

Darkest Before the Light

by Celisnebula

Someone wants Snape and Hermione together – thinks they'd be a perfect pair. Kidnapped, separately via Portkey, they're trapped deep within a darkened, older forest without their wands. They've a tent and supplies enough to last a few weeks out in the wilderness... It's not a question of survival in the wilderness; it's a question of whether or not they can survive each other.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Part I

Hermione Granger wearily trudged down the hallway towards the underground public bathroom, twirling the golden Ministry of Magic coin between her fingers. If she had her way, there'd be a more dignified way of entering and leaving the Ministry besides flushing oneself down a toilet. Granted, if you flushed in, you ended up in the Atrium, but the return trip always left much to be desired.

Giving herself a mental shake, she exited the stall and walked to the washroom sink. She looked tired... good thing she had a vacation to the Bahamas booked. Sure, it was with her parents, but a free trip to somewhere, anywhere that wasn't London, was always a welcomed reprieve.

She sighed, and bent forward, her head touching the mirror over the sink. So what if that wasn't exactly true? She had no choice, she *had* to take this vacation, per her

managers' request. It wasn't that she was opposed to going anywhere it just seemed futile to do so now that Ron was gone. It hurt too much to go off to some place exotic without him when they had constructed so many plans to see the world together.

Still, given the alternative of going nowhere during this imposed time off and being available for Molly to drop in on (probably pulling Percy or some other poor bloke along to pair her off with) and being somewhere sunny and warm with her parents who'd probably go off on their own, she'd take the trip.

Giving herself a mental shake, she Apparated to the alleyway just behind her favorite take-away place. Concealing her wand in her purse, she strode forward towards the front of the building. Twenty-five minutes later, she was trudging up the three flights of stairs to her small flat. She fished out her wand and keys and let herself in, stepping over the nightly London newspaper. Dropping her purse, keys, wand and the bag of kung po chicken with low mien noodles onto the side table, she turned around to pick up the newspaper.

As soon as her fingers touched it, she felt a huge a jolt as if she were being picked up by a giant hook and whirled about. She seemed to spin in the nothingness of the Portkey forever, until suddenly she was dropped. She landed hard on her stomach.

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Part II

Severus Snape pushed the small spectacles back up the bridge of his nose. They had started slipping as he bent down to inspect the stock of lacewing flies on the bottom shelf. While the selection of ingredients wasn't as fine as the stock at Slug and Jiggers Apothecary, it was adequate enough for his needs. Deciding that the lacewing flies looked off, he straightened. The infernal spectacles slipped down the bridge of his nose once again, and he pushed them up with an impatient huff.

"We have an impressive, fresh stock of dragon liver," the clerk yelled out from behind the counter.

Severus shot the man a quelling look. "If I were looking for dragon liver," he said, pressing his thumb against his throat. His voice rasped out in a soft, almost monotone whisper. "I would have asked for it."

"We've also got some runespoor eggs."

"Do you mind?" Severus snapped. "I am *trying* to shop."

"I'm just trying to be helpful," the clerk whined. "It's part of my job."

"Well, don't."

"Fine, suit yourself," the clerk called out. Then under his breath he muttered, "Bloody git."

Only a slight stiffening of his spine betrayed the fact that Severus had actually heard what the clerk muttered. Deciding to ignore the dullard, he moved down the aisle towards the selection of alihostsy leaves. These were, at least, fresh.

He was pleasantly surprised to see the owner of the apothecary at the check out counter when he returned twenty-five minutes later with all the supplies he needed.

"Ah, Mr. Snape," the proprietor said with a small smile. "How nice to see you again. I do hope you found everything you were looking for."

"Quite," Severus said softly, placing his items on the check out counter. "Though I didn't care for how the lacewing flies looked."

"We could order some fresh ones in, if you prefer," the proprietor responded, sorting through the items Severus had set on the counter.

"No," Severus said with a slight shake of his head. "I really don't need them for anything pertinent."

"If you're sure?" he asked without pause, placing the items into a shopping bag.

Severus arched a dark eyebrow. "I would deliberately ask for it were they a requirement."

"Yes, yes," the proprietor replied. "Of course, you are right. Though, it never hurts to make sure." Severus merely grunted in response.

"Right then," he continued, as if Severus had not uttered a sound. "That shall be ten Sickles and seven Knuts." Severus started to reach into his robe pocket for his change purse. "We do take wand credit transactions," the proprietor said when he noticed Snape's actions.

"I find it is immensely less of a hassle to pay in actual coin," Severus replied placing the coins on the counter. "I dislike the idea of money being removed from my account by anyone but me."

"Indeed, sir." He handed the change back to Severus.

Severus pocketed the change and reached for the shopping bag. With a curt nod to the man, he turned to make his way out of the store. He didn't acknowledge the man's overly cheery, "Have a nice day," as he walked out.

Old habits died hard; he fished his wand out, prepared for any unexpected problems as Apparated to the first safety checkpoint. He waited a minute to see if anyone had followed, and when no audible 'pop' was heard, he Apparated to the next destination. Five jumps later, he was on the porch of his house on Spinner's End.

He tested the repelling spells he'd placed around the doorframe earlier; satisfied that everything was as he left it, he disarmed the protection spells and entered. He bustled towards the back of the house, placing his parcel on the table as he walked into the kitchen.

With a swish of his wand, the stove started, heating a kettle of water. He set his wand down on the counter as he reached up, into the cupboard above his head for a mug. The fingers of his left hand never strayed far from the slender piece of wood as he reached into another cupboard for a packet of tea. He peeled the protective paper from the tea bag. He had barely touched the inner tea packet when the Portkey activated, twisting him about as it pulled him through time and space.

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Part III

"Oh, bloody hell," muttered Hermione, pushing herself up into a sitting position.

"You!" Snape growled softly as he rolled over.

Hermione scrambled back, eyes wide. "Snape!" she gasped. "What...? Is this your idea of a joke?"

"Of course, I go around kidnapping young, nubile woman for my sadistic pleasure on a routine basis." He shot her a scathing look. "Obviously I missed my mark tonight."

Hermione flushed. "Yes, I suppose you have," she shot back. "But then, now that Bella's dead and Narcissa is on the continent, psychopathic bitches are in short supply."

"Ah, not so much," he countered, sitting up. "You're still here."

"Oh... you... you..." Hermione stuttered.

"Yes, do go on," he sneered. "Your articulation is at its best tonight."

"You sanctimonious arse!"

He touched a hand to his heart. "Oh, how your words wound me!"

"Oh, I'll wound you all right," Hermione muttered, groping around the ground for her wand. She came up empty.

"Shite! Damn! Blast! Bugging Hell!"

"Do you kiss your mum with that filthy mouth?"

"Fuck off, will you? I've bigger problems than you at the moment."

"Yes, I'd say so, stuck in the middle of god-knows-where... wonder who dislikes you enough to send you off into the vast nowhere."

"Pot, kettle."

"Ah, yes, but I, at least, *know* that people hate me, and protect myself against it."

"Yes, you've done so well. Off on a holiday in Venice, are you?"

"If only," he shot back. "Then I wouldn't be stuck with a shrill harpy."

"Yes, well, unless you have your wand, we are decidedly stuck."

Severus let out a strangled laugh. "Oh, that's rich. You're wandless?"

"I wouldn't laugh," she scolded him. "Chances are you're wandless too."

"I would never..." he started as he patted down the side of his robe. "*Shite!*"

"I thought so," Hermione said smugly.

"This is unconscionable!" Severus ranted.

Hermione cocked her head to the side. "Just a moment ago, you thought it was funny."

"Of course it was whilst it was happening to *you*."

"You're not a very nice person."

Severus snorted. "I never claimed to be."

"Don't get me wrong," Hermione continued as if he hadn't answered. "You were a right bastard as a teacher but that was understandable. Yet, I always supposed you couldn't be a total rotter." She shrugged her shoulders. "I guess I was wrong."

"That must be a first," he threw out with a sneer. "You, admitting you're wrong. The whole bloody world must be ending."

"Yes, well, I've been wrong about a great many things in my life," Hermione said with a sigh as she stood up. She brushed the dirt from her robes. She turned to get a look at her surroundings in the fading light. About fifteen feet away stood a small tent with a rock-pile campfire ring in front of it. "Well, whoever has done this obviously doesn't hate us *that* much."

Severus snorted. "Your Gryffindor optimism is showing."

"Yes, but..." She swung a hand at the lone tent in the clearing. "...we could've been left with nothing. So far, we at least have a tent. I don't relish the idea of sleeping outside in the middle of nowhere freezing my arse off."

"A tent. A tent we have to *share*." He gave her a scathing look. "I don't share."

"Well, you have to," Hermione huffed.

"What's to stop me from claiming it for myself and leaving you out here to rot?"

"The same thing that's keeping me from hexing your balls off, you disgruntled git!"

"Ah, yes... a lack of a wand." He arched an eyebrow. "Do you really think the lack of a wand will keep me from claiming it?"

