

Faith of the Fallen

by BulletTimeScully

In a world ruled by Darkness, two souls find solace in each other.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 15

In a world ruled by Darkness, two souls find solace in each other.

Disclaimer: I'm not J.K. Rowling, so I'm not making a single red cent off this. I'm merely dabbling in her wonderful world for a bit; I promise to give them all back when I'm done! Well, maybe not Severus.

**Just a reminder: there are song lyrics included in this part of the story; they're represented by the boldface type. Thanks!

Prologue:

October, 2006

Scotland, U.K.

She pulled the tattered green quilt more tightly around her shoulders, trying to block out the chill even as the fire crackled loudly, the only sound in the quiet room. Lying back deeply into the overstuffed sofa, she closed her eyes and waited for him.

This was their night, as it had been for longer than she could remember. They would meet here, and for a few precious hours, they would be together without a single thought for the outside world. No master to answer to, no looking over their shoulders for the glint of a blade in the dark, no lies, no deceit; only two souls escaping the madness, if only for a moment.

It would be only minutes now; he was never late.

This thought placating her mind, she closed her eyes, burying her face in the fabric of the quilt, and inhaling its sweet scent: traces of soft leather with a faint hint of firewood smoke and a subtle musk that could only be described as 'him.'

Awash in comfort, her body was just relaxing into the subtle edge of slumber when a soft hand caressed her cheek.

She opened her eyes and found the shining ebony spheres of her soul-mate.

"Tired?" he asked.

"Not anymore." She smiled, closing her eyes and turning her face into his hand, slowly kissing his palm. His eyes slipped closed, and his lips parted slightly as she took the hand in hers, slowly kissing each knuckle and then the top, where a wisp of dark hair tickled her lips.

"Mmm...", he groaned.

She ran her fingers over the sleeve of his robes. "You do realize that there are a myriad of other clothing options more suitable to the occasion?"

"Intimidation, my dear; it is my forte, remember?" he said softly.

She smiled. "I do believe that we are well past the point where I'm intimidated by your billowing." A dark eyebrow arched at her menacingly.

Laughing softly, she stood, running her hands up his chest and letting the quilt fall to the floor. His mouth fell open as he took in the sight of her. She was clad only in a simple black nightgown, its silk fabric reflecting the firelight in warm auburn glimmers, the delicate lace at the hem brushing lightly against her slim thighs.

"Intimidation, indeed," he breathed, and in an instant they were locked in a searing kiss. His hands twined in her hair while hers clasped the nape of his neck, two separate forces working towards the same goal.

Far too soon they pulled apart; she let him go reluctantly, raking his lower lip between her teeth. Breathless and lightheaded, their hearts hammered in their chests as they looked at one another for one long moment before sharing another kiss, this one chaste and gentle.

She brought her hands down to the first of the many small buttons lining his jacket front. Taking him firmly by the collar, she turned him around and gently pushed him down onto her recently vacated place on the sofa.

The fire threw his face into soft relief, and she felt its faint warmth on her back as she moved to straddle his lap, running the knuckles of both hands reverently over his cheeks. Never breaking eye contact, he gave her a small, sad smile, which in itself said more than any words ever could.

"Spend all your time waiting

For that second chance

For a break that would make it okay

There's always some reason to feel not good enough..."

She closed her eyes and leaned her forehead against his. "I love you."

"*Always?*" came his soft baritone.

"Always."

"And it's hard at the end of the day

I need some distraction,

Oh, beautiful release

Memories seep from my veins..."

He opened his eyes and took her face in his hands; he kissed her slowly, deliberately.

Small fingers ran through his long, dark hair as he parted her lips, his tongue tasting hers as she deepened the embrace.

Pulling apart from him, she set those same nimble fingers to work on his jacket front. After unclasping the first few ebony buttons, she pulled his collar open and placed warm, lingering kisses at the base of his jaw.

He sighed softly, closing his eyes as he leaned his head back against the sofa, exposing more of his soft, pale skin. His hands moved down to her thighs and slid underneath the fabric of her gown, coming to rest on her hips. He returned her nip to the skin of his neck with a firm squeeze to her waist and an upward thrust of his hips.

Finally, after a slow, torturous descent down his front, she was able to push his coat open and begin removing the other barriers that separated her skin from his. She began with his tie. She gave it a firm tug, pulling it free with a soft 'sshhhh.' Sliding it slowly from around his neck, she tossed it, forgotten, onto the floor.

His white tailored undershirt was soft under her fingers as she smoothly laid open its ivory buttons. She always smiled at the contrast of colors, black and white. They were such a contradiction to this complex man who had lived most of his life in shades of gray, neither here nor there. The only unwavering, immovable truth in either of their lives was their love for each other, a love that no one dared question or interfere with.

She was brought back from her thoughts as finally his pale skin was exposed as she pushed the fabric aside. He moaned softly, his tongue coming out to wet his lips as she placed her warm mouth, and occasionally her teeth, again and again against his hot flesh.

With each subsequent touch of her flesh to his, his breath came faster, heavier.

His strong hands caressed her skin and she could feel the small calluses on the tips of his fingers as they pressed into the crest of her hips.

When she finally reached the last button, she pulled the shirt from the hem of his black trousers and pulled on his lapels, urging him to sit forward. He did so, and she pushed both jacket and undershirt back off his shoulders. When he pulled his arms from the sleeves, the cool air hit his heated skin like a branding iron, causing gooseflesh to pepper his arms and his nipples to harden into tight peaks.

Still, he never took his eyes from her. He watched her as she looked at him, still wanting to see how she reacted to him.

Even after all this time, she was still marveled and somewhat saddened by the sight of him: he possessed a long lean frame, lightly muscled, and had strong, wide shoulders. His chest was brushed with a few dark hairs that ran in a dark line downwards before disappearing below the waistband of his slacks. His body was a landscape of scars, mostly old injuries, but with a few newer acquisitions standing out in harsh pink lines. All were testament to the life he led, the consequences of falling into a madman's disfavor... or doing his will.

She ran the knuckles of her hand slowly over his cheek and down his neck, tracing one long white scar that began under his right ear and ran down over his collarbone, across his sternum, down over his lean stomach, finally coming to an end just above his left hip. Both their lives had changed the night he had received it, the night he almost traded his life for hers.

"Let me be empty

And weightless and maybe

I'll find some peace tonight."

As her hand left his hip and moved to his left forearm, softly stroking up the inside with the tips of her fingers, he instinctively pulled away. She stayed with him, grasping him gently.

"All of you," she said as she looked at him, adding to her declaration spoken only moments before.

His head was lowered and turned away from her, but she could still see that his eyes were closed, guilt and sorrow etched into the lines of his face. Even after years together, those two emotions still held him in a vice grip; he still blamed himself for everything.

She twined her fingers with his and pulled him up from the sofa. He embraced her as they came to their feet, holding her as if the world would fall away if he let go.

"In the arms of the angel

Fly away from here

From this dark cold hotel room

And the endlessness that you feel

You are pulled from the wreckage

Of your silent reverie

You're in the arms of the Angel

May you find some comfort here

You're in the arms of the Angel

May you find some comfort here."

"I'm so sorry," he choked.

Now holding back her own tears, she placed a soft kiss to his trembling lips, brushing his hair back from where it fell around his face. "There is nothing to be sorry for," she said as she pulled away. "What I did was of my own free will, no one else's."

"So tired of the straight line

And everywhere you turn

There's vultures and thieves at your back..."

"Please...", he pleaded, his voice heavy, "make me forget." The kisses he placed on her neck were hot, desperate, passionate. "Make me forget everything."

He raked his hands through her hair and down her back to the hem of her gown. In one swift pull it was over her head and tossed to the floor, forgotten along with his own garments.

"The storm keeps on twistin'

Keeps on building the lies

That you make up for all that you lack..."

They stood in the firelight, she in black knickers, he in black slacks and boots, each staring into the other's eyes, into their very souls.

Warm hands pressed into the small of her back, holding her tight against his growing arousal. She pressed into him, and he kissed her neck again, softly this time. Goosebumps rose on her skin as a shiver ran down her spine.

"Yes," she answered breathlessly, "let's forget..." Her words were lost in another searing kiss as he lifted her, his hands tightly grasping her bottom, and moved towards their bed. She wrapped her legs around him, feeling him pressing into her hungrily. Grinding her hips against him as he carried her, she sank her teeth into the muscle of his shoulder and raked her nails across his back.

There was no gentle lying down upon the duvet; there was only his passionate groan as his mouth found hers again and his hand sought out her warm center. She moved against him as he reached beneath the waistband of her knickers, seeking her out. After a few languid moments, his free hand gave a swift flick as he hurriedly murmured, "*Evanescence*," and the black fabric was gone.

Her head went back, and a low moan escaped her as he trailed swift kisses down her chest, taking each nipple into his mouth and laving it slowly before moving further down. His tongue darted into the depression of her bellybutton and she laughed throatily. He watched her face as he slowly, and with great deliberation, moved further down, coming to rest between her trembling thighs. She knew what he was about to do, but that did not stop her body from arching upwards or quiet the ragged gasp that came as he covered her with his mouth, laving at her with his tongue. His long fingers found the well known spot that made her body writhe in ecstasy.

"It don't make no difference

Escaping one last time..."

Placing a long, soft kiss against the inside of each thigh, he heard her whisper, "Please... please, I need you."

She reached for him then, pulling him on top of her, wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. She ground her hips against him as she traced his warm lips with her tongue, invading his mouth as his hands clasped the small of her back, pulling her firmly against him. Following his lead, this time it was she that spelled him out of his remaining clothes, leaving him skin to searing skin with her.

He placed himself at her entrance and, as he always did, looked into her beautiful, intelligent brown eyes, making sure she was ready. He was assured by the passion, the love, written on every part of her face, and as she pulled him to her mouth again, he pressed himself to the hilt within her.

Gasping against his mouth, she dug her nails into his shoulder as he moved within her. She moved with him in the familiar pattern of old lovers, and even in the cool air, a light sheen of sweat soon covered both their bodies.

They were quickly lost in each other, in the movements of passion, in breathless words of love, in the knowledge of lives eternally bound.

"It's easier to believe

In this sweet madness..."

They wore no rings, had had no ceremony or public display of devotions.

All they had was each other, the only light in a world of Darkness, pulling each other back from the brink of madness. That they were able to find each other in such times

was a testament to the Fates that they were meant to be.

The Great War had not gone smoothly; the Resistance had been crushed, utterly defeated.

Many lives were lost, many friends.

Whether or not 'The Chosen One' had survived was unknown even to her. If he did indeed live, then he had gone into hiding, leaving behind no trace of his continued existence.

Even without their Hero, the remaining few on the side of the Light never gave up hope, even when it seemed that hope had forsaken them. Perhaps one day the Dark Lord would meet his match, but for now the world lived in Darkness, hope all but lost.

"Oh, this glorious sadness

That brings me to my knees."

Lost in her lover's embrace, she could feel the tingle beginning in her toes, the warmth building in her center as his movements became more erratic. "Yes... please... yes!" she cried as a wave of pure ecstasy consumed her body, her mind, and her soul. She grasped at him, leaving angry red trails down his back, arching into his body as his climax met hers with earth-shattering intensity. His whole body stiffened as he released himself into her, pressing his face into her neck and holding her so tight that there was no doubt in either of their minds that she would bruise.

When the waves of culmination subsided, he rolled onto his side next to her, pulling her with him so that they were nose to nose. Each sought the others' eyes, and he found hers glistening with fresh tears. A few spilled over her lids, leaving behind shining trails in the firelight.

"Don't cry... you are too beautiful," he whispered, brushing away her tears with his thumb.

"As are you," she said as she leaned in for a soft, slow kiss. That they could find this little piece of happiness in a world filled with hate, fear, and despair was beyond all their hopes.

They lay together in the dying firelight, neither knowing what tomorrow would bring. For now, however, being together was enough.

As Fate, and perhaps Irony, would have it, they were among the lucky ones, the fortunate few.

His fate had been out of his hands for longer than he cared to remember. *Hers*, on the other hand... she had chosen hers when she had chosen him. She had said so herself; there was no other way, aside from death, and that was unthinkable if the world were to ever have a chance at the Light.

"I would do anything for you, Severus," she breathed as her eyes closed. "*I will* be yours for always."

"You're in the arms of the Angel..."

"And I yours, Hermione," he whispered into the quiet night. As sleep finally overcame her, he covered them with the down comforter and pulled her closer, burying his nose in her hair. He knew she spoke the truth; these were not hollow words spoken in the afterglow of passion. Her promise was fixed, unbreakable and undeniable. A promise made with blood... and sealed with unimaginable sorrow.

"May you find... some comfort here."

"Anything," he said softly, repeating her words as a single tear made its way down his cheek. As he finally gave himself over to the peace of dreams, his last waking vision was that of her small, delicate forearm resting atop his stomach and the dark form of a skull and serpent writhing slowly in the dying firelight.

~FIN

A/N: To be continued...

Confused? Well, me too. I initially intended this as a one-shot story, but then I started wondering how they arrived at this place and time. I will tie up all the loose ends eventually, so you will get answers if you keep checking in.

Also, please remember that this is the first thing I have ever written in the realm of fan fiction. Be kind, people! No cookies for haters! ;)

I had a dream about the first half, with them on the couch undressing each other, while the end simply popped into my head as I was writing. I'm a happy ending kind of girl, but I just couldn't resist ending it this way.

Evil, I know.

Personally, I have never read a story where Hermione has taken the Dark Mark out of her love for Severus. I see it as a testament to the absolute desperation of their situation; there is no way (at least in my mind) she would ever willingly take the Mark, if there were *any* other option. The Order has been defeated, The Chosen One is nowhere to be found; their world is truly in the hands of the Dark Lord. The only way for her to survive is to be with Severus, and the only way to be with him is to become a Death Eater, in a manner of speaking. If she had to choose between death or taking the Mark and perhaps helping Severus in his true quest for the Light, I feel that she would have chosen the latter. I also think that this gives a huge testament to her love for him; what other reason could she have to go against everything she believes in such a dramatic way?

****The title is the same as one of the books in Terry Goodkind's "Sword of Truth" series, which I highly recommend to any fantasy lover. However, just to be clear, this story is in no way related to TG or the SoT series in any way, shape, or form. They are two totally separate entities.**

****The song is "Angel" by Sarah McLaughlin. I think this is a beautiful, sorrowful song that fits well with the feel of the story. They are both trying to forget, for a moment, and find peace in their hopeless world. Thankfully, they can find it in each other.**

Anyway, please leave comments! I would love to know what you think and appreciate any constructive criticism and advice! Thanks so much for taking the time to read! Also, if anyone would be interested in doing a beta-read for me, please let me know!!! I appreciate any thoughts, concerns, or constructive criticisms!

BTS

A Light in the Dark

Chapter 2 of 15

Hermione's curiosity gets the best of her...

□

5 Years Earlier:

October, 2001

-Scotland, U.K.

A howling wind tore its way around the long turrets of Gryffindor Tower, vibrating the ancient stone.

A flash of lightning and a resounding clap of thunder awoke the young woman who had been sleeping restlessly in the top-most room, tossing and turning in her bed until her blankets were nothing but a bunched pile near her feet.

A cold sweat soaking her shirt to her skin, Hermione Granger snapped awake, hand automatically going for the bedside table. She looked frantically around her private rooms, pointing her wand into the moonlit darkness, seeking the demons, daring them to come.

When her challenge was unmet, she slumped back into her pillows, covering her face with her hands. Her body shook as she tried to hold back a sob.

This had been happening all too frequently of late.

Harshly swiping at her eyes, she looked back to her nightstand where a bottle of Dreamless Sleep stood, still corked. She would be damned if she was going to resort to drugging herself to get a good night's sleep.

After a moment of staring blankly at the dark blue bottle of sleeping draught, she suddenly snatched it from the table and threw it violently against the far wall. She slammed her hands against the mattress in frustration.

"Damn him!" she cried, her voice wavering with fury.

She slid out of bed, the night air cool on her skin. She was clad in a simple tank top and pants set, and she knew that she should dress more warmly, but she was determined to run from, if not entirely escape, her demons... *right now*.

Snatching her black cloak from the hook by the door, she threw it haphazardly around her shoulders.

"Damn him to the ninth circle of *Hell*..." she muttered, emphasizing the last word as she harshly adjusted the cloak about her shoulders.

She slipped her feet into her sandals, secured her wand, and stole quietly out into the corridor, silently warding the door behind herself.

No one crossed her path as she slipped silently through the castle.

The staircases seemed to sense her haste and made a quick path to the ground floor. She silently thanked the sentient castle when she reached the main hallway in short order.

Still seeing no one, she slipped quickly into the shadows and out the small side door leading to the fountain courtyard. Its covered walkway was the perfect haven for a person to find solitude on a night such as this.

A quick sprint through the drizzle and she entered under a stone archway, trailing her fingers over the soft moss at its edge. It was a small ritual of sorts she let the castle know she was there, and it kept her securely hidden.

The storm wind caught her hair, throwing it across her face as she found her way to what she thought of as 'her spot.' It was a recess at the end of the walkway. With the castle at its left side and back, and the open archway of a window at its right side, it gave her a full view of the Black Lake and the mountains beyond.

It was beautiful.

The moon still shone brightly, though blurred slightly by the increasingly steady rain. She hopped into the cozy space, which was still untouched by moisture, and tucked her cloak around herself. Casting a simple nonverbal Disillusionment Charm, she relaxed back into the stone with a sigh.

Reaching up into a tiny, hidden crevice, she pulled out a Muggle lighter and a pack of cigarettes.

She laughed to herself.

Hermione Granger, apprentice and brightest witch of her age, had been hiding a pack of fags from all and sundry.

She did not really care what others thought, but tobacco was not allowed on school grounds, at least not in possession of students. While she was not a student, she would still hate to set a bad example.

Rule breaker! her subconscious screamed, shaking its mental finger in her face.

"Oh, do shut up," she said to herself, placing the fag between her lips and cupping her palm around it as she flicked the lighter to life. She inhaled deeply, leaning her head back and closing her eyes. After a moment, she exhaled, the wind blowing the smoke away in violent swirls.

Her hands rested across her knees, which were pulled up to her chest. As she watched the ring of fire burn the white paper of the fag to ash, a small flicker of light in the distance caught her attention.

Her head snapped up she was instantly on alert.

As she had heard all too often of late, these were dark and dangerous times. It would be foolish to follow strange lights into the darkness. The Gryffindor in her boldly reminded her that it might also be foolish to disregard strange lights in the darkness.

Against her better judgment, she stowed her pack of contraband in an inner pocket and slid out of her haven back into the walkway. She took one last drag from the cig before flicking it into the darkness and drawing her wand.

Eyes never leaving the light, which was steadily growing fainter, she followed it into the night.

No! cried her inner voice, once again. **You mustn't!**

Ignoring her conscience, she walked quickly but carefully, the rain soaking her within a few minutes. As cold and wet as she was, she dare not cast a Shielding Charm or light her wand for fear of detection.

Detection from what?

From whom?

With the wards up, no one dangerous could get onto the grounds.

Well, no one dangerous that wasn't already here, she thought to herself.

If that's the case, then what the hell are you doing, wandering off alone in the rain, in the dark?

You have absolutely no sense of adventure she chided her inner voice.

Ignoring any more comments from her conscience, she watched the light working its way in and out of the trees on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. It seemed to be moving erratically... perhaps searching... but for what?

She slowed her pace as she came to the first huge tree marking the edge of the formidable woods. She stepped carefully over its roots as she cautiously made her way further in.

The light was closer now, brighter.

After a few minutes of trailing after the bobbing orb, she stopped under the branches of an ancient oak the forest floor was not exactly made for traipsing about in sandals.

Leaning back against the trunk, she closed her eyes. Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly through her nose, she regained her composure and looked up.

The light was gone.

There was no trace of it within her field of vision.

"Damn," she swore under her breath. "What now?"

Suddenly, the storm clouds swept over the moon, covering the forest in darkness.

"Fuck..." she swore again.

Fighting back tears, she knew she had two choices: she could stay where she was and wait for the moon to return, or she could light her wand and get the hell out of this God-forsaken forest.

As she stood in rain, dripping wet, debating her choices, a noise came from behind her. A soft rustle of... wings? Leaves? Something else?

Shaking and frightened, she pressed herself as tight as she could against the tree. Her cloak and nightclothes were soaked through, even with the partial cover of the forest. Her long hair stuck to her face in wet tendrils, the bark pulling at it as she turned her head first to the left, then the right, all the while fighting back the panic that threatened to overwhelm her.

Her breath shaking, she struggled to listen... to hear or see anything in the dark.

Maybe it was her imagination... maybe she was once again overcomplicating the situation... maybe she

From out of nowhere, a cold hand grabbed her by the throat, forcing her head and neck back at a painful angle and grinding the bark of the ancient tree into the back of her skull.

She barely had a chance to scream as cold, wet fingers pressed mercilessly into the sides her neck, cutting off the flow of blood to her brain.

She felt a hard point being pressed to her temple. She felt the pressure increase as her attacker dug the cold wood of the wand deeper into her skin.

Her eyes widened in panic as she frantically clawed at the long fingers holding her in their vice grip. Tension tightened every muscle in her small body as tears streamed silently down her cheeks, for she had no air with which to sob.

Terrified, she waited for the inevitable, for what she knew was about to happen, for what her own stupid Gryffindor bravado had brought upon her... for... for... release?

Release.

And sweet, blessed oxygen.

She fell to her knees on the wet ground, gasping for air, clutching at her throat with both hands. Her attacker stood silently behind her, watching her struggle for breath as the rain beat down on them both.

As her senses returned, her vision swam with red, rage swiftly coming to the surface. Still holding one hand to her throat, she made as if she was going to be sick, clutching at her stomach with her other hand.

NO!! her inner voice cried, realizing what she was doing even before she did. Slowly, but before she could be set upon again, she adjusted her wand in her shaking hand, making sure she had a firm grip.

Without warning, she flew to her feet and spun towards her attacker, water droplets flying from her body. Her hair whipped around her as she brandished the wand like a rapier and screamed the only spell she could think of: "Sectum!"

She was cut off mid-curse, the breath knocked from her lungs as she was violently thrown onto her back in the mud. It felt like nothing less than a violent kick to the stomach.

Her wand slipped from her hand and was lost in the darkness.

Once again, she found herself struggling for air, her lungs betraying her.

She writhed in the muck on the forest floor. If there was a part of her that wasn't wet, cold, and caked in mud, she could not feel it anyway.

Before she could even attempt to roll over or crawl away, her attacker was upon her again. This time both her wrists were taken in another iron grip and forced over her head. Her mind screamed in protest as her cloak fell open and her small top rode high up over her ribs.

Finally able to draw breath, she struggled against him 'him' being an assumption based purely on strength and screamed as he straddled her hips. His leather boots hooked over her shins as she struggled, holding her firmly in place.

"No! Get off me!! I'll kill you... bastard... let me go!!" She struggled frantically, bucking her hips, kicking, jerking her arms, and even trying to sink her teeth into the arm that was only inches from her face. Her efforts were futile.

She was held fast.

She continued to fight him until a sudden realization swept over her.

What if... what if he means to... to rape me?

Even as the thought leapt unbidden to her mind, to her horror she realized that she could feel..*Oh, god... him...* pressing into her thigh.

She resisted the urge to be sick as a cold wave of dread nearly took her into unconsciousness.

He was... *aroused...* by her struggling.

She froze.

Her breath came in ragged gasps. Her blood pounded in her ears as adrenaline coursed through her veins. Her chest heaved she could feel rivulets of water running over her breasts and down her neck.

She tried to make out a face in the darkness, if only to spit at it.

She was all at once glad for the enveloping darkness, glad that whoever was on top of her couldn't see her in her thin top and pants, soaked to the skin, leaving nothing to the imagination.

As if in response to her new level of terror, the rain started coming down harder, the wind whipping it in huge sheets around the two bodies lying in silence on the forest floor.

His hand pressed her wrists harder into the mud as she felt him lean in closer.

"Please..." she whispered frantically, not daring to move. "Please don't..."

A deep, throaty chuckle, dripping with mirth, came from the darkness.

He was now so close that she could smell the heavy scent of whiskey on his breath, the wet wool that was his cloak.

She felt the faint brush of wet hair against her cheek followed by...

Oh, God!!

... lips... pressed hot and wet against the pulse of her neck.

Fire and lightning shot through her body, pooling in low, sensual places.

Her breath quickened.

She screamed to herself: *This is NOT right... no... I don't...*

Her rational mind was being taken over by her irrational body.

Again, his lips were on her wet skin, brushing softly underneath her ear. Terrified, but unable to stop herself, she arched her neck into his mouth.

Teeth grazed her skin.

She trembled, but not from the wet or the cold.

