

His breath on her face. Hermione groaned in frustration, placing a hand on his chest.

"Stop," she whispered. "Please stop."

His eyes darkened at her words, but he withdrew from her, scowling deeply.

"Sooner or later, Hermione, you are going to have to make a decision," he snapped.

She nodded, averting her eyes from his malevolent gaze. "I know... I just need time."

"You've had seven years."

She straightened her robes. "I know, Severus. It's just... I've thought one thing for so many years. I... I don't know what to do. Please believe me."

His features softened slightly, though he was still scowling. Hermione wondered how he could appear so foreboding and yet somehow still open.

"Hermione," he said, his voice strangled. "It was never my intention to hurt you."

"I know... I think that I've always known that."

He looked down at the floor. "I'll tell you if you ask, Hermione."

She brushed a strand of hair from her face.

"I know," she finally said quietly. "And I will. When we have more time. We need to work now. I have to Apparate to the department soon. For the autopsy."

He smirked at her. "Always the eager student, Miss Granger," he drawled affectionately.

She smiled softly in return. "Yes," she agreed.

Hermione could not say how, exactly, but she recognized a subtle shift in their relationship. A shift in the right direction, perhaps. A step forward, away from the past that had haunted her for so long.

A/N: As always, thanks to my beta, mgm86, and the admins at TPP. Special thanks to reets67 for her considerate offer and her hard work. And thanks to reviewers--I am blown away by some of your theories.

Revelations

Chapter 6 of 14

Hermione learns a secret from Severus' past.

A/N: For those readers easily squicked, please skip the first part of this chapter. It's not too graphic, but still. Don't skip the entire chapter, however, because you do find out something important! Thanks.

"Severus, come on. It's really not that bad."

In response, the irate Potions master crossed his arms and sneered.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "We don't have time for your childish theatrics, Severus. Now, come on."

"I feel ridiculous," he muttered.

"Well, you *look* good," she said, and she blushed at the warm look in his eyes. It was true. The green scrubs fitted him nicely, baring his arms and his neck.

"Well, in that case..." he purred, smiling.

"Let's go," Hermione said, pulling him through the foreboding double doors. She shivered, and she didn't know if it was due to the cool mortuary or the feel of Severus' skin beneath her fingers.

She thus entered the mortuary in St. Mungo's, a familiar resigned acceptance weighing her down. When she had first started at Special Investigations, she had considered the idea of going back to school for pathology. The idea of finding killers based on the evidence of the bodies they left behind had excited her.

Now, however, she thought only of another victim, lying dead on a cold, indifferent mortuary slab.

For this case, Hermione and her partner had been working specifically with one brilliant pathologist. Desdemona Drake was extremely intelligent, efficient, and did not water down her findings, much to Henry's chagrin. She was tall, wiry, and her dark hair was cropped and streaked with blood red highlights. Hermione had once gone out to drinks with Des, where the pathologist had spent the better part of the night regaling Hermione with tales of her days as a young Healer trainee, the most gruesome of which involved an overly eager wizard and a Muggle vacuum cleaner. The night had ended with drunken discussions about how one could commit murder and get away with it. Hermione had noticed that the men in the bar carefully avoided their booth.

Des, completely covered by the required plastic gloves and the protective robes and face mask, was removing the brain from Catherine Abbot's corpse, a pensive look upon her lovely face. She carefully placed the brain on a set of scales, dutifully cataloguing the weight.

"Hermione," she said. "Bit late, I see. Your partner is already here."

Des nodded her head towards Henry, who was determinedly studying the ceiling, his face a sick shade of green.

Des quickly flicked her eyes towards Hermione and Severus.

"Severus Snape," she said emotionlessly as she carefully placed the brain to one side. "So glad you could join us."

Des nodded her head once and washed her gloved hands.

"Guess what I found?" she asked proudly.

Hermione smiled at her tone.

"Five small, circular bruises. Consistent with fingers, Hermione. I'm hoping we'll be able to lift a print."

Henry, his eyes tightly shut, grimaced. "Where was it, Des?"

Des laughed. "Henry, you look like you're going to faint."

Hermione stifled a giggle when she noticed the self-righteous smirk on Severus' face.

"Her left cubital fossa...her inner arm at the elbow," Des answered him, still smiling. "I don't know what information we can get from it.... It's not that clear. But it's something, at least."

"Anything else, Des?" Hermione asked.

The pathologist shook her head. "Well, judging from the temperature readings when we found her, she's been dead for three, four days. Stomach contents consisted of sausage and eggs. This girl was killed after she finished breakfast, Hermione.... You should check into her schedule. Did she regularly go anywhere in the mornings?"

Hermione shrugged. "Ask Henry. He's been on the paper trail."

Henry opened his eyes and groaned as Des extracted the heart and lungs enbloc from the open chest cavity.

"Yeah," he mumbled, visibly sickened. "She didn't go many places other than work...she was working as a journalist at the *Daily Prophet*. She had a boyfriend. He's still being questioned. Mother died in childbirth. Father's in Azkaban for tax evasion. We're hoping the boyfriend will give us something."

Des shrugged. "It's something to think about, anyways," she said as she used her wand to separate a lung.

"Any signs of curses to immobilise her?" asked Hermione.

Des frowned. "That's what's weird, Hermione. Nothing typical. We've got the puncture wound, consistent with the other victims. And the bruising. It's almost as if... she knew him. Very little signs of struggle."

"And you believe the potion was responsible for her death?" asked Severus abruptly. Hermione was surprised. He had only reluctantly agreed to come with her and had spent the entire time unusually silent.

"I do, yes," Des replied. "I still have to take samples for the tox screening--blood and tissue samples--so I'll know more then. But if it's like the other four, chances are that we won't find anything unusual."

"What about the blood?" asked Severus.

Des grinned appreciatively. "Haven't done that yet. You're a Potions master, right?"

Severus nodded.

"Then you're qualified, if you want to help me."

Severus stepped past Hermione almost eagerly.

"A man after my own heart," the pathologist joked, looking Severus up and down. "If you weren't a convicted murderer, Snape, I might even consider dating you."

He smiled slowly in reply. "I've got until Friday. If Granger doesn't mind, that is," he purred, a wicked gleam in his eyes.

Hermione resolutely ignored the sudden sharp stab of irrational jealousy.

"And a sense of humour!" Des quipped, turning to Hermione. "Why is it that all the good ones are either taken or crazy?"

"That is the problem, isn't it?" she replied smoothly.

Standing next to Des, Severus took a large syringe and stabbed the victim's leg, sliding the needle in gently. He slowly withdrew the plunger, careful lest he apply too much pressure and collapse the vein. Hermione noticed with appreciation the intense look of concentration upon his face. She didn't know a person in the world who could match Severus' intensity. He simultaneously frightened and excited her.

With a flick of her wand, Des transferred the blackish-red sample to a vial.

"You'll have to give me a day or two before results, Hermione," Des said. "I'll contact you once I've written up a report."

The double doors swung open before Hermione could reply. Surprised, she looked towards the entrance and saw her boss. His hair was tousled, and he was frowning.

"Granger. Come out here. I need to talk to you." Solomon's voice was insistent, and Hermione shrugged her shoulders and snapped off her gloves.

"Okay, sir." Hermione stepped out of the mortuary. "I was going to check in with you after, sir."

She followed him into an unused office.

"Shut the door, Granger."

Perplexed, she did as asked and turned towards her boss.

"Listen," he said. "I talked with Henry earlier.... I think we should take Snape back to Azkaban."

Hermione's eyes widened. "But Severus is working on the potion, sir. He'll figure it out. I know he will."

Solomon shook his head. "He could, Hermione. That's true. But I'm more concerned about you. And so is Henry. I know that I asked you to do this. I did so against my better judgement. That... monster in there doesn't deserve this. He's too dangerous."

"He's done nothing to me," Hermione protested.

"We can find Angel some other way. There's always another way."

"Perhaps we could. After he kills another witch. And another. Until he slips up somehow. Is that what you want, Solomon? Severus is the best chance we have. He can't hurt me. He's bound by me."

"Henry told me that earlier, you stuck up for him. Snape."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Oh, Grayson's just upset because he lost a little verbal sparring match with Severus." Despite herself, she found herself almost grinning at the memory. She had forgotten how ruthlessly Severus could take someone's self-esteem and shatter it with a few well-placed insults. She had also forgotten how utterly attractive she found this trait.

Solomon cocked his head inquisitively and stared at her. "What happened between you two, Hermione?"

She didn't know what to tell him. Three years ago, Solomon had caught Hermione sobbing in her office, clutching the front page of the day's *Daily Prophet*. An extensive article, written by none other than Rita Skeeter, had described in lurid detail the life and crimes of Severus Snape, Death Eater and murderer. Snape's visage had scowled ferociously from the front page. Solomon had gently unclenched her fist and taken the paper from her. He had kneeled next to her sobbing form and simply put his arm around her. Ever since that moment, Hermione had been driven in her work by an almost obsessive dedication to her boss. And until this moment, Solomon had never asked what had happened between her and her professor.

"Solomon," she whispered. "That was so long ago. It doesn't matter anymore."

"But it does, Hermione. It does. Because I fear that you... care for him. And you can't. You can't care for him."

"Sir..."

"No. Listen to me." He was angry again, and Hermione found she was almost scared of him. She could feel magic pouring from him in powerful waves. He stepped closer to her and grabbed her rather roughly by the arm.

"Listen to me," he growled. "You may think you know him, Hermione. You may even start to believe he's innocent. That he was set up somehow. You can't. I won't let you. I was there, Hermione, at his trial. I saw him, and I know a guilty man when I see one. He is not a man. He is a monster, and you can't forget that."

"Solomon, don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

"Hermione, you don't understand." His grip on her arm tightened almost painfully, and Hermione wondered if she would have a bruise in the morning. She looked at her boss closely. He inhaled sharply, and Hermione saw tears glittering in his eyes.

"You see, Hermione," he continued, his voice now shaky with emotion. "Snape killed nine people that one night. What I never wanted to tell you was... Emma Rochester. He murdered my wife that night. My wife." His voice cracked.

Hermione swayed, and for an awful moment she thought she was going to faint. Only Solomon's grip was mooring her to reality. What had she done? Her sins ran through her mind like a never-ending litany. She had loved him, lusted after him, formed a truce with him. And she would have let him fuck her against her kitchen wall. She closed her eyes. How could she be a good person with all of this standing as evidence against her? What would Harry think if he were still here? Harry, who was all that was good and heroic in her mind. And Solomon. How could he even look her in the eye, knowing that she had actually *smiled* whilst remembering the man who had remorselessly killed his wife and eight other people?

"Solomon. I... I had no idea. I'm so sorry."

He shook his head. "Hermione, I am not telling you this to make you feel guilty. I'm telling you this to remind you of what Snape really is."

"I understand, sir."

"Now," he continued. "I think we should take him back to Azkaban."

She exhaled unsteadily. "Please, sir. That won't be necessary. I... I'll be in control now. If he can figure out what that potion is... if he can help catch Angel, then it will be worth it."

Solomon sighed. "But only if you're sure, Hermione. You need to be sure."

"I am," she declared, hoping her voice sounded strong.

"Fine. You have until Friday morning. But then we are taking him back to Azkaban, where he belongs."

"Should I send you my report about the potion tonight, sir?"

He nodded. "Yes. It won't be necessary to come in. Just write it up and owl it to me."

"Thank you for telling me," she said quietly.

In response, Solomon gently pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her. He rested his chin on her head, and Hermione felt completely safe from the world around her.

"Be safe, Granger," he said as he pulled away from her and left the room.

She was stunned.

In the few moments it took for her to walk back into the mortuary, she considered her life. Her choices. Her morals. Her internally held beliefs of right and wrong.

It's the things we choose. What we choose makes us.

She believed Dumbledore had said something similar at one point. She had never fully understood it until now.

Until now, she had simply reacted to certain catalysts in her life. Harry, Severus, Solomon. Important people came into her life and out of it just as quickly. From Harry, she had learned bravery and friendship. From Severus, love and heartache. From Solomon, loyalty and dedication. What was she to do now with all of these lessons, now when her heart yearned for the one thing that directly opposed her lifelong moral convictions? What was she to choose?

She quietly entered the mortuary and observed Severus. He was talking with Des, his eyes alight with new discoveries. Her stomach twisted painfully. How could she love this man to the very depths of her being, when she knew what he had done? What did that say about her?

Shaking her head, Hermione resolutely decided that she was not going to answer those questions immediately. It didn't matter. All that mattered was what she was going to do now.

Hermione refused to talk to Severus until they arrived home. He went immediately to his cauldron to check the potion. When she confronted him, her voice shook with anger.

"I talked to my boss tonight," she began. "My boss, Solomon. Solomon *Rochester*." She imagined that her voice sounded cold and harsh.

Severus stopped stirring and looked at her. "Rochester?" he asked sharply.

"What, does that name sound familiar, Severus? Ring a bell at all?" She walked closer to him, and her hand itched to slap him across his face.

For one fleeting moment, Hermione thought that she saw Severus' eyes grow dark with regret and guilt. Almost the instant she recognized it, however, it was gone.

"No," he said calmly as he looked down into the cauldron. "I can't say that it does."

Her hand tingled again, and before she even knew what she was doing, Hermione closed the distance between her and Severus and slapped him as hard as she could. She saw her handprint white upon his face.

Severus brought his hand up to his face and touched his cheek. His lips quirked.

"Why, Miss Granger," he said, clearly amused. "I had no idea you liked it so... rough."

Still momentarily stunned with her daring, Hermione barely registered what he was saying. She expected him at any moment to start raging. At the very least, she expected him to take points from Gryffindor. She most certainly did not expect him to start chuckling. Her eyes narrowed.

"What...what are you doing? I just *slapped* you!"

His laughter slowed. "I'm sorry if I offended you, Hermione. I just didn't think you had it in you."

"You deserved that," she whispered, and she believed the words as she said them.

"Yes. I most likely deserve much more." He had stopped laughing now and stood before her, his hands clenched at his sides.

"Oh, Hermione," he said quietly, and his voice shook. "What have we come to?"

She looked away from him. She looked out her window, imagining that she was somewhere else. Someone else.

"Did you kill her, Severus? I need to know. Just tell me."

He placed his fingers under her chin and gently turned her face back towards him.

"Emma?" he asked. "Emma Rochester?"

She nodded, and Hermione was suddenly very afraid of his answer.

"I did."

Hermione felt a lone tear slide slowly down her cheek. Severus brushed it away with the pad of his thumb.

"Do you regret it?"

"I've regretted it everyday since."

She nodded and stepped away from his hand, warm upon her face. "I need to leave," she breathed. Hermione walked out of the kitchen but paused as she reached the door. She cursed herself for her weakness.

"Severus," she said, unable to turn around to face him. "If you could go back, would you have done things differently? Would you have... chosen me?"

His voice, when it came, was soft. "I've had seven years to answer that question to my own satisfaction, Hermione. And I can only tell you that I quite simply don't know."

She gripped the doorframe. When she left, tears were silently streaming down her face.

Severus stood in the kitchen, alone. He heard the door shut behind Hermione, and the sound jarred him out of his memories. His nightmares.

He tried desperately to summon an anger he just did not feel. He had every right to be angry with her, the foolish woman. She judged him too hastily. She didn't know all of the facts, and he would be damned if he told her what she did not ask.

No. She would have to come to the right conclusions herself.

He opened the refrigerator in a desperate hope to find something strong and mind-numbing. Fuck her and her potion. He did not sign up for this.

He saw a bottle of wine on the counter out of the corner of his eye. Dark, red wine. She always had enjoyed wine. He rummaged through her cupboards in search of wine glasses. When he found them, crammed behind several large, colourful mugs, he realized with a start that they were his. Or used to be. Apparently, Miss Granger had gone into his quarters and took his wine glasses as... as what? A souvenir? He shook his head. Foolish Gryffindor sentimentality.

He poured himself a full glass of wine and headed for his room, taking both the glass and the bottle with him. If she felt it was appropriate to take the evening off, then far be it from him to protest.

He grabbed a book and sat on his bed. Settling in, he tried to focus on the words before him. He had royally buggered up his life once again. First Lily. Now Hermione. Somehow, he always managed to hurt those closest to him.

But they hurt you, too.

It mattered not, now. He would be back in Azkaban in two days time.

Briefly, he thought back to their little interlude in her kitchen. She had been so responsive, so deliciously open to possibilities. He remembered her skin, hot beneath his caress. Her eyes, darkened with arousal. Her throat tasted like honey and tears. Sweet and salty on his tongue.

Cursing, he realised he was painfully hard. Quickly, he got up and shut his door, wishing he had a wand for a Silencing Spell, but no matter. There was no one to hear him.

Severus returned to his bed and let his mind wander over his more erotic dreams of late. Hermione, kneeling before him, her mouth tight and hot around his cock. Sprawled deliciously naked across his bed, saying delightfully wicked things as he fucked her. Pressed against the wall as he pounded into her, her eyes alight with lust and love.

"Gods, Hermione," he muttered raggedly before reaching into his robes and unbuttoning his trousers. He took his cock in hand and pumped painfully hard.

Fuck me, Severus, she said in his mind, and he groaned.

I need you, Severus, she moaned as he licked her to completion.

I love you, Severus, she whispered as he made love to her slowly and sweetly on her bed.

"Yes, I love you too!" he shouted as he came.

Severus closed his eyes and leaned back against the headboard. He tucked himself back into his pants and sighed. Forgoing his glass, he reached resignedly for the wine bottle. He needed to drink until he couldn't remember anymore.

A/N: Thanks to my beta, mgm86, and the admins at TPP. Couldn't do it without you! The invaluable reets67 gets credit for everything autopsy-related in this chapter. And to reviewers--keep letting me know what you think! Especially now, as you know Severus is guilty... maybe.

Decisions

Chapter 7 of 14

Hermione goes to dinner with Henry and comes to a reluctant conclusion.

He found out where she lived with relative ease. A simple query into an official database, and he was privy to her most private information.

Part of him was strongly tempted to take her now. The potion was almost ready...one more day of simmering and he would have enough to complete his magic.

He smiled a slow, leisurely smile. He had time. Might as well take this slow and savour this last one.

He wondered if Hermione Granger would ever understand his work. He wondered if she would feel privileged to be involved so intimately in his groundbreaking experiment. He shook his head. Probably not.

Most people, when faced with their own death, lost... perspective.