Hermione flushed. "I err..." She shook her head. "I suppose not," she said softly.

"Quite," he replied smugly.

That comment was the final straw. Hermione straightened her back, giving Snape a haughty look. "I'm not afraid of you," she spat. "You may think you can claim anything you wish push me out if you want, but I'll not roll over and give it to you without a fight." She pointed her index finger, wagging it at him as if he were an exasperating three-year-old. "You'll share, and you'll share nicely."

With that, she turned from him and stormed off towards the tent. Severus watched her, torn between irritation and bemusement. Hermione Granger had been a vexing child; apparently time, instead of curbing that horrendous trait, had only added to it. Yet, instead of being annoyed and revolted by the brashness she displayed, he was intrigued. She'd certainly developed a personality in the years since she'd been his student. It might be amusing to see how much of a personality she had...

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Part IV

That sodding prick, Hermione mentally seethed as she stomped towards the tent. *As if I planned this!*

As she neared the clearing where the tent sat, she picked up a rather large stick.

"What do you plan to do with that?" Snape yelled from behind her. She ignored him.

She might not be able to practice protective magic without her wand, but she'd be damned if she'd blithely go near the tent without checking to see if it had any traps. If she poked at it with a stick, perhaps any booby-traps would snap at the stick and not her.

"I doubt you'll be able to do anything with that thing," he called out.

Hermione merely shrugged her shoulders without turning around. "It isn't as if I have anything better to use," she yelled back. The weight of the stick was rather hefty, so she adjusted her grip.

"Do you realize how absurd it is for you to be carrying that stick around?"

"I don't care," she said, throwing him a look over her shoulder. "I'm sure I could find something useful for this."

"It won't protect you from any magic."

"You don't know that." She waved the stick at the tent. "I'd much rather have the stick affected by any extra spells that might be set up around here than me."

"You're incorrigible."

She shot him an unreadable look over her shoulder. "I think that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

"I wasn't trying to be nice."

"I know," Hermione replied with a sigh. "But I'm going to take it as one then I can at least pretend that *something* is going right today."

"Oh dear, has the third wheel of the *'Golden Trio'* gone and had a hard day?" he asked in a sarcastic tone. She wheeled around, and even from where he sat, he could see how pale her face was.

"Do you have to be such a rotting bastard?" she asked, tossing the stick aside. He thought he heard her mutter, "I don't know why I bother..." before walking off in the opposite direction.

"If you get lost," he called after her, "I'm not searching for you."

"Fuck off!"

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Part V

Snape stared at her retreating back, suppressing the urge to laugh at her antics. Hermione Granger had grown up. She was no longer the young, eager to please, socially unsure and verbally inept teenager he remembered. She'd grown hard, almost brittle, though that outer shell still protected the soft inner core of herself.

Part of him wanted to keep poking at that brittle shell, wanted to see the volcanic reaction he knew was lurking under the surface. He wanted to see the changes time had wrought, wanted to see how far he could push her before she crumbled. Yet another part of him, the cautious side the one he normally listened to wanted to just ignore her. He knew that eventually this farce of a kidnapping would be over; it was just a matter of time.

It was obvious that whoever did this constructed the whole escapade with unfailing care. Whether for good or ill intentions remained to be seen, but for now, he and Hermione were relatively comfortable.

There was actually no *real* reason why he should contain himself.

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Part VI

It was nearly dark when Hermione walked back into camp. She hadn't planned to return, but somehow she had ended up in the exact same spot she'd left. Snape had been busy during the time she'd been gone. Near the front of the tent was a fire pit with a nice little blaze in the center. He'd placed a large rock near it. On top was a pan. She assumed he planned to use it as either a counter top or a tabletop.

She walked closer to the fire, noticing that Snape had already made himself at home. Inside the pan were the dregs of can of beans -- the bastard must've eaten the entire thing.

"Here," Severus said, startling her out of her black musings. He handed her a metal plate with beans and some sort of meat on it. Hermione gave him a suspicious look.

"Take it," he said, pushing the plate towards her again when she made no move to take it. "I'd rather you eat, even if I am *sharing*, then have to listen to you complain all night about how hungry you are."

"I don't want it," she said, ignoring the plate in his hand.

"Now you're just being childish," he said, thrusting the plate into her hand. "Eat the damn food and be glad to have it."

Hermione gave him a mutinous glare, and was tempted to toss the food on the ground, but the hunger pains in her stomach, and her practical nature won out.

"Fine," she said through gritted teeth.

"Good girl. Glad to see you have *some* common sense," he muttered, walking away. Hermione watched as he walked around to the other side of the tent.

She brought the plate up to her nose and gave it a small sniff. It didn't smell off, though if Snape really wanted to poison her, he could probably do it with something that had neither a taste nor a smell. Her stomach rumbled painfully at the scent of the beans.

"Just eat it already," Snape yelled from the other side of the tent.

With a sigh, she sat down on one of the rocks near the campfire and took a small bite. Strangely enough, beans had never tasted so good.

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Part VII

"I sleep nude," Snape said, walking towards the fire.

"What's that?" Hermione asked in a sleepy tone. She'd been slowly nodding off as she sat on the hard rock in front of the nice, toasty fire.

"I said I sleep nude," he replied moving into the light. He had lost his robe sometime between handing her the plate of beans and taking off on his own. He was dressed in

a pair of dark trousers and a dark blue shirt, and it looked as if his dark hair was damp. "Completely starkers." His smug tone suggested that he was trying to shock Hermione.

"And I need to know this because..."

"There's only one sleeping bag in the tent."

"Oh," she said softly. "I guess you'll be wearing pants then."

"No, I won't."

"You you can't mean to sleep *naked* out here!" she exclaimed, her cheeks feeling hot.

"I can and I will."

"But..." Hermione shook her head. "Surely you'll be... umm... uncomfortable."

"I will be if I can't sleep as I'm accustomed to."

Hermione worked her jaw, unsure of what to say to him. He slept naked. She didn't know anyone who slept that way. Hell, she and Ron never slept that way and they had been married for six years.

"Do close your mouth," Snape ordered. "It's perfectly natural."

"But we I... I have to share with you."

"This is why I'm telling you. I don't fancy having my bits ripped off in the middle of the night if you get startled."

"It's indecent."

"Then I suppose you'll be sleeping out here," he said slowly with smug satisfaction.

"I will not," she huffed. "You'll just have to cover up."

"I'm not changing how I sleep to suit your Victorian notion of what is and is not the morally proper way to sleep," he rasped out, pressing his thumb against the side of his throat. "You and your *delicate* sensibilities can sleep out here, far away from my *indecent* exposure."

"My *delicate sensibilities* can stand anything!" she shot back. "Go ahead, sleep naked. What do I care? You'll just freeze your bits off." She stood up and purposely strode towards the tent. "I'm going to bed. The least you can do is wait until I'm settled before coming in."

"And you're just going to ignore the fact that I sleep naked?"

"I've ignored far more impressive things," she replied, entering the tent. She thought she heard him chuckling outside the tent as she kicked off her shoes. *It had to be her imagination*, she decided, pulling her robes around her as she settled down on the sleeping bag. She was asleep within minutes.

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Part VIII

Severus sat on the rock Hermione abandoned, poking at the fire with the stick she'd brandished earlier. She had bristled, just as he intended though the flush that crept up her cheeks had been quite becoming.

Shite! Quite becoming? He grimaced at the internal thought as he thrust the stick into the fire, causing the flames to flare up. The last thing he needed was to find Hermione Granger becoming. Obviously, he'd been alone for far, far too long. *Hermione Granger becoming?* That was the last thing he needed to be thinking.

Shaking his head, as if the action could dispel the errant thought of Hermione Granger's attractiveness from his head, he reached over and grabbed another log. He slowly fed it to the fire, watching the flames flare wildly as the wood was consumed. He'd stay out here for a bit no sense in waving a red flag at temptation.

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Part IX

Hermione felt warm and cozy. She snuggled in closer. Hair prickled against her palm as she slid it over the warm body next to her in her sleep.

"If you keep doing that," said a sleepy voice next to her ear, "I'm going to think you actually *like* the fact that I'm naked. Not that I mind a little tickle the pickle."

It was as if someone had dumped a bucket of ice-cold water on her head. Hermione yanked her hand back and rolled away from him in one small, jerky movement.

"I uh..." She sat up, scooting out of the sleeping bag, making sure she didn't brush up against him as she moved. She quickly stood up, adjusting her shirt. "I'm going... I need to... nature call." Hermione wrinkled her nose. "I'll just let you get dressed."

She grabbed her crumpled outer robe and pushed the flap of the tent forward as she scrambled out. She suppressed a shiver as the cold air attacked her warm, sleep-drenched body. She threw her outer robe on over her mussed clothing and set out to find a likely spot.

If I had to be kidnapped, why did it have to be camping? She moaned internally as she searched for a spot that wasn't too close to their current living area. She'd had enough camping during her defunct seventh year and that was with people she actually *liked*. This was akin to hell.