Then, a voice, all dark chocolate and velvet:

"Don't what... Miss Granger?"

~TBC

A/N: For anyone that cares, I'm so sorry about the long wait! I have nine chapters so far, and they have all been looked over by my most wonderful Beta! I hope to post them once a week, so keep checking back! Thanks so much for R&R!!!

Demons In the Dark

Chapter 3 of 15

A realization... and a brief exchange...

Disclaimer: See Prologue.

Thank you, DelilahKelley, for all your help!

~*~*~*~

Then, a voice, all dark chocolate and velvet:

"Don't what... Miss Granger?"

Any coherent word or thought she may have possessed vanished at that moment.

No. Not **him**. Oh God... **please**... anyone but him!

She lay in the mud, in the rain, pinned helplessly. He held her body stretched beneath his they lay against one another as only lovers should.

NO!! her mind screamed frantically. *It cannot be him!!*

She had followed him into a thunderstorm where he had attacked her.

She had tried to curse him, and he had attacked her again.

She had wanted to harm him, but he had set her body on fire with the lightest brush of his lips, replacing her fury with lust.

He was her demon.

Her Master.

Severus Snape.

She was brought from the recesses of her dark thoughts when he spoke once more: "I shall... ask you... once more...*don't what?*" The words were slightly slurred, all running together except for the last two, which he emphasized with great care and precision.

Pressing her lips into a thin line, her anger outweighed her fear now that she could put a face to her attacker. She didn't dare speak she had no answer, but she also did not want him to hear her voice tremble. With a grunt of frustration at her silence, Snape rose swiftly, pulling her upright by her wrists.

Hermione let out a small yelp of pain as she was pulled to her feet before him. She was barely able to regain her balance before she was thrust back roughly against the very tree she had been hiding behind earlier. Again, the wet bark dug into her back, while at the same time his fingers moved to dig into the soft flesh of her upper arms.

"Answer me..." he whispered, leaning down to brush his nose along her cheek. She was shocked to hear the tone of his voice. It was almost, *pleading* with her. She closed her eyes and half-heartedly turned her face away from his soft caresses.

He chuckled softly in her ear at her feeble attempt to escape him. "Impudent girl."

Again, she could smell the sweet scent of whiskey on his breath. *Is he... drunk?*

The moon returned just as he started to speak again. "So *stubborn*..." he bit out, sliding his left hand up her arm and over her shoulder, laying it to rest against her cheek.

"So *willful*..." she heard him say, his voice only a hint softer as his thumb ran across her rain-soaked lips. He took her chin in his hand and gently but firmly turned her face to his.

In the sparse moonlight, she found his eyes for the first time. They were black shadows underneath his brow... dilated and glittering. As she looked into those eyes, he slowly leaned towards her. His words were barely a whisper against her face. "So... *beautiful*."

She knew it was going to happen, knew it as surely as she knew the sun would rise tomorrow. Her eyes closed, and she exhaled through her nose as he pressed his lips softly to hers. They were wet and soft, but ice cold. She found herself unwittingly leaning into him. Her hands moved of their own volition, twining themselves firmly in the hair at the base of his neck. Their mouths moved slowly, firmly, over one another, savoring the moment. In the back of her mind, Hermione pointed out to herself that he did indeed taste like whiskey.

He's drunk! her conscience screamed.

Jolting back to reality, she realized what she was doing. *Shit!!* Gently, she removed her hands from his soaking wet hair, sliding them down his arms. She noted that his cloak and robes were soaked through and realized that his body was probably just as cold as his lips. Her hands found his, and she gently pulled them from her face. Their kiss broke and his face slid against hers, coming to rest in the crook of her neck, his hot breath falling heavily on her wet skin.

"Pro-professor..." she whispered, a tremor shaking her voice just as she knew it would.

He did not answer as his hands released hers and moved to her waist. His face nuzzled into her shoulder, and he gave her hips a gentle squeeze, pulling her against him. She could still feel... *him*... through the cold, wet fabric of his trousers. The sensation was almost too much for her to overcome, and she mentally screamed at herself that he was not in his right mind. What could possibly have driven this hard, stoic man to such a measure as drunkenness?

"Sir...?" she whispered. She still got no response, only the press of his body against hers as his hands moved around to explore her backside.

Damn him! she cursed inwardly, closing herself off to the waves of sensation that shot through her as his hands tightened convulsively around her, pulling her even harder against him.

Taking a deep breath, she slowly ran her hands up over the soaking wet fabric covering his chest, pushing him gently away. He allowed himself to be moved, but only just.

It was enough to allow her to take his cold wet face between her hands. She could not help but think that he was going to catch his death out here in this weather. So was she, for that matter. His gaze was cast downwards, allowing rivulets of water to run down his face. His hair dripped softly onto her arms, where the water ran down to her elbow before falling to join the millions of other droplets on the forest floor.

"Severus..." she crooned, pleading with him. When she received no response with the use of his given name, she knew that whatever demon was plaguing him tonight had a firm grip.

A memory, still too fresh to be forgotten, but too painful to remember, fluttered across her mind's eye, but she dared not focus on it, not now not when he needed her, whether he knew it or not.

Closing her eyes, she steeled herself for what she was about to do, for what she was about to say. She had long ago promised to never again endear him with false words, even if it they were only false in his mind.

She knew he needed a severe jolt. He needed something to bring him back from this waking nightmare.

"Love?" she whispered to him, bending to look up at him beneath his wet hair, her eyes both pleading and questioning.

She could barely make out his own dark eyes in the moonlight as his gaze locked with hers. For a moment she saw painfully familiar emotions flash across his face: sorrow, regret, longing... fear...

... love.

She could see that there were so many things that he ached to tell her, to show her... and God how she ached to return those feelings. She held his gaze, seeing the fire and the pain therein, let loose by the liquor flowing through his body. He seemed lost, staring blindly at her, his mouth partially open.

Then, with a jolt that sent droplets of water flying into her face, he jumped back from her as if burned, his face becoming the emotionless mask she was so familiar with. He stood there in the downpour, in the moonlight, his black hair wet and clinging to his face as his breath came in ragged gasps. His body gave off a heady mix of arousal and fear, both emotions ebbing and flowing, each threatening to overwhelm the other, fighting to take control and send him over the edge.

Hesitantly, Hermione closed the space between them, slowly reaching out her cold dripping hand to softly wrap around his, which was slowly clenching and unclenching into a fist. "Severus..."

Standing there in the rain, she gently entwined her fingers with his as his fist unclenched again. He looked down at their joined hands, feeling hers trembling in his. She was *very* cold, ice cold, deathly cold, as was he. His brow came together in confusion.

"Hermione...?" he said as his hand gave hers a small, if perhaps involuntary, squeeze.

"I'm here, love," she said softly, returning the squeeze gently, yet hesitantly.

At the sound of her sentiment, he took a deep, shuddering breath and pressed his eyes shut. His teeth clenched, and his jaw cracked audibly. She knew what he was doing he was rebuilding his walls, preparing to force her away... again. When he finally looked back to her, she instantly knew that this was not Severus, but Professor Snape.

"Miss Granger?" he asked icily, snatching his hand away, in all outward appearances the modicum of control and stoicism.

"Severus!" she said exasperatedly, ignoring his use of her more formal title. "What in God's name has happened to you tonight?" She stepped towards him and reached up her hand to brush a strand of wet hair from his face.

His hand snatched her wrist with an audible slap, causing her to jump with fright. Eyes glistening, but never leaving hers, he watched her with barely withheld rage. He then released her, shoving her firmly, but gently, away from him.

"God has nothing to do with it... or me," he spat nastily. "You should know that better than anyone."

At that, he turned and swiftly fled into the night, leaving her standing there in stunned silence, battered, bruised, cold, and terrified, her tears masked by the darkness and the rain.

~TBC

A/N: Will she go after him...? We'll see... Oh, did anyone notice that they're both very cold? I don't know if I mentioned that... hehe...

Thanks for the R&R!

Breathe

Chapter 4 of 15

Shared sorrows...

I climb, I slip, I fall

Reaching for your hands

But I lay here all alone

Sweating all your blood

If I could find out how

To make you listen now

Because I'm starving for you here

With my undying love

And I, I will

Breathe for love tomorrow

Cause there's no hope for today

Breathe for love tomorrow

Cause maybe there's another way.

~Paramore, "Breathe"

"God has nothing to do with it... or me," he spat nastily. "You should know that better than anyone."

At that, he turned and swiftly fled into the night, leaving her standing there in stunned silence, battered, bruised, cold, and terrified, her tears masked by the darkness and the rain.

Hermione stood there for moment, staring at the spot where he had disappeared into the darkness, her breath still coming fast and tremulous. "Enough of this," she said, fists clenching at her sides. "It ends tonight."

She strode purposefully after him, not really knowing which way he went, but shooting for the edge of the forest. He would probably try and return to his rooms as quickly as possible.

If he even makes it to the castle, the drunken sod she thought harshly. Making her way swiftly but carefully, she was relieved when she finally saw the lights of the castle through the trees on the edge of the forest. As she stepped out onto the vast expanse of grass that led up to the castle, she stopped and surveyed the area around her. "Severus!" she called, not caring who heard her.

She moved forward slowly, arms wrapped around her freezing body, eyes roaming the darkness for any sign of him, ears alert for any sound. "Severus!!" she called again, louder this time, more desperate.

Nothing.

The only sounds were the violent sheets of rain whipping against the ground and the rolling thunder overhead. *Damn you, Severus*, she thought, *why must you be so thick-headed?*

Again, she took a few steps towards the castle. After a moment, she remembered her wand, which was still back in the forest. "Accio wand!" she called, extending her hand. After a moment or two, she felt the wet, slick wood slap against her palm. Closing her eyes in relief, she cast a nonverbal *Lumos Maxima* and tossed the shining orb into the air over her head where it bobbed and weaved, illuminating the area around her with soft, blue light. The orb followed her movements as she turned in place, searching.

For a third time, she drew in a breath to shout his name. As it was on the tip of her tongue, a dark shape, sprawled in the mud, came into the circle of her wand-light. "Oh no," she breathed, panic fluttering in her chest. She ran to his side, laying her wand on the ground as she pushed the lank, wet hair back from his face. By the glow of her floating light, she could see that his eyes were closed, and he was breathing shallowly. She sighed in relief when she could find no blood. She sent a silent prayer to whoever might be listening he was unconscious, but apparently un hurt.

Now that she had found him, she knew that they both needed to get inside as quickly as possible hypothermia was not something she wanted to deal with right now. Picking her wand back up, she pointed it at Severus and whispered "*Ennervate*," watching as his body jolted and his eyes slowly opened.

He found her on her knees next to him, hands on his chest, eyes pleading with him to be alright. His own eyes closed again, and his head fell back into the wet grass. "Leave me be, you insufferable woman," he groaned, the malice gone from his voice as he attempted to roll away from her. Her hands on his arm stopped him.

"I don't think so. You're drunk, and if we both don't get inside *now* - we're going to catch our deaths." She kept her hold on his arm she wasn't going anywhere.

If she had not just been a first-hand witness to his overwhelming anger, his *rage* she might have felt pity for the man that lay before her. He now spoke in a voice that carried no threat... no malice... not even self-pity. It was hollow emotionless and dead. "As if anyone would notice or care that I'm gone," he murmured.

She stared at him for a short moment before bowing her head. "I would," she said softly.

At this he huffed and turned back towards her, slowly lifting himself to rest shakily on one elbow. Her head lifted at his movement, and what Severus saw in her gaze broached no argument. Somewhere deep inside, the walls he had worked so hard to build cracked. Eyes filled with a new, more frightening emotion now searched hers, questioning... needing to know.

After a moment he spoke, his brow coming together. "Why?"

A pause as she drew a shaky breath. "Because I..." she began, but hesitated, her voice breaking. He slowly sat up straight, his eyes still locked on hers. She shuffled awkwardly on her knees and moved closer to him. The tears spilt over as he slowly reached out to cup her face in one wet, mud-streaked hand. With a sob, she grasped it to her and pressed her lips to the frigid skin of his palm.

"Hermione," he breathed, closing his own eyes at the feeling of her lips on his skin.

"*Why*, Severus? Why do you push me away?" she sobbed. "After everything? After" The rest was left unsaid as he pulled her to him, holding her tightly against his chest. Arms that were soaking wet and freezing wrapped themselves around his neck, holding on like a drowning sailor to a life raft.

She was so cold. Her hair was dirty and plastered to her face; she had mud caked on her clothes and under her nails; she was shaking uncontrollably, and it wasn't just from the cold.

She was beautiful.

And he was a fool.

A stupid, drunken, self-pitying, irrational, heartless fool.

His thoughts were cut short as a peal of thunder cracked violently overhead. Hermione screamed involuntarily and trembled even harder. Holding her gently, he looked to the sky, and the rain beat down into his face as he whispered, "I agree with your earlier advisement."

With a nod of her head, she stood and then leaned down to grasp him under his arm. She helped him to his feet. He stood holding his head, swaying slightly. He offered no protest as she slipped his arm over her shoulders and headed them both towards the castle doors. She could feel him leaning on her, but only just.

They entered the castle and made their way to the dungeons, unnoticed and unscathed. As they came to the door to his office, Hermione leaned them against the wall, panting from the exertion.

Severus resisted the urge to simply slide down the wall and spend the night on the cold stone floor. With great effort, he flicked a hand in the direction of his door, silently disabling the wards. Hermione could tell it took a lot out of him for just that simple spell: the skin of his face drained of what little color it had, and his breathing came faster

as he pressed his hands to his temples.

"Did it ever occur to you that you could simply have told me the password and I could have done that for you?" she said, pulling him away from the wall. She looked over to see him lift a muddy eyebrow at her. "Still enough strength to be snarky, I see." This got her a small, one-sided smile.

They passed through the office door and made their way to the far right-hand wall. "Severus, just tell me the password. You're exhausted; please don't waste what little strength you have left disabling wards." After a moment she felt him sag more heavily against her, a silent admission that she was right. He whispered something that Hermione didn't catch.

"What was that? I couldn't hear you."

"*Aislinn*." There was a long pause, the only sound that of the water dripping from their clothing onto the stone floor. "The password is *Aislinn*."

She stared at him blankly. He looked to the floor, sorrow masking his face, his lack of sobriety bringing forth emotions she had not been witness to in a long time.

"*Aislinn*," she whispered, sending a wave of magic at the wall with her free hand as she watched him.

The door to his private rooms appeared in the stone, shimmering into existence like a mirage. She helped him through and led him to the large overstuffed sofa in front of the fireplace. With a squelch, she released him onto the sofa, and his head instantly lolled back. With a groan, he brought his hands up to once again grasp his face.

"*Incendio*," she said, absently waving her hand at the hearth. Flames instantly sprang to life. Hermione could feel the strength seep from her bones the instant the spell left her lips. Her wandless magic was better when her emotions ran high, but that didn't make it any less tiring.

"I'll be right back," she told him, and made her way to the small kitchen off the main area, leaving a trail of water behind her. She quickly set about brewing a large pot of strong tea. When everything was in order, she went back to the sitting room. She stood for a moment in front of the blazing fire, staring into the embers and soaking up the warmth. When she looked over to Severus, she could see that he had started to shiver. Realizing that she had forgotten that they were both soaking wet and freezing, she quickly cast a slight warming charm on him, as it was all she could manage, and hurried to the large door at the back of the living space.

There were no wards here. She pushed open the door to his bedroom and walked across the plush rugs that covered the elegant hardwoods beneath. She went into his bathroom and turned on the shower, drawing back quickly as the hot water hit the cold skin of her hand. *I just want to warm us up, not boil us*, she thought.

After the taps were adjusted, she stripped out of her wet cloak, throwing it into a pile on the floor, followed by her sandals and pajama pants. She walked over to the porcelain sink and placed both hands on its cool surface. Her body leaned forward heavily, drained from the night's exertions. When she finally looked up, the steam from the shower had started to cloud the mirror, so she wiped away the moisture to get a better look at herself. She was filthy. Then again, so was he.

She shook her head at her reflection. "What am I doing? Do I... do *want* to be here? *Should* I be here?"

Shaking her head to clear herself of the conflicting thoughts, she turned determinedly and strode back through the bedroom, in only her knickers and tanktop, to where Severus sat on the couch.

"Your turn," she said, reaching for his hands where they still covered his face. He let himself be pulled to his feet.

"My turn for what?" he slurred.

"We have to get warm," she said matter-of-factly as she led him through his bedroom and into the steam-filled bathroom. "I don't think I have enough strength left to cast another warming charm after that last one and the fire. Besides, we're both filthy." She sat him on the edge of the large marble tub and started to unbutton his cloak. He reached up and took her by the wrist. His grip held none of the ferocity that it had the last time.

"We?"

Sighing and pressing her lips into a thin line, she answered back, "Yes, 'we.' I don't trust you not to fall and break your neck."

One side of his mouth lifted as he snorted at her remark. She continued to look at him, her gaze and the firm set of her lips showing that she was serious.

It was then that he realized she was standing before him nearly naked. His eyes left her face and roved over her body: the curve of her hips, the pale sliver of stomach that could be seen between her knickers and tank top, the soft curve of her breasts. He released her wrist and slowly put his hands to her hips, pulling her closer to him, between his knees. Her steps were hesitant, but when she was close enough he pressed his forehead to her stomach and closed his eyes. The smooth up and down motion of his hands over her hips made her body tingle, and it was *definitely* not from the cold.

Even though he was exhausted, filthy, and under the influence of many, *many* shots of Firewhisky, Severus could not deny that he was quickly becoming aroused, *again*, with her pressed so close.

Hermione's face flushed as his hands ran up her back, under the wet fabric of her top. He placed a single, slow, soft kiss on her stomach, and her hands moved on their own, twining themselves in his wet hair.

Her eyes closed, and her head went back with the sensation of his lips on her skin. The irrational part of her mind screamed at him to move his mouth lower, begged him to slide his long, agile fingers underneath the edge of her now even wetter knickers. It wanted to feel him inside her, feel his skin against hers, his breath hot and ragged on her neck as they...

"Severus," she breathed as cold reality came crashing back.

"Hmm?" he replied between caresses.

"Let's get you out of these wet things."

"Mmmhmm."

She crinkled her brow in frustration, knowing that he had just misinterpreted her words. Gently, she pushed him away. His head fell back heavily, allowing her access to his muddy topcoat. She started to undo the first clasp, but her fingers were so numb that she couldn't get a proper hold. He gently pushed her hands away. "Let me," he said. He slowly ran one filthy hand down his front, and every button unhooked itself effortlessly.

"A little something I concocted. They," he tugged on his lapel, indicating the ebony buttons "can become tiresome." His hand dropped heavily back to his lap.

She gave him a tired smile and pushed the sopping wet garment back over his shoulders. After helping him pull his arms through the sleeves, she tossed the filthy clothing in the pile with her own cloak and pants. "Better?" she asked, rubbing his arms through his white undershirt.

"Mmm... some," he answered. He let his head fall forward again, this time pressing his cheek into her stomach.

By now, steam from the shower had filled most of the room, and her body was slowly starting to warm up. She shivered as she rubbed his arms—he was still ice-cold underneath the fabric. "I think this one may be ruined," she whispered, running the fingers of one hand along the part of his mud-stained collar that had been exposed when he leaned forward. Her fingers brushed against the fine hairs at the nape of his neck where his hair had fallen towards his face. A shiver ran through him, and she gasped

as his hands suddenly grasped the backs of her thighs tightly.

He turned his face slowly into her stomach and pressed another light kiss just above her navel. She could feel the slight stubble from his cheek as it brushed over her skin. A soft gasp escaped her lips as he pulled her closer and placed another kiss lower on her abdomen, his tongue flicking out to taste her skin. "Severus..." she whispered. Her hands came to his shoulders, and it took all the willpower she possessed to push him away again. "Severus, stop. Not like this."

He looked up, his hands still clasping her legs. "Not like what?"

Was that hurt she saw in his eyes, behind the liquor and the lust?

"Not like" She sighed. "You're drunk. You don't really want this...*me*. You only think you do."

"Are a drunk man's words not a sober man's thoughts?" he returned. When she replied by again tightening her lips into a thin line, he dropped his hands, his head bowing in defeat.

His next words were muffled. "What was that? I didn't hear you," she said as she moved away from him to check the temperature of the water.

"I said, 'Do you even *know* what tonight is?'"

She let out a short, barking laugh as she walked past him to the cabinet, pulling out several clean, white towels. "Severus, I'm lucky to remember what my name is of late, much less the significance of a cold, stormy night in the middle of October..." Her voice trailed off.

She stood frozen... utterly silent for the span of several heartbeats before a low moan broke free, grief-stricken and hopeless. The towels fell to the floor as her hands clutched involuntarily at her abdomen.

The blood drained from her face as she remembered: the flashes of memory, the errant thoughts as she followed him through the rain, the inkling of... something... that had tapped at her mind since she first saw him that night.

She faltered, falling hard to her knees as the memory came slamming back to her, vivid and painful the memory of a cold, rainy night in October, much like this one.

As soon as she hit the floor, Severus was at her side. In the back of her mind, Hermione wondered how he had moved so quickly in his condition. As she gasped for breath, she felt his arms come around her, steadying her. He pulled her to him as he leaned back against the tub. Slowly, his hand found hers and their fingers twined together. He was still so cold.

She was sobbing now, the pain alarmingly fresh in her mind. "Hush, now. I'm here," Severus soothed.

"No, Severus... that's just it you're not here," she cried, releasing his hand and turning her face into the icy skin of his neck, clutching at the fabric of his shirt as she sobbed uncontrollably. "You're not here with me... not really. We're forever t-together, but f-forever apart. I'm alone... s-so alone." The last words came out as a whisper a small, warm breath against his skin.

"No, never alone," he crooned as he pressed a kiss into her temple. "I" he paused, choosing his next words carefully. "I have...*feared* this night for a while now, Hermione."

She raised her head to look at him, her eyes swollen and red, tears fresh on her face. "You? Afraid?" She sniffed and swiped at her eyes. "I've never know~~y~~*you* to be afraid of anything, not even Vo"

"This," he interrupted her, "is something entirely different. *Ido* fear... *him*, but it is not for the reasons you think. I care not for myself my fate was sealed long ago. As I have told you before, I only wish to see you happy, see you safe."

"I don't think I can ever truly be happy again, not without you. Not without"

"Please," he interrupted her again, his voice breaking. "Please do not say her name. I do not think I could bear to hear it again."

Her words were choked by a fresh flow of tears. "I can't believe I didn't realize the significance of tonight. God, I feel like a fool... a h-h-heartless f-fool!"

He squeezed her tightly once again, pressing his cheek to her temple. "It is my fault. I should not have engaged you in the forest. I knew it was you. I could smell you as soon as you were close enough... as soon as you hid behind that tree. I was angry and drunk and you were the most convenient target. I am... sorry."

Her lips pressed into a tight smile as she nodded.

"Come," he said after a few moments. "I believe the water is probably warm enough now." He stood slowly, bracing himself on the edge of the tub, and reached a hand down to her. She stared at it for a moment before grasping it and letting him help her stand. They both managed to finish undressing, after which they stepped carefully under the steaming showerhead. Warmth flooded over them, seeping down into icy skin and frozen joints, healing... soothing.

She turned to him and wrapped her arms around his waist, pressing her face to his chest. His arms encircled her as he rested his chin on her head. Neither cared that they were both without clothes for the moment, they simply needed the shared warmth, the simple comfort of being close to one another.

After a moment she spoke: "Why, Severus?"

He remained silent, but she felt his breath hitch. She knew he was trying to be strong, trying to keep the walls carefully in place, as always.

"Why us? Why her?" she asked again.

He inhaled and exhaled slowly, as if calming himself. "I do not know the exact reasons. My best guess... is revenge. Revenge against me for lo... for caring for you."

"Oh God, Severus, I don't know if I can do this anymore. It hurts so much!" Her sobbing started anew and she clutched at him. He held her as she cried, his own mind awash with memories still fresh and raw. He could hear her speaking. "Why her? Why her, Severus? She was our angel, our little dream... our baby... Aislinn."

As his daughter's name fell from Hermione's mouth for the second time that night, Severus could no longer hold back the emotions that had been building inside him. He held onto her as tightly as she held him, burying his face in her wet hair. Both wept unabashedly as the water beat down upon them, washing away the mud, the cold, and the tears.

~TBC

A/N: I was a little hesitant about turning the plot in this direction, but I believe that in the long run, it had to happen. Tell me what you think!

This chapter turned out a LOT longer than I intended it to be. I just started writing and couldn't find a good place to stop.

As to why Hermione did not remember the significance of this night, I think that she has chosen to push the memory to the back of her mind, subconsciously repressing it. She was totally distracted by Severus and did not remember completely until he specifically mentioned it. Sorry if anything is unclear. I plan on explaining everything! Promise!