"I have enough perspective for the both of us, my dear," he said into the dark. And it wasn't clear if he was talking to Hermione or to the slowly decaying corpse on his couch.

Hermione had only ever been to Henry Grayson's flat once before, back when they were first assigned to each other. He had invited her over for tea, he said, but she had only taken two sips of her beverage before her partner had wriggled his eyebrows suggestively and casually mentioned his bedroom. Hermione had hexed him with a Full Body-Bind curse and had spent the next two hours lecturing him about sexual harassment. They had been fast friends ever since. She knocked on his door, hoping that he would be home.

She had Apparated to Hogsmeade after she had left her house. She went to the Leaky Cauldron, where she downed three butterbeers and composed an uncharacteristically sloppy note to Solomon, detailing Severus' work and his comments on the Angel's potion.

And now, here she was in front of Henry's flat, hoping that he would be in. It was almost seven, and she knew from frustrating experience that he never worked late if he could avoid it.

She needed to forget. About Severus. About his guilt. Everything.

The door opened.

"Hermione! What...what's wrong?" Henry said, and Hermione could hear the concern in his voice.

"Oh, Henry. Can I come in?" Hermione asked, her wavering voice betraying her inner emotional turmoil.

He blinked in surprise. "Of course. I was just getting ready for dinner tonight." He smiled rather shyly, a sight that made Hermione's heart clench.

"Here. Come into the sitting room," he gently intoned as he lightly guided her in by the elbow.

She followed him into his immaculate living room. It was exactly as she remembered. Boring, lifeless. Utterly devoid of any personal items. She remembered Severus' harsh words.

"...you have nothing more than an empty apartment and a long list of women who don't even remember your name."

She shuddered.

"Please, sit. Do you want anything? Need anything?"

She smiled at his concern, relaxing slightly.

"No. I'm fine, thanks."

He sat on the couch next to her. "So, Hermione. What's up?"

She smiled again. Henry's open, easy manners had endeared him to her almost immediately. She felt better already.

"I just needed to get away from him," she whispered.

Henry's eyes darkened. "Snape. He didn't... do anything to you, did he?"

Nothing I didn't want him to do she thought as she remembered with a flash of longing his full length pressed against her.

"No," she replied uncertainly. "I just can't be around him for long. He's a bit creepy." It was a lie, and Hermione was never one for telling complete falsehoods, but Henry seemed to accept it. Strangely, she was strongly reminded of Harry and Ron.

"Creepy is one word. Asshole is another," he said bitterly. "Either way, he's not a pleasant guy to be around."

She frowned at him. "I spoke to Solomon today. I see that you ran off and tattled. How mature, Henry," she snapped. With a start, Hermione realised she sounded like *him*.

He shifted his eyes guiltily. "I was concerned for you, Hermione. You seemed... entranced by him somehow. Like he put a spell on you."

Hermione rolled her eyes. Honestly, Henry could be such a drama queen. And didn't he know by now that she was fully capable of taking care of herself? "Henry. He doesn't have his wand. And he's Bound to me."

"I know, but..." He trailed off. "Solomon hinted that something happened between you two." He ran his fingers through his hair. "If there is ever anything that you need to talk about, you know I'm here for you."

She put her head in her hands and sighed deeply. She wanted as few people as possible to know about her history with Severus. She didn't want people to look at her and think of him. She did not want to be irrevocably tied to such darkness.

"Can't we just talk about something else, Henry?"

He looked at her with such plaintive concern in his eyes that she wanted to cry. He shifted closer to her, raising a tentative hand to start rubbing small circles on her back.

"Of course," he said gently. "We could always talk about how simply ravishing you look tonight." He grinned devilishly, and Hermione laughed.

"Don't be a prat, Henry."

"I'm not," he said as he took her hand in his. "I'm not, Hermione. You always look indescribably beautiful to me." His voice was soft and his eyes were sincere, and for half a moment Hermione allowed herself to believe him.

"Which reminds me," he continued with another smile. "I got something for you tonight. Picked it up on my way after work."

He stood up from the couch and walked into an adjoining room. Hermione was slightly confused with his behaviour. He was acting unusually sincere, almost as if this was a real date.

He re-entered the room carrying a bouquet of bright, colourful gerbera daisies. A beautiful arrangement of fuchsias, yellows, and oranges.

"I was going to give these to you when I picked you up, but we'll just leave them here for now."

She gasped in surprise. "Henry, they're lovely!"

"Just like you," he said with a grin as he handed them to her.

Hermione brought the flowers up to her face and sniffed, taking in the spring-filled scent and the luxurious feel of the silken petals against her skin. When was the last time a man had given her flowers? Never. She had never received flowers before.

"I love them, Henry. Thank you," she said sincerely.

"I'll just put them in a vase for now. You can take them home tonight after dinner." She handed him the flowers, and he Summoned a vase, filled it with water with a muttered *Aguamenti* spell, and set it on the coffee table.

Hermione smiled warmly. This was shaping up to be a perfect ending to one of her more miserable days. She wondered where he was taking her for dinner. With a gasp, she realised that she had completely forgotten to ready herself for the night. She glanced down in horror. She was still in her work robes...the ugly brown that had so suited her this morning now appeared ghastly. She touched her face. No makeup to hide her many imperfections. And her hair! Had she even brushed it this morning?

"Henry," she said calmly. "Where are we going to dinner?"

He smiled, his eyes twinkling. "I refuse to tell you that, m'lady. I am going to surprise you, I think."

"I'm afraid I'm not dressed appropriately," she muttered, embarrassed.

He laughed. "No worries, Hermione. I'm positively a whiz at Transfiguration. Stand up."

She flushed. How embarrassing. "Oh! Well, I could always Apparate home for a quick change...."

He shook his head. "No. Now stand up."

Mortified beyond belief, Hermione reluctantly stood before her partner. Henry studied her critically. Finally, he waved his wand determinedly. Hermione closed her eyes, very afraid of what Henry Grayson would put her in.

"There. It's perfect. Don't look so terrified, Hermione."

She opened her eyes and looked down. She ran her hands along the length of her body, completely unaware at how Henry stilled and his breath hitched in his throat.

The dress felt... nice. Silky. Soft. Sensuous.

"You're free to use my bathroom, Hermione. We'll leave whenever you're ready."

She muttered her thanks and headed for the bathroom.

Hermione gasped at her reflection in the mirror. The dress was lovely. Like her robes, it was a deep chocolate brown, which complemented her skin tone and her eyes. It

was sleeveless and more form-fitting than anything she had ever worn before, though it was tailored exceptionally well. The darts that ran from her chest down to her hips emphasized her small waist whilst camouflaging her hips and thighs. She snorted. Henry would be good at tailoring charms. At the thought, she shook her head darkly. She was becoming too much like Severus.

Length-wise, Hermione felt a bit uncomfortable. The dress landed at least two inches above her knees. Turning around, she gasped again as she saw the back, or lack thereof. The backline plunged daringly to mid-back, exposing, in her opinion, too much of her creamy white skin.

"Lovely dress, dear. You might want to do something with your hair, though. Ruins the image," the mirror observed cheekily. Hermione glared at it.

"I know," she muttered. She smoothed her hair with her hands and whispered a de-frizzing spell she had learned from Lavender Brown in her sixth year. Better, but not great. She twisted her hair up, murmuring a charm to make it stay in place. Stray curls framed her face, and she determinedly twisted them until she was satisfied.

She stepped back and examined herself in the mirror.

"What do you think?" she asked the mirror uncertainly.

"Better, dear. I'm sure Henry will approve. He always does."

Hermione nodded her head. Right. It was time to go.

She left the bathroom and walked uncomfortably in the heels Henry had transfigured. This night had better be worth it.

Henry was waiting for her by the front door. He was pacing and muttering to himself. He had changed into black slacks and a dark blue dress shirt, and Hermione thought he looked absolutely handsome. Really, she was going to be the envy of every woman in the place tonight.

He looked up as he heard the click of her heels. His eyes warmed considerably.

"Hermione. You look stunning," he said breathily.

She laughed nervously and touched her hair gently.

"Thanks to you, Henry. The dress is lovely."

He smiled winningly and held out a hand. Taking it, Hermione wondered briefly what she was getting herself into.

"We're going to a Muggle place in London. Hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. You going to Apparate us?"

"I am. Now hold on to me."

She tentatively wrapped her arms around his torso. He slid his arm around her waist, pausing briefly to softly skim his fingertips across her bare back. Hermione's stomach clenched.

"I've been waiting to touch you for these three years, Hermione," he said softly, and for one second Hermione thought that he wasn't joking.

He was looking at her so warmly that she averted her gaze, shifting uncomfortably. It was almost as if Henry was purposefully crossing the lines of their well-established relationship.

Before she had enough time to consider her feelings, she felt the unpleasant squeeze of Side-Along-Apparition. They arrived before a small pizza pub. The building was dark green with several outside tables guarded by large orange umbrellas. Hermione followed Henry inside, where she found small wooden tables and chairs crammed together before an open stage. A live band was playing a sweet melody to a roomful of dancing couples.

Henry led her to the back of the building and stood next to the bar. Hermione noticed a cluster of women staring openly at him, whispering to each other and giggling. One of the girls, wearing a skimpy black dress and too much eyeliner, looked pointedly at Hermione and laughed. She confidently slid out of her seat and glided up to Henry and said something in his ear. He frowned at her and told her to leave. Despite herself, Hermione felt a burst of vicious glee at his denial of the tramp.

Henry placed his hand on the small of her back and led her to one of the crammed wooden tables. Hermione had to strain to hear what he was saying over the band playing in the background.

"I've ordered us a pizza and drinks. I hope you like."

She looked around and smiled. "I love it in here, Henry. It's wonderfully eclectic."

A uniformed waiter interrupted them with their drinks, and Hermione gasped at the size of the large berry-coloured beverage he handed her.

"Henry! What is this?"

He grinned. "An Atlantis Margarita. My personal favourite."

She snorted. "You know, it doesn't surprise me that you like the girly drinks."

"Just try it."

She sipped it. It was good. Stronger than she thought it would be. A few more of these, and she would be gone.

Hermione was surprised to find herself enjoying the evening. The food, the drinks, and the company had managed to force most thoughts of Severus from her mind.

It took three Atlantis Margaritas for Henry to convince Hermione to dance, and when he pulled her into his arms, she was too drunk to read the healthy combination of love and lust reflected in his eyes.

He pulled her close, and she laid her head on his chest. The band was playing a slow, jazzy tune, and Henry was caressing her back, his fingers trailing dangerously close to the curve of her arse.

"You're so beautiful, Hermione," he whispered in her ear. "And intelligent. Sexy. Determined. So Gryffindor. I wish I had gone to Hogwarts just so I could have known you as a child. Curse my parents and their private tutors!"

"Henry," she slurred. "There are Muggles in here!"

"I know." He scooted closer to her, pressing his body completely against hers, and Hermione realised with shock that he very obviously desired her.

Perhaps this was not the best idea. She didn't want to give him any false hopes that her heart, twisted and warped as it had become, was free. She looked at Henry, at his

carefree smile, his handsome face, his open, easy manners, and she knew. Against all logic, against all reason, she simply *knew* that she would love Severus Snape until the day she died.

"Henry!" she said shrilly, and she attempted to disentangle herself from his embrace. He clutched her tightly.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I can't help it. You are just so damned intoxicating."

"Well, at least let me go a little." She didn't want to spend the evening rubbing against him so inappropriately.

"Fine," he sighed, and he loosened his grip. Content once she couldn't feel his erection anymore, she settled into him again.

"This is nice," he murmured.

"Mmmm," she said in reply.

"Hermione?" His voice was uncertain.

"What?" she answered quietly.

"I want to ask you something. Just listen to me and think about it for a while. Don't say no right away."

"What is it?"

He took a deep breath. "What Snape said earlier today... It's true. I know it. You know it. And I want that to change. You see, I chase these women around because the one woman I... want is so unattainable. But Gods, how I want her. And I want her for forever."

Later, Hermione would blame her slow cognitive processes on the alcohol.

"Why don't you just tell her, Henry? I don't see how anyone could turn you down."

He laughed and leaned in close to her ear.

"It's you, Hermione."

She stilled in his arms, her heart beating erratically. Surely she had misunderstood him.

"I don't want an answer right now, Hermione. Just promise me you'll think about it. And know that I am always going to be here for you, no matter what."

Hermione tensed in his arms until he stopped whispering in her ear. She closed her eyes. How easy it should be for her to love Henry. He was a good guy...handsome, wealthy, funny, well-liked. He would take care of her and love her forever. In short, he was everything that Severus was not. To an outsider, perhaps, there would not be a dilemma. And she wished with all of her soul that there wasn't.

Severus glanced blearily around his room. He counted two bottles of wine. Two. Had he... had he drunk all that? No wonder his head hurt.

He stumbled into the kitchen. Must find more wine. He glanced at the timepiece in the kitchen, focusing on the numbers carefully. If they would only stop moving!

"Midnight," he said aloud in the darkened kitchen. "Where in the bloody hell is she?"

Unbidden, images ran through his mind, each considerably more gruesome than the last. If that Mr. Grayson so much as laid a hand on her, he would...

Severus paused. He would what? What if Hermione wanted Grayson? What if she loved him?

Just like Lily, a traitorous part of his mind whispered. *And that idiot Grayson is so like Potter...pretty, pure-blood, perfect James fucking Potter.* Severus was appalled to find a tear trail down his cheek.

He wiped at it fiercely.

"Bloody fool," he growled as he reached for another bottle of wine. After popping the cork and taking a long swig, Severus decided he was going to wait for her. Right here. She would come home eventually.

He was well into the third bottle of wine when he heard the sound of her wards coming undone. He straightened in his chair and eyed the front door intensely. He hoped that Grayson didn't come in with her. He might try to kill him.

Hermione opened the door with a crash. Severus waited impatiently for her to enter the kitchen, and when she finally did, he had to physically stop himself from gasping.

She looked exhausted, slightly drunk, and stunningly beautiful.

She was wearing a deep brown dress that he wanted to run his hands over, and she was holding a bouquet of flowers. She presented a lovely picture.

Until Severus realised that undoubtedly, Grayson had given her the dress. And the flowers.

"Severus," she said groggily. "You're supposed to be asleep."

He drew himself up to his full height. "I do not have a bedtime, Miss Granger."

She laughed, a gurgling sound that warmed him.

"And you're home very late, Hermione," he continued, focusing on his enunciation.

Her face darkened. "Not that it's any of your business, *Snape*, but I was on a date."

"You already informed me of that earlier, Miss Granger." His voice was cool. And steady. Good.

Bewildered, she looked around her kitchen.

"What? Did you drink all my wine?"

"Yessss," he slurred. "And out of *my* wine glasses, you thief."

Severus noted with satisfaction that her face flushed, and her eyes widened. She screwed up her face and finally replied.

"Well, *you* weren't going to need them in prison." She crossed her arms and smiled coyly. The little minx. Severus wondered if she was deliberately trying to make him suffer.

Deciding he wanted an answer to that question, he walked towards her unsteadily, unsure of what he was going to do to her when he reached her. All he knew was that he was drunk, and surely he could blame any untoward actions on the alcohol.

"Miss Granger," he drawled as he reached out a hand towards her. "This is a lovely little dress," he said as he thoughtfully fingered the smooth fabric of her shoulder strap.

She flushed and bit her bottom lip, and Severus was entranced. He lightly trailed his fingers down her bare arms, noting how she shivered at his touch.

"Tell me, Hermione. Did you enjoy your date?"

She backed away uncertainly, and Severus felt a flash of annoyance. When he was sober, he could possibly understand the girl's dilemma. But dammit, he was drunk. And horny. And she looked absolutely edible. This seduction thing was so much easier when he had full use of all his mental capabilities.

She stood there in that alluring dress, her vulnerability so painfully obvious, and Severus felt that he had never truly known how much he loved her until that moment.

"Hermione," he said softly. "Can I kiss you?" He scowled, upset that the question sounded like plea.

He waited for her answer, thinking that he might die if she refused him.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Yes," he growled, his voice deep and throaty. He quickly closed the distance between them and tangled his fingers in her hair.

"Severus," she whispered as she tilted her head up and parted her lips. Severus wanted her so badly his hands shook in her hair.

He hungrily lowered his lips to hers, and for the rest of his life, Severus would swear that he felt a spark once their lips met.

She made these delicious little mewling sounds, and Severus opened his mouth to taste them, groaning as he felt her tongue tentatively stroke his own. She tasted of sugar and alcohol and warmth, and he was addicted to her. He lowered his hands to her dress, caressing every inch of the silky smoothness, and she sighed.

"Let us have this one night," he growled.

Her eyes closed, and her head lolled onto his chest. Taking this as an answer, Severus scooped her into his arms, groaning again she cuddled against him with a soft sigh. He carried her into her bedroom and set her gently on her bed, leaning over to taste her once again.

Hermione fluttered her eyes, tilted her head towards him, and yawned sleepily. Severus was perplexed.

"Hermione?" he said softly. In response, she turned on her side, mumbling something incomprehensible. Her breathing was slow and steady. He frowned.

Surely she hadn't fallen asleep during his seduction. The rhythmic rise and fall of her chest, however, told him otherwise. The girl was undoubtedly asleep.

He smoothed back her hair. When she was asleep, her worry lines disappeared. She looked so much like the seventeen-year-old he had fallen in love with.

Severus gently unstrapped her heeled shoes and threw them on the floor before pulling her quilt up to her chin. Best to leave her dress on, he reluctantly decided, lest she accuse him of any un-gentlemanly behaviour.

He quickly shrugged off his robes and settled under the covers beside her. He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close, kissing her on the shoulder.

"I love you, Hermione," he whispered in her ear, and he wished that she were awake to hear him.

Severus fell asleep with his hand over Hermione's heart.

A/N: Big thanks to my lovely betas, mgm86 and reets67, and to the wonderful admins at TPP. Thanks to reviewers as well. I appreciate all of your kind words!

Discoveries

Chapter 8 of 14

Severus is sick....

Hermione felt... warm. Comfortable. Safe. She did not want to wake up, and she tried desperately to sink back into sleep. The person next to her, however, trembled and groaned heavily, and Hermione tensed.

Someone was in her bed. With her. She tried to think back to last night, but she only received vague impressions of dancing, a drunken Apparition, and something about wine glasses.

Please, oh Merlin, don't let it be Henry, she thought apprehensively as she slowly turned to face her sleeping partner. In the half-light, she could see the unmistakable profile of Severus Snape, and she relaxed.

