

Not Between the Lines

by *selinabl*

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Author's note: Hugs and kudos to Jadey for beta'ing.

"May I leave early today?"

Her question caused his quill to pause briefly on the parchment, the deep red ink spreading slowly over the material, unseen by his dark eyes.

Hermione had never left early, not once in all the time she had been working at his apothecary on her days off from university.

Granting himself a moment to adjust to the unusual development, he placed the quill back into its holder and raised his gaze to her. She was already standing at the entrance door, one hand curled tightly around handle while her eyes looked everywhere but at him.

"If your work is done, you are free to leave at any time, Hermione," he said evenly, although a sudden, peculiar numbness in his chest made it hard to breathe. From her appearance, she wasn't simply leaving; she was fleeing.

"Thank you." It was merely a soft, sad whisper, and she never looked back when she slipped outside.

It took the metallic snap of the lock, the final confirmation of her departure, to break through his emotional *Stupefy*.

A moment later, he was running downstairs. They had worked – laughed – together only minutes ago, until she had gone to the storeroom...

The moment he cast the Lumos, he noticed the small spot on the stone floor, shimmering with a mother-of-pearl glint. Something even the best *Evanescio* couldn't erase.

It was a futile fight to try and still his wild beating heart when he crouched down and brushed one hand over the slightly wet surface and brought his fingertips up to his nose.

The familiar scent of salty sea air and ancient books mixed with the honeysuckle aroma of Hermione's skin, confirming the two things he had already known. He had lost his heart, and she had dropped a bottle of *Amortentia*.

But what had she smelled that had caused her to leave, *toffee*?

Severus rose, brushing his thumb once more over his fingertips. Deep in thought, he climbed upstairs.

The scent of Amortentia only revealed desires that were already present, not create some sort of infatuation. Hermione would know that; however, such knowledge would cause her only more distress if her object of desire were unattainable...

Entering his office again, Severus' gaze caught on the empty desk next to his own, and he ran a restless hand through his hair.

Hermione.

She hadn't even been able to look at him earlier.

As if a part of her had been afraid he would discover something in her eyes, if she did.

Impossible.

Severus wanted to brush the foolish notion away when he noticed Hermione's book bag. It lay shrunken beside her chair, forgotten in her abrupt flight.

Without another thought, he grabbed the bag and headed for the door.

And even on his way out, he tried to convince himself it was only the fact that she needed her books for university tomorrow – and not the ridiculous tendrils of hope in his chest – that made him follow her.

He failed miserably.

Eventually, after what seemed an endless search, he found her in the library at Grimmauld Place. She slept peacefully on the settee with her arms wrapped around an edition of *Hogwarts: A History*, pressing its pages tightly to her chest.

He could have lost himself in the sight before him, if only there hadn't been dried traces of tears on her cheeks; tears that caused his throat to tighten with uncertainty.

Silently, he knelt down on one knee and carefully withdrew the tome from her embrace, his eyes never leaving her face. For a moment she stirred, but didn't wake.

He turned the book, tempted to see where Hermione had searched for consolation between those pages and frowned when he realized it was a paragraph on the Battle of Hogwarts.

However, his heart plummeted when his eyes caught on his own name.

"... given the war-changing effect of the spy's life-long love for Lily Potter... too strong to be overcome by time or Voldemort..."

Severus' gaze flew to the sleeping witch.

But *she* had, with her intelligence, her kindness...

The book slipped from his fingers, hitting the floor with a loud thud, and a pair of hazel eyes fluttered open.

"Severus?" Hermione yawned, rubbing her eyes and sitting up. "What are you doing here?"

"I – you forgot your book bag," he said, a bit lame, searching refuge in the indisputable fact as he held it out to her.

Her brow furrowed and a shadow fell across her face, as if her memories of the afternoon were slowly returning.

"Oh – well, thank you, then. However, I could have collected it –"

"Hermione, I know that," he said, picking the fallen book from the floor and moving to sit next to her on the settee. "I am not here because of your bag."

"I wanted to speak to you, about this afternoon –" He trailed off and heaved a breath. "About your reaction to the bottle of Amortentia you dropped."

He watched her blanch, hazel eyes brimming with tears and realization, as her gaze drifted from his face to the book next to him and back.

"Please, I – I don't want to talk about it," she whispered, her fingers curling tightly into the fabric of her robe. "I promise that my feelings... I won't bother you in any way, Severus. And if you'd like to search for a new assistant, I would understand that."

He reached for her hands – so small, yet so perfect in his.

"Severus, please, I know that you'd never... I mean, you... Lily. Damn it, it's even in *Hogwarts: A History*." She looked away, trying to hide the anguish.

He grasped her chin, lifting her face to him, and savoured how the expression in those hazel eyes changed from surprise to longing, a mirror of his own.

"Forget the fucking book, Hermione. The truth isn't between those lines, but where my heart is; and it's in your hands."

She smiled when her lips brushed gently over his. "And it's safe there."