The title for this chapter was inspired by the Paramore song "Breathe," which I listened to while writing most of this chapter.

Remembrances

Chapter 5 of 15

A bit of the past is unveiled...

Even from deep down in the bowels of the castle, she could hear the rain lashing violently at the ancient walls and feel the stone shake with the rumble of thunder. She was overwhelmingly glad to be safe from the raging weather, and even more so to finally be warm and dry.

She was also afraid. Fear tore at her heart fear of the emotions brought forth by the events of the evening; fear of the reason she was still down in the dungeons; and most of all... fear of him.

More accurately, she feared the way he made her feel the way he made her chest constrict and her pulse race. She feared knowing that she would most likely do anything he asked of her anything at all, her feminist principles be damned as her rational mind fought to give sway to her irrational body.

How could one man hold such sway over her emotions? Over her life?

Her brown eyes danced with the reflection of the flames in the hearth, flames which were slowly burning the oak logs therein down to mere embers, as the thoughts danced through her head. From her perch in one of the overstuffed armchairs in front of the dwindling fire, she watched Severus from the corner of her eye. The low flames were reflected in his ebony hair and black eyes, giving his normally sallow face a soft, warm glow. His left arm was draped over the back of the sofa in which he sat, his fingers rubbing small unconscious circles in the cream colored fabric. His other hand was under his chin, his index finger rubbing pensively at his lips as it kept time with the fingers of the other hand.

He was dressed in a pair of black nightclothes (they had been a gift from her, coincidentally), and his long legs were stretched out in front of him, crossed at the ankles. She could see the sparse sprinkling of dark hair across the tops of his feet where they peeked from under the black silk.

Hermione smiled to herself there was something inherently intimate about his bare feet, even more so than the bare skin that showed beneath the matching nightshirt that he had not taken the time to button. She felt her cheeks flush as her eyes followed the soft line of dark hair running from his chest down over the lightly defined muscles of his abdomen. It disappeared beneath the waistband of his pants, which she noticed were sitting rather low on his hips.

Quickly, but not so fast as to draw notice, she turned her face away, eyes closing, lips parting as her breath came slightly faster.

Don't do this to yourself! her inner voice cried. **You've been down this road... it only leads to heartbreak and pain!**

If Severus had noticed her watching him or seen her flushed reaction, he said nothing. She assumed he was now too lost in his own thoughts to pay her much attention.

The moments following their mutual shower had been slightly awkward. Neither had cared that the other was totally without clothes as they had stood under the hot spray, letting months of pent up emotions swirl away with the water and the mud. As the painful memories had softened a little around the edges, and when there had been no more tears to cry, they had simply stood together, embracing each other in mutual understanding and comfort.

Several long minutes passed as they stood there, her face pressed to his chest, his to the top of her head, their arms wrapped tightly around each other, before either decided to move. She felt his lips kiss the top of her head, while at the same time his hands started making slow, soft lines up and down her back. The sensation was soothing and familiar, and she kept her eyes shut as she relaxed into his touch.

An involuntary gasp escaped her when his hot breath hit her ear a few moments later. Her flesh tingled and her knees went weak with desire as he ran his nose slowly over her outer ear, her earlobe, and then down the line of her neck. It took all her willpower which was running on empty to place her hands on his chest and gently push him away. He offered no resistance, but his hands moved from her back and slid down over the wet skin of her waist to grip her gently about the hips. Brown eyes snapped to meet black as his fingers gripped her flesh in a silent request.

Although his eyes were bloodshot from all the tears, they still burned with a heated intensity that she had not seen in a long time but could never forget. Fingertips tightened their grip and pulled her gently back towards him. Inside her mind, her inner voice screamed at her for what she was letting happen, for the way she moved forward without resistance, letting him press their bodies close.

Blood pounded through her body as her heart raced, chased on by the waves of raw need that flowed from his body to hers. When her skin finally came into contact with the physical evidence of that need, all the breath left her lungs in a single involuntary rush. Her eyes pressed shut as her desire warred with her conscience, each in a race to overtake the other.

While her palms pressed firmly against the warm, wet skin of his chest in an unconscious gesture that tried in vain to keep her body separated from his her eyes reopened, and she watched as he seemed to move in slow motion, his lips once again brushing the sensitive skin at the base of her neck.

Fire and lightning had coursed through her entire body, sizzling and crackling over her skin before pooling in low, forgotten places. Without conscious thought, her hands crept to the nape of his neck, twining in his wet hair and pulling his lips firmly against her. Her response to his touch only served to add fuel to an already out of control fire.

Severus lifted his lips from Hermione's neck and crushed them to her mouth, kissing her as if he were dying, and she was his one and only hope of survival. Reciprocating his attentions, Hermione urged him to part his lips, and when he did her tongue immediately twined with his.

With a feral growl, he grabbed her roughly around the waist and lifted her, pushing her up against the back wall of the shower, where her legs wrapped around his waist instinctively. Instantly, she was lost in the feel of his hands grasping desperately at her backside and the intensity of his mouth against hers.

She felt him pressing against her, hot and wet, straining, begging, *pleading* for entrance.

God... yes! her body screamed, offering no protest as she tightened her grip on him and arched her pelvis into his. He groaned into her mouth and tightened his grip on her buttocks as he tilted his pelvis down and back, preparing for the final thrust. Frantically, the rational part of her mind clawed its way past the irrational part, screaming at her, trying desperately to get her to see reason: **Not like this not like this not like...!!**

"Stop..." she breathed, pulling her lips away from his as she finally found her voice. He stopped, but she could literally feel just how close they had come to crossing a line

that she was not sure should be crossed... yet.

His eyes were questioning as they searched hers. One of her hands made its way to his face, pushing the dark, wet hair from his eyes, caressing his cheek. "Please, Severus," she said, "not like this." Her head fell back against the shower wall with a wet 'thup.' "Not like this..."

With a resigned sigh, he let her feet gently touch the floor before he turned his gaze downwards, ashamed. "I..." he began softly. Words seemed to fail him, and after a moment he gave a remorseful sigh. "Forgive me." He backed away then, turning from her and lifting one arm to brace himself against the shower wall. His forehead pressed heavily against the tattoo on his forearm while the water continued to beat down on his neck and shoulders.

"Severus," Hermione crooned, placing a hand in the middle of his back, "please don't be sorry. I... you have no idea..."

Her forehead replaced her hand upon his back as her arms encircled his waist gently. She could feel the muscles in his stomach tighten and relax as he fought to catch his breath. After a few tense moments, she finally spoke again. "I want this... I want... I want you-"

He had snorted at that.

"It's the truth. Look into my mind if you don't believe me," she confessed softly. "But as much as I may desire this, I refuse to let you take me to your bed... only to be cast aside when you sober up."

"Hermione... I would never..."

She cut him off. "You have, Severus... and while I hope that somewhere deep down you still care for me... I know that if this happens here, now, like this that at the first light of dawn, I will no longer be welcome."

His only response was a lowering of his head. Her lips tightened as she sighed and backed away.

Her fingers reached out and caressed the line of his spine, desperately wanting him to feel her sincerity. "I want this. I want us... so badly, Severus so badly that I cannot sleep at night for thoughts of you... of what we could have had... could still have. But I must know that you feel the same way that your feelings are genuine and not the result of too much drink."

With those final words, she left him alone with his thoughts, her mind spinning frantically with the thought of what had almost happened, and the confession she had made.

So now, here they were, she in the chair, he on the sofa, the tea service on the table between them long empty. How she ached to join him on that sofa, to wrap her arms around him, to cover his face in kisses and beg him to come back to her. It was a selfish thought, she knew, but one that she felt no shame in thinking. Their current situation had not been her decision, after all...

*****Flashback*****

January 1st, 2001

They had been in his quarters when what was left of her world came crashing down around her. It was New Year's Day, 2001. They had made love the night before, on New Year's Eve, for the first time since that terrible night in October. He had made love to her as if it was the last time he would ever hold her in his arms, ever taste her lips, feel her breath on his neck, or her hands raking the skin of his back while her cries of joyful abandon filled his ears as he brought her over the edge. It had been a bittersweet, tear-filled, reunion. It wasn't until the next morning that she realized that it had not been a reunion, but a farewell.

When Hermione awoke to find the bed empty next to her, the sheets cold, she rose quickly and pulled her clothes on, wondering where Severus was. She then left the bedroom for the sitting room and found him on the sofa in front of the fire, already dressed in a white shirt and black slacks, quill in hand, with a stack of scrolls beside him on the end table.

"Severus?" she called softly. His posture stiffened at the sound of her voice, sending a twinge of anxiety through her gut. The way he moved as he set his quill and parchment down slowly, deliberately unnerved her.

Something was wrong.

He stood and paused before turning to face her, his brow drawn together with an emotion she could not quite place: sadness, fear... guilt?

She walked towards him, her hand outstretched, wanting, needing to touch him. "Severus, what...?"

"Please," he returned, taking a step back and holding up both of his hands, stalling her forward movements. She stopped dead, shocked. "Please... do not make this any harder than it already is."

She swallowed reflexively, nausea rolling her stomach. "Don't make what... any harder?"

Their gazes remained locked, and her heart jumped into her throat with what she saw in his eyes. "No," she said flatly, shaking her head, at the same moment her name had fallen from his lips.

"Hermione..."

"No!" she repeated, voice wavering. "Do not do this to me, Severus!"

His hands clenched into fists at his side, and she heard his jaw crack as he ground his teeth together. "I must. It is the only way."

"I will fight with you, beside you... always!" she screamed at him, tears streaming down her face. She closed the distance between them and twisted the front of his shirt in her fists, snatching on the fabric to emphasize her words.

"Foolish, stubborn girl!" he screamed back, grabbing her wrists harshly. "Do you not realize that to fight beside me, truly beside me," he said, shaking her, "would mean to turn over all of your beliefs however foolish they may be to him?" He released her right wrist and held up his left forearm in emphasis.

She did not answer, and they looked at each other for a moment, his face twisted in anger, hers filled with hurt and defiance. His eyes searched hers, looking for any signs that her words were false. They found nothing but hard, unwavering truth.

Something flickered across his face, and he made as if to speak but nothing came forth. For one brief moment, she thought he was going to take it all back. Her lips parted to speak the words that had brought them so much joy, and so much sorrow: "Severus, I lov-"

"No..." he said, releasing her other wrist and pushing her firmly away from him. "To fight at my side... to be with me... is a death sentence on either side. Have you not realized that yet?" His tone was cold, almost hateful. He turned his back to her then, walking away. "I have endured enough sorrow these past months than in the entire span of my unworthy existence. I..." He paused, leaning against the doorframe, his head bowed. "I refuse to suffer something that can be prevented... and I refuse to see

you suffer anything more."

She stood there with her head held high, her jaw set. "How can you be so selfish?" she whispered, her fury barely controlled. "For a man who **claims** to be one of the most powerful Legilimens in the world, you have no fucking idea what I truly feel! You have no idea that my heart and my soul and my body physically **ache** every single second of every single day for all we have lost! You are the **only** reason I am still breathing, Severus! If it had not been for you, I would have gladly spilled the rest of my blood that very night, ending my life as well!"

She watched as his hands moved up to cover his face. They clasped at his hair as if he was warring within himself, his heart against his mind, after hearing her confession. Her breath came in ragged gasps as she stood there, waiting to see which side would win. With a final grasp at his hair, he put his hands firmly back at his sides.

He peered back over his shoulder at her, not meeting her gaze. "Further reason for us to discontinue our... association. I have endangered your life in more ways than I care to count. No matter how much I may wish... to share my life with you, I would rather live a life of loneliness, with the knowledge that you are alive and safe, than live a life with you, only to know that you are in danger at every turn."

Her temper broke loose as he finished sparks of blue fire arched from her fingertips as she raged at him. "How in the bloody hell is not being with you going to keep me safe?! Do you honestly think that just because **you** turn from me that the Death Eaters and the Dark Lord will forget that I exist? Need I remind you," she screamed, pointing a lightning tipped finger at him, "that I am still the best friend of Harry-**fucking**-Potter!" Her screams got progressively louder as her tirade continued. "I might as well be his bloody sister, for God's sake! I am in more danger without you, without your protection, than I am as your lover!" With her last words, she clenched her fists together, and the bolts of blue lightning danced around her entire body.

Severus had turned towards her somewhere in the middle of her tirade and was now eyeing her cautiously, wary of what might happen if she was pushed any farther. For a few moments, they stared at each other, and the tension was thick enough to cut with a knife. Hermione stood there, looking like Hell's proverbial fury, and watched the man she loved more than her own life prepare to walk out of it forever. She willed him not to say the words she knew were about to pass over his lips.

When he did speak, it chilled her to her very core. His voice was not his own it held neither the cold, hard, condescending tone that he used on students, nor the warm, self-assured, almost reverent tone that he used when speaking to her. Instead, he sounded tired, almost defeated the silky baritone was rough and dry, like sandpaper over concrete. His eyes cold, black, and fathomless held only the barest glint of moisture as he held her in his hawk-like gaze. Had he been a lesser man, and had the rest of his countenance not been blank and emotionless, Hermione would have said he held back tears. "The house-elves will see to your things. As of this... moment..." his eyes closed and his normally stoic baritone trembled faintly, "we are no longer... lovers. I am master to your apprentice -- nothing more."

Her heart ceased to beat as her legs gave way. It was all she was able to do to stay conscious. The last words she heard him speak before he left her there on the cold stone of what used to be their home were: "I expect nothing less than absolute professionalism from this moment forward... Miss Granger."

Her sobs overwhelmed her then. She clutched at her chest, unable to breathe as darkness rimmed her vision, taking control of her body and curling her in upon herself. The last thing she saw before she was consumed by the darkness was a pair of black dragon-hide boots walk slowly to the doorway... and hesitate... before disappearing completely.

*******End Flashback*******

~TBC

A/N: Well, I hope that clears up a bit of their past. I'm going to try and get everything straightened out and cleared up within the next few chapters. My brain is hurting trying to figure out the timeline for all of this.

The present-day part of this chapter takes place in October of 2001, about ten months after the flashback, which is set in January of 2001. I hope I'm not confusing anyone too much!

Please let me know what you think! If you have taken the time to read, please leave me a review, no matter how small! It helps to keep me inspired and to make the story and my writing better! Thank you so much if you've read my little tale! I am eternally grateful!

A Proposal

Chapter 6 of 15

It all began with a question...

Disclaimer: See Prologue.

Thank you, Delilah, for the endless support and encouragement!

Severus could sense when Hermione's gaze settled on him. He watched out of the corner of his eye as her eyes drifted down his body, and then saw her turn away a moment later, a red blush upon her cheeks. A small part of him smirked with masculine arrogance as he noticed the subtle increase in her rate of breathing, the nervous way in which she rubbed her shins through the fabric of her shirt.

Perhaps her earlier words were not simply a means of appeasement. Did she still long for him as she had confessed? His mind answered in the negative, but there was no mistaking the hints her body was giving: flushed skin, rapid breathing through parted lips, nervous gestures meant to keep her mind from wandering... elsewhere.

Good.

He gave no indication that he had even noticed her.

Now he didn't feel like such a lecherous old man for having the thoughts that had run through his head earlier. He had wanted to take her straight from that shower into his

bed and make love to her until his body could not physically continue. He wanted to make up for all his previous bad choices, his mistakes, his shortcomings, his... well, Hell... he wanted to make up for everything.

He had cast her aside to protect her... and had replaced the man she knew the man she had loved and whom she had been willing to die for with the cold, heartless, selfish man he had been before she came into his life. He had pushed her as far away as he could, even as every part of his being had screamed in protest. The only reason she was still his apprentice was because their contract was unbreakable until she was fully qualified as a Master herself.

At the time, his reasoning had seemed sound. He had been the cause of all her sorrow, her heartbreak, her loss. If not for him, she would probably have a high profile career in which she would be renowned for her brilliance. She would probably be happily married to some well-to-do wizard, and they would probably have a small hoard of little ones...

His fists clenched and his eyes closed as the thought flitted across his mind. *After all that I've been through, after all that I have done... do I not deserve some small piece of happiness!? Doesn't she?! I suppose that's too much to ask... too much to hope for.*

He had been happy for a few blessed months. Then their world had shattered around them... all because he had loved her. *Had* loved her? He wasn't even sure that was the right context in which to use that word. Perhaps *still* loved her would be the correct form of the phrase?

He closed his eyes as he squeezed the bridge of his nose between his fingers. He was disconcerted by the whirlwind of emotions that were swirling through him: fear, guilt, anger, frustration, lust... love. It was truly disconcerting for a man who always had absolute control over that part of himself.

He continued to observe her as she sat off to his left in one of his overstuffed arm chairs. He smiled to himself that had always been her favorite chair. It was cream-colored to match the sofa and wide enough for two people to sit comfortably side by side. It was... cozy, that's what she had called it. He had never before had anything associated with him referred to as 'cozy.'

Belatedly, Severus noticed that she looked quite... cozy... herself, curled up as she was. She had taken the liberty of Transfiguring one of his shirts, seeing as how her own nightclothes were filthy. Even with the adjustments, it still hung down past her knees. Her legs were curled underneath her nothing but her small feet and a bit of ankle peeked from under the white fabric. Her hair was still slightly damp from the shower and hung down her back in long ringlets. Although she hadn't stayed long enough to actually wash it, he could still smell the lingering scent of her shampoo, probably from earlier that same day.

It was an all too familiar smell, one of chamomile and lavender. He had always heard that the mind will associate certain smells with certain powerful memories, with people, places, or events. He knew it was true, for her smell alone was enough to set his memories blazing. Some of the first included working side by side in his lab, he watching while she brewed, her delicate hands chopping and slicing ingredients with exacting precision. Some of the more recent and painful were memories of long nights spent making love by candlelight, while they each whispered words of love and devotion into each others' ears.

He snorted softly. Love. Devotion. They started out as some grand idea of eternal happiness but in the end brought only sorrow and pain. His love had brought about the most horrible, painful day of either of their lives. He often wondered what would have happened had he not been so eager, if he hadn't so quickly grabbed the opportunity that had literally come knocking. His eyes slowly closed as he remembered how it all began...

*****Flashback*****

June, 1998

Hogwarts School, Scotland, U.K.

The school year was quickly winding to a close, and Severus was most anxious for the slight freedoms that summer would bring. No more horribly written, witless, mind-numbing essays to grade; no more exploding cauldrons or House points. Yes, after two more agonizing terms of teaching the brainless spawn of today's wizarding society, he was quite ready for the simple pleasures of summer: reading leisurely by the fire, a nice glass of wine on the side table; brewing some of the experimental potions he'd been researching over the course of the year; perhaps taking in a London Philharmonic concert...

His daydreams were obliterated by a soft knock at the classroom door. 'Of all the... who the bloody hell could that be?' he seethed to himself, laying down his quill and steeping his hands under his chin. "Come in!" he bellowed.

The door opened slowly, and one of the last faces he expected to see peered around the edge: Hermione Granger, resident Gryffindor know-it-all and supposed brightest witch of her age.

His mood went from one of extreme annoyance to one of extreme astonishment when she smiled at him. It was a tight, hesitant smile, but a smile nonetheless. "Good evening, Professor. I-I was wondering if I might have a moment of your time?" Her eyes found the papers on his desk. "If you're not too busy, that is."

'A moment of my time?' he thought, narrowing his eyes at her. 'Not too busy? She must want something... oh, this should be rich.'

After exhaling a sigh that bespoke of what a tremendous inconvenience her presence was, he paused, scowling at her before opening his steepled hands out towards hers, palms up. "Well? Come in Miss Granger, I haven't got all night."

Realizing her good fortune at finding him in a somewhat tolerable mood, she quickly entered and shut the door quietly behind her. She had her satchel slung over her left shoulder as usual. No doubt she had been off studying for final exams before she had come to see him. As if she needed to still be studying. She could have sat her NEWTs in her fifth year and probably still passed at the head of the class... the seventh-year class.

She slowly approached the dais on which his desk sat. "How are you this evening, sir?" she asked as she laid her bag down on the top of the nearest desk.

Up went his eyebrow. "Seeing as how my few moments of blessed solitude have just been interrupted by a young woman who knows for a fact that she will... no doubt... receive an 'O' in my class, so should have no reason whatsoever to pester me about last minute extra credit or revisions... I would have to say my evening has just gone from bad," he gestured at the essays spread out on his desk, "to worse," he finished, with a gesture in her general direction.

She smiled at him again, confidently this time. "As you said, sir, I know that I'm probably going to receive an Outstanding in Potions, so I have no reason to need extra credit or to do any revising. I... I actually... well, I have a proposal for you." Up went the other eyebrow. "If you would hear me out, that is... sir."

He simply could not help himself. "A proposal, Miss Granger? I daresay, aren't you a little young to be throwing around proposals at dangerous, shady men twice your age?" He sat back in his chair and crossed her arms over his chest, eyebrow still raised as he waited to see how she would respond.

Her confidence faltered for a moment as her brow scrunched together in confusion. "What? No... how... why would you think..." she shook her head in frustration. "What?" she asked again, now extremely flustered.

He sighed and leaned forward again, resting his elbows on his desk. "For a young woman who is supposed to be among one of the brightest students ever to grace these hallowed halls, you really have no concept of the subtle nature of sarcasm, do you Miss Granger."

Her face flushed as she looked at the floor. "Oh. I... I'm sorry, sir. It's just... well, I've... I've never... well, sir..."

"Oh, for God's sake, spit it out, woman!" he said impatiently, gesturing at her with his right hand.

"I've never heard you make a joke before, sir." She lifted her eyes to meet his and he could see that her lips were turned up in another small but genuine smile.

"Well, consider it the first and last time then. What do you want?"

She drew in a deep breath before speaking. Her previous stammering had obviously annoyed him, so she summoned all her courage and got right to the point. "I would like you to consider me for an apprenticeship, sir."

He stared at her for span of two heartbeats before letting out a short, barking laugh. "Ha! Have your wits left you?! What makes you think I would take on an apprentice, yet alone an apprentice with such... affiliations... as yourself? More importantly..." he paused, watching her as she stood placidly, silently taking his chastising, "... more importantly, Miss Granger, why, when every other teacher in this God-forsaken school would... literally... melt into a quivering mass of jovial hysterics should you approach them with the same... proposal, would you come to me?"

"The truth, sir?"

He sneered, leaning back once again and turning his hands palm up as he spread his arms in a gesture of acquiescence. "Do enlighten me."

"You just answered it for yourself, sir." When he looked at her with an expression that said he was not in the mood for subtlety, she quickly continued. "Every other teacher would have gladly accepted me into the position without a second thought. You, on the other hand, I knew you would probably turn me down the second I asked you. You are more demanding than any other teacher at Hogwarts, and you have never once let me slide by because of my 'affiliations' as you so lovingly called them. I want to challenge myself, Professor, and you are the only person who will truly let me. That is, if you accept my proposal." She stood straight, her hands clasped nervously at her waist, her eyes on his while his mind worked over her words.

'Hmph... so the little princess thinks she can flatter me to get what she wants? How very... Slytherin of her,' he thought to himself. He broke her gaze and leaned forward once more, unconsciously picking up his quill and rolling it between his long fingers. He looked back to her, scrutinizing her, measuring her up. He had to admit, despite her near constant hand waving and the bleeding heart she had held for idiots like Neville Longbottom, she was admittedly one of the few pupils that he had actually enjoyed teaching over the last seven years. She wanted to learn she craved knowledge. She was very much like him in that aspect. Not that he would ever admit it.

"Miss Granger, I have to tell you, I have never before even considered taking on an apprentice." Her eyes were fixed on the black feather spinning in his hands. "Come to think of it, no one has ever been stupid enough to even approach me with the idea."

He saw her shoulders fall slightly she was disappointed.

"Oh. Well, I'm sorry for wasting your time then, sir. I'll just be going." She turned to leave, but his voice stopped her.

"I did not say that I would not consider it. I simply stated the fact that no one has ever been able to tolerate my presence long enough to consider apprenticing with me, nor have I gone out of my way to find such a person."

"So, you're saying you will consider it then?" Her demeanor had brightened considerably, which threw him off. How could she be happy at the prospect of spending the next four years of her life bound to someone like him? Surely she must know the consequences of the binding? The conditions?

He sighed as he pushed his chair away from his desk. The legs screeched loudly against the cold stone floor. Coming to his feet, he stepped down off the dais slowly, deliberately.

He had taken her by surprise when he had gotten up, so as he walked towards her, she watched him move like a trapped rabbit watches a fox, with only her eyes. Her body remained frozen as he came to a stop mere inches from her.