Seconds later, she gasped.

He was trembling, covered in a sheen of sweat, and his hair was plastered to his head in large sweat-drenched clumps. And he was groaning pitifully.

"Severus?" she asked timidly. "What is going on with you?"

Hermione reached out and caressed his face, confused. At the feel of his skin beneath her roving fingertips, she panicked. He was *waburning*. Placing her fingers on his neck, she realised that his pulse was thready and irregular. For a moment, Hermione wondered if he was perhaps suffering from alcohol poisoning, until the truth hit her like a Bludger to the stomach. It was that bloody spell--the Constrictus.

"Oh, Severus, you stupid, stupid man! Come on. You can be in here; I give you permission. Now, wake up, dammit!" Hermione was distantly aware that her voice was a keen wail and that her hands shook as she applied pressure to his forehead. At her spoken words of permission, Severus emitted another groan, and his face prickled in pain.

He still felt as if he were on fire. Desperately, Hermione struggled to remember the effects of the Constrictus binding if ignored.

Muscle spasms, burning sensation, raging fever, increased heart rate with declined output, loss of motor functions and eventual kidney failure due to muscle breakdown, unbearable pain, coma, death. All within several hours, if left uncorrected, her mind regurgitated obediently.

"How long has it been?!" she shrieked at him. "How could you be so bloody stupid?!" In response, Severus' entire body trembled.

He must be in so much pain she thought.

Hermione reasoned that she couldn't have been asleep for long, otherwise she would have woken up next to the corpse of Severus Snape. The thought made tears prickle at her eyelids, and she grabbed her wand from her headboard.

"*Mobilicorpus!*" she yelled, and Severus' twitching, sweat-drenched body rose obediently from the bed.

Hermione knew that she had no time to get him to St. Mungo's. He could be dead in minutes. She Levitated him to her bathroom, Summoning several potions and salves from her medicine cabinet and filling the tub with lukewarm water. Hermione lowered him carefully into the tub before turning to investigate her medicinal supplies.

"Ground willow bark, some Muggle paracetamol and ibuprofen. Must get plenty of fluids," she muttered. "He should be glad I'm a bit obsessive...."

Hermione kneeled next to her bathtub, gently smoothing back Severus' hair and unconsciously making cooing noises in the back of her throat. She carefully leaned his head back against the white porcelain and opened his mouth. With a whispered spell, she liquefied the willow bark and directed the fluid down Severus' throat. He reflexively swallowed. After he had consumed enough medicine and fluids to Hermione's satisfaction, she placed her hand flat against his forehead.

Good. He wasn't burning anymore, but he was still trembling and displayed no signs of wakefulness.

"Severus," she whispered. "Wake up. Please."

With a small sob, Hermione lowered herself into the tub, mindless of the water that soaked her new dress. Sniffing, she gathered Severus to her, pulling his head against her chest and wrapping her arms firmly around his waist. She rested her head atop his, cradling him in the water as if he were a child.

"Please wake up. For me," she said quietly, and almost as if in response, he began trembling again, shaking in her arms uncontrollably.

"No!" she cried, and she tightened her hold on him, as if she could stop his movement simply by the pressure of her grip.

Hermione imagined him dying, here in her arms in her bathroom. It didn't seem right. It didn't seem fair that things should end like this, before they had really even begun for her and Severus.

"Please," she whispered in an anguished breath into his cheek, her lips moving over his face restlessly, searching for any type of response. "Please come back to me."

He groaned painfully, and Hermione felt a tear trailing down her cheek. She hated crying. She hated how it made her feel...weak, useless, helpless. Most of all, she hated that when she cried, it was undoubtedly because of something...or someone...outside her control. Other people had the power to hurt her; other people had that power over her, and Hermione, in all of her prideful, stubborn, and resolute strength of character, *hated* that.

But the tears were coming now, and he was the one responsible. Again. And all because of his stupid, stupid sense of chivalry--carrying her to bed as he must have done might cost him his life.

Hermione cried. She cried until she sobbed, hiccupping her sorrow into the bathtub stall. She cried for Severus. For herself. For her loneliness. For the simple fact that no matter what she did, no matter what path she choose, her choice would undoubtedly be *wrong*.

"This is not my life," she cried as she fingered the silky-wet strands of Severus' hair, unknowingly dripping trails of water down his face, across the sharp angles of his cheekbones, down his overlarge nose, to puddle in the hollow of his throat.

She moved in the water, shifting to pull Severus upwards, and the lukewarm liquid sloshed to dampen her hair.

"This is not my life," she repeated, and she closed her eyes and lowered her lips to the curve of Severus' ear. "This is not our life. We are far away, Severus. Far, far away. A house, maybe. By the sea. Harry and Ginny are still alive.... They visit sometimes. Maybe... maybe we would have children with..."

She paused. The cooling water left her shivering slightly.

"With simple names," she continued unsteadily. "Like Michael... Elizabeth, maybe."

"We are most certainly *not* naming our son Michael Elizabeth, you foolish woman," Severus mumbled, his voice hoarse.

Hermione gasped and looked down at his face against her chest. He was still shaking, and the heat of his skin against her own suggested his fever had not completely abated, but the wry smile upon his face marked his sure survival.

"Severus!" she cried, and she pressed her lips to his neck and her hands to his heart, relishing the feel of the regular beating of his heart and his strong pulse.

"Hermione," he grumbled as he weakly attempted to push her away. "Let's go back to bed. Oh, and grab some SoberUp if you have it."

She laughed, and he smiled in return. It was enough for now.

"Hermione?"

At the unexpected sound of her name, Hermione slowly opened her eyes and yawned. She glanced toward Severus. He was lying on his back, his hair fanned out on her pillow, his chest slowly rising and falling.

Hmmm. Odd.

An insistent knock on her bedroom door interrupted her thoughts.

"Hermione? You're wards were down, so I was worried. Can I come in?"

It was Henry. Impossibly, it was Henry.

"What time is it?" she asked as she quietly climbed out of bed, careful not to wake her sleeping partner.

He chuckled. "Almost ten. I thought you would be up by now, working. So can I come in?"

"No!" she said shrilly. "I... I'm changing!"

He laughed again. "Well, I wouldn't mind seeing that." His voice lowered seductively, and all Hermione could think was that Severus' voice was far better equipped for such seductive timbres.

And that Henry was being a royal pain in the arse.

Severus mumbled on her bed, and Hermione stared fearfully at him. His eyes opened slowly, and he looked around blearily.

"Hermione?" he said, his voice roughened with sleep.

She shook her head fiercely at him and pointed at the door. Henry knocked again.

"Hermione? Is... is someone in there with you?" He sounded worried. And upset.

Panic gripped Hermione. What would he say if he found Severus half-naked in her bed? What would he *think*? Would he tell Solomon?

"Um, no. No one's in here. I'll be out in just a minute. Go wait in the kitchen, Henry," she said angrily.

Severus smirked and rose unsteadily from the bed. She desperately motioned at him to be silent, but he chuckled and grinned at her. He placed a hand on her bare shoulder and leaned over to whisper in her ear.

"Come on, Hermione. Let him in." And he smirked again.

"No!" she whispered furiously back at him. "Now don't talk. You should still be asleep. For your health, Severus."

"Oh, I feel wonderful, Hermione. Healthy," he said with a grin.

Henry's voice continued uncertainly outside the door. "I... I just wanted to talk to you again about... about last night. What I told you."

Severus quirked an eyebrow. "And what did he tell you, my dear?" he breathed into her ear. He slowly trailed his lips from her ear to her neck, nuzzling and biting gently.

"Severus, stop!" she ordered in the loudest whisper she dared.

"Mmmm, no. You taste too good." He ran his hands along her torso and backed her quietly against her bedroom wall.

"Hermione?" said Henry. "I just want you to know that I'm not pressuring you at all."

Severus' voice, low and rich, interrupted Henry. "I could fuck you right now, Hermione. Against *this* wall. While your partner stands just a door away."

She whimpered slightly, and Severus pressed himself against her.

"We can't. *You* certainly can't. You almost died last night," she said.

"... and I've wanted to tell you for, oh, about two years now. And I hope..."

Hermione was aware that Henry was talking to her, but she could not process what he was saying.

Severus' lips were at her ear again. "Oh, I think I could manage *this*, Hermione. Yes. I could lift up this dress..." His hands strayed to her legs. "Rip off your knickers..." He stroked the insides of her thighs. "I would take you hard and fast, fuck you until you wanted to scream my name." His fingers were at her knickers now, and slowly he pushed them down. "You would come with me buried deep inside you, Hermione, with your partner just outside the door." He lowered her panties to the floor. "Now tell me you don't want that."

"... and I've brought you something. I actually picked it out about a year ago..."

Severus reached for the buttons of his slacks, and Hermione watched as he loosened them. With a flush, she realized that he was serious, that he actually meant to fuck her, and that she actually wanted him to. A slight trembling of his hands and the shockingly white pallor of his face, however, betrayed the fact that Severus was not fully healed.

"Severus," she whispered, and she reached out to still his hands at his trousers. "Later. You're not well."

His eyes darkened, but he finally nodded his head. "Later," he agreed.

Henry knocked on her door again. "Hermione? Did... did you hear me?"

"Yes!" she cried, her annoyance with her partner causing her to shriek. "And I said that I would be out in a minute, Grayson!"

Grabbing her wand, she quickly Disillusioned Severus. "You stay quiet," she hissed.

She opened the door to find Henry pacing restlessly outside her door. He turned to her and smiled warmly.

"There you are! I was starting to fear something happened to you."

"You know, Henry," she said, feeling a strong flash of anger towards her partner. "You shouldn't be here. You should be working."

"I could say the same for you, Hermione. Sleeping until ten!" He playfully squeezed her arm, and Hermione batted his hand away.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

"I really just wanted to make sure you felt okay. After last night. You drank quite a bit." He smiled again, and for the first time in a while, Hermione was not charmed. She was furious.

"Henry, about last night, I..."

"Please don't say anything. Not so soon. Just give me a chance. That's all I'm asking for, Hermione. Just think about it. Please."

He looked so miserable that Hermione's annoyance abated. It wasn't his fault that her life was so fucked up. That she was completely in love with a man who'd twisted her heart into a miserable, empty facsimile of what it used to be. And that she was crazy enough to still eagerly accept his every advance.

Henry reached into his pocket and withdrew a sparkling silver bracelet. A charm, a miniature book, dangled delicately from the chain.

"This is for you," he said, extending his hand towards her. "Like I said, I bought this about a year ago, when I first... realized I loved you. I saw it and thought of you immediately."

She took the bracelet from his hand, feeling her annoyance abate with his unexpected, heartfelt gesture.

"Here. Let me put it on," he said. He circled the bracelet around her wrist and fastened it. "Perfect."

"Henry... I don't know what to say."

"I don't want you to say anything."

She smiled. "I love it," she said quietly.

He shifted. "It does suit you, you know.... Well, I should get back to the office. Oh, and Solomon wants you to report anything else you find out with Snape," he added, spitting the last word.

She walked him to the fireplace, thoughtfully fingering the tiny book hanging from her wrist. She whispered goodbye to him as he disappeared in a rush of flames. She sat down on her couch and rested her head in her hands.

Hermione had always been confident that she knew herself. She knew her dreams, her fears, her desires, her morals. But now, Hermione faced a moralistic conflict, and she couldn't figure it out. Would it be terribly wrong to take advantage of this last day with Severus? Would it be so wrong if they made love? Every cell in her body wanted him with an urgent desperation that bordered on insanity.

She shook her head. Today, they would work. Today, they would solve the Angel potion.

And tonight? Well, what would be, would be.

"I hope you know that I certainly would never give you such a gift. Ridiculous, really," Severus drawled. He was teasing her. He hoped that she knew he would give her anything. Anything at all.

Severus leaned casually over the counter, perusing a small green book intently.

"Really? And what sorts of gifts would you give me?" she asked.

He glanced up quickly from his book. Hermione's arms were crossed, and her lips quirked. He wondered if she knew how lovely she was.

He yawned and looked back down at the book. "You mean other than my witty sense of humour, my dashing good looks, and the most amazing sex you'll ever have?"

She laughed, and Severus found that he really loved it when she laughed.

"Well, I don't really know about that last one, now do I?" she asked coquettishly.

He raised an eyebrow. "That can easily be remedied, my dear." Severus was absurdly delighted with the way her face flushed and her breath hitched.

"Severus!" she chastised. "We agreed to wait until tonight. Besides, I am still worried about you. You still have a touch of a temperature."

He shook his head. "I swear, Hermione, I feel fine. Good gods, woman, you sound too much like Molly Weasley."

She laughed again, and he felt his chest tighten. He didn't want to leave her tomorrow. Idly, he wondered what she would say if he asked her to run away with him.

"So," she said as she leaned over his shoulder, her breath tickling his cheek. "What are you reading?"

"Hermione, if you keep teasing me like this, we won't make it until tonight," he growled. He had been consistently half-hard since this morning, and her innocent little movements and her breathy laughter was torturous to his libido.

She drew back, flushing, her teeth tugging at her lip. "Oh! I...I'm sorry. I just wanted to ask if you were making any progress."

He smiled. He found that it was ridiculously easy to do so when he was in her presence.

"I am reading. Here, listen to this. 'Of the darkest potions, the brewer's intent must be carefully infused within the potion itself. Death, torture, and pain may perhaps be the effects of the potion, but one must be sure to ascertain an elixir's true intent. Most often, this intent is reflected in the creator's choice of base.'"

Hermione furrowed her brow, and her eyes became slightly glazed and unfocused. He remembered that as a sign of her powers of concentration. Severus felt a burst of some strong emotion. She was so intelligent, his Hermione.

"So... it's saying that this potion wasn't created to take life? That death is just an 'effect'? But that doesn't make any sense. It kills, Severus."

He nodded, his thoughts whirling. "Yes... yes, it does. But how?"

"Well, we don't know."

He got up and walked to the petri dish filled with the black liquid.

"What are you?" he muttered. "What do you do?"

He looked up at Hermione, deep in thought. "It kills, yes, but how? What is its ultimate purpose? Why... why does this Angel kill?"

Hermione frowned. "Well, most people believe that he kills for... pleasure. But I never thought so."

"Really? And what do you believe, Hermione?"

She tapped her foot. "I... well, I was never really certain. Something tells me that there is something else... there. Something that he wants. Only... only nothing was missing from the victims."

"Hmmm," Severus said thoughtfully. Motives. What else, other than money, theft, vengeance, and pleasure?

Love, a voice reminded him inside his head. *People murder for love.*

"Love," he said quietly. "People kill for love."

Hermione blinked. "But... why would he kill women that he loved? That's really twisted."

"Not for love of them. For love of someone else." He stared at the potion intensely, refusing to look at her.

"Severus," she said. "Is that why you..."

"Hermione, I do not want to talk about me right now."

"Fine," she said gently as she touched his arm. "But I want to know, before you leave. I need to know."

She was staring at him with her wide, open eyes, her emotions playing openly on her face. Severus read pity, sorrow, guilt, and affection in her gaze. He swallowed heavily and looked away, cursing himself inwardly for his foolishness.

"So," he said, struggling to arrange his features into his patented impassive stare. "Shall we continue?"

Taking a sample of the potion, he added a sprinkling of lutlock dust, hoping that the fine powder would illuminate any other ingredient indicative of the base.

He considered his situation.

Despite seven years' worth of resolve, Severus had discovered that he was still very much in love with Hermione Granger. Each moment he spent with her, he discovered something new and utterly enchanting. Her laugh. Her tenacity. The way she smoothed her hair when she was anxious. The way she sought to punish herself with self-denial and restraint. He snorted. Only a Gryffindor would look at her own happiness and throw it away for imagined ideals of right and wrong.

And Slytherins? Well, Slytherins ultimately got what they wanted...through sneaky insinuations, lies, and charms, perhaps, but it was always freely theirs in the end. And what Severus wanted was most definitely Hermione Granger.

Again, he wondered if she would run away with him. She had certainly not rejected any of his lustful advances. He would be perpetually Bound to her, true, but for her, he would do it. He doubted that she would consent, however. Hermione still looked at the world rather naively, determined to see black and white. She had yet to discover that most of what she saw was varying shades of grey.

She had finally professed an interest in his past, finally wanted to know from him exactly what had happened. He wondered if his version of events would exonerate him in her eyes. Perhaps. Perhaps not. Either way, it didn't matter. She would still have a choice to make. When he noticed her staring at him with a warm, affectionate expression, he wondered if she had already made her choice.

He smiled. It looked like Severus Snape was going to get the girl in the end. Until tomorrow, anyways.

"Severus?" Hermione's soft voice cut through his thoughts.

"What?"

"I was just wondering what you were thinking about, just then. You were smiling."

"Was I?"

She nodded shyly. "I like it when you smile."

He smiled again and looped an arm around her waist. "Then I shall endeavour to smile more often, if it makes you happy." He held her close and was content that just for now he could pretend that she belonged to him.

Loosening his grasp, Severus returned his attention to the bubbling cauldron, scowling. Despite his confident declarations of yesterday, he was beginning to fear that he would not discover what this potion was, or what it did. This frightened him. When had he last faced a challenge he could not overcome?

Seven years ago, the cynical voice in his head reminded him. Ah, yes. There was that.

This, however, did not concern the Dark Lord. This was a potion, and it annoyed him that this Angel had created something that he did not understand. He felt, however, that he was frustratingly close. Somehow, he was missing something. Something important.

The base was undoubtedly powerful. Potent. Deadly. He had read his Dark Arts texts repeatedly...he had ruled out all possible base ingredients on the previous day. Obviously, the Angel had created a new ingredient, one that could kill without leaving behind any trace evidence. What could do this?

Avada Kedavra, his mind supplied, but he dismissed the thought quickly. It would be impossible to capture the Killing Curse in a potion. He had read papers in monthly Potions journals theorizing this very possibility. Scholars had dismissed this idea as well, due to the fact that the power of the Avada Kedavra curse came from the intent behind the spoken words.

You have to mean it, he thought bitterly, and he shuddered at the implications behind that thought.

Frowning, he glanced over at Hermione. She was huddled over a large blue book, reading intently, her brow furrowed in thought. He studied her, entranced by her formidable powers of concentration. Her face was scrunched, and she was absentmindedly biting a nail ragged. He gulped. He hoped she looked at him tonight with similar intensity.