She sighed; bunching her outer robes around her waist as she deftly unclasped her trousers. The cold air hit her warm skin causing goose bumps. She squatted, feeling gangling and inelegant as she let nature take its course, cursing as she realized she hadn't grabbed some proper leaves for the final step. Maybe she could kick Snape out of the tent for a bit after heating some water on the camp fire while it wouldn't be as good as a full-fledged bath, she could at least sponge herself clean.

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Part X

Snape was back into his austere black robes by the time he emerged from the tent. Hermione gave a mental sigh of relief; this was more like the intimidating man from her youth. A normal Snape she could handle.

"There's some scrambled eggs still in the pan," she told him.

He arched an eyebrow. "You cooked?"

Hermione shrugged. "I've been known to."

He walked over to the large rock near the fire pit and started scraping the eggs onto a metal plate. "Where'd you find the eggs?"

"They were with the supplies."

"Well, that answers one of the questions I had."

"What?" she asked.

"We didn't have any eggs last night, so obviously, whoever did this doesn't want us to starve. We'll probably get supplies on a fairly regular basis."

"They could've included toilet paper," Hermione grumbled in a low voice.

Snape barked out a harsh laugh. "That proves that no *woman* is behind this."

"How so?"

"Well, would you have forgotten such a thing?"

Hermione shook her head no.

"Men don't think in those terms."

Hermione snorted. "Are you telling me *men* don't use toilet paper?"

"No," he laughed, startling Hermione with its rich timber. "But we're simple creatures. Give us a fire, food, and some sort of shelter, and we're pretty much set. Everything else is secondary and usually unnecessary."

"So, by that reasoning, it couldn't be a woman who thought this whole thing up?"

"It seems unlikely. Even you, by your own admission, would've included toilet paper."

"Well," Hermione huffed, pushing her hair back from her face. "It seems like dodgy reasoning to me. Just because I wouldn't forget toilet paper doesn't mean that another woman would."

Snape waved his fork at her; she watched his neck work as he swallowed a mouthful of eggs. "Woman are creatures of comfort," he said once his mouth was clear. "I highly doubt that toilet paper would've been forgotten. Hell, had a woman planned this, there'd probably be a fully functional loo out here, complete with an oversized tub."

"A tub would be nice," Hermione sighed wistfully.

"See?" He forked more eggs into his mouth and chewed them thoughtfully. "The longer we're here, the more I'm convinced it was all a man's idea."

"Even if you're right," Hermione said, sinking down onto the rock beside him, "it still doesn't answer who did this to us. I mean, it couldn't've been random, could it?"

Snape shook his head. "I don't think so. But the fact that we're both alive does narrow the field down a bit."

Hermione cocked her head to the side. "How so?"

"We could be dead," he said with a small shrug.

"And that's supposed to be comforting?"

"Well, yes," he said, putting the metal plate down on the rock beside him. "Think about it. It would be rather easy to kill us off. The person who did this needn't have thought about giving us food or shelter. We're in the middle of who-knows-where without our wands. It's nearly winter. There are a variety of ways we could die out here."

Hermione shivered. "You don't know that. I've survived much worse."

"A winter in a magical tent with your wand at your side does not make you a survivalist."

"But it does give me an advantage."

Snape snorted. "If you believe that, I've got a potion to sell you that will lead to true love."

Hermione seemed to deflate a bit at his words. "You know, it wasn't easy," she said softly. "We didn't know what we were doing. We could've died."

"I know," Snape sighed. "I'm not trying to make light of what you, Potter and Weasley accomplished that winter. The fact that you're all still alive, especially considering the options that were stacked against you, speaks greatly of your fortitude. Just don't think that one situation prepares you for this."

"I think you're wrong," Hermione said with a sniff. "Just because it's not the same. And yes, I know not having my wand puts me at a distinct disadvantage. Doesn't mean that I can't cope."

"Fine," he muttered, savagely biting off the rest of what he wanted to say. If she wanted to be stubborn, then he wasn't going to enlighten her.

"Fine," Hermione echoed, giving him a glare.

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Part XI

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" Hermione accused him two hours later. He was sitting on the ground, his back against one of the rocks near the campfire, drinking a mug of tea. "We should be *doing* something, yet all you're doing is sitting on your arse."

He turned his head and gave her an appraising look. "Just what should we be doing?"

"Well, we could pack up the tent and leave."

"And that served you so well last night, didn't it?" He took a sip of tea. "Just how far did you get last night before you found yourself back in camp?"

Hermione muttered something under her breath.

"What was that?"

"I said," Hermione gritted out, "not far but that could mean anything."

"Yes, I'm sure it could," he replied. "However, I don't relish the prospect of chasing my tail for hours on end only to find myself in the same bloody spot I started out in."

"We just can't sit here and do nothing."

"Then give me a productive suggestion anything other than wandering around aimlessly. What do you think we should be doing, Granger?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, that's such a helpful suggestion," he retorted.

"Don't be such a prat," she admonished, picking up a clump of dirt. Without a thought, she tossed it at him, much as she would've had it been Ron or Harry there with her. It hit him on the shoulder.

"Did you just throw dirt at me?" he asked in a soft voice. Hermione paled. She remembered that tone of voice quite well it was the dangerously quiet tone Snape had before he struck. "Did you just throw dirt at me?" he asked again, in that same tone when she didn't reply.

"I... uh..." she spluttered.

"I can't believe you're juvenile enough to throw dirt at me," he said softly. He turned towards the fire and made some motions that Hermione couldn't see. "Especially when mud is so much better," he finished, tossing a gooey gob of mud at her. It struck Hermione on her forehead and slowly oozed down her face.

She let out a shriek of outrage. "No fair!" she yelled.

Severus arched a dark eyebrow. "You have the audacity to screech about fairness to me? Especially after you tossed a clump of dirt at me?"

Hermione scowled at him. "Fine," she hissed, stalking over to where he sat. Severus watched her with a wary expression as she tried to scoop the remains of mud from her face. "I won't talk to you about fairness." She leaned over him, and he looked up. Her shirt gapped in such a way that he had a wonderful, full view of her breasts clad in a lacy white bra. Transfixed, he watched them jiggle as she smeared her muddy hand down his cheek, muttering, "I'll just take revenge."

He jerked back as soon as the cold mud touched his cheek and rasped, "Brat!"

"Not so cavalier when it's you with the muddy face," Hermione huffed.

"No," he conceded. "However, the view was well worth it."

Hermione glanced down and noticed how much her shirt gapped, blushing hotly as she realized how much of a view he had. "Pervert!" she yelped, yanking herself upright.

A small smile curved at the corner of Snape's lips. "Can't blame a man for looking, especially when the wares are so well displayed," he replied smugly.

"Oh you... you..." she seethed, stalking over to the tent. "You plonker!" Without a backward glance, she darted into the tent.

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Part XII

"Here," Severus muttered, thrusting a pan through the tent flap. "This should help."

Hermione stared at his hand protruding through the tent entrance. "Why are you being so nice?" she asked suspiciously.

"It's not a matter of being nice," he said, placing the pan on the floor. "I'd rather not sleep caked in mud. And since you're sleeping with me, if you're muddy, I'm going to get muddy. I'd really rather not."

When she made no move towards the pot, he exclaimed, "Don't be naff, it's only water."

"It might *only* be water, but I'm not sure I trust you," she said with a sniff.

"Don't be a daft cow."

"Oh, as if you've a right to talk, pillock."

"Slag."

"Sleeveen," she shot back.

"You're a right cheeky monkey." He chuckled.

"You're not too bad yourself," she replied.

"Now quit being daft and use the water before it turns cold," he admonished, moving away from the tent entrance.

"Don't think that this makes us even," she called after him.

"Wouldn't dream of it."

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Part XIII

"Are you going to spend the rest of the day inside the tent pouting?" Severus yelled.

"I'm *not* pouting!" Hermione hollered back.

"Oh, right, you're not indulging in an incredible sulk."

Hermione stuck her head out of the tent. "I'm not *sulking*, *pouting*, *moping*, or whatever else you want to call it!"

"Could've fooled me," Severus guffawed. He turned from her and started sorting through the supplies to the left of the tent. "Well, this is a surprise."

Curiosity caused Hermione to lean more out of the tent. "What?"

Severus shot her a sly look. "You want to know? You'll have to come see for yourself."

"I'm not sure I'm interested," Hermione replied, pulling back into the tent.

Severus shrugged. "Suit yourself. Just means more chocolate for me."

Hermione surged out of the tent at the word chocolate. "Oh, I don't think so, mister." She stalked over to the supply area and snatched the package of chocolate out of his hands. "You," she raised the package up, "don't deserve this."

"Neither do you," Severus replied, snatching the package back. Hermione darted forward to steal the chocolate back, but Severus raised it over his head. "I don't think so."