He could feel the heat radiating from her body as he stood close, looking at her face, trying to ascertain her truthfulness. He could see that she was tense, her brow furrowed in thought, her front teeth frantically working her lower lip.

"Go on, then," she whispered finally.

His brow bunched in confusion.

She turned her face up to his. "If you don't believe me, look into my mind... go on."

She closed the distance between them as she spoke, so that now only a hand's breadth separated them. She continued to hold his gaze with those deep brown eyes of hers. 'So, she thinks she wants to apprentice with me, does she? We shall see...'

He knew he shouldn't she would not be able to push him out of her mind if he delved too deep. Of its own volition, his right hand rose to clasp her about the throat, his index finger and thumb pressing into the curve of her jawbone on either side of her face. She gasped audibly as he suddenly tilted her head up at a more severe angle. Her pulse was racing he could feel it against the skin of his hand, fluttering rapidly like some wild thing trapped under the skin of her neck. Skin that was so very soft, so very warm...

For a split second his mind wondered what that pulse point would taste like beneath his lips, his tongue, and what sounds would come from her mouth if he grazed it with his teeth. His lips parted as sensations he hadn't felt in a long time swept over him.

After a long, tense moment, he let his fingers slide from her jaw-line and down her neck, where they barely grazed the hollow at the base before dropping to his side. The movement was just slow enough to be intimate, but swift enough that he knew she would not really take it as such.

So it was with a one-sided smirk that he noticed the gooseflesh that peppered across her skin at his deliberate caress. She still watched him, however. Her breathing had started to come faster, whether from fear... or other things... he could not tell.

As reality came rushing back, he stepped away slightly and finally spoke. "I will not violate the sanctity of your mind." 'However tempting it may be,' he added as a mental afterthought.

"I am not a nice man, Miss Granger, but I am also not one to take things that are not... willingly... and wholeheartedly given." She continued to watch him as he spoke, relief flooding her face.

"Go back to your tower. Think carefully about your request. There is much more to an Apprentice/Master relationship than I believe even you realize. I also believe that you will find me a harsh and difficult Master... one that will test your strengths and rid you of your weaknesses. If I so choose, that is."

She forced a small smile. "So that's a 'yes' then, sir?"

He looked at her, calculating. "Indeed."

"Thank you, sir! More than you will ever know!" Her cheerfulness was almost more than he could stand. When she didn't immediately turn to leave, but instead stood there simply smiling at him, he began to eye her warily.

"What is it, Miss Granger?"

Her smile widened a little. "Well, sir... if you were anyone else," she dipped her head in embarrassment, "I'd be forced to hug you."

"Miss Granger, I..." He held up his hands and backed away, horror etching his face at the prospect of the young girl no, woman throwing herself at him so unceremoniously. However, all things considered, it would definitely not be the worst thing that had ever happened to him, and she was rather pretty, after all.

"What!?" his inner voice screamed.

He could see her teeth when she smiled this time, pulling her bag back to her shoulder. "Don't worry... I've never taken you for the hugging type, sir."

To say he was utterly relieved when she headed towards the door was an understatement.

"You will receive my owl sometime within the next week, letting you know my final decision," he said, moving quickly back to his desk, lest she change her mind and decide that he was indeed the hugging type.

She nodded and smiled again before opening the door to leave.

"Oh, and Hermione..."

"Sir?"

"You're welcome."

She literally beamed at him.

He glowered back. "But I swear if you tell anyone what I've just said, I'll hex you into two weeks from last Thursday."

"Don't worry, sir... I'll consider it the first and the last time."

He smirked at her as she left his office. 'Cheeky little swot,' he thought. 'Well, at least there's a slim chance that she won't be cowering away from me at every turn.'

He picked up his quill and returned to his marking.

As the raven's feather scratched quickly across the parchment, marking essay after meaningless essay, his thoughts remained on the young woman who had just vacated his office. He thought of the absurdness of the fact that she had come to him, instead of the likes of Minerva or Filius. He thought of the way she had smiled at him when he had said he would consider her proposal. He thought of the way she had looked him boldly in the eye, freely offering up her mind should he wish to verify the truth of her words.

Over the next several days, Severus Snape thought of many more things that concerned Hermione Granger...

... but never once did it cross his mind that he had called her by her first name.

*******End flashback*******

~TBC

Next: More from Hermione's POV and another flashback.

Thanks so much for reading!

Bound

Chapter 7 of 15

A ritual...

"Severus?"

"Hmm?"

"May I... may I sit with you?"

His hand dropped from where it was propped under his chin as he turned in her direction. His brow furrowed for a moment before he smiled sadly, gesturing to the space beside him.

Hesitantly, she unfolded her legs and stood. Brushing her damp hair out of her eyes, she walked slowly towards him. He removed his left arm from where it was draped,

allowing her to sit next to him, but not have to touch him if she didn't want to. Oh, how he wanted her to.

She did sit rather close, angled towards him with her right arm now occupying the space his left had vacated. Her smell had been intoxicating from a few feet away, but a few inches... it would surely drive him mad. Unsure of what he should say now, he clasped both of his hands in his lap and stared at the dwindling fire.

Her gaze could have seared a hole in the side of his head. Her brown eyes roamed over his face and its contours: the small, barely visible scar on his left cheek; the five'o clock shadow just beginning to show across his chin; the way his lips turned up just so at the corners.

She couldn't help herself. He was now staring intently at his entwined fingers, and when she touched him, he flinched away. Slowly, she reached out again and ran her knuckles over the underside of his chin and over his cheek. When he didn't turn away further, she gently pushed his black hair behind his ear and let her hand lie softly against his neck. His skin was warm and soft.

"Do you regret?" she asked, rubbing the knuckles of her hand back and forth across the skin of his neck.

She saw the muscles in his jaw clench as his brow furrowed. Obviously, he hadn't been expecting that particular question. That they should sit here together, on this night, and not talk about... things... was beyond reason. They hadn't been this close to one another in almost a year her skin literally prickled at the feeling of being so close to him, yet so infinitely far away. If only he could see her heart's desires, if only he could feel what she felt: the aching, the longing, the sheer, utter madness of it all, then perhaps he would no longer turn from her, no longer push her away.

He looked at her out of the corner of his eye as his mind worked over her question. Several times he started to speak, but did not. After a few futile efforts, he sighed. "Yes," he admitted quietly, slowly moving his left hand to grasp the one she moved against his neck. "I do... regret."

There was a moment of silence, the only noise the crackling of the logs in the fireplace, before she spoke:

"All of it?" she asked softly.

He pulled her hand to his lap, absently rubbing across the back with his thumbs. Moments passed, so many that she started to doubt that he'd heard her. Then, softly: "No, not all."

She leaned forwards a little, so she could look into his face. "Which ones?"

He drew a breath and paused, unsure of whether or not he should say the words rolling around in his head. "You," he whispered finally, so softly she almost didn't hear him.

Her eyes welled up with tears, and her breath hitched in her throat as she continued to listen. "You..." he said again, this time bringing her hand to his mouth, brushing it chastely with his lips. "Myself..." A light brush of stubble as he held it to his cheek. After a moment, he pulled away and slowly entwined their fingers. He finally turned his eyes to hers, looking at her over their clasped hands. "Us."

She squeezed his hand as a tear escaped the confines of her lashes and slowly rolled down her cheek, sparkling like a diamond in the firelight. God, she had missed him in the long months they had been apart. She was still his apprentice, even though she was nearly at Master level after more than three years of his tutelage. If all went well, she would be a Master in just eleven months time, a full four years since he had taken her on.

They had interacted as nothing more than teacher and pupil since he had decided that she was safer without him. A more preposterous notion she had never heard. He was Severus Snape, the most feared man in the wizarding world, save perhaps the Dark Lord and Albus Dumbledore. Anyone that crossed him had either underestimated the dark Potions master, was too confident for their own good, or had gone completely 'round the twist.

Besides, he had to protect her they were Bound. The vows that apprentice and master took were not to be treated lightly. The conditions were not as severe as those of an Unbreakable Vow, but they were serious enough in and of themselves. As she sat there, her small fingers entwined within his large ones, an ever-growing warmth fluttering in her chest, her thoughts drifted back to the night her new life had begun...

*******Flashback*******

~ September, 1998

-Wiltshire, U.K.

Hermione was nervous. No, nervous was definitely an understatement. Simultaneously, she was going to have a panic attack, pass out, and throw up... all over her formal robes her new, expensive... green... formal robes that Professor Snape had purchased for her.

Professor Snape.

No... no longer her Professor... soon to be her Master. She was starting to get cold feet, waiting here in the frigid night air, alone, in the dark. She stared ahead of herself, at the monolithic stone structure standing out against the setting sun. Stonehenge, a place of ancient magic, ancient people, ancient rites. What better place to have a ceremony such as this, an irrevocable bonding of two souls.

She stood in the damp grass, waiting to be called, while the late summer wind whipped her cloak around her, pulling strands of hair from underneath the hood and swirling them violently around her face. It's not that she was afraid, well, maybe a little but what if she let him down? She was his first apprentice, and while she had no doubt as to his abilities to instruct her in the art of Potions, she suddenly doubted her ability to live up to his high standards. Standards that had been nigh unachievable as a student. She couldn't fathom what he would ask of her as an apprentice.

"Oh God, what am I doing!?" she whispered, hugging her arms around herself, panic lacing her voice as she looked left, then right, desperately seeking an escape route. Just as she had made up her mind to turn and run, she heard Minerva's voice call from the darkness. "We are ready for you now, Miss Granger."

A halo of light appeared between two of the great stones, and Hermione could just make out the older witch's silhouette standing out against the flickering light behind her.

Shit.

Setting her jaw, Hermione took a deep, calming breath. 'It's just a ceremony... a few words, a few rites, and it's done with.' She carefully lifted the hem of her dark green robes as she started towards Minerva. The older witch, dressed in robes of a deep, royal purple with black beaded trim, smiled and stood aside as Hermione crossed the threshold and walked into the ancient circle.

She passed between several smaller stones on her way to the small clearing in the middle. A ring of torches, each at least seven feet tall, had been erected around the open space. In the dim light, she could barely discern three figures, two tall, one short. As she came closer, she saw the spectacled form of Albus Dumbledore standing at what appeared to be the head of the clearing. He was dressed in formal robes of the darkest blue, and she could just make out a tiny shimmer of beading along the hems.

As she came closer, she looked to her left, where she found her friend, her witness, Harry Potter. The flames from the torches reflected off his glasses, giving them a strange, eerie glow. He was clad in dark red dress robes, so dark that she had almost thought them black. No. Harry wouldn't show up here wearing black. Leave that color

to the man standing to her right. She smiled a silent 'thank you' to Harry, who nodded, before she turned her attention to the man whose gaze she had felt on her since she had entered into the circle of torches.

Severus Snape.

Her head turned... and her jaw dropped.

His robes were white.

Pure white... like new snow or swan feathers.

She knew she was gaping, but she couldn't help it. Where normally there existed only a swirl of formless black robes, there stood before her now a dark angel, a vision that could only exist in dreams. Even beneath the hood of his white cloak, she could see that his hair had grown longer over the summer; it now hung just past his shoulders, black as midnight. The contrast of ebony hair against white fabric was startling. The cloak was pushed back over his shoulders, so she could see his that his high-collared jacket fit snugly around his chest and trim waist, while the back continued down past his knees. The faintest hint of silver thread could be seen along the lapels and cuffs, both of which were accented with small, ivory buttons. His trousers seemed to be made of a soft, light material, which glowed amber in the torchlight and fit snugly against his long legs. Silk, perhaps? Along the seam of each trouser leg, there was a barely discernable vertical stripe, made of a slightly darker material. Each stripe ran from waist to knee before disappearing into a pair of black dragon-hide boots.

Black boots... the only visible trace of the Potions master she had known for seven years.

This man before her was not the man she had seen everyday for nearly half her life. This was not the sour, mean, greasy teacher that had made her life, and many others, Hell for almost a decade. This man was not greasy, nor scowling, nor ugly in the least.

This man was... breathtaking.

She was so astonished, that for the first time in her life she was rendered speechless. Who would have ever thought that he had hidden all of... that... under those dreadful robes for all those years? The long legs, the wide shoulders, the trim waist... A moment passed, and then another, before anyone spoke. His soft baritone snapped her out of her reveries. "Miss Granger... if you are done ogling my person, perhaps we can proceed with the rest of tonight's requirements?"

She started and snatched her gaze away from where she had been watching the muscles of his left leg move underneath the fabric of his trousers 'Fascinating...' to lock eyes with him.

"Y-yes, sir... sorry," she blushed.

He simply nodded at her, one corner of his mouth lifting in a small smirk. "Shall we?" he asked, closing the distance between them and extending his elbow. Hermione hesitated for a moment, before placing her hand in the crook of his arm and letting him lead her to the very center of the circle. Once there, he dropped his arm, but did not move away. They both stood facing Albus, who looked between them before gesturing to the two people still standing on the outskirts of the circle.

Harry moved up to stand on Hermione's left, while Minerva moved to stand on Severus' right. Hermione spared another glance for her lifelong friend, now an Auror-in-training; he had been upset with her when she had first told him who she had approached for an apprenticeship. He had never like Professor Snape, nor would he ever, but after a thorough discussion on the reasons behind her choice, Hermione had finally convinced Harry that she knew what she was doing. Reluctantly, he had agreed to stand as her witness during the Bonding Ceremony if Professor Snape accepted her, that is.

It had only been a few days later, while sitting at breakfast on the day of the Leaving Feast, that Hermione had received an owl bearing his seal. Her hands were shaking as she had removed the parchment from the barn owl's leg and unrolled the letter, totally forgetting to give the owl a treat. After snatching a piece of bacon directly from her plate, it had left in a huff. Her friends had watched as her eyes furiously scanned the letter. It was short and to the point:

~Miss Granger,

I accept. Your Bonding robes have already been purchased and will arrive at Madam Malkin's on Tuesday next. See that you pick them up in a timely manner.

SS

Her robes. She looked away from Harry and back to Albus as she ran a hand over the soft green fabric at her stomach. The color was a deep hunter green. The robes had a low, curved neckline, lower than anything she had ever worn, and Celtic symbols were stitched along the edge in silver thread, matching those running along the hem and around the cuff of the elongated bell sleeves. Her waist was accented by a belt of a darker green, almost black, that was tied with a silver cord that fell to her ankles. Her cloak was black, the clasp at her neck silver.

A glance to her right revealed Snape standing very still, hands at his sides. All she could see of his face from beneath the hood of his cloak was the very tip of his nose. She smiled despite herself. Further to the right, she saw Minerva look over at her. The older witch must have seen Hermione look at Severus and smile, because one side of Minerva's mouth lifted in its own small smile, accompanied by the adjoining eyebrow.

Before Hermione could contemplate the Deputy Headmistress's expression, she heard Dumbledore begin to speak:

"Is everyone accounted for?"

Four voices rang out. "We are here."

"Excellent. We may begin." The Headmaster gestured at Severus and Hermione. They turned to face each other, Hermione a trembling mess, Severus the epitome of calm. He reached up, or down rather... she was much shorter than he... and gently removed the black hood, settling it back over her shoulders. As she watched his face, fascinated, she felt him pull her hair gently from beneath the cloak and arrange it neatly about her shoulders. Putting his hands back at his sides, he gave her a small nod.

Hermione took in a deep breath through her nose and blew it out slowly through her lips. She had to stretch a little as she reached for Severus' hood. Her fingers brushed through his hair 'So soft...' as she slipped her hands underneath the edges of the hood and carefully pushed it back. Mimicking him, she took his hair in both her hands and pulled it free, laying it gently about his shoulders.

Their faces were very close together, seeing as how she had to reach so far, and she felt his warm breath on her cheek as she finished with his hair. It tickled, and goosebumps rose along her skin. Pulling back, she smiled tentatively at him. He smelled of sandalwood, leather, and something remotely... male. The corners of his lips lifted in a small smile as he nodded to her again and they both turned back to face Albus.

After a moment the old wizard spoke: "Are we ready?"

Again, four voices spoke as one: "We are ready."

Albus raised his right hand towards Harry. "Witness, have you come here of your own free will, to stand beside your friend as she begins this journey?"

"I have," Harry answered.

"So be it. Bring forth your strand."

The Headmaster held his open palm as Harry stepped forward. Hermione watched as her friend placed a thin, red cord in the man's hand. "I bring with me the color red: the color of fire, the color of passion, love, strength, and **protection**. May it be so." With a nod of thanks from Dumbledore, and a pointed glance in Snape's direction, Harry stepped back to his place beside Hermione. She turned to him and gave him a smile of genuine gratitude as Dumbledore called out again.

His left hand was lifted towards Minerva this time. "Witness, have you come here of your own free will, to stand beside your friend as he begins this journey?"

"I have," Minerva answered with a nod.

"So be it. Bring forth your strand."

Minerva walked forward, and Hermione saw a bright flash of color as her former teacher placed her own cord in the Headmaster's hand. "I bring with me the color yellow: the color of the sun, the color of joy, happiness, and hope. May it be so." Another nod from the older wizard, and Minerva returned to her place beside Severus. Hermione saw him turn to his colleague and nod. When he turned back she was certain there was a shine in his eyes, but it was gone so quickly she must have imagined it.

For a third time, Dumbledore's voice carried out across the night. "Apprentice," Hermione's eyes widened and her breathing quickened, "do you come here of your own free will, to stand beside this man as your Master until you yourself have claimed that same honor?"

Her voice trembled. "I have."

"So be it. Bring forth your strand."

Hermione reached inside her cloak and pulled her cord out of an inner pocket. She had chosen her color carefully. It reminded her of the man standing next to her, but it was also what she wanted for herself one day.

She placed the grey cord in Dumbledore's hand. "I bring with me the color grey: the color of security, reliability, intelligence, dignity, and maturity. May it be so." Dumbledore smiled at her as he added the cord to the others. She went back to her place next to Severus, and saw him glance at her ever so subtly. What would his color be, she wondered?

For a fourth and final time, the old wizard's voice rang out: "Potions master, have you come here of your own free will, to stand beside this woman, to guide her and instruct her until she too may claim the title of Master?"

"I have," Severus answered softly.

"So be it. Bring forth your strand."

Hermione saw Severus reach into his cloak as he slowly approached the Headmaster. He pulled his cord from within and placed it in the man's outstretched hand. "I bring with me the color white: the color of purity, innocence, peace, and humility. May it be so." Albus' eyes narrowed a little as he gazed at Severus, but his mouth turned up into a smile as he gave a final nod. Severus turned and reclaimed his place beside Hermione.

She couldn't help but wonder at his choice of colors. Each color was supposed to represent that which the bringer wanted for the relationship between Master and Apprentice, as well as for the two individuals that were to be Bonded. Peace? Humility? Obviously, there were many things about Severus Snape that she would have to learn.

Her attention was brought back to the clearing by Dumbledore's voice. He was adding his own cord to the pile. "Severus, Hermione, I have come here of my own free will, to bind you to each other, as Master and Apprentice, until such time that you, Hermione, have achieved the title of Master. I bring with me the color blue: the color of tranquility, stability, harmony, unity, truth... and trust. May it be so." He added his own cord to those resting in his right hand. With a wave of his left, there was a flash of light and a gust of wind, and instead of five short strands, one long, dark cord lay draped over Dumbledore's hand. His eyes grew wide with surprise, and he stared at the object in his hand for a moment before slowly speaking:

"Black: the color of power." He looked first at Hermione and then at Severus, his gaze calculating. "May it be so," he said as he finally gathered the cord in his hand. "Step forward."

Severus and Hermione stepped towards the old wizard who stood with the ebony cord held in his left hand, his wand now in the right. The wind chose that particular moment to rush through the stones, extinguishing most of the torches. Hermione and Harry looked around in a panic, afraid the ceremony had been disturbed, but the three others continued as if nothing had happened.

Dumbledore's voice again: "Severus, if you would." Hermione saw a brief flash of silver and then saw the Potions master flinch. Before she could comprehend what had just happened, he was holding his right hand out towards her, along with the hilt of a silver knife, the shine of the blade clouded by fresh blood. She stared at it for a moment, before realizing that he wanted her to take it. She reached out a shaking hand and grasped the hilt. It was warm where he had held it in his own hand. His blood covered the tip of the blade, as well as the thumb and forefinger he held it out to her with. All she could do was stare, transfixed.

"Miss Granger..." she heard Snape say, as if from a long way away.

She didn't respond.

A second time, louder, more forceful: "Miss Granger!"

She jumped. Composing herself, she looked to him, apologizing with her expression. "Your turn, Miss Granger." He indicated the knife she now held in her right hand. Her lips pressed together in a thin line as she lightly pressed the blade to the palm of her left. His warm blood ran from the razor edge, down over her skin, staining it red. With a deep breath, she closed her eyes and turned her head away, while at the same time closing her fingers around the blade. One swift pull of her right hand and a line of fire split across her left.

Tears were in her eyes as she handed the blade back to Snape, who watched her with an unreadable expression before handing the blade to Dumbledore. He took it carefully and wiped the blood off the blade and onto the black cord. "The blood of those who are to be Bound, freely given, will seal this cord of power and all that is contained therein." He finished wiping, and with a small flick of his wrist, the blade vanished.

"Now, for the final rite." Dumbledore once again gestured at Hermione and Severus. "Join hands, please." Hermione extended her bloody left hand to Severus, keeping her eyes locked with his, as she had been instructed. She felt the cool skin of his palm, also slick with warm blood, slide against hers. She thought she could detect a slight tremor in the always stoic man, but his face revealed nothing. It was expressionless, as always.

She was lost in the blackness of his eyes, empty pools of midnight, as Dumbledore began the final rite. He held up his wand and with a wave, he set the cord to winding its way around Severus' wrist, willing the power of the Master to transfer to the Apprentice, to help guide and assist. "Do you, Severus Snape, vow to become Master to Hermione Granger, to teach and guide her as your Apprentice, to watch over her and protect her while she is in your care, to provide for her as her Master, and to forsake all others while so Bonded?"

"I do," Severus answered, his gaze never leaving Hermione's.

A flash of light, and the cord wound its way around their hands, in a pattern of infinity, before winding onto Hermione's wrist, willing her power to transfer to that of the Master, so that he may know her strengths, her weaknesses.

"Do you, Hermione Granger, vow to become Apprentice to Severus Snape, to obey him in all things as they relate to your station, to learn from him, to be humble in that learning, to forsake all others and strive to honor him as you achieve your goals through him?"

Her eyes were stoic, determined. "I do."

Another flash of light, and the cord bound itself around her wrist, connecting her to Severus. She was the one trembling now. Dumbledore looked between them, an omniscient expression on his face. "As your Bonder and friend, I now join you as Master," he nodded to Severus, "and Apprentice," he nodded at Hermione. "May it be so. Now, if you would please close the final seal."

So, now they came to the rite of the flesh. This was the part that Hermione had been dreading. The Bonding needed a 'joining of the flesh,' as well as the blood. The fact that their palms were pressed together was irrelevant only one rite could be taken from each part of the body. Since the rite of the blood had been taken from their hands, they were now useless for this part of the ritual. It was simple really, nothing complicated. They simply had to touch flesh to flesh and the ritual was complete. As Severus leaned slowly towards her, Hermione could hear Harry's huff of annoyance from behind her. When Severus' lips brushed hers in a quick, chaste kiss, she knew Harry had turned away, disgusted.

Hermione was not disgusted she was, once again, fascinated. Even though they did not move, his lips were soft and warm, not cold and stiff, as they pressed against hers. Her eyes closed and her free hand moved to touch his cheek, but he pulled away so only her fingertips trailed along his jaw. His expression was startled for a moment, before he gave her another slow nod and directed his gaze towards their entwined hands.

With a flash of golden light the cord disappeared, leaving streaks across Hermione's vision. The flesh of her hand now bore what looked like a tiny interwoven scar in the exact place the cord had been wound. She glanced to Severus and could see that his was the same. He let go of her hand, and she saw him look at his palm it was healed, as was hers. A single, thin scar was all that remained.

After a moment, they heard Dumbledore speak again. "So it is on this day, in this place, that you are Bound to each other, Master and Apprentice. May all your endeavors succeed."

With those final words, Hermione looked around her, at the Headmaster, at Harry, Minerva, and finally at Severus, who bowed formally. She returned the bow in kind, and as they straightened, the wind suddenly howled out of the night sky, extinguishing all but one of the remaining torches, and bringing with it the first raindrops of a late summer thunderstorm.

"I believe that is our cue," Dumbledore said, just before Apparating away. Minerva was right behind him, gone in a swirl of robes. Hermione turned to Harry and smiled. With a quick glance over Hermione's shoulder at Snape, he too Apparated home. That left Hermione alone with her new Master, a man she had barely spoken to since that day in his office.

She turned back to face him, the light from the single torch making his features soft. "So," he said, moving towards her, "was it what you expected?"