Tonight. He couldn't think about tonight right now. It would drive him mad.

Hermione was very aware that Severus was staring at her. She tried to ignore him and the tingling feeling his attention produced. This was getting ridiculous. They had work to do, and Hermione Granger was not one to forgo work. Not usually, at least. They needed a distraction, something to make them forget they were standing so alluringly close.

"Anything definitive yet, Severus?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No." His voice was short and clipped. For the first time, Hermione allowed herself to worry that they wouldn't finish by tomorrow.

"Talk to me, Hermione," he said quietly from across the counter.

She blinked in surprise. "Talk? Again? I always thought you valued your silence."

"I've had seven years of silence. And I want to hear your voice."

He didn't look at her, but she could sense the urgency behind his statement. Her heart ached. He would be going back to Azkaban in the morning.

"What would... what would you like me to talk about?"

"Tell me about the War. About what you did." He glanced at her quickly, smirking. "I must admit, I doubted your success, my dear. Though I should have known better," he mused.

"The War," she said quietly. What could she say about the War? She still had nightmares sometimes. She was still driven by thoughts of Harry, walking so solemnly into the Forbidden Forest. Tonks and Lupin, lying so still in the grass outside Hogwarts. Ron crying on Luna's shoulder, the Ravenclaw's silvery blue eyes misted with unshed tears.

"What I did? Somehow, I feel I did very little in the end."

"Don't be so modest, Hermione," he said as he sifted a sample of the potion. "Potter and Weasley would have been lost without you, I'm sure."

"Really, Severus, I would have been lost without them. The War was... it was terrible. Too many good people died at too young an age. You should be glad you missed it," she finished bitterly. He did not have to witness his closest friends and loved ones dying.

"Indeed," he said sarcastically. "I think I would have preferred to make that choice for myself."

"But you did make that choice, Severus," she said, her voice carefully devoid of emotion. Hermione did not want to start a fight. She didn't want to cry again. She didn't want to second-guess herself.

Severus regarded her impassively for a moment, and then he shrugged and went back to his cauldron.

"Perhaps I did," he muttered. "Perhaps."

They sat in silence for several minutes, and Hermione fiddled with the hem of her robes.

Severus abruptly interrupted the quiet. "You never did tell me, Hermione. What exactly did your Mr. Grayson confess to you last night?"

Hermione coloured. "That is not any of your business, Severus."

He snorted. "I believe it is."

"How so?" she asked curiously.

"I don't know about you, Miss Granger, but I attempt to avoid... consorting with those already involved in relationships."

She rolled her eyes. What a backhand way to find out what Henry told her! As if Severus would ever consider Henry before becoming involved with her.

"Fine," she said exasperatedly. "I'll tell you. Henry believes that he is... in love with me. Last night, he simply wanted me to give him the chance to court me."

Severus smirked. "And what, pray tell, did you tell him?"

"I didn't tell him anything." Hermione watched with satisfaction as Severus' eyes darkened and his movements stilled.

"Do you... desire a relationship with him, then?"

"It would certainly be easier than a relationship between us." She gestured half-heartedly between the two of them.

He scowled darkly. "If you truly want that shallow, pitiful excuse for a man, then perhaps I do not know you as well as I thought."

Hermione felt a flash of anger. "Oh, shut it, Severus. Henry never did anything to you."

He glared at her. "He insulted me."

"And you insulted him! Just let it go."

He scowled again, muttering into his cauldron. "If I ever see him again..."

Hermione set her arms on the counter and leaned towards him. "You'll what? Believe me, Henry already wants to have you Kissed. Don't give him a legitimate reason."

Severus suddenly gasped, his face draining of colour. "What did you say?"

Hermione furrowed her brow, confused. "I said that Henry wants to have you Kissed, and that..."

He silenced her. "Stop babbling, girl, and let me work."

He leaned over his cauldron intently and muttered an odd spell, one unfamiliar to Hermione. In response, a greyish-black steam curled up from the cauldron, and Severus let out a sound that Hermione could only categorize as a whoop. And yet, Severus Snape did not whoop.

"What is it? What's wrong?" she asked urgently.

"Wrong?" He turned to look at her, his eyes wide. "Nothing is wrong."

She hurried over to the cauldron and peered in it. "What did you find?"

Severus wiped an imaginary speck of dirt off his robes, smiling smugly. The man was positively preening.

He cleared his throat. "The base, Miss Granger, the base."

A/N: The use of willow bark to reduce fever and inflammation dates back to 400 BC, as I learned from my wonderful beta, reets67. However, as a disclaimer, please do not try this at home. Thank you, reets; this chapter would be supremely inferior without your help! Thanks also to my beta, mgm86, and to the lovely admins at TPP. And to readers, you start finding things out next chapter. I promise! A final word of thanks to all reviewers. The bathtub scene in this chapter is a nod to a scene in Tim Burton's movie, 'Big Fish.'

Hogsmeade

Chapter 9 of 14

Hermione meets Ron in Hogsmeade.

A/N: A small squick warning for the first part.

He carefully filled his syringe with the bubbling black fluid, noting with satisfaction how it writhed in the cauldron. A particularly potent batch, then. Good.

He sat on the couch next to his sweet, renewing the modified Stasis charm on her corpse. He wished he knew a better spell to prevent putrefaction. She grimaced at him in her frozen death mask.

"Sweet, it's done," he drawled lovingly, grazing his fingers lightly against the cold, decrepit flesh of her arm. "Tomorrow. I promise. Tomorrow."

He leaned over and kissed her sweetly on her open mouth, ignoring the putrid smell.

"I love you so much."

He whispered her name into the dark and freed his aching erection from his robes. He remembered when she was young and alive, how she would suck him off whilst he reminisced about killing Mudbloods and the cool, powerful feeling his Death Eater mask produced.

"Yes," he slurred as he cupped his balls. His eyes were closed and his breath was heavy. He reached over and grabbed her hand. It felt cold beneath his warmth.

He guided her hand over to his upright cock and closed their joined fingers over his hardened flesh. Her hand, cool and lifeless, felt delicious against him.

He quickly found a rhythm, pumping painfully hard and groaning aloud in the dark. He came with force to thoughts of Hermione's eyes growing dim with death.

He gently wiped his semen from her hand. The flesh under his ejaculate had warmed slightly, and he smiled.

"You're coming back to me," he whispered. "You're coming back."

Hermione grinned and threw her arms around Severus, noting how he automatically stiffened in her embrace.

"Well," she said, looking up at him. "What is it?"

"I am not completely certain, but I believe your Angel has created a very... unique base." He took a deep breath. "I believe he is capturing souls."

Hermione stared at him blankly. "What?"

Severus nodded his head. "Souls, Miss Granger. Though I can't imagine what he wants with them."

She still didn't understand. "Souls? His base is..."

"No, Miss Granger. The purpose of this potion is to harvest souls. He does so by utilizing Dementors' essence... Extraordinary. I read of this possibility over ten years ago, though I... never imagined that it was possible."

Hermione cocked her head. "Dementors' essence? I had no idea..."

"Yes. He must have created a spell to capture the essence of the Dementor for his potion."

A chill ran through her. What could a mortal man possibly want with human souls?

"How did you come to this conclusion, Severus?"

He gestured towards her. "Your insightful comments about Kissing, followed by a spell, a variation of 'Expecto Patronum.' It alerts you to the presence of Dementors. The rising smoke you saw signified their presence."

Thoughts ran swiftly through Hermione's head. He would have to have fairly regular access to Dementors. That would mean Azkaban. She would have to check with the Department of Mysteries as well for the specific locations of all banished Dementors. She felt a thrill. Surely, they could catch him now.

Exhilarated, she threw her arms around him again. "This is such a relief, Severus. I'll need to tell Solomon immediately and let Des know tomorrow. She was so frustrated when all of her own tests yielded nothing."

He tentatively squeezed her back and rested his head atop her own. "I'll write up a report, if you like."

"That would be wonderful. And Severus?"

"I know that you will hear this from no one else, but... thank you."

He shrugged. "You know I only did this for you, Hermione." His voice was quiet, and Hermione thought that it trembled.

Hermione rapped anxiously on Solomon's door. Once she heard his gruff voice telling her to enter, she breathed deeply and opened the door.

"Granger," he said, nodding his head in greeting. He was pacing in front of the charmed windows in his office. Magical Maintenance had apparently decided on stormy weather, and the wind howled through the trees, and the rain pounded the windows.

"Sir," she replied. "I have a report for you." She handed him Severus' work, and Solomon took the papers from her quickly.

"Well, sir? What do you think?" She shifted uncertainly before her boss, her heart inexplicably pounding as Solomon perused Severus' hastily written report. It was as if she didn't know how to act around him anymore. She felt guilty.

Solomon rubbed his eyes before answering. "I think that we are going to finally catch this son of a bitch, Granger. And again, we have you to thank."

She blushed. "Not me, sir. Severus."

Solomon's eyes flashed at the mention of Severus' name. "Snape does not deserve thanks of any kind."

Hermione said nothing, afraid of revealing her true feelings for Severus.

"I'll send this out immediately, Granger. I bet we'll have him before morning. There can't be too many potions experts with continuous access to Dementors."

"Of course, sir. Do you need me to do anything else?"

He shook his head. "You've done more than enough. You've put your very soul on the line here, Granger. I will forever be ashamed that I asked you to do such a thing."

She leaned over his desk and placed her hand over his, squeezing gently while meeting his eyes in a level gaze. "My soul is still my own, Solomon."

"And I thank the gods for that," he growled. "I've arranged to take Snape back early tomorrow. I'll be at your flat at seven. I'll undo the Constrictus once he's behind bars again."

She nodded and tried to appear relieved, but she was afraid she didn't manage. Was she so painfully transparent in her desires?

With a final squeeze, Hermione stood up to leave. Solomon regarded her carefully.

"You will be okay tonight, Hermione?"

She managed a smile, though her heart was constricting agonizingly in her chest. "I'll be fine, sir. Just one more night."

Hermione turned to walk out the door but slowed as she again heard Solomon's gruff voice.

"You're a damn good agent, Granger. And a damn good woman. I hope you know that you deserve better than him."

"Thank you, sir," she whispered. She left his office quickly, before the guilt lodged deeply in her throat dissolved into tears.

Hermione wandered aimlessly around Hogsmeade, absentmindedly kicking the fallen leaves scattered across the cobblestones. She didn't want to go home. She was just so sick of her life that she simultaneously wanted to cry and scream. Loudly.

She had never been one to shake her fist at the heavens or curse the gods above for their cruel, cruel tricks, but she was sorely tempted. Surely this situation was not her fault. And she certainly had done nothing to deserve it.

"Nothing too serious anyway," she said out loud, causing a couple slowly meandering down the street to stare openly at her. She glared back at them. It was all she could do to stop herself from breaking down in the streets of Hogsmeade.

Perhaps worse than anything, she had woken this morning next to Severus and finally understood what had been missing in her life. This morning, she chose him, and since that moment, a weight, a burden that she had been carrying for seven long years, had disappeared. Right or wrong, what did it matter? What mattered was that it felt good to lie in bed next to him, to hear his steady breathing when she awoke.

She was utterly exhausted with second-guessing herself. She was a Gryffindor, known for courage and bravery, and right now she was cowering from her own feelings.

A complicated situation produces complication, she thought bitterly, and she emitted a short bark of laughter. Hermione felt a bit of madness touch the fringes of her soul, and she shuddered. This was not what she wanted from life. This had never been part of the plan.

Since the War, her plan had included working until she was too shattered to think about how empty her life had become. The plan involved promotions, medals, pay-raises. An endless supply of take-away meals at a table for one.

It had certainly never included Severus Snape.

She had not been prepared when he so abruptly entered her life again. She had not been ready to face him and the painful memories he brought with him.

It seemed that her life came down to this one dilemma. Of all of the decisions she had ever made...sneaking out with Harry and Ron under the Invisibility cloak, her fifth-year foray into the Ministry of Magic, Obliviating herself from her parents' minds, kissing her professor wantonly in the dungeons of Hogwarts...this was it. This was going to determine who she was and what she wanted.

"Our choices make us who we are," she mumbled. "Dumbledore always said so."

And so, who was she, really? Books, cleverness, memorisation, hand-raising, work...this is what she did. *But who was she?*

Hermione sighed. An identity crisis at the age of twenty-four, brought on by an arrogant, rude, and prickly ex-professor, was definitely not in the plan.

As Lavender Brown-ish as it sounded, it really came down to what she wanted and what she should want. A simple matter of heart versus mind, really.

She snorted. If only it were simple. If only a slow walk around Hogsmeade could whisper her the answer.

"Hermione! Oi! 'Mione!"

The voice was loud and insistent, and so Hermione, annoyed that her ethical musings had been interrupted, managed to plaster a fake grin on her face and turned around to greet her former best friend.

"Ron!" she exclaimed. "How are you? It's been ages!"

The red-head grinned goofily in return. "Since last Christmas, actually. I saw you through the windows of the Three Broomsticks. You should come join us. Luna and the kids would love to see you."

She shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. I've got work..."

Ron grinned again and looped his arm through hers. "No, you don't. We never see you anymore, and we miss you. I miss you, 'Mione."

His eyes were so sincere that she melted a bit on the inside.

"Oh, fine. I'll come in for a quick Butterbeer, but then I have to go."

"Awesome!" he said cheerily. "So, how have you been? How's work? How's your flat? And Crookshanks?"

"Ron, slow down," she said with a laugh. "It hasn't been that long!"

"Almost a year," he protested. "You should see Gabriella. She's grown so much. And you haven't even seen Harry since he was just a baby!"

Hermione felt a twinge of something that felt much like jealousy. Ron and Luna had married almost immediately after the War and settled happily into married life. They had three children...Hannah was six, Gabriella four, and Harry must be going on two by now. They were expecting their fourth in just a couple months. Hermione received Christmas cards from them every year, and she always put the pictures of the happily waving family on her refrigerator. She looked at it every morning and told herself it was *not* a reminder of what she didn't have.

When they reached the Three Broomsticks, Ron gallantly held the door open, and Hermione entered rather reluctantly. She spied a pregnant Luna surrounded by her three children in a corner booth. They were all sipping pumpkin juice, and the domestic tableau absurdly touched Hermione.

Ron put his hand on the small of her back, guiding her to their table.

"Aunt 'Mione! Aunt 'Mione!" Gabriella shrieked as she threw her arms around Hermione. Hannah gestured at her to bend down, and placed a warm kiss on Hermione's cheek.

"We miss you, Auntie," she said shyly.

"Oh, I missed you too," Hermione said, her eyes slightly damp from unshed tears. She would never understand why she had distanced herself from the Weasley family. She loved them all.

Harry had grown quite a bit since she last saw him. He was almost the spitting image of his father, and Hermione rather thought that his namesake would approve.

"Hello, Hermione," Luna stated dreamily, her hand absentmindedly stroking Gabriella's long strawberry blonde hair.

"Luna," Hermione said brightly, truly happy to see the Ravenclaw witch. There was simply something about Luna that dissipated bad moods and foul tempers. She suspected that was why Ron had married her.

Hermione settled into the booth across from Luna and the children. Ron went up to the bar to fetch two Butterbeers and three more pumpkin juices.

"So," Luna said. "How come you never visit anymore?" Her eyes were wide and unblinking, and Hermione had the distinct feeling that Luna would simply know if she was lying.

"Oh!" said Hermione, shifting nervously in her seat. "I've been on this case at work. I'm afraid I don't have much free time."

Luna smiled serenely. "Oh, Hermione. I don't believe that, but *we do* miss you."

Hermione nodded. "I've missed you too."

The blonde Ravenclaw suddenly reached across the table and laced her fingers with Hermione's, squeezing gently.

"Whatever it is that is bothering you so, Hermione, it will work itself out. You just have to let it go."

As if in response, Harry gurgled in his chair, spilling his pumpkin juice over the table.

Luna smiled happily and cleaned the mess with a wave of her wand, tucking the smooth expanse of wood firmly behind her ear when she was done.

Ron returned bearing drinks. "Here we are. I brought you another juice, love. Here. Hannah, stop pulling your sister's hair. When Gab gets bigger, she's going to fight back, you know."

"Thanks, Ron," Hermione said as he placed a Butterbeer before her and settled into the seat next to her.

"Well," he said as he reached across the table and gently pried Hannah's fingers from her sister's hair. "How have you been, 'Mione?"

"Fine. Just fine."

"I've heard that before," he said, grinning.

"Well it's true."

Luna adjusted Harry's bib and wiped juice from his face. "Ron heard that Professor Snape was staying with you," she said matter-of-factly. As if she were discussing the weather or some other similarly mundane topic, and not the crux of Hermione's pitiful life.

"Where did you hear that, Ron?" she asked, her calm voice belying her rapidly beating heart. It was as if she couldn't even escape Severus ~~here~~, in the relative quiet obscurity of the Three Broomsticks.

"My dad. He said he heard it from Auror Grayson. He's your partner, right? So I figured that it had to be true." He took a sip of his Butterbeer, his eyes never leaving her face.

"Henry told your dad that!" she exclaimed, and for the second time that day, she felt a burning anger towards her partner. Images shot through her head...she imagined him telling everyone within earshot in some petty attempt at revenge.

"So it's true then?" Ron asked, his voice trembling with rage. Luna looked at her husband pointedly.

"Oh, Ronald, do calm down," she said in her light, wispy voice, and Hermione was surprised to see Ron blanch and then nod his head.

"Sorry, love," he whispered across the table, and Luna patted him affectionately on the hand.

They both turned back to Hermione, questions written plainly across their faces. Hermione sighed.

"He is staying with me until tomorrow morning. It's for a case. I'm afraid I really can't give any details," she said, happy that her voice did not tremble.

"He hasn't... hurt you, has he?" Ron asked.

"No, Ron. He's done nothing. Really, it hasn't been that bad."

Ron's eyes narrowed and Luna's widened.

"Hermione," Luna said. "Be careful around him. And know that there are many people in this world who love you, if you would just let them."

Hermione looked down into her untouched Butterbeer, feeling inexplicably ashamed of herself.

"I really should go now," she whispered sadly into her beverage.

Despite Luna's look of sorrow, Ron's uncertainty, and the girls' clingy hugs, Hermione left, resignedly Apparating home. She still did not know what she was going to do.