Hermione glared at him. "If you don't give me the chocolate, I won't be responsible for my actions," she told him through clenched teeth. She grabbed his arm, trying to pull it down so she could reach the package of chocolate.

"Blood-thirsty wench."

"Only if I don't get some chocolate," she said in such a serious tone that he barked out a harsh laugh.

"Well," he told her, keeping the chocolate out of her reach. "You'll just have to wait until later. We've loads of goodies, and this is only part of it."

"Really?" Hermione asked suspiciously. "Like what?"

"A bit of wine, some steaks to grill, and potatoes."

"All that?"

He nodded. "As well as the chocolate."

Hermione shook her head. "Why would they send us all of that?"

Severus merely shrugged. "Who knows?"

"Do you think it might be poisoned?"

"I doubt it. There are much easier ways to get rid of us."

"That's true," Hermione conceded. "Still, I find it awfully odd that they'd send all of that to us."

"Odd enough to avoid it?"

"No." She snorted.

"Right, then, who's cooking?"

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Part XIV

"I'll say this for you; you definitely know how to cook," Hermione said with a sigh, licking her fingers. "I don't know when I've ever had anything that tasted this good."

"You're just saying that because you want more of my meat," Severus quipped. He reached over, picked up the bottle of wine and poured himself a healthy measure.

"Top me off?" Hermione asked, handing him her cup. Severus poured the rest of the bottle into her metal mug. "I can't believe we've finished off the bottle already."

"We've still a few more. I'll go get another bottle," he replied, standing up.

Hermione took a small sip of her wine and then watched Snape over the rim of her metal mug. He moved with a casual grace; but then he'd always been graceful, even when he stalked down the halls of Hogwarts. His figure was very mesomorphic he had a solid torso, with wide shoulders yet a tapered, narrow waist. He looked long and lean with muscles in all the right places.

He has such a grabbable arse she mused to herself as he bent over to search through the supplies. That thought caused her to snort softly into her mug of wine. *Snape would kill me if he knew I was ogling his arse.*

"Here we are," he said, walking back to the campfire. He settled himself on the ground beside her and handed her the package of chocolate.

Hermione unwrapped the top part and broke off a piece, popping it into her mouth. She groaned in pleasure as the chocolate hit her tongue and passed the packet back to Severus. "This is so peaceful," she said, once she swallowed her piece of chocolate.

Severus shot her a questioning glance.

"Don't look at me like that; I can appreciate the peace and quiet out here."

"You've been quite vocal about your distaste of the situation up 'til now."

Hermione let out a soft sigh. "I know. But this is different from the last time I had to camp no one is trying to actively kill me, at least I hope not." She stretched forward, flexing her fingers in front of the campfire. "I could almost come to like this; no one wanting my attention at all times, no need to rush off and do this, or hurry there to do that."

"It does feel like that sometimes, doesn't?" Severus mused.

"If I'd known adulthood would be so... stressful, I might've enjoyed my childhood more," Hermione confessed.

Severus snorted. "I'd hardly call dodging psychopaths an enjoyable childhood."

Hermione frowned. "Well, no. But there were many good times between all that rushing around and trying not to get killed."

Severus made a disbelieving harrumphing sound in the back of his throat.

"It really wasn't *that* bad," Hermione reassured him. "Really, until our fourth year and Cedric Diggory died, it didn't really feel as if any of it were real." She shook her head, letting her curling hair fall into her face. "In retrospect, I'm appalled at how blatantly we chased after the mystery that was Voldemort we just didn't realize the real cost of

our charging into danger."

"Part of that was due to Albus Dumbledore," Severus said gruffly. "He had a plan for Harry, and you got dragged along."

"I wouldn't call it being dragged. Not really." She sighed, stretching a bit on the ground, her knee brushing against his leg. "Harry was my friend, and I knew he couldn't do everything on his own, I don't think anyone could have and Ron... I think Ron wanted glory at first, but then chased after Harry, too, because not chasing would've been unfathomable."

"You were children all three of you. Had I my way, none of you would've been involved with it at all."

Hermione nodded. "I think I can see that now you weren't happy at our involvement at all."

"Why would I be? You were all decoys little play things thrown out to capture the mad man's interest so that we could outflank him. It's really an amazing feat that there were only a few casualties at all those first few years."

"Hand me more chocolate," Hermione demanded. "If we're going to talk about depressing things, I need more."

He handed the package over to her, and she broke off another piece. "We could always talk of other things," he said, when she handed the package back.

"We could," she said, slipping the piece of chocolate into her mouth. She rolled it around her tongue before continuing, "But I think we'd still end up with a depressing topic."

"Probably true," he replied, snapping off a piece of chocolate for himself.

"What does that say about us?" she asked after a moment. "I mean, didn't we do enough suffer enough with Voldemort? I thought... Wasn't it *my* time for some happiness? And for a little while, I had that. Then it was gone, and I... when Ron died, I wanted to go with him."

"That's not the way things work," Severus said softly, draping an arm around her shoulder.

"No," she said with a soft sob. "It's not. And it's patently unfair."

"Things are hardly fair in this world," he told her.

"Don't be so reasonable," she admonished him. "You have just as much right as I to rail over the unfairness of it all."

"It does no good." He took a slow sip of wine. "All it does is cause a mouthful of remorse and a bloody harsh head the next day."

"That's it? That's your sage advice?"

"If you've come for sage advice, I'm afraid you've come to the wrong place," he said with a soft chuckle. "I just try to do the best I can each day, and hopefully it's enough."

"I suppose that's good enough," she replied, leaning back into him. "Sometimes, I do wish things had been different."

"You mean with Ron?" She nodded, sipping her mug of wine. "I never understood what you saw in him," he said, causing her to splutter into her cup.

"Ron is was wonderful."

"Yet hardly your intellectual equal."

"Why would he have to be? That's not why I loved him."

"But it must've been hard..."

"Not really. You forget we'd known each other since we were eleven. I had no illusions about Ron, and he had even less about me. Yet, despite all of our differences, together, we worked. He was... home."

"And now he's gone."

Hermione shivered. "Now he's gone," she repeated softly. "And sometimes I think I'm lost without him." She stretched, arching her back against his side; she tucked herself back into the small curve of his body. "I still stand by my first observation, this is really peaceful."

"Even if you're out here with me?"

"Maybe because you're out here too," she said in a slurred tone, her eyes closing.

Severus watched the flickering light flash across her face for a time. She let out a soft little snore and cuddled in closer to him. She was right; it was utterly peaceful. That thought startled him.

With a sigh, he eased her off his shoulder. She rolled against the rock and muttered something in her sleep. He stood up and stretched, his warm, relaxed muscles protesting. He corked the last of the wine, and stored it with the supplies. The rest of the food was gone that alone should've made him feel wary, but he was pissed enough not to care.

Walking back to the fire, he sprinkled a cup of water on the small flames. He used a large stick to stir the wood and ash in the pit and slowly poured more water over it. He repeated the process until he felt no heat emanating from the pit. He then gathered up some dirt, dropped it on top of the pit ashes and stepped down. As soon as he was sure the fire pit was taken care of, he returned to Hermione.

"Severus?" she asked sleepily as he lifted her from the ground.

"Shush, Hermione," he said softly, shifting her weight. He started walking towards the tent.

"S sleepy..."

"I know, we're almost there." He nudged the tent flap open with his foot and stepped inside.

"... 'S you... nice?" she asked as he gently placed her on the sleeping bag.

"I don't know," he answered honestly, brushing some stray strands of hair back from her face. Hermione let out a soft sigh at his touch and then rolled onto her side. He waited a few heartbeats, watching her chest rise and fall as she slept, before pulling off her shoes. Once that was done, he shrugged off his own shoes, followed by his trousers and shirt. He slipped into the sleeping bag beside her, and she immediately curled around him.

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Part XV

Hermione instinctively snuggled closer to the source of the warmth next to her in her sleep. Her cold body wrapped itself around the source, trying to draw in the comforting heat. The source tried to move, but she would whimper in protest, her sleepy body trying to cuddle close again.

"Hermione..." a sleepy voice next to her ear breathed.

"Hmmm mine," was her incoherent reply. She wrapped herself around Snape's body, burying her head into the nook of his shoulder.

His body went from sluggishly asleep to instantly aroused as Hermione rubbed herself against him in an effort to get warm. He took a deep, calming breath in an effort to slow his body's response. Instead of peace, he caught the subtle scent of Hermione even the small sponge bath she'd taken earlier couldn't diminish the small subtle hint of vanilla that clung to her flesh. His semi-erect cock thrummed with arousal.

Hermione shifted in her sleep, her thigh swinging over Snape's legs. Each movement she made brought a surge of blood to his cock. Try as he might, all he could think about was how warm and soft she felt. Every instinct he had screamed, *'Turn her over and bury yourself deeply within her'*. It took all his will power to lie still.

He didn't fall asleep until nearly dawn.

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Part XVI

"Wake up, sleepyhead," Severus yelled, sticking his head into the tent. Hermione was wrapped around the sleeping bag, her shirt bunched up her stomach, her trousers twisted around her frame. She merely rolled over at the sound of his voice.