She rubbed her arms, not knowing why being alone with him would suddenly make her so nervous. "Well," she began, her eyebrows coming together as she thought for a moment, "even though I had read about it, the blood rite did catch me a little off guard." She looked at the scar on her left hand, tracing it with her index finger. "Stung," she said.

"Yes," she heard him reply. When she looked up, he was much closer, and before she could say anything, he had taken her scarred hand in his. Hermione watched as he ran his own finger over the line of new, pink skin. "It is a... powerful gesture, the spilling of one's blood for another." She stood transfixed as his feather light caress made her whole arm tingle. When she looked up again, he was staring at her intently, with a look she had never seen before. "No one has ever... willingly... spilt their blood for me, Hermione."

Her skin peppered with goosebumps as her given name crossed his lips. Slightly taken aback, she said the only thing she could think of: "I-It was a requirement, sir. The ceremony would not have been complete without it." She watched the unnamed emotion melt from his face, watched his features mold themselves back to their normal state.

He abruptly released her hand and took a step back. "Of course, Miss Granger."

The rain started to fall harder. "Shall we, my Apprentice?" he said, gesturing North, towards Hogwarts. She nodded.

"After you then, Miss Granger."

She nodded, and after giving him a tight-lipped smile, spun in place and was gone with a barely audible pop, the skin of her arm still tingling madly from the lightest of his touches.

*******End Flashback*******

Next: Things in the present are discussed, and another flashback from Severus' POV.

A/N: Wow! This ended up a lot longer than I had planned (over 5000 words!).

Also, I realize Stonehenge is slightly cliché, but I've always wanted to visit and well, I was too lazy to invent my own henge! :)

Please let me know what you think! I wrote the Bonding ritual off the top of my head, so I hope it turned out alright. I found the meaning for all the colors on the web, though I can't remember what site... sorry! If you take the time to read, please leave me a little note, even if it's to say 'stop the insanity'... Thanks so much!

Moonlight & Nightshade Part I

Chapter 8 of 15

Hermione's first task as Severus' apprentice goes pear-shaped...

It was always amazing to him the power that a simple touch could possess it could bring either unbearable pain or the sweetest bliss. With one simple caress, Hermione had brought months of his frustration and heartache to the surface. As Severus held her hand in his, he remembered what it was like when she had been his... when they had each owned a small part of the other.

"We could have those things again, Severus," she spoke quietly, with her head bowed. She put into words the deepest wishes of his heart, the ones he was too afraid to speak. "We could be happy, you and I," she whispered as she ran her thumb softly over the back of his hand, tracing the delicate, blue veins barely visible beneath his pale skin.

Severus' mind warred with his heart logic with love each seeking to outweigh the other. "You would never be safe," he replied, taking in the tears that flowed freely down her cheeks. He swore to himself that one day she would never have reason to cry. "As much as I... *regret* the horrible things that happened to you... *tous*... and as much as I wish I could change them or even make up for them... I cannot put you in danger again."

She laughed softly, wiping at her eyes with her free hand. "You never had any qualms about such things before."

"Before?" he asked, slightly puzzled.

"Yes, before... before we became, well, before *us*." She looked at him, one corner of her mouth turned up in a tiny smile.

He was overjoyed to see any semblance of happiness on her face, however small, but could not recall what she was referring to.

"You honestly don't remember?" she asked.

He looked away for a moment, searching his memories of the time before they had become romantically involved. After a moment, a spark lit in the back of his mind. He turned to her: "Surely you don't mean that nightshade debacle?"

She laughed again. "Right in one."

He feigned annoyance, huffing as he rolled left shoulder, which suddenly felt stiff. "Gods, woman, you never forget anything, do you?"

Hermione's countenance softened. "Not about you." She reached out to tuck a stray lock of hair behind his ear.

"Not about me'," he returned, nodding his head. "May I ask what it is about me that has kept the memory so fresh?"

She moved closer, tucking herself tentatively into his side. When his arm came around her, she snuggled deeper, pressing her face into the soft curve made by his shoulder where it joined his chest. Her fingers made half moon patterns in the fabric over his clavicle, tracing over the scars she knew were still there. He could feel her breath it was warm against his nightshirt when she finally replied, "How could I ever forget the night I lost my heart?"

His chest tightened. They had never really talked of how things began it was as if there was an unspoken agreement between them on the subject. If Severus was honest with himself, just like Hermione, that night had never left his mind either...

*****Flashback*****

September, 1998

~Hogwarts School, Scotland

To say he was nervous was understated to say he was excited was understated as well. It had only been two weeks since the Bonding Ceremony at Stonehenge. The Welcoming Feast had been held earlier that evening and this was Hermione's first official night as Severus' apprentice.

The feast had gone smoothly, starting promptly at 4:30. The new arrivals, all ninety-seven of them, were sorted quickly, and the meal started right on time at five. It was now almost six. Hermione was due to arrive in his office at any moment.

The girl was about to undertake her first assignment as his apprentice: she was to accompany him to the Forbidden Forest to gather a rare form of nightshade, which only bloomed during the full moon, which just happened to be tonight.

It would not be her first track into the forest she had been there many times during her tenure as a student *Albeit illegally*, Severus remembered with a sneer. Well, she would use every bit of that illicit knowledge tonight, whether she wanted to or not. The nightshade they were gathering only grew in the deepest parts of the forest. It would take them around two hours to reach the clearing where it grew, and they would most likely be spending the night in the forest, as it was not safe to travel too long after dark.

He was not looking forward to spending at least eight straight hours in the same tent with the girl, but what choice did he have really? It would take at least two people to gather the plant, and the positives far outweighed the negatives.

As for spending the night, the dangers of the forest, especially during a full moon, were too great to risk life and limb by traipsing about after dark. They had both agreed that the best thing to do would be to leave directly after the feast, find the clearing, and make camp while waiting for the moon to rise and the nightshade to bloom.

As he was shrinking the last of his provisions and putting them into a small duffle, there came a soft knock at his door. "Come in," he called. He looked back over his shoulder as Hermione entered his office, wearing a light traveling cloak with a red duffle slung over her shoulder.

"Are you ready, sir?" she asked, with just a bit too much pep for Severus' taste.

"Yes, Miss Granger. Have you everything you may need?"

She nodded.

"Fine. Let's go." He pulled the buckle tight on his bag, slung it over his shoulder, and brushed past her to the door. He opened it and waited for her to exit, which she did in a flurry when she realized that he was holding the door for her.

"Sorry," she muttered on her way out.

"Indeed."

It was a warm, late summer afternoon, and the sun had just started to ease towards the horizon as they made their way out the front doors of the castle. Severus was glad that he had decided to forego his usual topcoat for this trip. Instead, he wore a simple, long-sleeved, cotton shirt tucked into black trousers, with a pair of black hiking boots on his feet. Hermione, he had noted, was clothed in Muggle garb: she wore light-colored denims, a pair of trainers that had certainly seen better days, and a plain, short-sleeved, black t-shirt underneath her cloak.

Severus strode purposefully towards their destination: the Forbidden Forest. Hermione almost had to run to keep up with his long strides.

"Professor!" he heard her call, as she started to fall behind. He did not slow his pace. "Sir!" she called again. Still, he didn't slow. Only when he heard her outcry of: "Severus!" did he slow his pace and turn back towards her. She was picking herself up off the ground, looking irritated as she brushed dirt from her hands and knees.

"Are you quite capable of keeping up, or shall I have to toss you over my shoulder to insure you come along in a timely manner?" he spat. She stormed up to him, still brushing dirt from her front.

"If you weren't in such a bloody hurry, I wouldn't have any trouble keeping up... sir."

"Do you wish to be traipsing about the forest after nightfall, Miss Granger?" He watched her cross her arms petulantly. Her lips pressed into a thin line, obviously suppressing some sarcastic remark.

"I thought as much. Now, if you are quite ready, I'd like to make camp sometime this year."

He turned with a flourish of his cloak. Hermione swallowed her pride and gave him a good glaring at before running to catch up.

"Is this it?" Hermione asked curiously.

Tired and hot from their trudge through the forest, Severus simply answered, "Yes."

He stood quietly, gazing around the small clearing. It would probably be considered cozy, with its overhanging canopy of branches and soft blanket of lush grass, if it was not in the middle of one of the most dangerous magical places in Great Britain.

Severus dropped his bag to the ground gently. He walked towards the center of the clearing, looking up at the darkening sky through the gap in the canopy of leaves. "I'd say we have approximately thirty minutes until nightfall. I suggest we get things settled now." He gave the sky one last look before moving back towards his pack.

Hermione had set her duffle down as well and was also inspecting the clearing. "So, this is where it will bloom?" she asked, walking to the space underneath the gap in the canopy. She got down on her knees to inspect the ground more closely, running her hands over the grass. It looked the same as the rest of the clearing.

"Yes," Severus replied, watching her peer down at the ground as if she did not believe him. "Now, if you don't mind, I'd appreciate it if I wasn't the only one doing something constructive."

She turned to him with a frown. He waved vaguely in the direction of the trees on the other side of the clearing. "Make a circle. Set up repelling charms, Notice-Me-Nots, and a ward breach alarm about thirty feet out." He turned back to his pack as Hermione set off.

Kneeling down, he unbuckled the bag. He reached inside and pulled out a small brown bundle, about the size of a deck of playing cards. Searching the clearing for a moment, he finally chose a spot not far from where he was kneeling. He pushed to his feet and made his way towards the chosen location, his wand now in his hand, and tossed his small bundle onto the ground. With one flick of his wrist it turned itself into a small, canvas tent.

When he determined that it was livable from the outside, he threw back the flap and went to inspect the inside, his pack sailing after him. Hermione followed a few moments later, entering upon the tail end of a string of expletives.

"...shite!" he spat.

"Sir?" he heard her ask as she came up behind him. "What's wrong?"

"Done already?" he replied caustically. She crossed her arms and struck a classic 'and what of it?' pose.

He narrowed his eyes at her, but ignored her petulance.

"Wrong, Miss Granger? What could possibly be wrong?" He gestured around the space in which they were standing. Hermione looked around. Most magical tents were shockingly similar: they were standing in a small sitting area, consisting of two arm chairs, one small sofa, and a round coffee table. There was a small kitchen over to the right, what was supposedly a loo to their left, and straight back against the far wall of the tent was a large bed, outfitted with a deep red comforter and pillows, all sitting atop white sheets.

Severus could see her brow scrunch together as she took in the large bed. Her head swiveled left, and then right as she searched for another sleeping area. She came up empty. "Well," she said resignedly, "I'll just take the sofa then." She smiled at him and tossed her bag onto its overstuffed cushions.

Severus' annoyance level rose considerably. If he was a lesser man, he would have taken her decision as it stood and slept well that night. Instead and he told himself that it was simply a compulsion of the vow he had taken as a Master, to see to her well-being. Severus snatched her pack from its place on the sofa and walked to the back of the tent, tossing it on the bed. "Hardly, Miss Granger," he said.

"But sir, I'll be fine on the sofa, honestly."

"Be that as it may, I am more accustomed to sleeping in... relative discomfort than you are. I shall take the sofa." He walked back towards her. "Besides, I cannot have my apprentice unable to work because of a strained back, nor do I care to hear her whine about it for the duration of this project."

"But..." she began, before being cut off.

"That is enough, Miss Granger. Take the bed," he gestured towards it, *'how.'*

She huffed. "Fine, but don't expect me to like it."

He raised an eyebrow at her and turned away, headed towards the kitchen and she hoped a large pot of tea.

Two hours later, the moon had finally risen above the trees. Hermione and Severus sat around a small fire near the entrance of the tent. A fire she had insisted upon, much to Severus' utter annoyance. "It is September, Miss Granger," he had reminded her as she had set about making a ring of stones to safely contain the blaze. She had insisted again, stating that one could not camp properly without some form of campfire, be it September or not. He had rolled his eyes and left her to it.

Now, as the coolness of the night had settled upon them, Severus was secretly glad for her small fire, although he would never admit it. His supplies were at his side, and he kept watch on the moon, waiting for it to move into the correct position.

Hermione, on the other hand, was enjoying the fire immensely. She had brought a packet of marshmallows with her, for just such an occasion, and was even now pulling the hot, blackened fluff from the end of a long toasting stick. "Are you sure you don't want one, sir?" she asked him for the fourth time. "They're quite good."

She popped the sticky glob into her mouth.

"No, thank you, Miss Granger," he replied for the fourth time, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. His lips turned up in a small, amused smile as he watched her lick the leftovers from her fingers. She seemed so like a child at that moment, and Severus found himself once again doubting his decision to take her on. She was very young, and though she was intelligent and mature beyond her years, she was an innocent, still naïve to the real dangers and ways of the world.

"So," she said after her fingers were clean, "we're waiting on the moonlight to fall on the exact center of the clearing, correct?"

He had already explained it to her once. She had understood, but as was her way, she asked question after question, nitpicking every detail, wearing it down to its base properties... and wearing him down in the process.

He sighed resignedly and automatically shifted into lecture mode: "Yes, Miss Granger. When the moonlight hits the clearing, the nightshade will break through the earth and bloom in a matter of minutes. It is in these first few moments that they hold the most magic, the most potency... and are the most deadly. They must be harvested immediately." He reached down beside him and grabbed a pair of light, leather gloves, tossing them to her. "Wear those," he said. "I wouldn't want you to accidentally poison yourself in your exuberance."

She simply smiled at him and tucked the gloves into a back pocket. A few more minutes passed. Severus continued to watch the moon; Hermione ate another marshmallow.

Finally he stood, beckoning that she should do the same. "Come," he said as he gathered his supplies a leather bag and a pair of dragon-hide gloves before walking to the middle of the clearing.

He knelt in the cool grass, just as Hermione had earlier, and handed her the bag before pulling on his gloves. He took his wand from his sleeve and cast a look to the sky, where the moon was indeed directly above them, shining silvery light down onto the grass.

"Sir!" Hermione exclaimed.

He turned his attention back to the ground in front of them. It had started to writhe and churn, popping and rolling as if a volley of nightcrawlers fought to break free of the dirt. Hermione watched, transfixed, as the first tiny green shoot spurted from the grass. Its thin stalk was moist and luminescent in the lunar light, glistening like a wet diamond. It grew quickly, unfolding itself slowly, elegantly in the moonlight. By the time that first delicate flower had opened its sparkling lavender blooms, hundreds more were sprouting forth and opening right before her eyes. It was breath-taking... like watching nature in fast-forward, or witnessing the birth of a galaxy of stars.

"Beautiful," she whispered, pulling on her own gloves.

"Yes," she heard Severus whisper in reply.

She turned to look at him and was shocked. The Potion master's face was not that of her school days. Gone were the harsh lines and the scowling countenance. Instead, he looked upon the scene before them with what Hermione could only call reverence. The corners of his lips were turned up in a small smile, and she could even see his teeth peeking from between his parted lips. The moonlight shone down upon him, softening the rest of his features and making his ebony hair shine like liquid obsidian. Hermione found herself unable to look away. He was undeniably beautiful in that moment.

As Hermione continued to watch, he started the stasis spell for the first few blooms. With a delicate flick of his wand, he plucked them from their trembling stalks. As she held out the bag for him to place them in, her attention was suddenly drawn elsewhere. It was a sound, far off in the distance, which reminded her vaguely of... pipes? Horns? What on Earth? Whatever it was, it made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end.

She was about to turn back to Severus, to ask him about the strange noise, when his hand clamped over her mouth. Her first reaction was to grab hold of his fingers and pull them away. Before she could even get a grip, his wand arm encircled her waist and she was pulled roughly against him. Her back was flush with his chest, and her face was pressed against his. Panic seized her and she struggled in his grasp. She could feel his heart hammering in his chest as he fought to control her. His breath was hot on her neck as he whispered frantically, giving her a shake, "*Don't... move!*"

She froze.

Something was wrong.

Her brow came together as she quieted and strained to look into his face. He loosened his grip slightly, so that she could see him. The look on his face made her go cold: fear.

Severus Snape was afraid.

Keeping his hand over her mouth, he looked pointedly towards the far side of the clearing, then back to her, silently asking if she understood.

Her eyes were wide with her own fear as she gave the smallest nod of her head.

He removed his hand from her mouth, settling it around her waist with the other. Ever so slowly, Severus pulled off his gloves in order to get a better grip on his wand. They knelt there in the clearing, the nightshade forgotten as the low drone of flutes and trumpets once again pierced the air. When the outer wards screamed their breaching, Severus' hands tightened convulsively around Hermione, pulling her more firmly against him. She could feel the tightness of his knuckles around his wand as she gripped his hands with one of her own. Following his lead, she slowly pulled off her own gloves before reaching into her back pocket for her wand.

She and Severus were pressed together so tightly that she had to force her hand between his hips and hers. The fact that he did not notice her hand as it brushed up against his groin frightened her immensely. His full attention was focused upon the forest at the far side of the clearing, to where the unknown object of his their fear was coming ever closer.

They could now hear the protestation of the trees, a snapping and breaking of branches as something too big for the forest tried to force its way through. This time it was Hermione who tightened her grip on Severus. Feeling her fear, and knowing that they must move, he tightened his grip on her waist and pulled her to her feet.

The sounds of destruction were right outside the clearing now. They could literally see the shrubbery parting and crashing around the nightmare that was coming straight for them. A low, resounding tremor rippled through the air.

It was growling.

With the stealth of a phantasm, it stepped out into the clearing. Hermione felt her heart leap into her throat. Severus' hand tightened once more around her waist. The

creature standing before them was the stuff of nightmares, something sent from the darkest corner of Hell to bring the wicked to their doom. They were right to be afraid. This was Death...

The mantichore was enormous the size of a horse and twice as wide. It came with the body of a lion and a sickeningly human face that peered menacingly at them through ice blue eyes set beneath a thick brow. It slunk into the clearing, muscles rippling beneath its tawny skin, its nose in the air, sniffing. Leathery wings sprouted from its shoulders, reaching upwards into the sky like those of a great, demonic bat. The moon shone through the thin, waxy skin, turning the silver light a sickly pink.

Catching their scent, the beast roared, and Severus shoved Hermione behind him. Multiple rows of razor-sharp teeth dripped with thick saliva as it bellowed its rage at them. A scorpion tail was raised over its back, the tip dripping with venom, instantly fatal to anyone unlucky enough to feel its sting.

"Back away... now!!" Severus growled at her, never taking his eyes or his wand from the leviathan before them.

Hermione did not hesitate. She did as she was told, keeping a firm hold on his hand to make sure he too was backing away.

He offered no resistance, and they slowly backed their way towards the forest. The creature roared once more and took a step towards them.

Formalities were forgotten as Hermione whispered, "Severus..." in a voice laced with panic. She too, had her wand trained on the beast. It watched them as they backed away, its eerie blue eyes glittering with malice, along with something else a terrible, raw hunger. Dagger-sized claws dug trenches in the earth as it dug in, muscles coiling tightly as it prepared to spring.

There was a pregnant pause, in which everything seemed to slow down. Hermione could make out the beads of sweat on Severus' brow, the slight twitch of the muscle in his jaw, tight with tension. Severus, in turn, could feel the pulse of her blood as it rushed through the hand still clinging to his own. He could hear the slide of the moist skin of her palm as she readjusted her grip on her wand.

It was but a single moment, and then Hell unleashed itself upon them.

"Run!!" Severus shouted as the beast sprang into the air with one powerful downward swoop of its wings. The great leathery appendages churned the air around them leaves and twigs flew everywhere in a cyclone of wind that whipped their hair about their faces, stinging their skin. Hermione turned, still grasping his hand as she sought to get them both to safety, but was pulled up short when he didn't move.

"What are you doing?!" she screamed into the maelstrom.

"Saving your precious Gryffindor hide!!" he screamed in return, giving her a shove towards the trees. "Now run, dammit!!"

Severus turned back to monster and slashed his wand at it, his hair still flying wildly about his face. The creature shrieked and dropped to the ground. It clawed at its face where a great gaping wound had opened up, spilling viscous, black blood onto the grass.

When a second blow, not of his making, fell on the creature, Severus turned to see Hermione standing with him. Her wand was trained on the demon before them, shaking with her barely contained fear.

"You God-damned Gryffindors are all the same, aren't you?" he spat, as he turned back to land a third blow, this one laying open the beast's chest. It screamed its rage at him, spittle flying from its gaping maw.

Although her voice shook when she spoke, his cutting remark seemed to renew her vigor. "I'm not going to let you die, sir. How will I finish my apprenticeship if my master is being digested?" She sent another hex at the creature, but like her first, it simply rebounded into the trees with a crackle.

He sneered at her. "Spoken like a true Slytherin."

"When in Rome..." she muttered.

"Cheek, Hermione... and don't bother using hexes they won't work. Curse the bastard!" He slashed again with his wand, slicing through the tip of one wing.

Infuriated by the onslaught of curses that Severus was throwing at him, the beast roared again, this time lashing out with its tail. It struck the grass not two feet in front of Hermione. She shrieked and scrambled backwards before falling to the ground. The mantichore saw this as his opportunity to strike and surged forward.

Severus did not hesitate as he sent Hermione flying backwards with a repelling charm and leapt into the path of the charging nightmare, seeking to land a fatal or at least debilitating blow.

Instead, as Hermione watched in horror, the beast fell upon him. It was by the grace of whoever was watching over them that its razor sharp teeth did not clamp down on Severus' throat. They closed around his left shoulder instead. Hermione could hear the crunch of bone and the tearing of skin and sinew as he was lifted from the ground and slung through the air. His body slammed into a tree and he slid to the ground, gasping in pain. As his world narrowed to a small black tunnel, he tried to sit up, but his left arm wouldn't work. *Funny, that*, he thought in a haze.

"No!!" he heard Hermione scream. He looked up and could barely make out her small form hurtling across the clearing, throwing everything she had at the enraged animal. He knew it was futile. Like he had told her, a mantichore's hide was thick, so thick that it repelled everything except the most powerful curses curses with which most people were not familiar, least of all Hermione Granger.

Besides, the creature had tasted his blood and now it wanted the rest of him.

In a daze, he reached for his wand with his working arm, only to find it gone, lost somewhere in the churned up clearing.

In desperation, he slashed his hand at the approaching beast, sending out a silent repelling spell. It only shook its head slightly, as if troubled by a bothersome insect. Severus' heart sank as he felt the last of his strength drain from him when the wandless magic left his fingertips. Without his wand to channel his magic, and injured as he was, he stood no chance against the monster before him. He sank back against the tree trunk, exhausted, and waited for the end.

The animal slowly closed the last bit of distance between them. It could sense that its prey had given up. It would be an easy kill.

The beast let out a low growl that resonated throughout Severus' entire body. He could smell its putrid breath: the smell of rotting meat and fresh blood was so heavy he thought he might be sick. Was this the last thing he would know in this life? The gaping maw of a man-eater as it tore at his flesh, spilling his life blood on the cool grass of the clearing? God, what would happen to Hermione? He knew she would not run, not when she thought she could save him, not when she thought he had a chance.

As if on cue, he saw her run at the creature, raising her wand. Simultaneously, the mantichore raised its mammoth, razor-tipped paw, preparing to strike the final blow. As if in slow motion, Severus watched that paw descend towards him. He could see the serrated edges, the clumps of wet earth underneath them as it descended to take him to his death.

His vision was darkening again. Perhaps he would pass out before the beast landed its blow. Perhaps it would be painless.

It was almost completely dark now... peaceful. A woman's voice *Hermione*, he reminded himself frantic with fear, was screaming at him from somewhere far away. He wondered why...

Suddenly, a flash of green cut across the darkness.

Impending death must have made him senile, because the last thing he remembered thinking before his world went completely black and everything stopped, was that his apprentice, Hermione Granger, Princess of Gryffindor and beloved friend of The Boy Who Lived, had just cast the Killing Curse.

~TBC

A/N: Mwahaha!! Sorry for the cliffie, but I had to end it here!

This chapter is pretty long I think it came in at around 5,000 words but this flashback isn't over yet. The next chapter will continue this memory, but it probably won't be quite as long. Also, I didn't put the flashback in italics this time, simply because there were so many pieces of dialogue that the logistics made my head hurt! I hope everything was clearly separated... let me know if you have any questions!

As for the manticores, I've taken a few liberties with him, but all in all, he's just your normal, everyday, mythical beast. As for the pipes and horns, this is what the voice of a manticore sounds like, according to internet sources. Interpret it as you will.

Also, please take a moment to review! I know you're out there! At least, I hope you are... It lifts my spirits and fuels the Muse to hear your thoughts, even if it's to threaten to come find me and bash me over the head with my keyboard! Thanks! *Not for the bashing... for the reading and reviewing!"

Moonlight & Nightshade Part II

Chapter 9 of 15

Continuing Hermione's disastrous first task as Severus' apprentice...