Severus waited impatiently on the uncomfortable couch in her sitting room. The day had been particularly exhilarating, but the night promised to be more so. Though she had never explicitly told him what she intended for tonight, her warm looks and coquettish smiles explained all. He only hoped that this last visit to her boss would not leave her with additional tedious moral dilemmas. He sighed. Working through complicated ethical conundrums was not his idea of foreplay.

No, he would rather have her aggressive and domineering. He would rather have her take her frustrations physically out on him. Mmmm, yes. Delicious.

It was Severus Snape's last night of freedom, and he was going to enjoy it.

A/N: As always, thanks to my lovely betas, mgm86 and reets67, and the hard-working TPP admins. Thanks to reviewers as well! Next up, Severus explains himself...

Explanations

Chapter 10 of 14

Severus explains himself.

Severus stilled as he heard the front door open. He was lying on his bed, attempting to read "Crime and Punishment." He had been intrigued by the title when he saw it on Hermione's bookshelves, but quickly found that the verbose Russian novel could not distract him.

He smoothed his hair behind his ear and scowled. Despite himself, he was... worried. Perhaps he was even vulnerable, if there was still any part of his black soul that could feel vulnerability. Whatever it was, he hated it.

Azkaban had mostly eradicated any kind tendencies he possessed. Though he perhaps had never inspired many friendly feelings or advances, what little social abilities he had died many years ago. He was not the same man Hermione fell in love with, and he doubted very much that that man even existed.

Sometimes, Severus felt like he was little more than a handful of snide comments and a few cutting remarks. Sometimes, he felt as if the façade he had so carefully crafted over the years to ensure his survival was all he had left. He had truly become a cold, heartless bastard, and whatever was good inside him...whatever had befriended Lily and enamoured Hermione...was as dead as Emma Rochester. This thought depressed him.

He heard Hermione call his name, and her voice somehow reminded him of his best memories...his first Potions class at Hogwarts, Lily's hand clasped tightly in his own, Dumbledore's kind eyes and his dotty smile, Hermione's breathless confession of love.

Tonight, he didn't want to fuck her. He wanted to love her, tell her that she was everything that was good and beautiful to him. She was his saving grace, and he wanted to cling to her amidst the darkness of his life. Only, he didn't know how to say that. He didn't even know if he had the capability to say that.

"Hello," came her voice from his doorway, and when he looked up she was leaning casually against the doorframe, her arms crossed and her eyes slightly red. "Sorry I was gone for so long."

He placed the book on the nightstand and sat up, clenching the bed frame so tightly his knuckles turned white.

"Hermione," he finally said. "Hello."

She smiled wistfully and came to sit down next to him in the bed. They sat in silence, and Severus found he couldn't breathe properly. Inwardly, he cursed himself for his weakness, wishing he could manage to maintain some distance from the girl. But he found he wanted to rest his head on her heart.

"Severus," she breathed. "How are you?"

The question confused him, and he cocked his head inquisitively at her.

"How am I?" he repeated incredulously. How to answer her... "I was a bit bored here, without you." He attempted to lower his voice to its silkiest decibel, but feared that he sounded a bit too desperate for seduction.

She raised her eyebrows. "Dostoevsky not doing it for you, huh?"

"Ah, the novel. No."

She nodded her head. "I read it first when I was twelve. Interesting, really. Seeing how... evil you can be without your conscience getting in the way. Seeing what you are truly capable of."

Again, he realised that he was having trouble breathing and his chest hurt. He was too damned old for this. "Have you set such an experiment up for yourself, Hermione?"

She blinked rapidly. "Not consciously. But perhaps I have."

"Do you know the results yet?" His voice sounded strained.

"Do you?" she replied sharply. He didn't answer her, and she sighed deeply.

"Listen, Severus. Before anything else happens, before this goes any further, I need to know what happened."

He scowled at her and was tempted to say something biting about her sense of timing. She only wanted to know now, when it benefited her. But when he needed her to believe in him those seven years ago, she conveniently couldn't be bothered. More than anything, this fact had tormented him throughout the years. As time passed, he forgot how he could completely engulf her tiny little hand with his own and the light smattering of freckles across her nose and the way she would laugh in the dungeons. All he remembered was that somehow, Hermione Granger had morphed into Lily Evans, and so joined they ridiculed him in the darkness of his cell.

Fuck.

And so he would try to focus on her ink-stained hands and her endearing slight overbite. For tonight, at least.

"I'll tell you then," he said, his voice gruff.

"Well?" she said.

"What? Now? Here?" He needed time to prepare. Surely she knew that.

She crossed her arms and huffed. "I think I've waited long enough, Severus."

"That is hardly my fault, Miss Granger," he said, his voice cold despite his previous resolutions.

Her face softened somehow and she tentatively placed her hand over his. He blinked. Her nails were bitten ragged. For the second time that night, he felt as if something in his chest was going to explode.

"I know. And I'm sorry for waiting so long to ask, Severus." Her voice was gentle and her eyes were deep and warm, and Severus felt that he would forgive her anything if she kept looking at him like that.

He cleared his throat, thinking back. The memories assaulted him quickly, and Severus Snape, fiercely protected by the life-long walls he had built around himself, was left *feeling* with the sheer pain of it all.

** Seven Years Earlier **

Severus scowled as he opened the doors to his Potions classroom. Hermione Granger, one of the many banes of his existence, was due at any moment. If she was late, he figured he would simply shut and ward the door, and damn it all. They were doomed to failure anyways. Mere potions could not help them, despite what Dumbledore or the girl herself thought.

He glanced at the clock on the wall. 6:58. She had precisely two minutes. If he was feeling particularly generous, he might wait three. But no more.

He stared at the clock, watching as the seconds ticked by. This was really ridiculous.

Suddenly, Miss Granger ran breathlessly through his open doors.

"Oh! Good. I'm not late!" She smiled up at him, and Severus scowled in return.

The girl came overly prepared, as he should have realised. She had pages and pages of notes on the potions and the spells they would need, and he was annoyed. He had hoped this would take a few nights of his time. Judging by the parchment in her hand and the eager look upon her face, this was going to take all blasted summer.

"Dispense with the foolish grin, Miss Granger. I'm in no mood."

She smiled wider. "Of course, sir. I'm sorry." But he noticed she didn't stop smiling.

The night was spent mostly creating a timeline in order to satisfy Miss Granger's inane requests. Apparently, she believed that they were going to require an entire potions laboratory on their doomed quest.

"And what, pray tell, are you going to need a Thickening Solution for? And wouldn't Potter's cloak be more effective than an Invisibility Elixir? I am beginning to believe you are here to waste my time."

"I'm sorry, Professor. I just want to make sure that we are prepared for anything." The girl, though she flushed slightly, did not cower at his harsh tone; rather, she summoned several ingredients and asked if he was ready to begin. This was... intriguing.

"Of course, Miss Granger, you are aware that you are not correctly brewing the Invigoration Draught?"

Severus smirked as she looked at him exasperatedly. "Yes, *lam* correctly brewing the Invigoration Draught. I know that some supposed Potions experts prefer to stir it with a silver rod, three times clockwise, but I have found that the potion is much closer to the correct shade of aquamarine if I use this pewter rod. See for yourself." She gestured towards her cauldron, the perfectly aquamarine liquid twinkling devilishly.

He snorted. "If this were the school year, I would deduct twenty points from Gryffindor for your arrogance." The girl was really too smart for her own good.

"My arrogance? Really, sir. I mean, pot, meet kettle." Her lips quirked, and he looked at her suspiciously.

"I am not arrogant, Miss Granger. I am simply confident in my abilities."

"Same thing," she muttered under her breath as she stirred her cauldron. Severus was confused. Normally, he would feel a strong flash of annoyance and wound her deeply with a few cutting remarks. But instead he felt... warm. And that most certainly annoyed him.

That night, Severus dreamed of Hermione splayed wantonly on his bed, her chest heaving and her face flushed as she rubbed herself whilst moaning his name. Try as he might, he was never able to look at her as a student again.

He paced restlessly. She was late, and she was never late. Panic coursed through him. Perhaps... perhaps she had been captured. Perhaps she was being tortured at this very moment. He should alert Dumbledore. He should find her.

She rushed into the dungeons, her hair flying out behind her. "Professor! I'm so sorry I'm late."

He looked at her. She appeared unharmed. "What kept you, Miss Granger?" he snapped.

She flushed. "I... I was talking with Harry and Ron. I lost track of time."

At that moment, Severus felt something that he thought he would never feel again. Not after Lily. But a streak of possessiveness, strong and maddening, ripped through him, and he felt he wanted to murder Potter and Weasley.

"Well, Miss Granger," he snarled, his voice cruel. "Since I mean so little to you perhaps you would like to put an end to our... meetings."

Her eyes widened. "But sir! You... you mean a great deal to me."

And the look upon her face was so urgent and so sincere that Severus found himself... hoping. For what, he couldn't say, but the feeling was strongest when she was with him.

"Miss Granger! What are you doing here? We don't meet again until tomorrow night."

The girl was in his office, curled up on his couch and reading a book. At the sound of his voice, she looked up and positively beamed at him.

"I'm sorry, sir. But I thought that we could just... spend time together. As friends. If you want." She looked uncertain and she nervously chewed her bottom lip.

"As friends?" he questioned, and he told the feeling so akin to hope in his chest *tøstop*.

"If you like," she said shyly. "I would like that."

And Severus was quite lost. He sat next to her and allowed their legs to brush, and the touch felt more intimate than anything he had ever known. When their fingers grazed, something deep within him cracked, and Severus knew that this seventeen-year-old girl would be his undoing. Looking at her crooked smile and her dark eyelashes, he knew that she would be worth it.

That night, he dreamed of Hermione in a lovely white gown, a gentle smile upon her face as he lowered his lips to kiss her.

He sat with his mask in his hands and a look of sheer boredom upon his face. This was getting ridiculous. It was a wonder that the Dark Lord would listen to such asinine ramblings. He glanced quickly at his timepiece. Avery had been talking for over thirty long minutes. If he would just get to his point! Hermione would be in the dungeons soon.

"Need to be somewhere, Severusss?" Voldemort asked, his voice a hiss.

"No," he said sharply, and before Severus had time to properly set up his Occlumency shields, the Dark Lord had slipped into his mind.

An image of Hermione...her hair pulled back into a messy bun and her eyes wide with excitement...flashed across his mind briefly before he forcefully dissolved it. He offered Voldemort other images...Dumbledore worriedly talking to McGonagall, Potter riding his broomstick over the Quidditch pitch...until he felt his master slip away.

Voldemort was chuckling. "Who was the girl, Severus?"

"The girl?" he asked, forcing himself to steady his breathing and slow his heart rate.

"Yesss, the girl you did not want me to see. What are you hiding from your master, Severus?" Voldemort steepled his fingers together and smiled.

"I am hiding nothing, my Lord. I live only to serve you. The girl is a student I teach. Nothing more."

"I see," he hissed. "Do you believe him, Avery? Or you, Lucius? I myself do not."

The Death Eaters around him murmured in agreement, and Severus felt a chill touch his heart.

"Very well," Voldemort said quietly. "I want to speak to you alone, Severus. The rest of you, leave now."

Severus approached Voldemort as his compatriots Apparated around him. He focused all of his thoughts away from Hermione.

"Are you lying to your Lord, Severusss?" Voldemort asked, and the slits of his eyes gleamed wickedly.

"I would never lie to you, my Lord," he replied.

"Who is the girl, then?"

"A student. Nothing more."

Voldemort laughed, a high-pitched eerie wail. "Tell me the truth, Severus, or I will use other means to... break you."

Severus felt his hand begin to tremble, and he clamped down on his emotions. "I... desire her," he finally said.

Voldemort paused, considering him, the spiny greyish length of his fingers clasped tightly together. "Yesss. I can see that you are telling the truth. I am sorry, Severus. You know what I must do."

Severus bowed his head in acquiescence.

"*Crucio*," the cold voice said, and Severus knew only pain.

"Professor! What happened to you?"

He blearily opened his eyes and found that he was somehow on the floor of the Potions classroom. The girl was kneeling on the ground next to him, stroking his forehead gently.

"Hermione," he said, his voice cracking. "Potion... on my desk. Get it."

He closed his eyes as his body twitched painfully. He had suffered through the effects of a prolonged Cruciatus curse before, but somehow this was worse. Perhaps it was because *she* was here to pity him.

He felt her tiny hand coax his mouth open. She poured the potion into his mouth and gently forced him to swallow.

"There," she whispered. "Please get better, sir."

As Severus slipped into sleep, he imagined he felt her lips, cool and soft against his cheek.

He awoke howling with pain, his Mark throbbing and writhing on his arm. He barely had the presence of mind to Summon his cloak and his mask, so bad was the pain. The Dark Lord was either very angry or very happy, and neither option appealed to Severus.

He Apparated with a pop, and when he arrived he felt a jolt of surprise. This was no ordinary meeting. Voldemort was seated with Nagini curling herself around her master's feet. A cloaked and masked Death Eater whom Severus did not recognize stood motionless next the Dark Lord.

He bowed deeply at Voldemort's feet. "Yes, my Lord," he breathed.

"Severusss," he hissed as he stroked Nagini affectionately. "So glad you could join us." And Voldemort smiled, his lipless mouth curling upwards unnaturally.

"As am I, my Lord."

"You see, Severus, it has recently come to my attention that you have... betrayed me."

Severus breathed. If he were going to die now, he would not die a coward. "That is not true, my Lord," he said, his voice steady.

"Perhaps not," the Dark Lord said. "But perhaps it is. I need you to do something for me, Severus. To prove yourself."

"Anything, my Lord."

Voldemort withdrew a single sheet of parchment from his robes. "This is a list of people I want dead, Severus. Dead. Kill them."

Severus took the list. He didn't immediately recognize any names, but he quickly counted nine.

Nine people. He wants me to kill nine people

"It would be my pleasure," he lied.

Voldemort smiled again. "I'll give you one week, Severus."

Severus bowed again, kissing the hem of his master's robes, and stood to leave.

"Severusss," the Dark Lord continued. "If you fail, there will be consequences. Not only for you... but for the girl as well. Hermione Granger."

When Severus arrived home, he took a bottle of Firewhisky and drank deeply.

The Death Eaters would torture and rape Hermione before they killed her in some horrific way. He had seen it happen far too many times. And they would do it, of that much he was certain.

He drank again, revelling in the way the liquid burned a hot trail down his throat.

What in the bloody fuck was he going to do?

Fuck this, he thought angrily. *I should just let her die. Let us both die*

But even as he thought that, he knew that he would do anything to keep Hermione Granger safe and alive. She was worth more than the lives of nine people he didn't even know.

He knew that she was leaving tomorrow, and the thought hurt him. He did not want her to go; he wanted her to stay, to save him from himself.

When she asked for wine and innocently settled into him on the couch, he knew that whatever it was between them...this heat, this feeling of completion, of rightness...she felt it too.

He knew what he was going to do tonight, and he knew that by doing so she would hate him. But she would be safe, and that was all that mattered. He simply had to convince her not to render his actions useless by throwing her own life away. But she was being impossible.

"I'll promise you one thing if you'll promise me the same, Severus," Hermione said. "I promise you that I will do everything I can to survive this war. Promise me the same."

He shook his head. The girl should understand that he mattered only insofar as she survived.

"I've lived long enough, Hermione. There is nothing here for me anymore."

He saw how her eyes darkened and her face took on this endearing pinched quality.

"If that's what you think, Severus." She reached out and touched his shoulder, and Severus froze, hardly breathing. Her tiny fingers trailed a path down his arm, caressing the ugly Dark Mark tentatively. "If you think that there is no one in this world who cares for you, who loves you..." The girl then grasped his hand, and he noticed how completely his hand could engulf her own. He felt a twinge. "Then I must tell you, you must not be as intelligent as you claim. You are missing what is right in front of you."

Severus stared disbelievingly at their entwined fingers. Surely she had lost her senses, but the feeling inside his chest tightened. He looked at her, hoping that his gaze conveyed what his words never could.

"Hermione," he whispered, and his voice sounded broken.

He needed to touch her. Just once. He needed to. Reaching out his hand, he noticed how his fingers were shaking slightly. He touched her face, caressing lightly, and to him she felt real in a way Lily never had. Her eyes glowed with the touch before they closed, and he wondered briefly how he ever could have preferred green eyes to her warm brown.

He ended his caress because he feared that soon he wouldn't be able to stop.

She opened her eyes.

"Why did you stop?"

He swallowed heavily. "You should leave, Miss Granger, before this leads to something we will both regret."

"I won't regret it." She sounded so certain of herself.

Wincing, he wished that was true. It wouldn't be after tonight. "You might not at first. But you will come to regret it. And you will hate me. Of that much I am certain. It would be much kinder for me to deny you now and ask you to leave."

"I won't regret it, Severus, and I could certainly never hate you. I... I am in love with you."

The tight feeling in his chest pulsed. "Don't say that, Hermione. Not to me. Not now."

She walked towards the door, and Severus followed her, wanting to smooth away the confused look upon her face.

"I don't understand," she whispered. "I thought you cared."

"Cared!" The foolish girl! He grabbed her wrist and turned her around to face him.

"Do you think this is easy for me? Hermione, I care about you with all of my heart and soul, with all of my mind and being. I belong to you completely." As he said the words, he knew that they were true, and so he kissed her. She tasted of tears.

"My life," he growled, his voice deep and husky. "You are my life. And for that, you must leave tonight."

"Don't make me go," she begged. "Let us have this one night."

And he wanted her to stay. He wanted to carry her into his bedroom and make love to her.

"If we both survive this war, Hermione, and this is what you still want, then I will selfishly take you, marry you, and keep you all to myself."

"That's what I want, Severus. It's not going to change. I'm not going to change."

He grimaced. If only she knew. "You say that now, but you will."

Tears ran down her face. "I am going to miss you, Severus."

He turned from her, worried that if he kept looking at her he would break. "Just go, Hermione. Please."

After she left, Severus closed his eyes tightly until he didn't feel like crying anymore.

He found the first house easily. Too easily, it seemed. Murder, he felt, should not be this easy. The wards in place were amateur at best, and he quickly worked his way in.

The flat was small, and he located the bedroom easily. The couple was sleeping deeply, her arm flung carelessly around her husband's waist. But he didn't care about him. No, she was his target.

Emma Rochester.

She had a very small nose, he noticed. And her hair was very blonde.

Severus clenched his wand, unsure if he could do this. But he thought of Hermione. He imagined her broken and bloody, surrounded by jeering Death Eaters, and his heart clenched until he raised the wand in his trembling hand and pointed it at the sleeping blonde witch.