He ducked into the tent and nudged her with his foot.

"Go the fuck away," she muttered, throwing the sleeping bag over her head.

"You're a right bitch when you have a hangover, aren't you?" he mused.

"And you're a fucking git! Now go away."

"Now, now, don't slag off on me, else I might not help with that pounding headache I know you've got knocking around."

"Bastard."

"Hermione Granger," he said in the tone he'd often used with students, "rise your lazy arse up and get out of the tent. I'll not tell you again."

"You're evil incarnate," she moaned, sitting up.

"Possibly."

"You don't have to be so smug about it."

"I can't believe you got pissed on such a small amount of wine."

"Oh, please stop being so loud."

"Move your arse, and I'll pour you some coffee."

Hermione groaned, her stomach rebelling at the thought of anything touching it. "That sounds revolting." Severus reached out a hand, intending to help her up. Hermione eyed the hand with a wary expression. "I don't think I should trust you," she mumbled.

"Quit whining, Granger."

"You're no fun," she hissed, grabbing his hand. She deliberately made him pull her up from the ground, arching an eyebrow, as if daring him to comment on her weight.

"I've never been accused of being fun," he chuckled, releasing her hand once she was on her feet. "Now, why don't you wash the dried drool off your face and act like a normal human."

Hermione's eyes widened in shock, and she ran a quick hand over her face. "Ugh," she let out in horror. "Go," she ordered him, trying to resist the urge to hit him as he left the tent, his shoulders quaking as he suppressed his laughter.

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Part XVII

"I would kill for a bath," Hermione muttered, leaning against a tree. "A nice, hot, bubbly bath."

"Not going to happen any time soon, Granger."

"I know, but I can wish, can't I?" She shook her head. "I don't know how you can stand it. Don't you feel grimy?"

Severus had the good grace to blush. "Err..."

"You don't even look as if you've been in the forest for three days," she went on, as if he hadn't made any noise.

"Actually," he interjected, "I've... There is a small stream."

"And you didn't share?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I'm surprised you didn't find it, the way you've been pacing around the area for days."

"Do you think I'd be this grimy if I had found it?" she practically shrieked.

"I think you're fine."

"You are such a man," she huffed. "I feel gross, and you think it's natural."

"Now that's going a bit far, I didn't say it was natural, I just said I think you're fine. It's not as if you smell repellant or anything."

"Ugh, please. You don't honestly believe that." She put her hand on her hip and gave him a scolding look. "I think you'd better show me this small stream, it might not be as good as a hot bath, but at least I can clean off the muck of three days." She pursed her lips. "I wonder... is it deep enough to actually swim in?"

"I don't think you'll want to go that far; the water's pretty frigid."

"What I wouldn't give for a wand right about now." Hermione sighed. "We could Transfigure something into a bathtub, heat the water, and be blissful for a few hours. Ah well, no matter. Even if the water's near ice, I need to clean up."

"I still think you're fine as you are."

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Part XVIII

An hour later, Hermione sat before the fire, slowly drawing her fingers through her hair in an effort to dry it. She watched Snape through the corner of her eye, noticing how every so often he'd press a thumb against the base of his throat. It was an action she'd seen him take countless times over the last few days, though she didn't know why.

"Why do you do that?" Hermione asked softly.

"Do what?" he asked, pressing on his throat.

"That thing with your hands."

"This?"

She nodded.

"I sometimes have to."

"But why?" she asked, her brow furrowed.

Severus sat back on his heels, surprised she asked. "Why do you want to know?"

"I just wondered... You don't have to tell me if you don't want to. I shouldn't have pried." She set her metal plate on the ground and raised her hands up in the air near the fire. She rubbed her hands together, trying to get some heat into her freezing fingers.

"Nagini," Severus whispered into the darkness. The snake's name seemed to hang in the air for an eternity. Hermione sat still, her fingers soaking in the heat. "In a way," he continued, "I was rather lucky. Voldemort wanted her to rip out my throat he thought that... that I owned something he wanted and that only my death would give it to him."

"The Elder Wand," Hermione muttered.

Severus nodded his head. "Yes, the Elder Wand. Even though he had it in his possession, he thought that /was the owner of the wand because I had *killed* the great Albus Dumbledore," he said bitterly. "It was inconceivable to him that the wand would pass to another's hands without bloodshed so it never dawned on him that it might have belong to someone else."

"Who?" Hermione asked before she could stop herself.

"Potter's never told you?"

Hermione shook her head. "He he spoke of some of the memories he received from you, but he never went into details about anything. I think once it was over, he just wanted to forget it all."

"I see," he said softly. "The night Albus," his voice cracked over Dumbledore's name, "died, Draco had forcibly taken his wand. That small act transferred ownership to Draco."

"So then the wand was Draco's?"

"In a way, for a bit."

"I don't understand."

"What happened to Harry's original wand?"

Hermione blushed hotly. "I broke it. I hadn't meant to I had cast the *Confringo* spell in an attempt to stop Nagini at Godric's Hollow, and it ricocheted around the room, before hitting Harry's hand. When the spell hit his hand, it broke his wand. I felt awful about it."

"And?" he prompted. He shifted his body, easing down onto the ground to near Hermione to make himself more comfortable.

"And what?"

"Well, obviously Potter didn't go without one for..."

"Oh, that's true. He stole Draco's..." Understanding lit her eyes.

"Exactly. Potter took Draco's wand."

Hermione shook her head. "Still, it wasn't the Elder Wand that Harry took; it was his normal one."

Severus shrugged. "Doesn't matter. Potter was able to subjugate Draco, hence whatever was Draco's now belong to Potter - that included the Elder Wand. Technically, even Draco could be considered Potter's property."

"But that's barbaric," Hermione gasped, clearly aghast at the prospect.

"Humanity is inherently barbaric," Severus replied. "Some of the oldest magic had some untenable results it is tied to our baser instincts; often to our own detriment."

"Still... to be owned by someone simply because they were able to overpower you?"

"It's a vicious cycle. Magic is drawn to someone who has the potential to be powerful. Those with potential often seek any means necessary to become powerful. The more powerful they are, the more magical ability they have, and the more they crave. Most people don't know how to temper themselves once they've obtained it all."

Hermione shivered. "And so the wand was Harry's in the end," she said softly. "Yet Voldemort believed you owned it because you killed Dumbledore." Her eyes darted to

his neck, a horrified expression flashing across her face. "He wanted Nagini to kill you for that wand a wand you didn't even own."

"Yes," he said flatly.

"I had always wondered what had happened in the Shrieking Shack by the time I arrived with Harry, all I saw was you on the floor, surrounded by a pool of blood. I " She broke off, a soft sob catching in her throat.

"There was nothing you could've done," he said before she could continue.

"We could've tried."

"I didn't want that I was quite ready to die."

"You can't mean that," Hermione gasped, placing a hand on his forearm.

Severus looked down at her hand; it'd been so long since someone had touched him with even an ounce of compassion. "Hermione, I was ready," he responded with a susurrant sigh.

"But, you " She started to speak, but he placed a long, tapered finger against her lips, effectively silencing her. Her nostrils flared and her pupils dilated a fraction at his touch.

"It's a moot point," he said gruffly, pulling his hand away. "I'm alive. Nagini's bite left me with some scars and her poison damaged my larynx, but it wasn't enough to kill me."

"May I see?" Hermione asked impulsively, leaning forward. She didn't even wait for his response. He jerked slightly at the touch of her cool fingers against his neck, then sat impossibly still. She felt, on some level, as if she were slowly petting some wild, predatory animal; he'd move and savage her at any moment.

"You're very lucky," she murmured, letting her index finger trace one of the scars.

"That's one interpretation," he replied caustically, causing Hermione to glance up at his face. He was staring at her his eyes incredibly dark.

"Are you always this difficult?" she asked, sliding her finger across the rough ridges of the other scar.

"You don't know when to stop, do you?" he muttered, hauling her into his arms.

Hermione let out a small gasp as his lips captured hers. It wasn't the soft gentle sort of kiss Ron used to give her this kiss was one of hunger; she could feel Snape's need to possess her.

She could only clutch at his shoulders as he slowly drew her tongue into his mouth. He sucked on it gently and then followed it as it retreated back into her mouth.

Severus tore his mouth from hers, panting slightly. "I'm not sorry," he told her, quickly standing up.

In a daze, Hermione lifted her face up, her gaze locking with his. Slowly, her tongue flicked out against her bottom lip. Severus groaned.

"I didn't ask for an apology," she whispered in a husky voice.

"Still, I shouldn't have," he said, watching her with a wary expression as she stood up.

Hermione shook her head. "I didn't mind." She cocked her head to the side. "Unless... you didn't like it?" Hermione stepped closer to him, watching his face. "You did like it, didn't you?" she asked softly, moving in front of him. "Because I did."