Thank you DelilahKelley!

This chapter is a continuation of the previous chapter, just so things are clear. :)

***** Continue Flashback...*****

Severus awoke to the sound of hysterical sobbing. The first thought that came to mind was, *How am I still alive?* The second was that his left shoulder and back were hurting mercilessly. He heard himself groan.

"Sir?!" he heard as the hysterical crying stopped abruptly. Soft, cool hands brushed his sweaty hair away from his cheek and out of his eyes. He turned his face into the caress it was calming, soothing.

"Sir, are you alright?" the voice asked again.

Severus felt someone shake him. Slowly, he opened his eyes and found Hermione kneeling beside him, her face twisted in concern. "Miss Granger... wha..."

"Oh, thank God!" she cut him off. Her hands clenched in the front of his shirt, and she nearly fell on top of him in her relief. Her sobs renewed themselves, and her tears were soon mixed with the sweat, dirt, and blood that now covered his once white shirt.

"Miss Granger..." he called softly, laying his right hand on her back. His mind was still hazy. He needed to find out what had happened.

The girl was still clinging to him, sobbing into his chest.

"Miss Granger!" he called again, raising his voice. Hermione pulled away from him, wiping angrily at her tears.

"I'm s-sorry, sir... I'm just... I don't know what..." she sighed and closed her eyes tightly. She took a deep breath to compose herself before speaking again. "Are you alright?" she asked finally.

"That has yet to be determined," he said tightly.

He shifted in order to sit up. Even without her weight pressing down on him, Severus' left arm gave way beneath him in a flash of hot, searing pain. He heard Hermione's sharp intake of breath as he fell back to the cold ground with a grunt, his face contorting in excruciating pain. Bringing his right hand to his left shoulder, he could feel that the fabric of his shirt was shredded and wet tacky with congealing blood. His hand came away scarlet.

"The manticore, Miss Granger?" he said weakly, closing his eyes against a wave of nausea.

A pregnant pause. "Dead, sir."

He turned quickly in her direction, cringing as another sharp, hot pain shot through his shoulder at the sudden movement. Another wave of nausea rolled his stomach. He swallowed thickly against the bile rising in his throat. "How?" he asked after a moment.

Her face contorted in shame. "I... sir... It was going to *kill* you!" she cried desperately. She covered her face with her hands as the sobs returned.

He stared at her in disbelief. Slowly, using his good arm for leverage this time, he attempted to sit up again. His injured arm lay uselessly across his lap. The sleeve of his shirt was virtually nonexistent only the cuff and a few shredded pieces of white fabric held it together. Blood ran in slow, dark lines down his bicep and into the crook of his elbow, where it split into two thick rivulets to run down either side of his forearm. His black trousers were soaked through. He ignored it. All his attention was focused on the trembling young woman in front of him. He vividly remembered the flash of green just before the darkness had overcome him, and his heart lurched in his chest. "I take it... that you have never cast the Killing Curse before?" he said, resting his weight shakily on his uninjured limb.

She shook her head frantically, silent tears streaming down her face.

Severus stared at Hermione as she knelt next to him. His brow drew together as he suddenly saw this diminutive girl in a new light. She had cast the Killing Curse... ~~leave~~ him. Only twice in his life had he a heartless Death Eater, a minion of the Dark Lord ~~ever~~ cast the Avada Kedavra, and even then it had been forced upon him. ~~Never~~ had he used it in defense of another.

His chest tightened with something long forgotten something taken from him long ago that he thought he would never find again while he still drew breath. It was not the feeling itself that scared him. What scared him was that instead of turning from it instead of burying it deep inside he unwittingly embraced it and felt strangely... renewed.

Shaking his head, he pushed the fledgling emotion down. It was not gone; he would simply think about it and the implications later. Right now, he needed to tend to his wounds and Hermione's, if she had any. He turned to his uninjured side and slowly rose to his knees, clutching his injured arm to his stomach. He waited a moment, letting the dizziness subside before coming shakily to his feet.

Hermione rose quickly to his side. She grasped him gently by the upper arm as he swayed on his feet.

"Let's get inside sir, so I can see to that shoulder."

"I am more than capable of dealing with my own wounds, thank you." He closed his eyes against a third wave of nausea, so he did not see the irritated press of her lips.

As the sick feeling subsided once more, he opened his eyes and glanced to the side, where the dead manticores lay. Its mouth was twisted in a vicious, nightmare snarl, even in death. "Cast a stasis spell on the carcass. Manticore parts are exceedingly rare and invaluable as ingredients." Hermione reluctantly let go of his arm and did as she was told as Severus hobbled slowly back to the tent, clutching his injured arm to his chest.

She caught up to him before he reached the tent, but not before he stumbled and fell to his knees. Hermione cringed as she watched him empty the contents of his stomach onto the churned up grass of the clearing. Feeling helpless, she simply knelt beside him and held his hair out of his face. She pulled her wand from her pocket and looked around. She spied a large, fallen leaf and flicked her wand towards it, turning it into a cool, moist compress which she pressed to the back of Severus' neck. Finally, he appeared to be finished. He sat back shakily and wiped his mouth with the sleeve covering his good arm. Breathing heavily, and with his eyes closed, Hermione thought he might be sick again. Gently, she pressed the compress to his forehead.

When a few moments had passed, Hermione asked quietly, "Can you stand?" He nodded, and she put one hand under his good arm to steady him as he came to his feet. When she was certain he wasn't going to fall over again, she hurried ahead to lift the tent flap.

He nodded at her as he entered and then headed straight for the sofa. He sat down heavily, his blood-soaked trousers squelching against the fabric of the cushions. His injured arm and shoulder were stiff and almost unbearably painful, and as he started unbuttoning his ruined shirt, Severus grudgingly realized that he would probably need help in the end.

After quickly throwing up a few warding spells around the tent, Hermione had busied herself gathering the supplies Severus would need: several clean cloths and rolls of bandages; dittany; an anti-infection potion; an anti-nausea potion; Blood Replenisher; and a very strong painkiller.

"Here you are, sir," she said, holding out the pain potion.

After so many years in the service of the Dark Lord, Severus had become somewhat accustomed to pain and therefore extremely tolerant of most pain potions. The ones he brewed for himself were extremely potent just because he was used to experiencing pain did not mean he liked to suffer. He stared at the bottle for a moment. If he took it now, he would be incoherent within 30 minutes. Could he trust the girl to care for him?

He took the bottle from Hermione and set it on the cushion next to him before turning his attention back to his buttons. He finished the ones down his front and at the cuff of his left sleeve. He tried once to use the hand of his injured arm to undo the buttons on his left sleeve it was impossible.

"If you would, Miss Granger," he said reluctantly, holding up his uninjured arm.

"Aren't you going to take something for the pain first, sir?" she asked, reluctant to do anything that might cause him more pain.

"Not yet. That potion will make me delirious, and I want to have my senses about me in case you don't know what you're doing."

"You don't trust me, sir?" she said with a small smile.

"It is not a matter of trust, Miss Granger. It is merely a matter of wanting the full use of both arms."

She huffed softly before reaching out to undo the cuff of his sleeve. His breath was warm on her neck as she leaned in, helping him slide his good arm out. She could smell his aftershave a hint of something sharp and herbal - mixed with the metallic smell of fresh blood and the thick, sour smell of vomit and sweat. Slowly, Hermione peeled the shredded, blood-soaked shirt off Severus' shoulders and down his left arm.

He gritted his teeth as the tacky fabric pulled at the deep slices in his flesh. Nausea rolled over him once more, and for one fleeting moment he thought he might pass out from the pain. Finally, the shirt was off, and Severus leaned back against the sofa with a groan. Its removal had caused the semi-coagulated wounds to start bleeding again, and dark-red blood was once again slipping down his arm.

Hermione reached for a cloth before summoning a bowl of warm water and dipping it in. After ringing out the excess, she reached towards his bare skin... and froze. When she did not move, but instead continued to stare, Severus became irritated. "Do you intend to let me suffer for the entirety of the night?"

She started. "Oh... sorry. I've just... well, that is to say..." she trailed off as her face flushed red.

He realized she was young, barely nineteen, but... "Surely your eyes are not so innocent that you have never seen a shirtless man?" he inquired acidly.

"Well, yes, sir... I mean... no, sir," she said, moving closer to him on the sofa. Her thigh pressed against his. "I've just never seen you in so few clothes. It's a bit disconcerting after nearly a decade of neck-high collars and layers of black robes."

He scowled at her. "Indeed."

She gave him a small smile, and he could tell that she was summoning every bit of her courage as she tentatively began wiping the blood from his chest. Normally, a simple Scourgify spell would have worked, but the magic of the manticore would not allow for magical healing of the wounds. That was one reason they were such dangerous creatures. The potions themselves, since not used directly on the wound, would help, but the gashes would have to heal on their own. Severus knew how lucky he was. One inch to his right and he would have been a dead man.

He turned his attention back to Hermione, watching her as she worked. She smoothed the warm cloth down his neck and over his collarbone. Warm trails of water ran down his chest, leaving tiny droplets of moisture clinging to his sparse chest hair. Her hands were warm and gentle, and Severus found himself relaxing despite the hot, throbbing pain. Again and again she wiped the red stain from his skin, until finally his chest was clean and dry. He was shocked to note that he was sorry she had finished so quickly.

As Hermione started on his injured arm, he noticed that the water in the bowl was dark-red, as were several of the cloths. How much blood had he lost? Obviously not too much or he wouldn't be conscious. No matter the Blood Replenisher would take care of that.

By now, Hermione was working her way down his bicep, over his forearm, never missing a beat as she passed over his Dark Mark and down to his fingers. He winced slightly when she had to scrub a little to get the blood out from beneath his fingernails. "Sorry," she whispered.

She had him cleaned up after about thirty minutes. With a clean bandage applied and the potions now in his system, Severus started to feel better. However, there was still one matter left to attend to his blood-soaked trousers. "Sir?" Hermione asked hesitantly.

"Hmm?" he replied lazily from his reclined position on the sofa. The pain potion was already taking effect.

"Um, I don't think you want to go to bed in your... with your boots and trousers on, sir."

He looked at her quizzically.

She sighed. "They're filthy, sir."

He continued to watch her, a lazy expression on his face.

The courage of Gryffindor House was being sorely tested tonight. "Would you like something clean to wear, sir?"

Realization came to him slowly. He had to shake his head to clear it before he spoke. "Ah... yes... of course. There is some nightwear in my satchel."

She silently *Accio*d his sleepwear a pair of black, cotton sleep pants and held them out to him. "Here you are, sir." He sat there calmly, holding the pants in his lap.

*He really is out of it. How strong **was** that potion?* Hermione wondered.

"Sir?" she called softly.

"Hmm?"

"Do you... do you need some... some help?"

This seemed to bring him back to reality a bit. His lips pressed into a thin line. "No," he said slowly.

She was utterly relieved. "Alright, then. Um, I'll just go into the kitchen. Call if you need me." She left quickly. As she waited by the small wood-burning stove, she heard a loud thud followed by an equally loud curse. She ran quickly back to the sitting area, only to find Severus on the floor, propped against the sofa. He looked murderous despite the narcotic pain killer running through his system.

She did not move, but waited on him to give her a sign that he wanted her assistance. He waved her over with a lazy, irritated sigh. Standing on his right side, she helped him back onto the sofa. Gently, she took off his boots and set them underneath the table. She was reaching determinedly for his belt when his hand closed around her wrist. "I would rather you... not... do that."

"But sir..." she argued.

"Just... help me stand, Miss Granger." He held out his pajamas to her. She took them, hugging them awkwardly to her chest. Reluctantly, she moved to his injured side and carefully helped him to his feet. She turned her head away and closed her eyes tightly as he carefully extricated himself of his filthy trousers. She heard the buckle come undone, and she even felt the fabric brush her legs as the pants dropped to the ground. His weight pressed down on her as he shifted to kick them away.

Eyes still pressed firmly shut, she held the pants out to him. He took them, and Hermione felt his weight press down on her again as he shifted to put first one leg and then the other into the pajama pants. Hermione thought she would literally die of embarrassment if she had to stand there her naked former teacher literally pressed up against her for one more second.

"Finished," she heard him say finally.

More relieved than she could possibly say, she put her arm around his very warm, very bare waist and helped him walk to the bed. She sat him down, and he flopped back onto the covers as the pain potion started taking maximum effect. She flushed red as she noticed that the soft cotton pants were riding low on his hips. So low, in fact, that she could see where the line of dark hair traveling down from his navel thickened, as it met with the hair around his...

Stop it! her inner voice cried.

She flushed as she pulled her eyes away from the soft dip of his stomach and places further down and continued with what she was doing. The bed itself was tall, so after she pulled the covers back, she hopped up beside him and gently helped him to sit back up.

"Come on, sir, under the covers with you." She indicated the raised duvet with a tip of her head.

Slowly, and surprisingly without protest, Severus let her help him crawl beneath the covers. Once there, he lay back absently against the pillows, and Hermione tucked the soft fabric gently around him, careful to avoid bumping his injured arm.

"There we are, sir. You rest now." She was shocked when he smiled at her. Her stomach fluttered at the look in his eyes it was as if he had never seen her before.

"Beautiful," he whispered, reaching out with his uninjured hand to brush her face with the backs of his fingers.

To say she was startled was an understatement. She blushed furiously, and her heart thudded wildly in her throat. "S-Sir, you're delirious," she stammered as she gently pulled away.

His eyes went out of focus for a moment as he looked at a point just over her shoulder. "No," he said finally, looking back to her.

She absently re-tucked the duvet around him. "Yes, you said so yourself."

"Not about this." He reached out slowly to take her hand in his. Her heart returned to her throat.

"Do you know how beautiful you were on the night of the Bonding?" he said softly. The look on his face was so serious it left her momentarily speechless.

"Sir, I..."

"You were the most beautiful woman I had ever seen." His gaze took on that faraway look again, and his voice was barely a whisper. "You have no idea, Hermione, how easy it would have been for me to stand there and imagine that instead of my apprentice, you were becoming... my wife."

Her mouth moved, but nothing came forth.

His confession shocked her to the core. She had never thought of him as a man who would tolerate another person for long, let alone a lifetime. Hell, she *was still* shocked at her apprenticeship.

For him to want a wife? That was unheard of. Who would have thought that such a cold, supposedly unfeeling man would want a companion... a family even?

"I don't know what to say, sir," she whispered, averting her eyes from his.

He still held her hand. His skin was warm, and his fingers were long and fine-boned. Hermione imagined he would make an excellent pianist if he so chose.

When he did not reply, she looked up. His eyes were closed, his face slack in restful sleep. She smiled softly. He was a severe man, both in attitude and appearance, but

to see him in sleep, one would think him gentle, the type of man any woman would kill to have love her. She placed his hand upon his chest and pulled the duvet higher, tucking it carefully around his shoulders.

Remembering how he had defended her by standing up to that horrible monster, thinking of her safety before his own, she thought that any woman *would* be lucky to have him. If only she were half as lucky one day... But, hadn't he just admitted...? Did he want *her* as his wife? That was inconceivable. No. He was simply drugged out of his wits and not thinking clearly. Yes, that's all it was.

Hermione watched him for a few moments. His dark hair fell across his face as he turned his head in his sleep. Sighing, she reached out to brush it from his eyes, trailing her fingers absently down his cheek as she did. The corners of his mouth turned up at her touch. "Sleep well, sir," she whispered as she leaned down and placed a gentle, chaste kiss on his forehead.

Hermione returned to the sofa, transfiguring it into a small, *clean* cot before she lay down. Transfiguring one of the small throws into a warm, down comforter, she snuggled into it and closed her eyes. The night had been eventful to say the least, and she was exhausted. Severus' whispered confession was reluctantly pushed to the back of her mind as she soon fell into a light slumber.

She would not realize until much later that, although she had *almost* lost her life that night, she had *most certainly* lost her heart.

*****End Flashback*****

~TBC

A/N: Next up: Back to the present for a bit. Thanks for R&R!!

In the Winter of My Sorrow

Chapter 10 of 15

We come back to the present for a bit... and Hermione and Severus receive a bit of closure.

Disclaimer: See Prologue.

A/N: I've changed their daughter's name from Aithne to Aislinn. As the author, if I was having trouble pronouncing it then I'm sure many of you were as well. So... name changed.

Thank you, DelilahKelley, for all your help!

~*~*~*~

□

~*~*~*~

Gray storm clouds rolled and tumbled across the sky, threatening to release their contents onto the two figures that walked slowly down the gravel path leading from the castle. The rain from the night before had mixed with the cold, leaving a layer of thin, crystalline frost across the grounds, the first sign of the coming winter. Hermione clasped Severus' gloved hand tightly in her own while her other clutched at the wool scarf wrapped tightly around her neck. The end of Severus' own scarf fluttered about in the cold, biting breeze of the early October morning, accompanied by the occasional billow of fabric as the wind caught the edges of their traveling cloaks. They continued walking towards the gates at the edge of the grounds, neither speaking, for each was lost in their own thoughts.

The previous night had been a massive if unexpected step towards rebuilding what they once had. It had been Severus who had asked Hermione to stay, but after their earlier close call she was extremely reluctant. He had assured her that his intentions were nothing but honorable, and finally she had assented. He had led her to his bed and they had lain together as the fire slowly died in the hearth. They spoke of the past of mistakes and regrets as well as happy times and previous dreams of the future. They had shed more tears, but they had also laughed. It had been bittersweet.

It was during one of those lighter moments that Severus had asked Hermione a question he had not expected to ask, and she certainly had not expected to hear: "Would you visit her with me?"

The smile had faded from Hermione's face like wax under a flame. "What?" she whispered.

He spoke softly, slowly, not wanting to frighten her away. "Aislinn would you visit her with me?"

Hermione let out a nervous, breathy laugh. "Severus, I don't know if I can..."

"You can," he said confidently, cupping her cheek in his hand. "You need to." He dropped his hand from her face and lay back against the pillows, staring at the dark canopy overhead. "God knows I do as well."

Hermione sat up and drew her knees up to her chin. There were a few moments of silence as she stared off into the night. Finally she asked, "You mean you've never..."

He shook his head. "No."

She turned her head to look at him, resting her cheek on her knees. She watched as he continued to stare into the darkness overhead she could just make out the faint glimmer of the firelight shining in his eyes. After a moment, she softly asked, "Why?"

He laughed bitterly and ran a hand over his face, rubbing the darkening stubble on his cheeks.

Hermione watched as a myriad of emotions played across his angular face: anger, regret, sadness, fear... shame. It was slightly disconcerting after so many months of cold indifference. "Cowardice, I suppose," he said finally.

She nodded, although she would never have called him a coward. She picked at an errant thread on her nightshirt. "I suppose my reasons are the same cowardice. I feel that if I don't acknowledge it, then it didn't happen, you know?"

He nodded his agreement. "Yes... but I also know and I know you do as well that if we don't allow ourselves to... grieve... that it will only be worse in the end. A year is a very long time to hold this kind of thing inside, Hermione. It has already manifested itself in my actions my cruelty and anger towards you. It has shown itself in you as well. Do not think that just because you no longer share my bed that I do not realize how angry you are all the time, or that you have trouble sleeping. But I suppose that is my fault."

Hermione blushed, surprised at his insightfulness, but not denying that he was the reason behind her nightmares and the terrible anger that was an almost constant companion.

She nodded as she began to speak. "It's been so long, Severus, and yet it hasn't. Since you pushed me out of your life on New Year's, since you denied me the last touchstone that I had in my life, I've been very angry. I'm angry at you, I'm angry at myself... I'm angry at the whole fucking world."

Severus nodded, staring absently at the dying fire as she continued.

"I may be young, but I'm not ignorant of the way the world works I know that bad things happen to good people all the time but this is almost too much. When I walk through Hogsmeade or London, and I see all the smiling mothers with their prams and their babies... I *hate* them for it. I *hate* them for having what I was denied... whatwe were denied! I don't know if I can ever truly be happy again."

He sighed and turned slowly towards her. Reaching out, he tentatively ran one long finger softly along her foot, along the dip behind her ankle bone. She closed her eyes at the sublime feeling of his skin caressing hers. It had been so long...

"I do understand, Hermione," he said softly. "I have been angry as well this past year at you, at myself, at those who took her from us... at everything. I, too, cannot withhold the hatred I feel for those happy families the fathers I see holding their children and kissing their wives without fear of retribution. I would give my life only to have a fraction of that happiness."

She nodded again, and there was silence for a while as they each contemplated what the other had said. It was now obvious to Hermione that Severus regretted the decision of pushing her out of his life. It was obvious to Severus that Hermione desperately wanted needed to be a part of his. They needed each other... but the rift between them was so deep and dark, filled with so much loss, so much anger and bitterness that neither knew if it was possible to cross, let alone repair completely.

"Do you think we're strong enough?" Hermione asked just as Severus had started to drift into a light sleep.

There was a pause before he answered. "No..."

Her brow drew together in fear and confusion, and she felt the bed dip as he shifted. She opened her mouth to question him, but before she could speak, his large, warm hand curled around hers.

"...but we will be," he finished.

She turned her face to his, and the conviction she saw there steeled something within her soul. She squeezed his hand tightly in agreement.

He gave her a tight smile. "Come," he said, "it's getting late rest now." Settling himself on top of the covers, Severus pulled them back so Hermione could slide underneath. She gave him a smile of gratitude as she pulled the duvet high around her chin. She lay there for a moment, a myriad of thoughts rustling through her mind, before she spoke.

"Severus?" she called softly.

"Hmm?" came his sleepy reply from the other side of the bed.

"Hold me?" she asked nervously.

When he did not respond, Hermione thought he was denying her, but after a moment she felt the mattress shift as he slowly moved the rest behind her, his chest to her back. Tentatively, his arm came around her waist. It wasn't until her hand found his, and she twined their fingers together, that Severus relaxed into the familiar curves of her body. She could feel his heart beating strongly against her skin, and it was that steady rhythm, mixed with the warmth of his encircling arms, that lulled her into sleep. For the first time in months, Hermione slept... and did not dream.

So it was that they were now walking hand in hand towards the Apparition point just outside the school grounds. They were both nervous, although neither would admit it. The cold, iron gates sensed their presence, parting as the couple neared. They stopped just outside the grounds, and Severus looked absently over his shoulder at the distant castle. He turned back to Hermione. "Are you ready?"

Hermione took a deep, trembling breath before nodding. She stepped to him and wrapped her arms around his trim waist. In turn, he wrapped his long arms around her, and with a single, sharp *crack*, they were gone, leaving behind only a small swirl of fallen leaves.

They reappeared next to another iron gate, this one covered in frost-bitten ivy. They held onto each other for a few moments longer, drawing strength for the walk ahead. Finally, Severus gave Hermione a final squeeze. "Come," he said, keeping one arm protectively around her shoulders. There was only a slight hesitation to her steps as he led the way up the dirt path, lined on either side by ancient oak trees, their branches bare and skeletal in the cold, gray, winter morning.

The cemetery was small compared to many cemeteries in Great Britain. It seemed to be composed entirely of wizarding families, although to Hermione's surprise many of the Muggle members of the families were buried alongside their magical relatives. Beneath the bare, outstretched branches of the ancient trees, mausoleums adorned with ornate scrollwork, ancient runes, and weeping, marble angels stood alongside small, simple headstones, some of which held only a name and a date.

There was no rhyme or reason to the layout, except for the small iron fences that enclosed each individual family plot: poor wizards lay alongside rich; pureblood with half-blood; magical with Muggle. It made Hermione smile sadly *Only in death are we truly equals*, she thought.

After walking in silence for a while, they finally turned off the main path and walked down a small, well-worn side lane. Near the end of the lane was a small plot encircled by a waist-high iron fence. There were five headstones four well-tended and one not four large and one small. Hermione's breath hitched as Severus released her to push open the gate. The metal hinges squealed as it swung inward, and the sound rang out like a gunshot in the silence of the morning.

Hermione flinched but recovered quickly. She steeled herself, gathering all the courage of her House, and stepped over the threshold. Severus followed silently, allowing her to walk ahead she needed to do this herself.

Hermione slowly approached the smallest plot, nestled next to one of the larger, well-tended ones. She stood at a distance, simply looking down at the small marker for the span of several heartbeats.

Hermione had miscarried right around three months into her pregnancy the funeral had merely been a ceremony to give her and Severus some closure. All that was buried beneath the cold ground was a small collection of items: letters to their daughter one from Severus, one from Hermione; a small, tatty pink blanket that had been Hermione's when she was a child; and a ragged, brown, patchwork teddy a gift from his mother to a two-year-old Severus. It was the only remnant of his childhood that meant anything to him, so he had laid it to rest with the memory of his own child.