"*Avada Kedavra*," he whispered, and the green light from his wand hit her squarely in the chest. She stopped breathing.

Severus collapsed outside the house, trembling and breathing heavily. Somehow, her husband had not awoke. Somehow, he had escaped.

His wand slipped from his grasp and landed on the lawn, and Severus cradled his head in his hands. Waves of guilt and self-loathing washed over him until he leaned over and vomited on the lawn.

He was crying; he was sobbing into his hands, and he wanted to die.

"I can't do it," he howled. "I won't do it."

"You disgust me," snarled an unfamiliar voice, and Severus looked up in surprise to see the unknown Death Eater from before.

"I disgust myself," he whispered. "Just kill me."

The masked figure laughed. "No. That would be far too easy."

The Death Eater regarded him for a moment. "*Stupefy*," he finally said, and Severus knew no more.

When he next awoke, he was sitting shackled in a small cell. He tried to remember what happened.

"Hello?" he said uncertainly.

A small, well-dressed man entered the cell. "Ah, Snape. You've awoke. Good. I'm Wilbur Whittleby, and I will be representing you in court."

"Court?" he muttered groggily.

The man nodded, his long moustache quivering. "Yes. The Wizengamot. You are being charged with nine accounts of murder."

"Nine?" He was forgetting something, something important.

The man nodded again. "Now, I won't be able to get you off, with all that evidence against you, but I'm thinking we can avoid Kissing if you'll name some Death Eaters. Yes, I think a life sentence in Azkaban is far preferable to Kissing."

Severus mumbled in agreement. It was far better than he deserved.

He was still worried about Hermione, and he figured that he would protect her best if he admitted to killing the nine people. And so when the prosecutor asked him if he had killed them, Severus readily lied. And when he was asked to give an explanation, he gave the one that Voldemort would most enjoy.

After the War, after the Dark Lord and his followers fell, Severus allowed himself to hope for the first time that perhaps Hermione would come visit him. Each day, he awoke feeling confident that she would come. If he could have her forgiveness, he could live somewhat happily in his prison. He could remain somewhat whole.

But it took her seven long years to come, and by then the hope that Severus had survived on had died, replaced with bitterness and hatred.

A/N: As always, thanks to my betas, mgm86 and reets67, and the wonderful admins at TPP. A final thanks to readers and reviewers!

Redemption

Chapter 11 of 14

Hermione comforts Severus.

Hermione wanted to sob. She felt overwhelmingly guilty, as if everything Severus had told her was directly her fault.

She lightly caressed his arm, noticing with dismay how he flinched away from her. What was she going to do? How could she undo the damage that she had wrought?

She should have known, somehow, that he wasn't guilty, and that he wasn't completely the monster everyone claimed him to be. She should have done something. She should have remembered how much she had trusted and believed in him as a student and, later, as a woman.

What to do now? Hermione looked at Severus. He was staring at the ground, his hair completely shrouding his face from her gaze. His breathing was heavy. How could this one man have so much misery to bear?

"Severus," she said quietly, and she gently turned his face up towards her. "Look at me, please."

He opened his black eyes, and the intensity of his gaze pinned and held her.

"What?" Though his voice was sharp, Hermione saw the uncertainty beneath his glare, and she did the only thing she could think of.

Slowly, she leaned across the bed and tentatively brushed her lips against his. He made no move to reciprocate the kiss, but she bravely ran her tongue along his bottom lip.

"I'm so sorry, Severus," she breathed, inclining her head and whispering into his ear.

"I don't need your pity," he responded dismissively.

"What do you need, then?" she asked as she more firmly stroked his arm.

He opened his mouth as if to speak, but paused. Hermione saw confusion flicker in his eyes as he seemingly struggled for words. Finally, he turned his head away from her, his eyes blinking rapidly.

"I need your forgiveness," he said, his voice so quiet that she had to strain to hear him.

Her heart ached for him. "I forgive you," she said, and she leaned in to kiss him once more.

"Hermione," he rasped brokenly, and suddenly his fingers were in her hair, and he pressed his mouth to hers.

The kiss was hot, desperate, and Hermione forgot everything but the feel of his tongue against hers and the way he was slowly massaging her head with his fingertips. She groaned, and he mumbled something into her mouth.

"Pardon?" she asked, her voice hoarse.

"Let's go to your bed, Hermione," he replied shakily.

"Yes," she answered before he kissed her again and scooped her into his arms as if she were still a child. Her heart fluttered in anticipation.

"Severus," she whispered.

"Hermione," he answered.

They reached her room with alarming speed, and Severus placed her gently on the bed. He stood next to her, his eyes gleaming in an odd mixture of happiness and lust.

He tentatively reached a hand towards her, his fingers lightly grazing the smooth expanse of her inner thigh. "What do you want me to do, Hermione?" Again, Hermione could read the uncertainty in his expression, and she could hear it in his voice.

She looked directly at him. "I want... you, Severus. Please."

"Hermione," he said slowly.

"Yes?" she asked.

"I love you," he whispered.

She nodded. "And I love you. Now, come make love to me."

He smiled and inched his hand up her robes.

She wriggled impatiently on the bed, willing his hand to move faster. He laughed.

"Patience, woman."

"Seven years is long enough, Severus."

He slowly, agonizingly trailed his fingers up her legs, causing her to shiver.

"Seven years," he said teasingly. "Then surely you have the... control necessary to wait a bit longer."

Hermione reached for him, wanting to touch him...any part of him...but he batted her hand away.

"Why, Miss Granger," he murmured. "What a shameless little thing you are."

"Yes!" she cried as he reached the silky gauze of her knickers. He was on the bed now, leaning against her, his breath coming in short, hungry gasps.

"Miss Granger... what are you wearing under your robes?"

"Ah, don't stop! Just... just a skirt

He laughed. "Convenient."

Hermione really wanted Severus to resume the matter at hand. She reached down and covered his hand with hers, urging him to move.

"Useless things, knickers," she breathed.

"Indeed," he growled as he slid them down her legs and threw them on the floor.

He leisurely trailed a finger over her mound.

"You're very wet, Hermione.... Are you wet for *me*?"

"Only you," she gasped as she twisted in an attempt to create the friction she so needed. "Always you."

"Hmmm..." He brushed her clit teasingly, his eyes darkening as she moaned.

Severus suddenly straddled her with his long legs and pressed his body atop hers. He kissed her ruthlessly, and she felt his erection erotically pressed against her stomach.

"Severus, please," she panted as he stroked her clit more firmly.

He growled and plunged two fingers deeply into her, his long thumb still insistently stimulating her clitoris. He fucked her with his fingers, hard and fast, until she felt her orgasm arriving on the horizon of her consciousness.

"Yes!" she shouted. "More!"

He dipped his head down to her breast and bit an erect nipple through her robes. He was thrusting into the air now, and the force of his panting almost surpassed her own.

"Yes! Oh fuck, Severus!" Hermione yelled as she came. The waves of intense pleasure subsided slowly.

"Gods," he said as he collapsed next to her. "And I haven't even undressed you yet."

She smiled, and she felt her recently sated libido flare again at his words. She leaned over on her side, running her fingers across the buttons on his robes.

"We'll have to remedy that," she said as she loosened the buttons that ran alluringly down his black robes.

He closed his eyes and again batted her hands away. "I can do it faster," he said roughly. He looked at her, his eyes narrowed to little slits. "Undress yourself," he demanded.

She nodded and quickly unclasped her robes, her eyes never leaving his. As she pulled her blouse off over her head, Severus inhaled sharply, and his fingers stilled.

"Focus on your task, Severus, not mine," she said laughingly.

"Tease," he mumbled. "Shameless wench."

She laughed again but stopped as he quickly tore off his shirt and lowered his trousers to the ground. Severus Snape was naked in her bed.

She pressed his shoulders down against the bed with force, and he raised an eyebrow.

"Quite the eager student, Miss Granger," he drawled.

"Oh, shut it," she said affectionately as she straddled him, rubbing against him. She ran her hands along her torso, cupping her breasts and roughly pinching her nipples. Beneath her, Severus groaned and thrust upward. The movement created a jolt of pleasure that ran along her spine deliciously.

"Hermione," he pleaded. "Put me in. I'm so fucking hard for you. Please, put me in."

She smiled, wishing she could revel in their role-reversal, but the hot, hard length of him was too tempting. With a breathy moan, she lifted her hips and slid onto him. They both cried out at their joining, and Hermione smoothed her hands across his chest.

There was heat here, between them. She could taste it in the air around them.

"Fuuuuck," he groaned as he pivoted his hips and thrust upward, digging into her almost painfully.

She experimentally leaned over and placed hot, open-mouthed kisses on his neck. She lapped at his chest with her tongue; the scent of their mutual arousal was so strong in the air that she could taste it, thick and tangy. And she was addicted.

"More!" she gasped, and he reached up and grabbed her shoulders. In one deft, fluid movement, he flipped them around so she was once again pinned beneath him. He

moved within her again, slower this time.

"Yes. More," he agreed. He was up on his knees now, and he grasped her ankles and placed her legs upon his shoulders. She raised her hips, wanting him to quicken his pace.

"Mmmm, Hermione," he said as he moved in and out of her. "Do you know how long I've wanted to do this?" Her thighs were against his chest, and he ran his hands across her legs as he fucked her. "Hermione. Touch yourself."

She moaned and lowered a hand to her clit, rubbing fiercely. He sped up, their bodies slick with sweat and heat.

"Oh, Severus. I'm close."

"You're so fucking beautiful like this, Hermione." He grabbed her legs, hoisting her higher and rotating his hips. Hermione gasped at the new angle.

"I used to imagine you, Hermione, visiting me in Azkaban," he growled. "You sucking my cock through the bars, your delicious little lips warm and eager. Oh, yes!"

"Gods, Severus." She was so close, so close. He reached down and roughly grabbed her breast, pinching her nipple, and she screamed. Her mind slipped from reality, her orgasm carrying her outside herself.

He moaned as his own movements slowed. "Yes, Hermione."

Hermione opened her eyes and witnessed the very erotic sight of Severus Snape reaching orgasm. His eyes closed, and his head tilted up, a grimace upon his face as he pumped erratically.

With a final groan, he lowered himself onto the bed next to her.

He flung his arm around her waist, pulling her close to him. He kissed the back of her shoulder.

"Your hair is tickling me, Hermione."

She smiled. "Should I move?"

He tightened his grip. "Never."

They fell asleep in each other's arms.

When Severus next awoke, it was still dark. It was either very late or very early.

He heard a moan and felt a hand stroking his balls. Looking down, he saw a deliciously naked Hermione cupping and fondling his bits. She grinned at him, her face flushed.

Severus pushed himself up onto his elbows. "Hermione..."

"Hush, Severus. Just let me work."

He felt his cock harden almost instantly, and Hermione purred her approval. She lightly pumped his shaft with one hand whilst she rubbed his balls with the other. A finger touched the sensitive skin behind his sac, and he hissed.

"Now," she said. "About that scenario you mentioned earlier..."

"Hermione," he groaned.

She leaned down between his legs, her eyes never leaving his. She stuck out her tongue and lapped at the underside of his prick.

She flicked her tongue across the head of his cock. He jerked involuntarily, and her eyes darkened.

She grasped his length firmly and looked at him again so openly and so lustfully he twitched again.

"Hermione, please."

She smiled seductively and brought his cock to her lips, swirling the head around her lips as if she were applying lipstick.

She brought him fully into her mouth, and Severus sighed in combined relief and frustration. He experimentally surged his hips forward, and Hermione hummed in response. Her mouth vibrated around him.

"Yes," he whispered raggedly.

She looked so beautiful to him, with her eyes closed, her cheeks tinged with colour, and her mouth tight around his cock.

Slowly, she started to move, her tongue expertly swirling.

When she cupped his balls and again insistently pressed her fingers into his responsive skin, he knew he wasn't going to last long.

"Hermione!" he gasped. "Stop!"

She pulled back, releasing him from her mouth.

"I want to make love to you," he explained, and she smiled, climbing next to him.

She snuggled into his chest, and he kissed the top of her head.

"Thank you, Hermione."

He felt the curve of her smile against his chest. "You're welcome." She lazily trailed her hand across his stomach, her nails scratching him slightly.

"I don't want you to leave, Severus." Her voice was teary.

He looked up at the ceiling. Leaving. He hadn't thought of that, really. Somehow, the prison cell he had spent the last seven years in didn't seem real anymore. This felt real. *Hermione* felt real.

He wondered if he should suggest they run away. Severus looked down at the woman in his arms. Her fuzz of hair hid her face from him, and he suspected she might be crying. Again, he felt a strong streak of possessiveness tear through him.

When she sighed and kissed his chest, he knew that he loved her.

When she nuzzled his neck and made a quiet mew of contentment, he knew that if given the chance to go back in time, he would kill for her again.

And when she brought her lips to his and kissed him sweetly, he knew that he didn't care what that said about him. Did that make him a monster, as everyone claimed? It mattered not. He was, at the very least, a monster in love.

"Hermione," he mumbled against her lips. He wanted to tell her that he loved her, and that she was his entire reason and his whole purpose for existing, but he didn't know how. And so he took her in his arms and kissed her until she stopped crying.

When he entered her again, she whispered. "Slow this time, Severus."

"Slow," he agreed, and he memorized the soft curve of her breasts, and the way her fingers constantly roved his body, as if reminding herself that he was there. The way she touched his face and whispered "I love you." And the way she glowed when he kissed her neck and told her he loved her too.

Afterwards, they held each other close. They had two hours left until morning.

A/N: Thanks to my betas, mgm86 and reets67, and the admins at TPP. Updates will be more regular from now on. A final thanks to readers and reviewers!

Return

Chapter 12 of 14

Severus returns to Azkaban

Today was the day...no matter how it happened...today was the last day of Hermione Granger's life. So to speak.

He closed his eyes, kissing his wife's cold lips before he slipped a syringe into his robes, the excitement of today thrilling him.

"Off to work, my sweet."

He glanced once more at his wife, who lay comfortably on the couch. She would come back to him soon. Depending upon how... accommodating Hermione would be. He couldn't help but think that she wouldn't succumb easily, and he felt his heartbeat accelerate at the thought of her struggling against him, crying out in fear.

Yes, today would be a very exciting day.

The spray of the hot water jetting out of the tap, pounding against Hermione's back and neck, had been enough to occupy her mind, keeping her dreaded thoughts at bay and masking the warm tears that fell down her cheeks.

But when the water turned cold, Hermione couldn't hide any longer. She stepped reluctantly from the shower, wrapping a towel around her body. She muttered a quick drying charm for her hair, pausing to gaze at her reflection in the foggy mirror. The condensation on the glass distorted her face. She hardly recognized herself.

Slowly, she trailed a finger across the mirror, etching an unsteady line across the moist surface.

What am I doing? she thought. *What am I going to do?*

A quiet knock on the door brought her back to reality.

"Hermione?" Severus opened the door and entered the small bathroom, dressed only in his black cotton bottoms, his hair still damp from his earlier shower. He was trembling slightly.

"Morning," she said with a rueful smile.

"Morning," he replied, and he bent down and placed a chaste kiss upon the tip of her nose.

"Last night was lovely," he continued. "Wouldn't mind a repeat, actually."

She smiled and managed a laugh. "Severus! Solomon is going to be here in less than an hour!"

"I'll be quick," he promised, and his eyes gleamed as he gently loosened her towel.

"So beautiful," he whispered hoarsely, lifting her onto the sink top, settling his hips between her legs. Hermione reached into his trousers, gripping his erection, and guided him into her, filling her.

Their lovemaking was slow, passionate, and she savoured each gasp and each tremble. An overwhelming sadness permeated the air; Hermione didn't even know she was crying until Severus wiped the tears from her face.

"Don't cry," he said into her ear. "Don't cry."

She looked at him then, committing to memory the way he opened his mouth slightly in pleasure and the way his voice wavered unsteadily when he told her he loved her.

I love him obsessively, she thought, and she gasped when he slightly quickened his pace.

"Hermione," he said brokenly. "Don't leave me."

"Hermione," he said as he thrusts became more uneven and erratic. "I love you."

"Oh!" she cried as she came. He followed her with a groan.

He leaned his head against her chest, breathing heavily. Hermione stroked his hair, the strands still silky with water. Her heart thudded painfully in her chest. Would this be the last time they made love?

"Hermione," he said, smiling when she felt his mouth on her breast. "Come away with me."

She stilled. Come away with him?

"But... but you would still be Bound to me," she stuttered.

Raising his head, Severus considered her. "At least I would be with you, Hermione, and not in Azkaban."

She opened her mouth to speak, but she didn't know what to say. Words seemed inadequate for what she wanted to convey. She had previously considered running away with him, but part of her, the part that still yearned for public recognition and approval, shied away from the suggestion. She could see the tabloids now. Forget the tabloids, Rita Skeeter would have a heyday with the story. *War Hero Runs Away With Mass Murderer. Love or Seduction? The Tale of Hermione Granger and Severus Snape.*

And who would read these headlines? Solomon, who had lost his wife to Severus. Ron, who had tried to reach out to her. Henry, a good man who loved her and promised a life of contentment, if not happiness. What would they think?

Because when it came down to it, Hermione would lose everything...her friends, her job, her life...and Severus would lose nothing.

She tried to imagine living a life on the run with him, but she couldn't. Auror Hermione Granger, hiding from the law with glamour charms and hasty Apparations? No, she could not imagine it.

And yet, she couldn't imagine her life without him either.

What was this, then? Why was she doing this? Why was she hurting them both when she had always intended that he go back to Azkaban and she continue leading her harmless, dull, and empty life?

Severus must have seen the answer to his question in her eyes because he chuckled and kissed her lips.

"Don't worry, you foolish girl. I never thought you would."

She widened her eyes, surprised. "You're... you're not mad?"

He kissed her again. "Hermione, I know you would never run away with me because of who you are you...a good, kind, loyal, bloody Gryffindor," he snarled, though a smile played on his lips. "And that is why I love you, Hermione. So no, I am not mad."

She kissed him back. "I'm going to miss you, Severus. I'm going to miss this."

He smiled wryly. "I'm only an Apparation away, Hermione."

She nodded. "It won't be the same though."

"I know," he agreed, his eyes glinting. "I doubt that I'll be able to make love to you through the bars. We can always try, though."