"Hermione..." he started, and then stopped, choosing instead to lean down and softly kiss her. His lips slowly moved over hers and she sighed, her right hand reaching up to grip at his shirt.

Severus pulled back, and looked down into her upturned face. "Are you sure?" he asked softly. The expression in Hermione's eyes must've reassured him. He kissed her again, moving his hands slowly down the front of her shirt.

She shivered at this touch. As his tongue licked at the edges of her mouth, his large, warm hands slid underneath the material of her shirt, skirting across her skin. Hermione gasped against his mouth at the feel of his hands, and he took full advantage, slipping his tongue between her plump lips.

Hermione tugged at his shirt, dislodging it from the waistband of his trousers. The fabric bunched against his back as her greedy fingers worked their way up, flattening against the plane of his back. He felt so warm and so solid. Heat pooled in her belly.

Severus shivered against her, his probing kiss faltering as Hermione's hands moved around his waist and up his chest. Her pert fingers found his nipples, and he groaned into her mouth as she tweaked them.

"Do you like that?" Hermione gasped against his mouth.

Severus groaned and pulled her tight against him. "You've no idea. None at all."

Hermione laughed and tweaked his nipples again, raking her nails slightly across the puckered ridge.

"Do that again," he ordered.

"Hold on," she told him, pulling her hands out from under his shirt. He moaned in protest. The buttons of his shirt were so bloody small she ended up just pulling the shirt open, causing the buttons to pop off. She pushed the shirt off his shoulders and bent her head down to his chest. He hissed in pleasure as her mouth latched onto his right nipple.

"Yes," he moaned as she rolled her tongue around his nipple.

He lifted Hermione off the ground and spun her towards the tent. The movement caught her off guard and she gasped.

"We should take this somewhere a little more private," he told her as he pushed through the tent flap. He set her on the sleeping bag and then straightened. He stood above her, his shirt agape; he could feel her eyes roving over his chest like a physical caress.

Hermione leaned back on the sleeping bag, propped up on her elbows watching as Severus slowly peeled his shirt off and tossed it to the floor. His eyes never left her face as he stepped out of his shoes, kicking them to the side. His hands drifted down to his waistband.

Hermione's eyes wandered down the length of his wry frame, down to the sight of his cock straining against the material of his trousers. She unconsciously licked her lips.

"Wanton."

She smiled up at him, trying to look innocent, but failing miserably. "It must be the company I'm keeping," she said in a husky voice, sitting up. "May I?" she asked,

reaching for the waistband of his trousers. He didn't say a word as she slowly unbuttoned the top button. She looked up into his face as she lowered the zipper; his eyes glittered darkly as his cock sprang free from its prison of material.

Hermione pulled back, eager to see his body. Severus wasn't a big man by any means, but he was wholly male. His shoulders were broad, his chest nearly hairless, his waist tapered and narrow. She let her eyes wander over his body, down to the rigid member jutting up from his groin. She leaned down and licked the tip of his cock. It was just a small lick, more of a teasing preview of what was to come than anything else, but it caused Severus to utter a harsh, guttural groan of pleasure.

"Hermione..." he moaned, clenching his hands at his sides. She smiled up at him and impishly licked the tip of his cock again. Severus gasped, his dark eyes fluttering closed as he reached for her. "Bloody hell, are you trying to kill me?"

"No," she replied with an impish smile. "I'm just trying to motivate you."

"Oh, I'm motivated," he replied, stepping completely out of his trousers, which had pooled at his feet. He straightened, standing before her completely naked, his engorged penis proudly jutting forward. Then, before Hermione could move, he leaned down, pushing her back against the sleeping bag. He placed an arm on each side of her head and pressed his naked body against her still-clothed one.

Hermione arched against him. She could feel the heat of his body through the material of her own trousers, sinking past the flimsy cotton of her shirt. Severus kissed her again, his mouth roughly taking hers. He kissed her as if she were the only woman in the universe, and Hermione reveled in that feeling. His tongue pressed past her lips, sweeping into her mouth, leisurely teasing and twisting against her own. His hands moved against her flesh, pushing and tugging at the material of her shirt.

The shirt was gone in a second, smoothly sailing over Severus's shoulder before his head dipped down to nuzzle between Hermione's breasts. He licked at the curve spilling out of her silk bra, sucking at the soft flesh, causing Hermione to groan.

She arched up, and his hands wound their way around her back as he deftly unhooked her bra. He pulled the flimsy material down her shoulders, freeing her breasts from their confinement.

Hermione's breath caught in her throat as his lips captured one nipple. He wrapped his tongue around the tight peak, swirling and teasing the sensitive point until she let out a ragged, gasping breath. Her reaction seemed to please him, because Severus let out a low growl, then moved his mouth to her other nipple, giving it the same treatment.

Hermione clawed at his back, desperately trying to breathe in the onslaught of so many wonderful sensations. Her hips moved restlessly against him, her need to feel him inside of her mounting.

She pushed at him, pushing that glorious mouth away from her breasts, gasping, "Take these off..." All the while pushing at her trousers.

Severus gave her a sizzling look as he helped tug the offending material down her legs. His fingers hooked the elastic of her silk knickers and dragged them down too. He tossed them somewhere behind them.

Hermione moaned in pleasure as his hands touched her; it felt electric because this time there was nothing between her flesh and his hands.

Severus tried to pin her to the sleeping bag, but Hermione met him halfway, pushing him back until he was sitting beside her. She grabbed at his hands before they could continue to wander over her body. That earned her a haughty look.

She leaned in towards his chest and whispered, "Not so fast," before licking at his nipple.

"You're going to kill me," he gasped out.

"No," she told him as she leaned in, casing him to fall back against the sleeping bag. "Just torture you a bit." She released his hands and straddled him as she nipped at his neck, her tongue tracing the path of the scar. His eyes closed and his hands gripped at her waist.

He licked his lips, his voice all hoarse and breathy as he called her a sadist. He rocked his hips up, positioning his cock at the crux of her sex. Hermione arched her back as he flexed up, sheathing himself fully inside of her. Hermione whimpered in pleasure, a strangled, "Yes..." hissing from her lips.

Severus reached up and pulled her down, groaning as his lips captured hers. He flexed his hips, arching up as his tongue swooped into her mouth, the tandem movements making Hermione squirm against him.

Back and forth they rocked, Hermione's hips rising and falling as she rode him, sometimes only taking a part of him into her flesh, other times taking the full length of him as deeply into her as possible.

Hermione placed her hands on his chest, using him for leverage as she moved against him at a faster pace. Her thighs flexed, the muscles tensing as she threw her head back in pleasure.

Severus slipped a hand down between them, his fingers searching until they landed on her clit. Hermione let out a strangled gasp. He stroked her clit slowly, relishing the way her inner muscles clenched around his cock with every light touch.

Severus arched up, his hand teasing at Hermione's clit as his cock moved inside of her with first a shallow, then a deep thrust, alternating until Hermione thought she'd go insane.

"Please," she whispered.

He moved both hands to her hips and moved her body with his, the thrusts becoming almost sharp and brutal. Hermione shifted a bit, and then suddenly she jerked, letting out a keening cry. Her eyes rolled back as she convulsed around him, the power of her orgasm clenching around him.

Severus let out a harsh groan, thrusting up one last time as his own orgasm overtook him.

Hermione collapsed against Severus's chest, her breath ragged and quick. Severus's hands stroked her back, slowly sliding over the curve of her spine as she tried to recover. He kissed the side of her neck, and she groaned in protest as he moved, easing them both onto their sides.

"That... that was..." she gasped out, trying to find the right words.

"Shush," he told her, placing a long, tapered finger against her lips.

Hermione opened her mouth, wanting to protest, but something in his eyes belayed her. She ducked her head, nuzzling against his chest as she closed her eyes. He let out a soft breath, reached over, and pulled what he could of the sleeping bag over them.

@@@Part XIX

Severus was not in the tent when Hermione woke up. She sat up slowly, ignoring the dull ache of her muscles. Her trousers, knickers, bra and shirt were at the edge of the tent where Severus had thrown them the night before. She scooted down the sleeping bag and reached for them. The cold air attacked her warm skin as she pulled her clothes on.

She pushed a shaky hand through her hair, knowing it wasn't going to do much good as she debated whether to sit in the tent a bit longer or head outside. He was sitting

on one of the rocks near the fire pit when she finally emerged from the tent.

"Do you regret it?" she asked before she could stop herself.

His head jerked up at the sound of her voice, and he turned towards her. "No."

Hermione bit her lip, worrying the bottom portion with her teeth. Indecision was etched all over her face. She felt odd. The night before she had felt more alive than she had in years, yet this morning, waking up alone had caused nothing but doubts.

"I last night..." she started to say, but stopped. She let out a frustrated sigh. "I'm not very good at this," she admitted.

"I've no complaints."

"But... you..."

"I thought you might like some privacy this morning."

"Oh. *Oh!* Privacy! That... was thoughtful."

"But not necessarily what you wanted?"