When Severus heard the first ragged sob, his heart clenched in his chest at Hermione's sorrow. Slowly, she walked forward, and he moved to stand behind her as she knelt in the brown grass next to the ivory headstone. His black cloak whipped about his ankles, and his dark hair stung his cheeks as a biting gust of wind swept through the cemetery. Hermione's hair also flew wildly around her face, and the tip of her scarf snapped viciously in the onslaught of icy wind, but she didn't notice she was

speaking:

"Hello sweet. It's your mother." Her head bowed, and Severus saw her wipe tears from her cheeks. "Your father's here as well." He placed a hand on her shoulder, which she clutched gratefully. "We miss you, dear heart. You would have been almost six months old if you were here."

A broken sob as she continued: "I'm so sorry I haven't come before... it's been... it's just that..." Hermione sighed and shook her head free of excuses. "No... the truth is... your Gryffindor mother is nothing but a heartless coward..." She released Severus' hand and covered her face. Great, gasping sobs racked her body.

Severus knelt beside her in the grass and pulled her close. As she clutched at the front of his cloak, he found himself staring at the white marble of his daughter's headstone at the small letters that composed her name, the simple epithet inscribed beneath, and the runes symbolizing peace, protection, and love carved along the bottom of the stone:

Aislinn Eileen Snape

October 20th, 2000

"May the love hidden deep inside your heart

find the love waiting in your dreams."

Severus had to grit his teeth to keep the tears from falling. One managed to escape and rolled hot and fast down the icy skin of his cheek. He finally spoke, though his words were soft whispers against the rising wind. "I have been a fool, sweet one. Perhaps it is because I never saw your face, never held you or touched you. Perhaps that is why I have let myself push you away... let my heart seal itself against you..." Hermione gave another shuddering sob against his chest. Severus looked away from the headstone and pressed his face to the top of her head, closing his eyes against the pain in his chest.

"... and against your mother," he continued. "Forgive me, Aislinn. Forgive the selfish attempts of a bitter old man to save what remains of his black heart."

Hermione rose up and wrapped her arms around Severus' neck, holding on with all her might as she cried. Severus buried his face in her neck as well, holding her in a vice-grip as the tears finally escaped him, rolling silently down his face. They stayed that way for a while, two dark figures kneeling under a steel-grey winter sky, before a tiny, white headstone in the gray solitude of a small, forgotten cemetery. When at last there were no more tears to cry, Severus stood slowly and helped Hermione to her feet. He took her red, tear-stained face between his hands and leaned in, pressing his forehead to hers.

"Kiss me," she whispered shakily from behind closed lids.

There were no questions, excuses, or protests against the small intimacy as Severus pressed his lips gently to her own. There were so many things conveyed by that simple touch of flesh. It was a silent promise, a reminder of what they once had, and a beacon of hope for the future. She took his face in her hands and deepened the kiss, pouring her love for him into the movement of her skin against his. Finally, they broke the kiss and stood with foreheads pressed together once more.

After a moment, Severus stepped back and reached inside his cloak. He pulled out a small bouquet of flowers: white carnations. Hermione smiled sadly as she watched him pull one flower out of the bunch before laying the rest snugly against his daughter's headstone. He then stepped to the left and stood for a moment in front of one of the larger plots.

Hermione watched as Severus knelt in front of the grave and placed the single, white carnation upon the headstone.

"Hello, Mum," he began softly. He stared down at his hands for so long that Hermione almost called his name. Finally he spoke, but his words were so soft that she had to step closer to hear. "I just wanted to thank you... for watching over her." His gaze slid to the smaller stone and lingered wistfully for a moment before sliding back again. This time, it was Hermione that placed her hand upon Severus' shoulder, and he that clutched at her for support. "You would have loved her. We lost her before we could even know her, but I know that she's with you now... and that you'll guide her... protect her... as you were not able to do for me..." A pause, and then, "... and as I could not do for her."

Hermione squeezed his hand.

He stood then, and she moved to wrap one arm around his waist. They stood in the gray light of morning for a long while, each sending silent prayers along with words of love and gratitude to those gone before them. When the first icy raindrop landed on Hermione's head, she looked to Severus, silently asking if he was ready. He nodded and they started back to the gate, but not before he swept his hand out and cast a stasis spell over the flowers on the headstones.

"Let's go," he said, putting his arm back around her shoulder as they left his mother's family plot. The well-tended graves of his daughter, mother, and maternal grandparents stood in silent salute to their coming... and their going. In the far corner of the lot, the lonely, overgrown, untended grave of his father was almost unnoticeable compared to the pristine stone of the others.

Hermione looked back as he shut the gate, confused: "Severus, why is your father buried here?"

They walked for a few moments before he answered. "My mother insisted that he be buried with her family, as he had none that she knew of."

Hermione nodded. "They loved each other once, didn't they?"

"Yes. But that time was long gone when I came along."

"Who tends the plot, if you haven't been coming?"

"The groundskeeper. He has specific instructions to keep the first four pristine and to not give Tobias Snape a second glance."

Hermione nodded. It seemed a bit cruel, but from what she knew of Severus' childhood and his father, she really couldn't blame him.

"Do you really think she would have loved her, Severus?" Hermione asked when they stepped back onto the main path.

"I would not have let Aislinn share her name if I did not believe it with all my heart, Hermione."

That was enough for her, and she let the subject drop. As they walked away from their unborn daughter's memorial, they were heavy-hearted and weary with grief, but strangely they both felt as if the weight of the world had lifted, if only just. However small it may have been in the grand scheme of their lives and the world in which they sought to live them that part of their journey together had received a bit of closure. Aislinn was a part of their past, but she would be forever with them. Maybe now they could move forward... together.

They came back to the ivy-covered gates just as the rain started to fall in earnest. He turned her face to his and placed another gentle kiss upon her lips before pulling her close. They held each other tightly as the rain pelted them, leaving icy beads of quivering liquid on the wool of their cloaks.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"No... but I will be."

The corners of his lips turned up in a sad smile just before he whirled them both into the ether, leaving behind only a small, insignificant swirl of fallen leaves.

~ TBC

A/N: This is the last completed chapter at the moment. I have another almost complete and tons of material that I simply have to work into the story. Don't worry... it shouldn't be too long until another chapter posts. Thanks so much for reading! Please let me know what you think.

I had to step back to the present for a bit in this chapter the flashbacks were getting harder to write. The exact circumstances behind Hermione's loss will be cleared up soon. I know what happened; I just have to write it down. Thanks to anyone who's taking the time to read! *hugs*

Also, as this is an AU story, I've obviously taken a few liberties with Severus' parents and his background. Nothing too confusing, I hope.

I listened to "Hymn to the Sea" and "Never an Absolution" from the *Titanic* soundtrack as I wrote this. Both songs are sorrowful and bittersweet, and I thought they fit perfectly with the contents of this chapter. They helped inspire me, and both are beautiful instrumental pieces regardless.

"In the winter of my sorrow, I remember the summer of my joy."

~ Anonymous

White carnations symbolize remembrance.

A Letter

Chapter 11 of 15

Something unexpected...

Disclaimer: See Prologue.

Thank you, Delilah!!

~*~*~*~

"Love is my sin..."

~ William Shakespeare

~*~*~*~

The next few days were... different. There was no longer the air of tense anger and frustration between the Potions master and his apprentice it had been replaced with a sense of calmness... a quietude that came only from the deepest soul-searching and the hardest lessons learned. Hermione and Severus worked amiably, he at his workstation and she at hers. Neither of them spoke of that night in the forest or of their visit to the small cemetery. It would never be forgotten but was now a part of the past... and they seemed to be making a decided effort to move forward into the future, whatever it may hold.

Two weeks after the encounter, Hermione was at her worktable, working on a simple batch of potions for the infirmary, when she heard an owl swoop through the open door of the laboratory. Absorbed in her work and assuming that the bird was for Severus, she called into the other room.

"Severus... owl for you."

She heard the leather of his chair protest as he stood from his desk and walked into the main lab, his boots heavy against the stone floor. She heard him pause in the doorway. "Hermione?" he said.

"Hmm?" she replied, still absorbed in the stirring of her cauldron.

He cleared his throat. "*That* owl is not for me."

"What?" she said as she looked up in confusion. Severus heard her sharp intake of breath as she finally spotted the bird sitting patiently on the chair behind her. "Hedwig!" Hermione shouted, startling the Snowy Owl a bit. "Oh, my God... it's been... it's been so long..." She walked slowly to the bird and reached out cautiously. When no angry bite was forthcoming, Hermione slowly stroked the soft, white down of the bird's cheek. Hedwig clicked her beak in friendly recognition, hooting softly as she held out her leg. With shaking hands, Hermione untied the string and unfolded the small piece of parchment wrapped inside.

Hermione,

I know it's been an unforgivably long time, but I'm coming to the castle this Saturday, and I desperately need to speak with you.

Both of you.

~ ***Harry***

Hermione stared unbelieving at the letter in her hand.

She heard Severus walk slowly towards her. "Hermione?"

She knew there was a scowl on his face simply by his tone of voice.

She turned her head to look over her shoulder at him. Tears welled in her eyes as she handed him the letter. He took it slowly. Hermione watched as his confusion turned to anger and his scowl deepened as his eyes scanned Harry's words. She jumped as Severus crushed the letter in one swift motion, his fist and jaw clenching in fury. "So... he thinks he can just walk back into your life? After all this time, he thinks he can *demand* that you that *we* grant him an audience simply because he deems it necessary?!" He brandished the fist holding the piece of crumpled parchment.

"Severus," Hermione said softly, now staring at her hands, "what if... what if he truly needs us?"

The dark wizard's face was red with fury. "Who gives a bloody fuck!" he raged, his hands flying into the air in exasperation. "Where was he ~~when~~*you* needed *him*? Where was he when your life was turned upside down? *Where the fuck was he when you almost died!* His hair flew around his face as he slammed his fists onto the worktable, upsetting several vials of ingredients in the process. That he didn't notice the spillage bespoke of how truly furious he was.

Hermione's throat ached from holding back tears, and soon her brain overpowered her mouth. "I could ask some of those same questions about you," she whispered tightly. Despite their newfound peace, her voice was laced with the barest hint of anger, anger she knew should be aimed at Harry, not Severus.

As it was, Severus balked as if she'd slapped him, and the fury on his face melted first to shock before twisting into shame. After staring at her for a moment, but not denying her statement, he cast his gaze to the floor and gave a stiff nod before turning and retreating back to his office, leaving the letter crumpled and forgotten on the worktable.

Hermione knew she had wounded him deeply and had regretted the words the moment they left her mouth. "Severus," she called as the door clicked shut. *Dammit...* she sighed, pressing her forehead to the thick, wooden door and silently imploring him to let her in. "Severus, I'm sorry... please... I didn't mean it."

They had come so far in the past two weeks... and here she was mucking things up again. "Severus...*please*," she called again a few moments later, this time turning the door knob. It wasn't locked. She closed her eyes and exhaled he wasn't shutting her out.

Slowly, she opened the door and peered inside. He was sitting behind his desk, facing away from her. She could see a thin line of smoke rising above his head.

"You know that's bad for you," Hermione said softly as she approached him.

"Pot. Kettle. Black," was all he said.

"Yes, well... at least I go outside."

A grunt was all she got in return.

She moved around to face him. "I really am sorry. What I said was uncalled for. I was just so taken aback by the letter, I... I wasn't thinking." She knelt, placing her hands on his knees and looking up into his face. "Forgive me?"

He met her gaze from between the long strands of his dark hair. After a long moment, he closed his eyes and nodded. She smiled softly and stood, leaning in to lay a gentle, lingering kiss on the top of his head. "Mind if I join you?" she asked, indicating the pack of fags on the desktop.

"Help yourself."

Hermione pulled one out, held it to her lips, and lit it with a flick of her hand. She leaned against the edge of his desk, chuckling as she exhaled. "Do you remember the first time you caught me smoking?" she asked.

He swiveled his chair around to face her, taking a slow drag as he narrowed his eyes at her. "If I remember correctly it was about..." he paused, exhaling as he tried to remember, "three months after the manticores attack around the beginning of December '98?"

She nodded, taking another long drag. "After three months of caring for you, plus all my other duties, I was sufficiently stressed out, thank you very much."

"Ahh...", was his only reply.

Hermione smirked but stared off into space, noticing a wayward spiderweb strung between two of the specimen jars on the shelf behind Severus' desk. She continued to stare at it, mesmerized as it drifted soundlessly back and forth, riding the invisible currents of air winding through the dark room.

Finally, Severus' voice broke the silence. "What do you think the little blighter wants?" he spoke softly, although there was no masking the loathing in his voice.

Hermione shrugged. "No clue... but there's only one way to find out." She looked at him, the expression on her face both pleading and remorseful.

He took a final drag before flicking his hand and vanishing the remains of the fag. He returned her gaze, his eyes narrowing. "Yes," he said, "I suppose there is."

She held his gaze for a moment before finally nodding her understanding. She pushed away from the desk; she would send a reply to Harry, agreeing to a meeting on Saturday. What she wouldn't tell him was that fate of the world be damned Severus was probably going to kill him the moment he walked through the door.

~*~*~*~

Harry Potter liked to think he was a smart man. Not a brilliant man, but definitely smart. He was an Auror after all.

However, his opinion of himself changed slightly as he walked unannounced through the door of Hogwarts' Potions lab on Saturday morning. He had been expecting to see Hermione perhaps she would be happy to see him, perhaps not but was instead greeted by the furious countenance of Severus Snape. Before Harry could speak, the Potions master had backed him against the wall, silenced him, bound his arms, and lifted him off his feet by something akin to an invisible hangman's noose.

I deserve this, Harry thought to himself as he struggled for breath. As an Auror, Harry could very well have Severus arrested and incarcerated for attacking him, but he needed the dark wizard, and he needed Hermione.

Severus started to speak, his wand pressed under Harry's jaw. "Well, Potter, to what do I owe the...*pleasure*... of your visit?"

Harry's mouth moved but nothing came out. Severus simply raised an eyebrow and smirked. "What was that? Kneazle got your tongue?" He flicked his wand at Harry and the invisible noose tightened. Now, he truly couldn't breathe. Just as the edges of Harry's vision started to go dark, he heard her voice from the back of the room.

"I think that's enough, don't you?"

Severus didn't turn when Hermione spoke. Instead, he narrowed his eyes at Harry before slashing his wand at the cyanotic young wizard, who fell to the floor with a thud and a gasp.

As the color returned to his face, Harry rubbed his tender neck and looked around the room. Hermione was leaning against the far worktable, her arms crossed over her chest and an unreadable expression on her face. Snape had moved to stand beside her and still wore a look that bespoke of torture, murder, and death, all in the cruelest forms possible.

"Hello, Hermione. Professor," Harry rasped out. He watched as Hermione caressed Snape's arm almost reassuringly and met the dark man's blazing gaze with a small, tight smile before moving towards where he lay sprawled on the floor.

"Harry," she greeted in return, squatting down before him. She gave him a small, genuine smile. "You do realize that I couldn't stop him... and that you're lucky he is a somewhat reasonable man?"

"Yeah," Harry said, "I know. I suppose I deserved it after... well, you know...", he trailed off, looking utterly ashamed.

"I know," she said, her expression sad. Harry knew he would have to answer for his past sins eventually, but that now was not the time. After a moment, Hermione stood and extended her hand. "Now get up," she said. He took the offered hand, and she pulled him to his feet and embraced him in a fierce hug, which he returned wholeheartedly.

"So," Hermione asked as she broke the hug and wiped her eyes, "what's so important that you need to speak with both of us?" She turned and walked back to where Severus was still glaring. Harry noticed, with no small margin of discomfort, how her hand went automatically to the man's back, moving soothingly up and down.

Harry looked between the two of them and took a deep, calming breath. To hell with sugarcoating anything... it would be insulting to them both. "Horcruxes."

Severus let out a bark of laughter and sneered at Harry as Hermione's brow furrowed in confusion. "Looking to make yourself immortal now, Potter? Did you come here to politely ask that one or both of us give up our lives so that you may live on indefinitely?"

Ignoring the jab, Harry continued. "Not me. Voldemort."

Severus' eyes narrowed dangerously, and Harry didn't miss the minute twitch of the man's left hand. "You waste my time, Potter. Don't you think that I, of all people, would know if the Dark Lord had succeeded in splitting his soul?"

"No, actually, I don't. He would have told no one. Not even his most trusted." Harry's eyes flicked to Severus' left forearm.

The older man's face contorted with anger. "You are a fool, Potter! Get out of my sight!" At that he turned and stormed into his office, slamming the door hard enough to dislodge a jar of something pickled and slimy from the shelf behind the worktable. It shattered and Hermione jumped.

Harry watched as his friend ran a worried hand over her face as she turned in the direction of the slammed door. He sighed. "I'm sorry, Hermione, but it's the truth. Or at least Dumbledore suspects it is. I just came to see if either you or Snape had ever heard of such a thing... and to tell you that Ron and I will be leaving soon. Dumbledore's sending us to find the damn things."

Her eyes snapped back to his. "Sending you to find them?"

Harry nodded. "The good news is that two have already been destroyed." Hermione's brow furrowed, her expression curious.

Harry continued. "Do you remember in our second year, Tom Riddle's diary?"

She nodded.

"Well, I destroyed it in the Chamber of Secrets. That was the first one to go."

Hermione nodded again.

"The other one was a ring. Dumbledore found a way to destroy it using Gryffindor's sword." He held up a hand to forestall Hermione's questions. "No... I don't know how he did it. I only know that he did. So that leaves five more. We have a few ideas of what they might be, but no real proof."

Harry paused and Hermione took the moment to ask a few questions. "So... from what Severus said, a Horcrux is... an object, an object in which a person... hides a piece of their... *soul*?"

Harry gave a tight-lipped nod.

Hermione continued, her eyes going out of focus as she thought over what Harry had just said. She spoke slowly as she came to her conclusion. "So... that would mean... hypothetically at least... that if you could find the five remaining Horcruxes and destroy them... we destroy Voldemort?" She looked up, and her face was ashen.

"Yes... that's exactly what it means," Harry confirmed. "It's also why I need your help... and his." The young Auror tipped his chin in the direction of the closed office door.

Hermione nodded slowly. "Harry... I'll do what I can to convince him, but I don't know what good it will do. We've just gotten back on good terms with each other... and I don't want... I *can't*... jeopardize that." She stood and moved towards the closed door.

"Not even to save our world, Hermione?" She could hear a hint of anger in her friend's voice. "Is he really worth sacrificing everything for?"

Hermione's hand paused on the doorknob. She shook her head. "Harry, I really don't think you want me to answer that." She turned to give him a tight smile. "I'll owl you soon." And then she was gone, leaving the young Auror standing in the lab alone, angry, and confused.

~TBC

A/N: This is a bit shorter than I normally write, but it just worked out to end itself there. There will be more flashbacks soon, including the humble beginnings of their relationship. Thanks to all who have stuck with me!

Sorrow

Chapter 12 of 15

A step forward, in more ways than one...

Disclaimer: See Prologue.

A/N: If you're interested, the song that inspired this chapter is entitled "Sorrow," and it's on the *King Arthur* soundtrack (the one with Clive Owen and Kiera Knightly). Very fitting, I think.

~*~*~*~

Why will we struggle to attain, and strive,

When all we gain is but an empty dream?--

Better, unto my thinking, doth it seem

To end it all and let who will survive;

To find at last all beauty is but dust;

That love and sorrow are the very same...

~ Madison Cawein, from *The Land of Illusion*

~*~*~*~

That evening found the two of them once again in front of Severus' fireplace; neither wanted to speak of the incident with Harry, even though it loomed over them like a proverbial thundercloud. After half an hour of staring morosely into the flames, Hermione finally tired of waiting for Severus to speak.

"Well?" she asked.

"Well, what?" came his terse reply from behind the dark curtain of his hair.

She sighed in irritation, rubbing her eyes tiredly. Their ease with each other had gradually waned as the day wore on, replaced by a suffocating tension that she knew had little to do with 'them' and everything to do with their morning visitor. "Don't play dumb, Severus. It doesn't suit you."

He gave his own sigh of irritation and leaned forward to rest his head in his left hand; the other held a tumbler of whiskey. It irritated her how he drank so much, but she kept her mouth shut; there were bigger troubles brewing than the state of Severus' liver.

His voice was muffled when he spoke again. "What would you have me do, Hermione?"

She gave a short, barking laugh, shaking her head in amazement at his stubbornness. "I don't know... how about at least... at least *consider* helping him! I know he hasn't been the best person to me in the last few years, Severus... that he deserves to have the shit beat out of him and more, but this is so much bigger than personal grudges. Can't you see?"

He stood from the couch, throwing his glass into the fire with a sharp crash that was followed by a green burst of flame. "Yes, dammit, I see! How the hell could I not?!" He paced back and forth, running his hands through his hair. "That doesn't mean I have to like it."

She stood, blocking the path of his enraged pacing. "No, it doesn't," she said, holding up her hands, trying to placate him, "and I know that of all people *he* should be the one to say let him suffer... to say let him go it alone. But how can I? How can I condemn the entirety of our world to darkness because he has wronged me... *us*... in the past?"

He whipped around to meet her pleading gaze with a fiery one of his own. "Easy... tell him to *fuck off*." He brushed past her, oblivious of the hand she held out to stop him. "I'm going to bed. Goodnight, Hermione."

The clicking of the lock on his bedroom door echoed through the room like a gunshot, making her heart ache in her chest. *Damn you, Harry...* she thought bitterly.

Though they had not shared anything more intimate than the casual touch of a hand or on a very rare occasion a chaste kiss since that day in the cemetery, Hermione had hoped they were slowly rebuilding the intimacy they once had. Severus could still be a bastard, and his rude, sharp-tongued, sarcastic nature was usually out in full force, but he *had* shown in his own way that he still cared for her: the brush of his hand along the small of her back when he would join her at the worktables; the way he looked at her his eyes dark and hooded when he thought she was otherwise distracted and wouldn't notice; the feather-light brush of his lips over her cheek or forehead, lingering a hair's breadth too long to be completely innocent. He was a master of subtlety.

Then there were the times like this: times that made her wonder if he cared at all, if the gentle touches and lustful gazes were all in her imagination. She knew him well enough by now to realize that his rudeness and spite covered a multitude of other emotions, and while she could rightly understand his need to protect himself, she still didn't see why he would do it at her expense. She had made *her* intentions perfectly clear; she still loved him, and she wanted to be with him, but she couldn't unless he felt the same. Caring was one thing one cared for colleagues and acquaintances, for pets and possessions but loving someone, truly being *in love* with them, was another thing all together. She couldn't be with him if he didn't love her as she did him... it would hurt too much.

Sighing, Hermione picked up her cloak from the back of the sofa. She grabbed her wand from the coffee table and flicked it towards the fire, cleaning up the glass shards and dousing the flames. Severus wouldn't be coming back out tonight.

With one last glance at his bedroom door, Hermione exited his quarters quietly, her murmured, "Goodnight," lost to the cold, empty room behind her.

~*~*~*~

Hours later, Hermione's room at the top of Gryffindor tower had settled into darkness. No fire flickered in the hearth; its ashes lay cold against the ancient stone. No candles burned brightly in their holders; the wax had long ago stilled and hardened. Silvery moonlight bled through the large glass windows leading to the balcony empty on such a cold night and illuminated the young witch sleeping fitfully in the curtained four-poster. Her body twitched and writhed as she dreamt, not of lazy summer days or childhood memories, nor of passion-filled nights or loving caresses...

Her dreams were horrifying.

Screaming babies are being swallowed up by the Darkness while she is helpless to save them. She finds herself clothed in flowing robes of purest white, lost on a barren, black field of ash. A sharp, slicing pain in her heel makes her glance down. She steps back, leaving a glistening crimson trail behind. Kneeling, she reaches for the source of her pain, her fingers dusted with black as she reaches for the hard edge hidden in the drifting powder. She knows what it is the moment her fingers touch it, just as she now knows what the cinders and swirling dust around her are made of.

As she pulls the jagged piece of charred human jawbone from the slag, she knows she should feel revulsion, disgust, anger even... but all she feels is fear: powerful, overwhelming, earth-shattering fear. Discarding the bone with what she knows is a terrifying indifference, she wanders alone until suddenly, in a swirl of ash, she sees a billowing figure slowly emerge from the barren landscape. Whether it is an unholy wraith, intent on destruction, or a fallen angel wandering through Hell, perhaps looking for lost souls to save, all she knows is that she is overjoyed to not be alone. Her irrational joy turns to pure elation as the figure comes closer. His harsh features are softened in the dark, sooty air, but she would know him anywhere.

Severus.