She laughed and placed her hands upon his shoulders, squeezing gently. "Come on," she said. "We should probably be dressed when Solomon arrives."

"Indeed," he said silkily as his eyes roved her body. "This sight is for my eyes only."

They both dressed in silence, unwilling to speak lest their words somehow jolt them from the fantasy they had created.

Hermione took the whistling kettle from the fire and poured herself and Severus two mugs of steaming water. She watched him as he added the tea leaves and took a sip of the drink.

They were both on edge, tense with what was to come.

"What time is he going to be here?" he asked, his voice tight.

Hermione glanced at the clock on her kitchen wall. "Five minutes ago," she said. "And quit acting so nervous, Severus. I can barely take it as it is."

"Hermione?" he said quietly as he resolutely stared into his tea.

"Yes?" She placed a hand on his arm.

"You will come and visit me, yes?"

"Oh, Severus," she said. She closed her eyes and wished things were different. "Of course I will."

He visibly relaxed. "Good. I..."

A sharp knock on her front door interrupted him, and they both jumped in their chairs.

"I... I'll just go get the door," she said uncertainly. She stood and made her way to the door.

"Hermione?" Severus said gently. She turned to look at him, the pain in his eyes so tangible that she wanted to take him in her arms and Apparate somewhere far away.

"I... I'm sorry."

She sighed. "So am I... So am I."

Hermione reluctantly left him seated in the kitchen and went to open the door.

Solomon and Henry stood before her, each with matching glares upon their faces.

"Granger," Solomon greeted her roughly. "Let's get this over with."

Henry nodded and smiled wistfully. "Hermione."

She nodded back, her face grim.

"He's in the kitchen," she whispered; somehow, she felt like she was betraying Severus.

Solomon pushed past her, and Henry grasped her hand with his own, stroking her fingers tentatively.

"It'll be alright, Hermione. It'll be over before you know it."

She nodded her head in dumb acquiescence and allowed Henry to lead her into the kitchen. Solomon had his wand trained on Severus. Severus glanced quickly at her, scowling at the sight of Henry. In response, Henry put an arm possessively around her waist. Hermione glared at him and pulled free from his embrace.

"This is *not* the time, Henry," she mumbled under her breath.

"Come on, Snape," demanded Solomon.

Severus stood, his face devoid of fear and anger, and Hermione felt a sudden, strong flash of affection for him...bravery did run through the veins of Slytherins.

"I'll only Apparate with Miss Granger," he said, his eyes glinting.

Solomon nodded at Hermione, and she stepped forward and placed her arms around Severus. Her heart fluttered nervously.

"You can Apparate with me, Severus. I give you my permission." Her voice was sad.

He wrapped his long arms around her shoulders, and smirked at Henry whilst he lightly caressed her arms.

With a sigh, Hermione Apparated them to Azkaban.

Despite himself, Severus felt an unwelcome chill at the sight of the imposing structure before him. He grimaced. He grimaced again once Henry and Solomon arrived with matching pops next to them. Hermione released him, and he reluctantly let go of her, of the warmth he had felt with her in his arms.

"Come on, Severus. You can walk."

Solomon, with a determined whirl of his wand, quickly undid the Constrictus Binding before heading towards the checkpoint. Severus shivered slightly, stretching his arms and grinning at the feeling of unbelievable freedom. He looked at Hermione, and she nodded her head at him.

He stood patiently while the three Aurors checked their wands at the front desk. Isaac...the rather chubby, fish-faced guard...logged them into the system. Severus noticed that Isaac seemed rather excited to see them. His bulging eyes gleamed, and his hand shook slightly as he took Hermione's wand. Odd. Perhaps Isaac had a bit of a crush, he thought with a smirk.

"This way," Isaac's voice squeaked, and Solomon roughly grabbed Severus by the collar and shoved him into the prison.

Severus allowed the man his anger, and controlled his desire to retaliate. He still remembered Solomon's wife and how small she looked before she died.

They reached his cell, and Severus felt an uncontrolled spasm of fear. He would really rather be dead than return to his cell, knowing as he now did that Hermione loved him.

Ahhh, my life, he thought bitterly. A never-ending charade of false hopes and empty promises.

Solomon tightened his grip on Severus' clothes and turned to face the others.

"I'll put him in his cell. Hermione, Henry, wait out here for me."

Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but Solomon's determined glare silenced her. Severus wondered what the older wizard wanted from him. Justice? Some form of closure? An explanation, perhaps?

Intrigued, Severus allowed Solomon to push him roughly into the cell. The door closed behind them with an ominous *thunk*.

"So," Solomon said as he casually rolled up the sleeves of his robes. "What did you do to Hermione?"

Severus blanched. He had expected their confrontation to concern Solomon's late wife; he had not expected the sharp, menacing look in the Auror's eyes at the mention of Hermione's name. Interesting.

Severus crossed his arms. "I did nothing that she didn't beg me to do." He knew he was baiting the man, and he also knew that if there was one man who deserved his respect, it was Solomon Rochester. But Severus didn't care. Judging by the incensed look upon Solomon's face, the man felt a little too much for his curly-haired employee.

Solomon lurched forward, grabbing Severus by the cusp of his uniform and slamming him hard against the concrete wall.

"Snape, you fucking creep," he growled. "I should have you Kissed, you fucking bastard!"

"What did you do to her?" Solomon asked again.

Severus looked down at Hermione's boss, wondering what the man wanted to hear *Well, I fucked her*, he thought viciously. *And she liked it. I loved her, and she liked that too.*

"I did nothing to her, Rochester."

Solomon loosened his grip slightly, finally stepping away from Severus. Severus straightened the collar of his prison garb.

Solomon turned to look at him, and Severus saw a touch of madness in the man's gray eyes.

Solomon clenched his hand into a fist and fiercely punched Severus hard in the face, his knuckles cracking against an already crooked nose.

"Fucking bastard," he spat. "That was for my wife." He turned and headed for the door. "Just stay in here and die, Snape."

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose, hoping to stop the blood as the bars lowered around him, once again trapping him inside a small cage. He gingerly touched his right eye, hoping the swelling wouldn't be too horrendous. There would be a bruise there, come tomorrow. He wondered if Hermione would bring him some Bruise Salve.

Hermione entered the cell alone, telling Solomon and Henry that she needed to ask Severus something about the potion. Really, she just wanted a private farewell.

He was pacing in his cell, holding his face.

"Severus?"

"Hermione," he said, grinning.

She gasped. A black-blue bruise was blossoming on his face, blood smeared across his lips and chin.

"Severus! What happened?"

He wiped the blood on the back of his sleeve. "Oh, nothing. I'm afraid your boss doesn't approve of us, Hermione."

Panic washed over her. "Does... does he know?"

"Not for sure. But he suspects something. And he's understandably upset."

"So he punched you? How unprofessional!" Hermione couldn't help the tiny surge of anger she felt towards her boss. He had hurt the man she loved.

Severus laughed in his cell. "Hermione. I killed his wife. He is entitled to hate me, I think."

She flushed. "I know. I... I just wish it wasn't like this, Severus."

"So do I."

"You could have told him the truth, you know. About that night," she whispered. "He would perhaps... hate you less."

"Oh, Hermione," Severus said as he ran his fingers through his hair. "Sometimes you are so... innocent."

She bristled. "We could tell everyone, Severus. Get the story out. Maybe... maybe they would let you out of here. Maybe." Even as she said the words, Hermione didn't believe them. Who would believe her? Especially since she was currently sleeping with Severus, a fact that would undoubtedly come to light.

Severus shook his head. "Now, Miss Granger, you are certainly more intelligent than to believe that."

Her eyes sparkled with unshed tears. "I know. This is just so damn unfair."

"It is. Now, come here and kiss me goodbye."

She smiled, wrapping her fingers around his through the bars. She opened her mouth and kissed him until they were both breathless.

"You should leave now," he whispered. "Before we arouse anymore... suspicions."

She kissed him again, softly. "I'll come see you every day," she promised.

"I'll hold you to that," he whispered, nuzzling her cheek. "Now, go live your life, Hermione."

Furiously blinking back tears, Hermione left his cell and joined Solomon and Henry. They were talking quietly but stopped once they saw her.

"Hermione," said Solomon. "Let's go."

She nodded and didn't protest when Henry again looped his arm around her waist as they followed the guard outside.

"So," she said. "I haven't heard anything. Do you have a list of possible suspects based on Severus' report?" she asked Solomon.

Though his eyes darkened slightly at Severus' name, her boss nodded. "We do. It's not a long list, luckily. I've sent agents to question everyone, and so far we've got nothing. I'll let you know when we catch him. And we will catch him."

"Can I help? I mean, I'll question some people."

Solomon shook his head. "Absolutely not. You need to take some time off, Granger. I don't want you around any more of this... darkness. And that's an order."

Hermione frowned. "Fine," she finally said as they reached the front desk and the guard returned their wands. "I'll just be at home, then."

Solomon nodded. "Good. And stay there, Granger," he demanded before Disapparating.

Henry was rubbing small circles on her back. "Can I accompany you home, Hermione?" he asked,

She sighed. She might as well tell him now. As sweet and endearing as she found Henry, she knew that there could never be more than friendship between them.

She really ought to tell him.

"Of course," she said quietly, ignoring her screaming conscience and the chubby prison guard who was avidly listening to their conversation.

Hermione placed a mug of tea uncertainly before Henry. He accepted the cup with a murmur of thanks, and she sat down in the chair next to him.

"So," she said. "What's up?"

He placed his hand over hers. "Hermione. I... I just need to know. I thought I could wait for you, but... Is there a chance at all? For us, I mean?"

The look in his eyes was so desperate and so hopeful that Hermione wished she could lie to him.

"Henry..."

He nodded his head and leaned forward to brush his lips against hers. The kiss was sweet, tender, and Hermione reluctantly withdrew from him.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I wish..." She trailed off.

He shrugged and smiled wistfully. "So do I, Hermione." He tightened his hand on hers. "I should go," he added.

"Yes," she said. "I'll see you at work?"

"Of course you will." As he turned to leave, he abruptly stopped in the doorway.

"Hermione... is it Snape?" He was studying the floor and shifting nervously.

"I..." She swallowed heavily. "Yes. It is."

Henry laughed cynically. "I thought as much. It's hard, you know, to be second to Severus fucking Snape. He's a murderer, Hermione. Gods."

She blinked. "He's a better man than you think, Henry."

Her partner shrugged again. "I really don't want to hear it, Granger. I'll just let myself out."

"I'm sorry, Henry. Really."

"Just forget I ever mentioned anything. I'll see you later, I suppose. I need... I need some air."

She followed him to the door and watched him walk away, his shoulders hunched and his hands in his pockets.

Hermione knew she had done the right thing, but it still hurt. Distraught, she walked resignedly back into the kitchen, feeling acutely like she did something wrong. Distracted by her thoughts, she didn't notice that she had failed to reset her wards.

A/N: Thanks to my beta, the brilliant shellsnapelover, for her hard work on this chapter, and to reets67 and the admins at TPP. Thanks and apologies to readers and reviewers- I promise to regularly update this until the end.

Doubts

Chapter 13 of 14

Hermione figures something out a little too late.

Hermione cursed Severus for drinking all of her wine, as she desperately wanted a glass. Not wanting to Apparate to the local pub, she opened the cupboards, gathering the items needed to make a cup of hot cocoa. Waiting for the water to boil, she unlaced her boots, tossed them near the front door, and headed towards the bedroom.

She tore off her robes, quickly pulling on her favourite jumper and sweatpants, and then she trotted back to the kitchen. She poured the steaming water into a bright, yellow mug, stirring in the rich cocoa. She walked back to the sitting room, inhaling the chocolaty scent, settling into her large chair in front of the fireplace, and pulling her wool blanket over her legs. Sipping her cocoa, she sighed.

What a long few days.

She looked around room. It felt empty with Severus gone.

"I miss you," she said into the silent room, and the words seemed to echo mockingly around her.

She took another sip of her drink and stared at the crackling fire. Her house seemed cold now. The warmth from Severus' presence was now replaced by a bitter loneliness.

"Not much better than Henry's," she muttered, glancing around her flat. There were very few personal effects here. Her books, of course. Her research. A desk overflowing with case files.

Not even the vase of daisies on her mantel was able to brighten the room.

Sitting next to the vase was a silver picture frame...the only one in the room. *Accio* photograph."

She touched the frame. It was of Harry, Ron, and her, and they were laughing and waving at the camera. Her third year, she believed. Over ten years ago. How different life was back then. She had the world ahead of her. Again and again, she watched as Harry looped his arm about her waist and laughed into the wind. His scar flared whitely against his skin. She felt a pang.

"Harry," she whispered as she touched the photograph. "I wonder how things would be different if you were still alive. I wonder what you would think of me."

"Would you hate me?" she asked, her voice cracking. "Would you hate the person I have become?"

As if in response, Harry smiled and waved, pulling her thirteen-year-old self into a hug. Somehow, that helped.

Hermione placed the picture gently on her coffee table, wiping away the tears that had rolled down her cheek, before standing up to stretch. Restless, she started pacing. She just didn't feel right anymore.

She needed... resolution. Closure.

She needed some bloody fucking *wine*.

She threw the blanket onto the sofa and headed towards her room, irritated that she would have to change out of her comfy clothes to go get a drink.

"Fuck!" she exclaimed, tripping over her discarded boots. "Fucking shoes!"

She bent to pick them up and froze. A thick, gooey grime coated the tread of her boots.

Hermione swiped a trail of the muck, bringing it to the level of her eyes.

She had seen this substance before. Thoughtfully, she rolled it between the pads of her thumb and finger. "It's the same! The same stuff that was on the bodies!" She sniffed it delicately. Musky. Damp. She sniffed again, trying to place the scent...where was this from?

It hit her quickly, clues connecting in her mind like a puzzle.

Azkaban.

Fingering the grime triumphantly, Hermione felt a surge of pride. She held in her hand the same gooey dirt found on all four victims...she was sure of it.

"He kills them in Azkaban!" she exclaimed. "Lures them. Perhaps a guard? Someone they would trust, which would explain the lack of struggle."

Rejuvenated and instantly forgetting her dire need for a drink, Hermione grabbed a boot and ran for the fireplace. She pinched some Floo powder from her old jar and excitedly Flooed to the Ministry.

"Solomon!" she shrieked, not even pausing to consider the sight she presented, dressed as she was and holding out a dirty boot.

Her boss held up a hand. "Not now, Granger."

"But sir! The Angel was at Azkaban. The grime we found on the victims...it's from Azkaban! I..."

"Granger!" Solomon interrupted. "We know. We know who he is."

Hermione blinked and lowered the proffered shoe. "And?"

Solomon read briefly from a long sheet of parchment. "Name is Isaac Asrail. The guard from this morning. He disappeared after we left, the bastard. There are Aurors at his house right now, though, to apprehend him. I'm about to join them."

"Can I come?"

"No," said Solomon as he pushed past her, heading for the Ministry fireplaces.

"How did you find him, sir?" Hermione asked, desperate for answers as she hurried along beside her boss.

"Snape was right. There are not many potions experts with continual access to Dementors. This Isaac fellow was an apprentice in Ireland for a while. We found him via the victims. All four women were visiting prisoners in Azkaban, you see. Isaac was their guard."

Hermione touched his shoulder. "Please. Let me go with you."

Solomon shook his head. "Hermione, no."

"But I..."

"Look," said Solomon, interrupting her. "I know more than anyone how much you put into this case. I won't forget, Hermione. Go home. You'll be safe there."

She frowned. "I don't like this, Solomon."

He patted her on the back. "Neither do I... I'll contact you once we have the bastard behind bars."

He was gone in a flash of green flames, and Hermione, frustrated, let the dangling boot fall to the marbled floor.

"Dammit," she growled, glaring at the emptiness of the Ministry. "This is so bloody ridiculous."

Aggravated and feeling unfamiliarly powerless, she walked determinedly into Solomon's office, eager to find a scrap of news, any possible hint of information. A large, locked cabinet, heavily warded, became the object of her ire. Angriily, she shook it, loose objects rattling mysteriously inside.

"I fucking hate this. Hate it!"

With a wave of her wand, she scattered the loose-leaf papers and various official documents on Solomon's desk, feeling a vicious stab of pleasure at the mess.

Resignedly, she sighed heavily and Flooed home.

As soon as she stepped from her fireplace, she knew instinctively that something was wrong. She had felt like this in her fifth year, when Harry had insisted they travel to the Department of Mysteries to save Sirius.

And that hadn't turned out so well, she thought as the hair on the back of her neck raised.

"Hello?" she said uncertainly, slipping her wand from her pocket, ready for anything. "Who's there?" she asked, this time more confident.

Her flat was silent.

She stopped breathing and focused on listening. She heard... nothing. Silence. Craning her neck, she heard the ominous ticking of her kitchen clock. Although her shoulders relaxed, she was still tense. She wished that at least Crookshanks were still alive to purr and flick his tail, assuring her she was safe.

Perhaps she was uneasy with the emptiness of her flat, truly unwilling to come back here alone. She stepped from the fireplace, stuffing her wand back into her concealed pocket, and gathered her discarded mug of cocoa. With a simple, wandless charm, she heated the chocolate and headed towards her bedroom.

Reaching out to pull a book off her shelf, Hermione was shocked when she was shoved forward, her head connecting with the wall with a resounding *crack*. Her mug clattered noisily to the floor, echoing throughout the small room. Dizzy and confused, she attempted to shout, but hot, sticky breath on her neck and the tip of a wand digging painfully into her ribs stopped her. She blinked rapidly, trying to gain control of the situation.

"Gotcha," came a voice from nowhere...her opponent was Disillusioned.

She closed her eyes, concentrating with all her might, hoping her wandless magic was strong enough for the spell. *Finite Incantatem.*

She pushed against him hard as he appeared, but his grip around her only tightened, crushing her. His baby-fine hair gleamed, and his chin trembled as he shoved his wand into her stomach, twisting it maniacally.

"Hello, Hermione," he said, a smile on his face. "You have *no* idea how happy I am to see you."

Hermione forced herself to breathe deeply. One. Two. Three. She thought of Severus, and she imagined him sneering at Isaac and laughing as he cut him with words and wand. The thought calmed her.

"Isaac," she said calmly as she attempted to surreptitiously reach her wand.

He smiled. "You have something I need, Hermione. Your wand is useless against this," he said, revealing a syringe, pulsating with the menacing, black liquid.