"No," she said in a miserable voice. "I was afraid that you were disappointed and had left."

He stood up and walked over to her, tucking a thumb under her chin, he pushed her face up. "I was having similar thoughts and wanted to spare you any awkwardness."

"I wish you had stayed."

"What do you want from me? From this?" he asked her, his voice rasping out in some unnamed emotion.

"I don't know," she admitted. Her teeth pulled on her lower lip.

"Hermione..." he groaned as he watched her pink tongue dart out to slide along the lip she'd just abused with her teeth.

She dipped her head. "I told you I wasn't very good at this."

"Shall I assume that it was just a one off? Have a shag with your poor, pathetic older teacher, then run back and have a laugh with all your friends?" he asked ruthlessly, his body pushing into her personal space.

"No!" she gasped out. "How could you ask such a thing?"

His fingers curled around the nape of her neck, and his free arm wrapped around her waist. He pulled her hard against him, causing Hermione to suck in a startled breath.

"Then tell me what you want!" he demanded, and before she had time to react, he bent his head, capturing her lips with his. Hermione felt a surge of excitement spike through her. Her eyelids fluttered closed, and her lips parted, allowing his tongue to enter her mouth. She let out a low moan, and Severus tightened his hold around her waist.

She flattened her palms against his chest, feeling the smooth fabric of his shirt under her fingers, the warm, muscled plains of his chest, and the steady thrumming of his heart beating.

"I'm a bloody fool," he muttered against her lips. Somehow his hands had moved, they gripped her upper arms as if he were about to push her away.

"What?" Hermione asked groggily, pulling back. Severus stared at her swollen lips, let out a strangled curse, and then pulled her hard against his chest again. Hermione's mouth willingly opened, accepting the ferocious onslaught of his kiss. Warmth flooded through Hermione's body, and she moaned into his mouth.

Severus broke the kiss again and started to shift his body. Hermione gripped at his shirt, trying to forestall his movement. She might not have been able to answer his questions before, but in this moment, she knew she didn't want him to stop. Knew that she couldn't let him stop.

She opened her eyes. His face came into sharp focus above hers, his features set in a harsh expression. A frown creased his forehead, drawing his dark eyebrows down above his dark, glittering eyes. "Hermione," he said in a hoarse whisper.

She licked at her bottom lip and he groaned. They sank to the ground, his weight pulling her down. His long, elegant fingers started unbuttoning the front of her shirt. She let out a shocked breath as his cool fingers worked their way under the material, and she let out a ragged groan as his hand palmed her bra-clad breast.

His fingers plucked at her nipple, and she arched towards his hand. "Oh, yes, Severus," she whispered.

"Ah, Hermione," he said, her name like a soft benediction as his lips skimmed across her flesh. "Sweet, sweet, Hermione." He punctuated each word with a well-placed kiss against the column of her throat.

"What do you want?" he asked her again. "What do you want from me?"

"I don't know," she gasped out, arching into his hand, which was still teasing her nipple. "You... please, Severus." Her hips writhed against his, and she could feel the burgeoning evidence of his desire against her.

He groaned and buried his face against her neck. "You're going to kill me," he muttered, his hot breath fanning against her skin. "I should leave you," he muttered. "I should just go."

Hermione didn't say a word, but when he shifted his weight, she cried out in protest, afraid that he had meant those words. But then his warm hands were at her waist, those wonderful fingers unbuttoning her trousers; in his hand slipped, easing underneath the material and downward to the crux between her thighs. Hermione let out a sharp cry as one lone finger slowly caressed her. She moaned, shifting against his hand, wanting more but Severus only teased her with a soft, single touch.

Each slide of his finger brought a storm of sensations. Hermione wrapped her arms around his shoulders and held on to him as tightly as she could, her whole body surging upwards towards his touch. Her body jerked uncontrollably, and she arched, angling her hips in such a way that would bring her more pressure, but it was to no avail. Severus deliberately kept his touch light and teasing.

He bent his head down to her chest and mouthed her bra-clad nipple. Hermione moaned low in the back of her throat and tilted her head backwards. He somehow worked the material down, so that her bra was trapped under her breast, and slowly slid his tongue against her nipple. The combination of his fingers and his mouth was overwhelming.

Hermione let out a strangled shriek of pleasure as she felt him draw out her nipple with her teeth. Severus suckled her, his teeth and tongue working in tandem with his slow fingers.

"Severus," she hissed, bucking up against his hand. He let out a soft chuckle and withdrew from her.

"Patience," he muttered, looming over her. He sat back on his haunches, pulling his clothing from his lean frame.

"What?" she gasped out in shock. "Shouldn't we..." She nodded towards the tent as he threw his clothing over his shoulder.

"What for?" he asked, reaching over and tugging her shirt off her shoulders. He reached around and deftly unclasped her bra. The sailed over his shoulder and landed not far from his own clothing.

"We're outside," she squeaked, pushing his hands away.

"So?" He placed a small kiss on her stomach, his fingers slowly drawing her trousers down her hips. Hermione shivered. He trailed kisses down, moving lower, causing Hermione to lose her train of thought. Severus pulled the trousers down her legs, yanking her shoes off as he pulled the material completely clear of her body.

He eased his body between her legs, sliding his arms under her legs. He paused for a moment, waiting to see if she'd continue to protest. When she didn't say a word, he nuzzled her thigh. Hermione groaned as he kissed her intimately, his tongue tracing around the folds of her sex. She whimpered, arching up, her fingers threading through his hair.

A hand made its way up between her thighs, his fingers probing her as his mouth and tongue teased her clit. Her hips moved against his mouth, her body shuddering in pleasure. "Please, Severus," she begged. He continued to stroke her softly with his tongue, each lick causing her body to jerk in pleasure as she writhed under him.

"I need... I need..." Hermione gasped out.

This time he took pity on her. He moved, covering her with his own body, and she could feel the engorged length of his brushing against her mons.

"Yes," she muttered, clutching at his shoulders when she felt the tip of his move against her. He groaned, kissing her throat as he flexed his hips, sheathing himself fully within her. He rocked, pulling back just a bit before surging deep into her.

She arched up, hitching her hips just so as he pushed forward again. She wrapped her arms around him, pulling him down against her and he rocked his hips, going incredibly deep. Hermione held on to him as he began to move forcefully, each stroke seemed to bring him deeper into her. She moved her hips against his, thrusting up, their rhythm becoming fast and frantic.

"Severus," she cried her body tensing. "I oh... I..." His head bent down, and he captured her lips, drinking in her cries of pleasure as her body convulsed. Her orgasm seemed to last forever. Then, suddenly, he let out a harsh cry, thrusting deep into her once more as his own orgasm violently streaked through him.

He collapsed against her, breathing erratically.

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Part XX

They both jumped up from the ground at the sound of someone crushing through the leaves. Severus pushed Hermione behind him, in an effort to shield her from an attack. Hermione scrambled to grab at their clothing. She pulled her shirt on and threw Severus his trousers. They dressed as quickly as possible. From the thick growth of trees, two figures emerged.

"Potter!" Snape spat, taking a menacing step towards the shorter man. Hermione placed a restraining hand on his arm.

"Now, Severus," Draco cautioned stepping into the light.

"Malfoy!" Hermione growled, narrowing her eyes.

"You're not going to hit me again, are you?" Draco asked, hiding half-way behind Harry.

"You hit him?" Severus asked, placing his hand on top of hers.

"Once." She gave him a chagrin look. "I was only fourteen at the time," she admitted sheepishly.

"Once was enough," muttered Draco, rubbing his jaw at the memory.

Snape narrowed his eyes. "Then I suggest you explain this situation to us right now, else I'm apt to let Hermione have her way."

"She really wouldn't hit you," Harry tried to assure the blond man.

Hermione glared at him. "I wouldn't be too sure of that, if I were you, Harry."

"Ah, come on, Hermione..." Harry started.

"Really, Potter, you're not helping," Draco interjected, cutting Harry off.

"You're trying my patience," Snape growled.

"Right," Harry gulped.

"Look, Severus," Draco said at the same time. He gave Harry a look, and Harry simply shrugged his shoulders.

"One of you better start explaining..." Severus warned.

Harry cleared his throat. "Well see... I knew Hermione had to take some time off."

"And, well, I knew that you'd not be missed, Severus," Draco interjected.

"You've just been so miserable, Hermione," Harry continued.

"You can't tell me that you're not lonely," Draco threw out. Harry nodded in agreement with Draco's sentiment.

"You both so much alike - so..."

"We figured we'd throw you together and see if something sparked," Draco finished.

"So you Portkeyed us out here, without our wands because you wanted to play match maker?" Hermione glared at Harry. "You really thought that it was a *good* idea?"

"We've just been over there," Harry said, waving his hand towards the west. "It seemed prudent to be near, in case you needed anything."

"Or killed each other," Draco muttered under his breath.

"You've been here the whole time?" Hermione gasped.

Harry nodded.