Forgetting all reason, Hermione screamed, fighting to get away from him.

"Let me go, you sick fuck!"

He chuckled. "This won't even hurt, Hermione. Hold still now. It'll pass more quickly if you hold still."

As he brought the needle scarily close to the inside of her arm, Hermione's survival instincts took over. She brought her leg up sharply, kneeing him hard in the groin. The resulting squishing sound and his growl of pain were music to her ears.

"Fucking bitch," he moaned, doubling over as the syringe slipped from his fingers, rolling to a stop just a few feet away from her. Flicking the wand from her pocket, she pointed it at the syringe levelly.

"*Confringo!*" The glass exploded, releasing the potion into the air. It swirled for a moment and then evaporated.

Isaac let out a shriek and knocked her bodily onto the floor, sending her skidding into the bookshelves. Still clutching his crotch, he pointed his wand at her.

"*Petrificus Totalis,*" he muttered.

Hermione, effectively frozen by Isaac's spell, was helpless to stop him. She tried to move, and she knew the overwhelming panic of powerlessness.

Isaac stood unsteadily before her, a grimace upon his face. He kicked her hard in the stomach, and Hermione heard rather than felt something crack. He kicked her again. Unwillingly, she felt tears well in her eyes.

"Fucking bitch," he spat. "Do you have any idea how much I worked on that fucking potion?! I should fucking kill you now." He glared at her.

"*Mobilicorpus,*" he said resignedly. "I'm taking you home."

Hermione could do nothing as he put his arms around her and prepared to Apparate them.

A thought occurred to her then.

He doesn't know Solomon's there. He doesn't know.

Severus had completely forgotten the worst part of Azkaban.

Sheer, mind-numbing boredom.

And it was worse this time. After Hermione, it was far worse.

"I hate my life," he said morosely into the emptiness of his cell. The words echoed around him.

He shook his head. Severus Snape was many things, but pathetic, self-pitying fool was not one of them.

"Self-righteous arsehole, maybe. Bastard, definitely." He shook his head again. How was he going to make it until tomorrow? Tomorrow would bring him Hermione, if the girl stuck to her word and visited him. His heart clenched. What if she didn't come?

What if he never saw her again?

"Then I will hardly be worse off than before," he assured himself, though he didn't quite believe his words.

Severus sat down on the ground, drawing mindless patterns in the dirt that covered his cell floor. Sometimes, he had difficulty believing that this was his life and that he was the one responsible for it all. His life amounted to no more than monumental mistake after monumental mistake.

Lily. The Dark Mark. Potter. Dumbledore. Hermione. He tainted everything he touched.

When he was twelve, Potter and Black had magicked a sign to follow him around. It had flashed over his head for an entire day. *Snivellus Snape the Greasy*, it had said. He hadn't been able to get it to go away, and his classmates jeered and laughed at him. When Lily had seen it, she'd laughed and told him he needed to calm down...that it had just been a joke.

It had been then that Severus Snape, at the young age of twelve, had first begun to realise that his one true friend was beginning to see him as everyone else saw him...that Lily thought of him as they did. That knowledge had hurt him.

It had only been a only a matter of time before Severus began to see himself as everyone else did. Ugly, alone, unlovable.

He had joined the Death Eaters simply because he wanted people to stop laughing. He had soon realised that crying and cowering were not preferable reactions.

Severus sighed. How different things could be right now! He could be married. He imagined making love to Hermione, pregnant with his child, and he felt tears stinging his eyes. He blinked rapidly. It was useless and weak to hang on so desperately to that dream.

"You're so weak, Snape," he muttered to himself. "You don't deserve that."

Perhaps the most difficult thing about spending seven years in Azkaban had been reconciling his childish, naïve longings for happiness with the darkness that was his life. And perhaps Hermione's refusal to visit him had pushed him over his metaphorical edge, effectively killing the voice deep inside him that simply longed for something *good*.

He burrowed his face in his hands. Fuck.

Severus heard the sounds of wards coming undone, and he looked up at the door expectantly. It had only been a few hours since Hermione had left. Did she miss him already? Though Severus scowled at the thought, he felt that damned feeling so akin to hope flutter in his chest.

He stood up and walked to the front of his cell, impatient as the door slowly opened. It was not Hermione

It was Henry Grayson.

Severus regarded him suspiciously as the younger man nodded at him coolly.

"Snape," he said, his eyes narrowed.

"Mr. Grayson," Severus said. "And to what do I owe this... pleasure?"

Henry scowled. "Cut the bullshit, Snape. I came about Hermione."

Severus smiled. He would gladly engage the arrogant Mr. Grayson in a conversation about Hermione. "What about her?"

Henry came close to the bars, and Severus was slightly surprised to see panic in his eyes. "What did you do with her?" he asked finally, his voice a thin, reedy wail.

Severus blinked. "Why, Mr. Grayson. I'm not sure what you mean."

Henry's face scrunched with anger, and Severus felt waves of magic pouring from the man in angry bursts.

"Now is not the time for games, Snape. She's gone. She's not in her flat. I need to find her!"

Horrified, Severus felt his face drain of colour. "What happened?" he asked.

The Auror hit the bars to the cell angrily. "I just came from her apartment. She should be there! I found... signs of a struggle. And her wand," he added, holding out the fifteen inches of smooth vine wood.

Severus' mind went blank with panic. "Henry! Henry, you have to let me out of here. I have to find her."

Henry regarded him. "So you don't know where she is?"

"No, you bloody fool! Why would I harm her?"

Grayson sighed in response. "Why should I trust you, Snape?"

Severus felt cold. This man was wasting his time. "Because I love her."

Henry nodded his head. "And so do I."

"Then let's find her," Severus pleaded, his hands tightly clenching the bars of his cell.

Henry looked at him thoughtfully. "She loves you, Snape. I don't know what she sees in you, but there must be something good if she loves you. So I'm going to trust you this once."

"Thank you," he said quietly. "Now hurry."

Henry quickly said a few enchantments, and soon Severus was out of his cell once again. He wished he had his wand, but no matter. He would kill anyone who touched his Hermione with his bare hands, if necessary.

"Do you think the Angel took her?" Snape asked as he followed Henry and the prison guard outside.

Henry shook his head. "Maybe. But I don't know where he would have taken her. Half of the Aurors are at his house right now, and there is no sign that anyone has been living there recently."

"Do you know who he is, then?" Severus asked, annoyed at his own ignorance.

"Thanks to your work, yes. It's Isaac, actually. Your old prison guard."

Severus frowned. He should have known the moment he saw Isaac looking at Hermione so oddly. He should have warned Hermione.

"Do you have his file, Henry? He must have a relative, or another house, or something." Severus struggled with himself. He was beginning to panic.

Henry offered him a lengthy sheaf of parchment. "I've been over it already, Snape. Maybe you'll catch something I didn't."

Severus took the paper from Grayson's trembling hands. There had to be something there.

He *must* save Hermione.

A/N: Immense thanks to my beta, shellsnapelover! Thanks also to reets67 and the admins at TPP!

Hope

Chapter 14 of 14

A captured Hermione loses hope.

A/N: I want to thank Shellsnapelover and reets67 for all their help on this story! I am a significantly better writer thanks to them. As a warning, this chapter does contain a description of a decomposing body. Finally, please know that some your theories were SO brilliant, I considered changing my original idea. Ultimately, I decided to end this as intended. I do hope you enjoy, and there are two more chapter to come after this!

Hermione groaned as Isaac pushed her carelessly against a wall, her skull cracking against the brick. Trying to ignore the throbbing in her head, she glanced around, hoping to see Solomon. Her hope for a rescue died as she took in her surroundings...dusty books, grimy countertops. No proper Auror had been in this room.

She coughed, grimacing at the putrid smell of the house. The sharp, sweetly putrid odour possessed a physical presence, invading her nostrils and her mouth until she gagged involuntarily, heaving onto the floor.

"You just stay there, Hermione," Isaac muttered. He quickly flourished his wand, and Hermione found herself bound with ropes. Interestingly, he had not gagged her.

Keep him talking, she thought desperately.

Isaac walked over to a dirty grey couch and leaned over it, whispering. Hermione strained to see whom he was talking to, but could not make out a recognizable shape.

"Whom are you talking to, Isaac?" she asked, her voice calm.

He looked back at her, his eyes misty. "My wife," he said. "Zinnia."

Hermione slowly tested the strength of the ropes, straining against each bond. "Zinnia. That's a pretty name."

Isaac smiled, his face gentle. "She was beautiful," he whispered hoarsely.

Hermione blinked. *Was beautiful?* "Can I meet her?" she asked.

"Meet her!" Isaac snorted. "Soon, you will become her, and she will become you."

Hermione struggled against the ropes again, fear consuming her. This man was completely mad. She would not be able to barter with such lunacy.

"You can stop struggling, Hermione. You'll never free yourself." Isaac leaned over the couch, and Hermione heard the distinct smacking of a kiss.

But who...or what...was he kissing?

"Where are we?" she asked tentatively, trying a different approach.

Isaac straightened and walked towards her, his lips working convulsively. "Why? Do you like it here?"

Hermione looked around her. The room was small, overcrowded by the couch and a large workbench. Cauldrons and potions ingredients lined the shelves on the walls, but what caught her attention were the four glass jars on one of the shelves...they seemed to glow from within.

She wanted to scream, but she found she could only emit a pitiful squeak.

Isaac chuckled. "It is a humble abode, madam, but let me assure you, miracles happen here. Miracles," he said again as he longingly gazed at the couch.

He turned towards his workbench and muttered a spell to start a burner, his eyes alighting with the burning flame.

"Wh...what are you doing?" Hermione asked, her voice shaky. The pounding of her heart against her chest nearly deafened her. She was going to die here, alone with a mad man and a rotting corpse. A vile, slightly metallic taste bubbled up from her belly, stinging the back of her throat. She swallowed, demanding herself to not let this man see her fear.

Isaac smiled at her. "Fortunately, I have enough of my potion left to kill you, my dear. I just need to reheat it and catalyse it. Oh, don't worry. It will take me two hours at the most."

Two hours. Not much hope in that. Who would find her in two hours?

Severus, her mind whispered. *Severus will find you.*

Hermione stomped down on that trail of thought viciously. Severus was in Azkaban. No one was looking for her. But if she could just keep him talking... keep him occupied, perhaps she could save herself.

"Could you tell me more, Isaac? I want to understand you and your work," she said, hoping that she sounded interested and not repulsed.

He glanced at her. "Yes," he said. "You might... appreciate what I am doing here."

"I would love to understand," she said again.

Isaac shrugged. "I suppose... since we have the time. And you won't be telling anyone, now will you?" And he laughed, his Adam's apple bobbing spastically.

Hermione felt a tear run down her cheek, but she refused the overwhelming urge to sob. She would not let herself be weak.

"Well," continued Isaac. "I am raising the dead." He looked at her, his eyes glinting, and Hermione felt a thrill of revulsion.

"The dead cannot be raised," she replied. "Your wife is dead, Isaac. She will not come back, no matter how many people you kill."

His eyes narrowed, and his nostrils flared. "You don't know what you are talking about!" he shouted hysterically. "You don't know the work I've put into this! The years of work and research!"

He slammed his fist hard on the table before turning to face her. He walked towards her, his hand raised, and Hermione attempted to flinch away, knowing what was coming.

"This *will* work," he seethed, backhanding her across the face. Her neck snapped to the side; she felt like her skull was on fire. She rapidly blinked away her tears and bit her lip, holding in her cry.

When she was able to speak again, she quietly said, "Then help me to understand, Isaac."

"First apologize to Zinnia, Hermione. You're hurting her, not me."

Hermione turned her head towards the couch. "I'm sorry, Zinnia."

Isaac sniffed. "Fine. I'll tell you. Someone should be able to appreciate my work."

She nodded in agreement.

He adjusted the temperature of the burner, turning away from her.

"It's my fault she died," he said quietly, sniffing. "I... I was so proud. The Dark Lord had entrusted me with something... invaluable. He trusted me more than he trusted Snape," he growled. "I fucking hated Snape. He never loved the Dark Lord as I did, and still Lord Voldemort seemed to favour him as his Potions master. I should have had that title, that privilege."

Hermione snorted.

Isaac turned towards her. "Do not mock me. I know how to make you scream, Hermione."

She shivered. "I'm sorry. I was just thinking that I am sure Severus would have given up his title with little regret."

Isaac nodded. "Yes. He was a traitor. Filth. And I tried to make the Dark Lord see that. But he didn't listen to me until..." He trailed off, concentrating on the potion with slanted eyes.

"Until what?" Hermione prodded him. Despite all, she was curious.

He shook his head. "I'm still not sure," he said with a frown. "I believe that Lord Voldemort saw something in Snape's mind... Something that made him question his true loyalties. Whatever it was, my Lord entrusted me with a most invaluable project."

He smiled, and his smile was one of insanity. His lips quivered with the memory.

"You see, Hermione. I was to make a potion, a Dark potion, to bring the dead back to life. Lord Voldemort had his Inferi, you see. But he wanted his most loyal Death Eaters back to serve him in the War... and beyond. I was to create that potion. You can imagine how honoured I was, being a junior Death Eater. It was my chance to prove myself, prove how much I loved the Dark Lord."

"A potion to bring back the dead," Hermione said incredulously.

Isaac glared at her. "You may not believe such a thing to be possible, Hermione. But you will soon." A spasm of emotion crossed his face. "Very soon."

She felt her heart rate increase at the threat his words held. She forced herself to be calm. She thought of Severus, of his steady gaze and his contemptible sneer. She wondered if he had ever felt all-consuming fear. She wondered how he dealt with fear.

Undoubtedly with belittling words and a sneer of contempt she said to herself, and the thought calmed her.

If Isaac intended to kill her, she would not go easily.

If she could only get Isaac to loosen the ropes, then perhaps she would have a chance. An idea came to her then, and she grasped at it desperately.

"How did she die, Isaac? Your wife? Zinnia." Hermione's voice was soft, and she hoped that he could detect the sympathy in it. She was depending on it.

He grimaced. "I... failed my task." He took a deep breath and continued. "I failed. The Dark Lord was unforgiving. Her death was my punishment. I never forgave myself," he finished, his voice little more than a whisper.

"I have spent the last seven years finishing the potion," he continued, his voice quivering. "But not for the Dark Lord. For my wife. I need her back, Hermione. Surely you can understand."

Hermione blinked, considering her options. "Of course I understand," she said thickly.

Isaac looked at her, his eyes shiny with tears. "When you truly love someone, you will do anything to be with them *Anything*."

She nodded her head in agreement. "I understand."

"And so I created this potion for her. Not for me, Hermione. I am not evil, or a monster, or anything else you... Aurors make me out to be. Do you see?"

"Yes, I see.... But Isaac, how do you know it's going to work?" she asked quietly.

He gazed at his couch, his face the very picture of pain. "I don't. But I have to try. My... work...my research, my equations...all lead me to believe it will work. Instilling the souls of others to bring her back. If it doesn't work, I'll try again. And again until she comes back to me."

Hermione shivered. This man would never stop killing. "Can... can I meet her?"

Isaac wiped furiously at his eyes before grabbing his wand. "Is this some kind of trick, Hermione?"

She shook her head earnestly. "No! Of course not!"

He narrowed his eyes suspiciously, but muttered a quick charm under his breath. She felt the ropes loosen across her legs. Experimentally, she shifted.

She could move. But she didn't have her wand.

Hermione stood up unsteadily, swaying on her feet as Isaac came near her. He grabbed her roughly by the arm and pulled her towards the couch. "I've applied multiple Stasis charms to keep her looking so beautiful."

When Hermione saw Isaac's wife, she gagged reflexively and turned away from both the sight and fetid stench. Despite what Isaac had said about the charms, they had either been poorly applied or they were not the specific ones used for embalming for long-term viewing. She knew this, as a discussion on embalming technique had been the high point in a singularly bad blind date with a mortuary technician during her student days at the lab.

Isaac grabbed her head roughly to face the bloated corpse. "Look at her. Look at her!" he yelled.

Hermione was forced to look. Various stages of putrefaction present. Zinnia's face was a combination of dried leathery areas and fatty adipocere, giving it a waxy finish. Her eyes were sunken and clouded; her small, perfect teeth stood out in a macabre mockery of a smile against her desiccated, shrunken lips and gums.

Looking down, Hermione noticed deep purple and white marbling towards the underside of her body. Large areas of her skin were covered with fluid-filled blisters, sloughing off in random patches. Hermione felt her stomach contort. Zinnia's green-stained abdomen was grossly distended...undoubtedly from the bacteria in the bowel, multiplying and spreading to liquefy her internal organs.

She wondered if Isaac's potion would really work. And if it did, she wondered what Zinnia would look like. She wondered who she would be.

Isaac was lovingly caressing what was left of Zinnia's face.

"Soon, my dear," he whispered. "Soon."

Hermione quickly scanned the room.

Now, she thought. I've got to do it now. He's distracted. His wand is sheathed.

Her heart was pounding hard and fast, pumping adrenaline through her veins. She could feel a thin sheen of sweat on her face, and she was trembling.

But Hermione Granger was determined.

She covertly shifted towards him, forcing herself to slow her breathing.

"Isaac," she said quietly, and when he turned to look at her, she threw herself towards him. They collided, falling to the floor next to the couch. Isaac's wand clattered to the floor.

They both simultaneously turned to look at it.

"Why, you *fucking bitch!*" Isaac screamed, and he brought up his hands to her face to push her off of him. Hermione, however, launched herself towards his wand, twisting until she felt it beneath her. She struggled to reach it with her fingers.

Isaac stood up, his face a twisted mask of anger.

"Bitch," he spat again, and he kicked her again, shoving his boot into her organs. Another kick, and a painful, hideous crack shot through her like a red-hot poker. Still, she struggled to reach his wand, but the ropes that bound her were too tight. She was helpless, and she couldn't help the cries of her pain and her failure as Isaac assuredly grasped his wand.

"Now," Isaac said as he straightened, his wand in hand. "We'll have no more of that."

Hermione succumbed...it was over. She had tried, but he had won. He raised his wand, a manic gleam in his eyes.

Tears blurred her vision, and she was helpless against the strangled plea for her life. "Please..."

With all hope lost, she closed her eyes, ready for what was to come, but a loud crash interrupted her final breath of life. She opened her eyes, blinking, wildly looking for the source of the noise when the front door blasted open. Isaac was thrown across the room, his body slamming against the wall.