"You've been here the whole time," Hermione slowly repeated herself. "And you've been watching us?"

Harry flushed. "I err..."

"What he means to say," Draco threw in. "Was that we've been close by, just in case... you know... an accident happened or something. Not that we've been *watching* you."

"Yes," Harry said quickly, grasping the safety line Draco threw to him. "We've only been near by for accidents, we haven't been watching you. I mean, I certainly didn't want to see you and Snape going at it like rab "

"Harry!" Draco exclaimed.

"What?" Harry glanced at Draco, then up at Hermione's face. She had that look the one he remembered quite well from Hogwarts. "I um... what I mean to say is we've been nearby. For worse case scenario things."

"We've been wandless for a week," Severus interjected. "I would say that is pretty much worse case scenario for Hermione and myself."

"But you weren't in any danger," Harry retorted.

"Give me one reason not to turn you into a toad, Harry," Hermione said through clenched teeth.

"Um cause you love me?"

"Only a toad?" Severus asked her. "I can think of much worse things to do to the both of them."

"Now, Severus... don't be too hasty. You wouldn't really *do* anything to me. Would you?" Draco asked, backing away from the taller man. "I mean, we're practically family."

"I've never let sentiment stop me before why would I let it do so now?"

Harry's green eyes grew large behind his glasses. "Hermione?" he squeaked.

"I'm inclined to agree with Severus on this," she told him. She took a menacing step towards Draco.

Draco shot Harry a haughty glare. "If I end up as an eye of newt, you're not getting shagged, Potter!"

Severus snorted.

"Harry James Potter," Hermione shrieked. "Are you telling me you're a bloody poofster?" She whirled around to face him. "Oh, this makes so much more sense." She thrust a finger at him. "You're worse than Molly! Finally in a relationship, so of course, everyone has to be as *happy* as you are." She poked him in the chest. "It's..." She poked him again. "Not..." She poked him a third time. "Your bloody business!" She went to poke him a fourth time, but he moved back.

Harry raised his hands, palms out, in supplication. "Hermione..." he sighed. "Ron's dead."

"Don't you think I know that!" she yelled at him. "Don't you think I have to live with that every day?" She turned from him and walked towards the tent, her shoulders shaking as she tried to suppress the sob building at the back of her throat.

"This is a bloody disaster," Draco muttered under his breath.

Severus arched an eyebrow at him. "Yet, it appears you were a willing participant." He turned away from both men and went to Hermione. She let out a shuddering sob as he draped an arm over her shoulders and pulled her to his chest.

"Hermione," Harry called out desperately. "Don't... don't cry. I " He walked over to Hermione. Severus glared at him as he placed a hand on her arm. "I just want you to be happy." He brushed the tears from her cheek with the pad of his thumb. "You're the closest thing I have to a sister," he sobbed.

"Look, Granger," Draco said from behind them. "He we had good intentions. And, you can't tell me that you two haven't connected." He threw a look at Severus.

"I know you, Hermione," Harry said softly. "You wouldn't have willingly gone along with some plan just to set you up on a date you've been dodging Molly for how long?"

"Too long," she said wearily.

"Too right." He gave her a small smile.

"And," Draco interjected. "You wouldn't have been willing to either, Severus. I know you. So, we had to be inventive."

"Still, Harry," she sighed. "Can't you see how wrong this was?"

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I thought..." He shook his head. "I don't know what I was thinking."

"You weren't thinking," Severus told him. "Neither of you were."

"You're right," Harry said dolefully, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Now that we have the matter of your ineptitude settled, give us our wands."

Harry shot Draco a look, and he shrugged as if to say 'up to you'. Harry turned back to Severus, and pushed his glasses up his nose. "Only if you promise not to hex us."

Severus released Hermione and took a menacing step towards Harry. "The only thing I can promise you is that if we do not have our wands in two seconds, I'm going to beat you to a bloody pulp."

"I uh," Harry gulped.

"Severus," Hermione said, shaking her head.

He let out a sigh, and muttered, "Fine."

"Give me our wands, Harry. Severus isn't going to hurt you."

"You shouldn't make promises for me, Hermione."

She lifted her chin just a notch and gave him a quelling look. He sighed. "I'm not going to hurt you, Potter." Hermione smiled at him. "No matter how much I might be inclined to," he muttered under his breath.

Hermione held out her hand. "Now, if you please," she told Harry. Again, Harry shot a questioning look at Draco, and the blond man merely shrugged.

"We really did have your best interests at heart," he told Hermione, digging into his robes for her wand. He pulled the slender wood from his wand pocket, and handed it to her as Draco pulled Snape's wand from his robes.

"Harry, I'd rather not talk about it," she said, taking her wand from him. "All I want to do is go home, take a long hot bath, and forget the past couple of days." She wagged a finger at Harry. "You're quite lucky I'm in a forgiving mood, because if I weren't, I swear you'd be missing some pertinent bits right now."

Harry instinctively covered his crotch. "Aw, Hermione."

"No. Not *aw*, *Hermione*. I'm done, Harry. I want to go home. And I'm sure Severus wants the same." She shot a glance at Severus, and he nodded his head. "I'll talk to you when I feel more human. But, Harry -- it's going to take me a long while before I reach that state."

"Okay," he sighed.

Hermione gripped her wand, preparing to Apparate home. "But, what about...?" Harry asked before she could depart.

"What about what?"

Harry nodded towards Snape. "You know... him?"

"What about Severus?"

"You're not going to just take off on him, are you?" Draco asked, indignant on Snape's behalf.

"Why shouldn't she?" Severus asked.

"But -- you..." Draco spluttered.

Severus arched an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"Nothing," Draco mumbled.

"It's been fun, Severus. Perhaps I'll see you around," Hermione told him before Disapparating away.

"If you *gentlemen* will excuse me," Severus said as soon as she disappeared. "Hermione had a rather grand idea -- a long bath sounds just right." He flicked his wand and was gone in a moment.

Draco gave Harry a confused look. "Shouldn't they be thanking us or something? I mean, they did spend the week doing... that."

Harry shrugged. "I guess we didn't do such a hot job."

"Straight people," Draco sighed. "They're just bloody confusing."

@@@ Part XXI

"Should we take pity on them? I mean they did work so hard to get us together..."

Severus shook his head. "They should suffer for a bit." He placed his hand under her chin and tipped her face up. "Just think of all the trouble they'd get into if they realized their plan worked," he muttered just before brushing his lips across hers. Hermione rested her palm against his chest and leaned into his kiss. "Could you imagine," he whispered against her lips, "who'd they try to get together next? I've nightmare visions of Longbottom and McGonagall."

Hermione giggled and dropped her head onto his shoulder. "Be nice," she warned him.

"Really! I wouldn't put anything past those two -- they could try all sorts of combinations; Flitwick and Firenze, Trelawney and Hagrid." Severus shuddered.

Hermione groaned. "Enough all ready. You've made your point. Those two are entirely too dangerous."

"Exactly," he whispered, kissing the base of her neck. "Now, can we talk about something important?"

"Hmmm, important..." she repeated.

"Oh yes, very important," he said, taking her hand and sliding it down to his crotch. "See how important it is?"

"Oh, my... yes," she said huskily. "This time, though, I'd like a *real* bed."

"As you wish," he groaned against her skin.

~~ **Finito** ~~

Authors' Notes: This is actually based on the art prompt I chose to fulfill. I worked on the art piece, and suddenly I felt as if I just *had* to write the story that went along with the artwork. It somewhat fits your third story prompt, so I do hope you don't mind.

Many thanks to S for her super fast beta job; you know I love ya! Any mangling of the English language is solely due to me.

Original Prompt: Severus disappeared after the battle of Hogwarts. Years later, he bumps into Hermione in an exotic location. What is she doing there? Is she married? Do they have hawt sex00rs (yes please)?

Original Art Prompt: In the Forbidden Forest. Dark, atmospheric. Creatures looking on.

Artist's Notes: Created with ink and charcoal, and based on a stained glassed window.

Cancer survivors who have lost their voice box due to cancer of the larynx often need a mechanical larynx. It produces a mandible vibration to allow speech. While survivors can no longer breathe air in and out of their mouth, some survivors can work air into their throat muscles enough that they can speak without the mechanical device. This causes tonal vibrations, which, with some speech rehabilitation, they can turn into audible speech. Sometimes they have to use their thumbs to create tonal variations. I know this for a fact because my grandfather is a 15 year larynx cancer survivor. He was initially given an electrolarynx but he disliked it so much that he learned to "talk" without it.

I know, I know, y'all are wondering what this has to do with anything... Well, I postulate that the poison from Nagini's bite damaged Snape's larynx, so his voice and way of speaking will be remarkably different... quieter in some instances and more deliberate (as he has to use his hands) in others. Remember, not every injury is magically fixable in the Harry Potter universe.

Note after the exchange:

My grandfather, the one who I used as inspiration for this story died in Jan.... so the story is a bitter sweet testament to how much he impacted my life.