She rushes to him, and he holds out his arms, his beautiful smile beckoning to her, calling her to safety. She doesn't think it strange that his black cloak is as pristine as ever, his pale skin and dark hair unblemished. No ash covers him, no blood or wounds mar his body. He is just Severus, as he always has been, blessedly unscathed by battle and the aftermath.

However, just as she reaches him, his smile his beautiful, loving smile turns to a mask of anguish, and he throws his head back in agony, clutching his forearm. His Mark, she knows, is burning... burning as his Master calls to him. Desperately, she reaches for him with her ash-blackened hands, hoping to save him from his fate, like she could not save the screaming babies. He looks to her, his black eyes wet with unshed tears, as the fire-brand of the Mark spreads outward in a sizzling ripple of crimson and gold, consuming him until the ashes of his body fall in a sickening fluid rush to join those of the other Fallen.

She doesn't scream or wail; for all her terror and anguish she cannot find her voice. All Hermione can do is stare at the mound of ash that was once the man she loved, her breath coming in ragged gasps as her tears fall to the ground in small puffs of gray. Encased in her sorrow, she does not notice the warmth that has gradually started to fill the air around her. When a gritty, hot gust blows suddenly and violently from the South, it causes her to lift her head. Her eyes remain closed, and she is soon covered in gray, her mouth and nostrils assaulted with the powdered remains of lost hope. She finds herself still unable to move. Her tears leave streaks in the darkness and despair covering her cheeks, but she doesn't raise a hand to wipe them.

Why, when there is no one to see her weep, no one to care?

She hears a rushing sound and finally opens her eyes. A wall of flame, reaching to the heavens, rushes towards her. She knows she should flee, for someone has to keep Hope alive. Even so, she does not move. Instead, she stands amid the bleak chaos with the ashes of the man she loved, the father of her lost child, swirling harshly around her ankles. Even in death, she hears him call her name; he tells her to run, to protect herself but no, not this time. The hellfire rushes onward while the ashes bury her small feet, seemingly in one last desperate plea for her safety. She ignores the silken tickle as she spreads her arms wide. Her once white robes now a deathly, murky gray billow and snap in the rush of air from the approaching flames.

More tears rush down her face now: tears containing one last bit of selfish fear for herself; tears of anguish and sorrow for Severus and Aislinn, for friends and loved ones forever gone; tears of lost dreams, forgotten hopes, and the knowledge that there will be no tomorrow for any of them. Her breathing quickens as the heat from the onslaught starts to sear her skin. She can still hear Severus calling her name, frantically, telling her she must not let it take her... she must fight, she must survive. She has no time to think about his words, for as the flames rush over her, all she knows is Darkness as her body explodes into a cloud of ash.

~*~*~*~

Hermione's scream echoed off the walls of the tower as she snapped from her nightmare. She gasped for breath as the Darkness pulled at her subconscious, trying to lull her back to sleep, to that barren plane of ash and hellfire. The smell of seared skin and sulfur lingered on the edges of her consciousness, and although her rational mind knew that she was no longer dreaming, the irrational part saw nothing but dirty, gray ash littered with bone, and a firestorm on the horizon.

She scrambled frantically to her knees, suddenly overcome with a powerful urge to flee, as she had been unable to in her nightmare. Her pulse pounded in her throat like a wild thing trapped, and her breath came in shuddering gasps. She could hear the fire closing in, could smell the flames... burning... forever burning. "No!!" she screamed and made an instinctive rush towards the edge of the mattress. She didn't make it however, as a pair of strong, warm hands around her waist stopped her from launching herself from the bed in a dead run.

"Hermione!"

She knew that voice...

*But no... he's dead... I just saw him die!*she screamed to herself in her half-conscious stupor.

"Hermione!" Severus' voice hissed again as he gave her a small shake, "Hermione, stop! It's a nightmare! Only a dream!"

"No!" she screamed, flailing her arms at him in a frantic attempt to escape the flames that she knew were coming. "No! Let me go, Severus!"

He shook her again, more forcefully this time, and turned her to face him. "Stop! Stop this madness at once!"

She doubled her efforts to escape, screaming and clawing at him, her eyes open and wild but unseeing, filled only with the shadows of imagined flames. He hissed in pain as her nails cut across his right cheekbone, leaving a triad of angry red lines. "Let me go!! I want to go... I want to die with them... with you!"

Gritting his teeth, he put all his effort into subduing her. He released her momentarily, in order to readjust his grip, but she was lightning fast and was able to slip away. He snagged her around the waist with his left arm as she tried to get by him. Throwing his full weight against her, he shoved her bodily back onto the mattress. She shoved and slapped at him, leaving red marks where her small hands made contact with his bare skin. Finally, he was able to wrap his long fingers around her wrists and push them over her head.

She wailed in terror as he lay against her, his body flush with hers, effectively pinning her down and forcing her to stop her manic flailing.

"Stop!" he whispered, his mouth right next to her ear as he gave her wrists a fierce shake. "I'm right here! I'm alive, and you're safe... we both are."

"No!" she wailed. "No... you're dead... I saw you... you fell! You turned to dust! You died, Severus..." Her voice trailed off as the first sob wracked her body, and she seemed to wilt in upon herself. Her body went limp under him, the fight leaving her as she broke down. Cautiously, he released her wrists but did not move off of her, lest she try to flee again.

"Hermione..." he said softly, brushing his fingers lightly over her tear-stained cheeks. Her eyes were closed, yet she turned into his touch, and her arms came up to wrap around his neck, pulling him to her in a fierce embrace.

"You died..." she whispered into his neck. "You died and left me... and the babies were screaming..." She started to tremble, and her voice shook as she spoke, "They were screaming and I couldn't save them... I couldn't save them..." She trailed off again, tightening her hold on him.

Severus moved off of her to the side and pulled her close. "It's alright... it was only a dream... only a dream." He soothed her with nonsense words, wrapping his arms around her and letting her cry. They stayed that way for a long while, and the moon had moved halfway across the sky by the time Hermione finally pushed gently away from him.

They lie facing each other, close enough to feel the warm puffs of the other's breath against their lips. She reached up to brush a stray hair from his eyes, letting her hand rest against his cheek for a moment. "Thank you, Severus. I'm... I'm so sorry..." she said, caressing the angry marks her nails had left.

He gave her a small smile and reached up to cover her hand with his own. "It's nothing..."

"Not to me..." she whispered.

They gazed at each other for a long moment, but when Severus saw Hermione's eyes flick to his lips and back, and her tongue dart out to wet her own, he knew he had to leave.

With a tight press of his lips, he sat up, long legs sliding over the edge of the bed.

Her brow furrowed at the sudden change in his mood, and it was only then, when she lost the warmth of his body next to her own, that she realized he had already been in the bed with her when she awoke. She looked at him as he sat on the edge of her bed, clad only in a pair of black sleep pants, the pale line of his back shining in the moonlight, and knew that she wasn't going to push him away if he wanted to be there. His *reasons* for being there in the first place were what concerned her.

"Why are you here, Severus?" she asked cautiously. She saw his features tighten into his familiar scowl, but that was it. No reply was forthcoming.

She sighed and pulled the covers back up around her. They had been shoved down to the foot of the bed while she struggled against her demons. "Severus?" she asked again.

He put his head in his hands, his dark hair obscuring his features. After a pregnant pause, he spoke. "Because I'm a coward, Hermione... a bloody, fucking coward," he mumbled from between his fingers. He mumbled something else, but she couldn't make out what it was.

The agony in his voice grabbed at Hermione's heart. She moved from her safe, warm spot under the covers to kneel behind him on the bed. She could see the muscles of his shoulders stiffen as she moved close again. Did she dare touch him? She wanted to, God how she wanted to, but could she take the risk of it leading to something more? Would she stop him if it did?

Making up her mind, she reached a hand out to lay it against the pale angle of his shoulder. He was burning hot, and she felt him shudder under her palm. A long-forgotten feeling swelled within her a feeling of absolute power. If she could make him react so with only a light touch of her palm, what would a press of her lips to his nape do? A flick of her tongue against the shell of his ear?

Don't be deliberately obtuse... she thought to herself. She knew exactly what her touch could do to him... the way his body would respond beneath her hands. Her breath quickened as she laid her other palm against the opposite shoulder. He shuddered again, and this time she could have sworn that he moaned softly.

"You are no coward, Severus Snape," she said as her hands softly caressed the sharp lines of his scapulae. "You are the bravest man I have ever known."

He snorted at that.

"Please... why are you here... really?" she asked, now moving her hands slowly over the planes of his back.

"I'm drunk," he said slowly.

Her ministrations stopped, and only then did she realize that the smell of alcohol was coming off him in waves. She frowned again. "I'm serious, Severus... I thought we agreed that..."

"I know what we agreed, Hermione. I do not need a reminder." His voice reminded her of steel wrapped in velvet... a dangerous tone that she remembered well, if not fondly.

She dropped her hands in frustration. "Then tell me! Why did I wake to find you in my bed?" All thoughts of slowly seducing him were gone as he fired her temper with his stubbornness.

"Why does it matter?" he whispered vehemently, standing and whipping around to look down on her.

"Why does it matter?" It matters because I don't know whether you're here in a drunken fit of pique, or if you're here because there's a tiny chance you're sorry for being a dick earlier!"

"Of course I'm sorry!" he screamed back, spreading his arms wide in supplication. "Dammit, Hermione... do you know how hard it was for me not to kill that... *that mbecile* this afternoon?" He was pacing now.

"Yes, I do, but..."

"No, you have no idea," he cut her off. "I would gladly slice him open and hang him from the highest turret by his innards. He's hurt you, Hermione, almost as much as I have... and now you want me to help him? Do you not realize the gravity of the situation you ask me to put myself in?"

She saw the involuntary flex of his left arm. She did know what she was asking, or she thought she did she was asking him to risk his life to help Harry save the world. However, she was pretty sure that it wasn't his life he was worried about; he had been risking it since before she was born. This time was different; he was also risking hers, risking any hope of a future they may have together, of a life free from tyranny, of the freedom to... love... without fear of retribution... to have children...

The sound of screaming babies tugged at her memory, and as the enormity of the situation truly settled on her, she realized that she was tired... so very tired. Her reserves broke as she realized that he that they might actually be killed if anyone on the side of the Dark ever found out where his true loyalties lay. "Oh God..." she sobbed, her hand covering her mouth as she sank back into the mattress.

Her distress seemed to soften him a bit, and he moved towards her a fraction. "Hermione..." he whispered, pleading with her not to cry for him.

She shook her head. "No... I don't care what they do *to me*, Severus, as long as you stay safe. As long as you help Harry defeat him!"

Fresh tears poured down her cheeks as Severus stood there, a dark angel in the moonlight, wanting to go to her, but not trusting himself to do so.

The decision was made for him, however, as Hermione suddenly moved from the bed to wrap her arms around his waist. "I can't stand being apart from you... These past months have been torture... I would rather spend the rest of my life under Bella's wand than spend one more cold, wretched night without you!"

She pulled back to look at him and took his face in her hands, watching his open-mouthed expression turn from one of surprise to one mixed with sadness, fear, and perhaps under it all, a small amount of joy. He started to shake his head. "Hermione, I..."

He never had a chance to speak, however, because she crushed her mouth to his, all earlier thoughts of propriety gone in her need to be near him. The kiss was desperate, passionate, and full of longing, with a subtle trace of anger underneath it all. He couldn't help but kiss her back, his hands moving instinctively to her waist, as she boldly pulled him back towards the bed. Her knees met the edge, and she pulled him back down with her onto the soft duvet. The nightgown she was wearing rode up her thighs, and she pressed herself against him, making him moan and gasp into her mouth.

Hermione knew he had been drinking, but her body was overpowered by lust and a desperate, unbearable need to feel him against her... inside her. She knew it was wrong... she had stopped *him* on that night so many weeks ago, but she simply couldn't find the willpower to stop *herself* now. If they were going to die soon, why not live as much as they could now? Damn the consequences... damn the world if need be...

Severus could only think of her as well. He kissed her feverishly as she raked her nails down his back, dipping her fingers into the waistband of his pants, pulling them lower... lower... until her fingers brushed against him. He gasped and thrust towards her feather-light touch. He did not think of the possible consequences of following through, of sating their desire for each other. He could only think of his Hermione looking up at him, her eyes clouded with lust even after all this time, her small, deft fingers stroking him to utter abandon.

His Hermione... he thought as her hands gave him a light tug, her mouth never breaking their kiss. Suddenly, with enough force to make him gasp once more into her plundering mouth, the truth crashed into him he still loved her. She meant more to him than anything, was more precious than every rare and exotic thing he possessed; he would snap his wand in two if it meant he could have her back in his life.

He followed her back onto the bed, her little gasps and moans pulling him forward, enthralling him with their promises. "Yes," he breathed between kisses, "yes... please... come back to me, love."

His words only fired her passion. She drew back for a moment to peer into his eyes, seeking the truth of his words. She slowed her pace, running her hands reverently over his high cheekbones.

"For always?" she breathed, her voice shaking, terrified of being rejected and cast aside.

His hands found her face as well, his thumbs brushing away fresh tears. "Yes, love... for always."

They found their way back to each other that night in Hermione's bed, swathed in moonlight and darkness. They cried their pledges to one another and swore new allegiances to body, mind, and soul. Afterwards, as they lay entwined together, bare and glistening with sweat, nothing could harm them as long as they had each other. That is until cold, cruel reality came rushing back in the form of Severus' agonized gasp of pain as he grasped at his left forearm.

Hermione gaped for a moment before she realized what was happening. "No..." she whispered, terror evident in her voice. "No!" she cried again, grabbing him by the arm as he rose to leave.

He pulled away from her gently, moving to pick up his discarded pants from the floor. "What would you have me do, Hermione?" he asked as he pulled them over his slim hips, tying them quickly in place.

"Don't go, Severus! Tell the manipulative bastard that you're tired of fighting..." She pointed in the general direction of the Headmaster's quarters. "...tired of playing both sides! Help the Light, and stay away from the Darkness... please!" Her bare breasts, shiny with sweat and covered in gooseflesh, heaved in the silver light from the windows.

He looked up, fire burning in his eyes. This man standing before her was not the man she had just given her body to, the man who had declared his love for her while spilling himself inside her, her name a benediction upon his lips. This man was the double-edged sword, the spy, the Death Eater. "To what end?!" he cried, taking a step back towards her. She flinched back at his vehemence, but he didn't seem to notice and continued his tirade. "To the end of all we hold dear; the end of being one step ahead of a maniac intent on destroying the lives of any who oppose him?" He dropped his gaze, his fists clenching in anger and frustration. "It would be the end of... everything."

Her eyes swam with angry tears. "Fine... but when *will* it be enough? When will all the sacrifices and the duplicity be worth it, Severus? You're going to end up dead..." her voice hitched, and she swiped angrily at a stray tear, "... and I can't lose you too..."

He took a deep breath before stepping forward and pulling her close. He could feel her nipples pressing into the bare flesh of his chest, and he longed to press her back into the mattress, to regain the almost effortless passion they had shared only minutes ago, but which seemed so far away now. He pressed his cheek to the top of her head and inhaled her heady scent; sweat and sex and lavender and musk. He closed his eyes and pushed away his reawakening desire; now was not the time. He sighed. "It will be enough only when the Dark Lord is dead... when Potter and his... omniscient overseer... decide the time is right."

Her voice was muffled against his chest. "The time is never going to be right, Severus! Harry was... is... my friend, but he couldn't find his rear end with both hands unless someone helped him..." Her voice trailed off and he heard her sigh in frustration.

Severus ground his teeth, sharing in that frustration. "Then I suppose we don't really have a choice, do we?"

She pulled away, looking up to meet his gaze. After a moment of shared understanding, she shook her head. "No... I suppose we don't."

He leaned in, and his lips brushed hers in a warm, slow kiss... one of both sorrow and promise. He pulled away sharply as his arm flared again, the pain blacking out the edges of his vision this time.

"Severus..." she whispered, wanting him to stay, even though she knew he had to go, lest he face the consequences of earning a madman's disfavor.

He took her face in his hands and pressed his forehead to hers as the pain abated. "I need you to owl Potter. Tell him that we have decided." With one last brush of his lips over hers, he turned away, all deathly pale skin and harsh angles, ready to meet the Darkness head on.

"Tell him we will help him find his Horcruxes."

And then he was gone in a flash of green flame and sulfur. She stood there for a moment before moving to the outer room, snagging her robe from the edge of the bed as she went. Summoning parchment and quill, she scrawled a short missive:

~ **H.**

Yes.

~ **S&H**

"Dobby?" she called once she had magically sealed and warded the note.

The house elf popped into her room. "Yes, Harry Potter's friend?"

Hermione smiled softly at the elf. He was loyal to a tee and was the only one she trusted to deliver her letter, as owls could be easily intercepted. "Hello, Dobby. Can you take this to Harry?"

He took the note almost reverently. "Yes, Miss... Dobby is free... he can go where he wishes."

"Good. Please get that to him as soon as possible. Let no one else see it... understand?"

The elf nodded and disappeared with a soft crack.

Her task finished, Hermione went back into the bedroom, locking and warding the door behind her. She dropped her robe and crawled back under the covers naked and alone, to pray, to weep, to wait... for the dawn and for Severus' *Please, God...* safe return.

She closed her eyes and tried to find sleep again, hopefully free of war-torn landscapes and bones turned to dust. Her hand sought out the spot where he had lain, but it had already gone cold. In a moment of unexpected panic, her hand moved to the apex of her thighs, brushing against her soft curls as she sought out the only remaining evidence that told her he had actually been there; the evidence was there, drying cold and sticky between her thighs. Many long moments later, her hand still nestled between her legs, blessed dreamless sleep finally found her.

~*~*~*~

When the flames flared green again in the early morning hours, and his warm body slid in next to hers, she rolled over and pulled him to her sleepily, allowing her relief to show in a smoldering kiss. He smelled of dirt and rain and sweat and fear with the lingering aroma of their earlier lovemaking underneath it all. She pulled him over her, and he came willingly, already hard and wanting. This time wasn't tender or slow, but fast and needy, a release of the tension and anger that came from the meetings he was forced to endure.

She took him in, remembering what it had been like, remembering how he had needed this... had needed her... before. His thrusts became erratic, and his hot breath blew harsh and wet against her neck. She held him close, pulling her knees up and moving with him. When he cried out his release, and she felt the warm fluid gush inside her

once more, she pulled his mouth to hers in a kiss. He returned it, his hips moving slowly as his climax subsided.

They didn't speak, only moved to lie beside one another. He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her back against him, burying his nose in her hair. She sought his hand and entwined her fingers with his, pulling it to her chest. Sleep found them both eventually, and it was blessedly free of nightmares. Perhaps the powers that be knew that the horror of the coming days was soon to be upon them, or perhaps it was the nearness of each other that kept the demons at bay. Either way, with the dawn would come a new day, and a huge, frightening step towards freedom from the Dark.

~TBC

~*~*~*~

A/N: Well? I think the next one is going to contain another flashback... we need to get a little more backstory in. I think this is the third chapter without one...

This chapter was partially inspired by the beautiful SSHG story, *Breeding Lilacs Out of Dead Land* by Areola:

<http://ashwinder.sycophanthex.com/viewstory.php?sid=2670>

If you haven't read it... well, what are you waiting for?

Beginnings

Chapter 13 of 15

Just a glimpse...

Disclaimer: See Prologue

~*~*~*~

You're the bravest of hearts

You're the strongest of souls

You're my light in the dark

You're the place I call home...

~Celine Dion, "If That's What It Takes"

~*~*~*~

The dawn broke gray and cold over the slumbering mountains. Smoky tendrils of new morning light slithered forth slowly, gently, as if in deference to the two souls in the lonely tower whose sleep was, for once, quiet and undisturbed. At its apex, the new day would bring a sense of urgency, and though the sleeping couple was as yet unaware of the incredible sacrifices they would be asked to make in the coming days, neither were they ignorant of the risks. Harsh reality lingered against the outskirts of their subconscious minds, waiting for the appropriate moment to fell the sweet illusion of peace... of safety and serenity. It would fall upon them – the cold, cruel truth of things – but not at this moment.

This moment was for them.

Hermione awoke slowly, and her first thought was that she felt... rested, content even. Her second thought was that she had not been dreaming, for she was indeed not alone. A glance down revealed a pale, wiry forearm wrapped possessively around her naked waist. The breaking dawn provided just enough light for her to make out the lines of the Dark Mark branded into the flesh of that arm, and dread sank unbidden into her stomach like a leaden weight. Whatever sense of serenity she had felt upon knowing that Severus was indeed with her faded upon seeing the skull and serpent upon his pale skin. It reminded her of what lie ahead... of the gossamer thread that he walked every single time he was summoned... and that at any time that thread could break.

Not now... she thought to herself.

She sighed and pushed the maudlin thoughts to the back of her mind.

Later... later.

Gently, she turned to lie facing him and found him still deeply asleep. In the arms of Morpheus, his face was free of worry and anger, and it made him look so much younger than his hard-lived forty-one years. She softly traced her finger down the center of his brow. She knew the skin would furrow deeply once he was awake, but for now it was unlined and relaxed. She smiled softly as his eyelids fluttered at her touch, his long, black eyelashes moving against the dark circles under his eyes. Leaning forward, she pressed her lips to his forehead before burrowing back against him.

She sighed once more as his arms tightened unconsciously around her. If she was allowed her way, they would stay here forever, in her tower, and the world could go on without them. Severus would no longer be a spy, and she ... well, she would no longer be *whatever* she was to the Light.

They would simply be Hermione and Severus, two people that any reasonable person would never have equated with each another.

A small huff of laughter escaped her lips, and Severus' morning stubble caught on her hair as she buried her face in his neck and inhaled his scent: musk, wood-smoke, and sandalwood.

She smiled to herself; truly, who in the world would have thought they would end up here, now, like this? Hell, who would have thought they would end up together at all? It was all so preposterous when it first began...

Flashback

December, 1998

Handa Island

Sutherland, Highland, Scotland

Her changing feelings for him hadn't registered until one particular moment. It had surprised her to say the least, and she was more unprepared for it than she had ever been in her life. To start with, she and Severus had been 'volunteered' to chaperone a field trip to Handa Island for the fifth-year Herbology students. Professor Sprout had found herself short on certain grasses and lichens, so she had taken the opportunity to schedule an outing. Severus and his apprentice just happened to be on the short list for field trip duty. To say they were both overjoyed would have been an understatement.

No amount of pleading or bribing could get them out of it, and they had ended up on the west side of the island, atop the cliffs facing straight into the Atlantic. Amidst the picking and gathering, Hermione had seen Severus wander off to the edge of the group. Following him with her eyes, she had observed him while filling her basket.

His arm was still strapped to his chest in a splint, having been bandaged shoulder to elbow with only his long fingers protruding from the end. He was clad in only a white linen shirt and a black waistcoat, his long black overcoat having been abandoned at Poppy's insistence that he allow the extremity as much range of motion as possible.

Hermione had honestly believed that Severus would rather have cut off his arm than be seen without his normal armor of black wool and ebony buttons.

As it was, he had drawn a few odd looks from several students, and even one or two from Professor Sprout, but they all knew better than to comment on his state of undress. He made up for it in true Slytherin fashion however, by finding the longest, blackest, most concealing cloak possible.

She watched Severus as he stood on the cliff-face, his cloak and hair billowing in the biting wind blowing in off the sea. He was backlit by the setting sun, and even though she was only able to see him in profile, she could see that his eyes were alive with red-gold flames, thanks to the ball of fire sinking slowly into the distant horizon. The look on his face suggested that if he had a choice, he would gladly sail away over the waves to some distant shore, perhaps to find peace, solace... maybe even love.

At the time, Hermione had cursed herself for her childish fantasies, yet it was this thought that had caused her stomach to churn with something frightening... something forbidden. She had watched him stand there – on the crumbling edge of the world, the frigid wind ripping and snapping at his cloak, the white waves dashing themselves into infinity against the rocks below, his dark eyes full of fire and longing – and the only word that came to her brilliant, highly-logical mind was...

Magnificent.

He was magnificent...

...and dear God in heaven, Merlin, and whatever other deities might be listening... she was in love.

In love with Severus Snape.

Snape: a man that aside from one single, drug-induced 'confession,' could barely tolerate her.

Hermione had turned away quickly, but not before she felt a flush to her cheeks that was from more than the frigid air and a quickening of her breathing that was from more than the physical exertion of the outing. Ignoring her traitorous body, she tucked her basket of grasses and lichens under her arm and did her best to ignore the man for the rest of the trip.

She had tried to push the feelings down, knowing that he would never return them, not even if she were the last woman on Earth, but she simply couldn't manage it. No matter how hard she tried, no matter how rude he was, no matter how many times he insulted her or her work, her affections continued to grow.

They would grow so fast and so fierce that eventually, in one moment of weakness, in one single act of naïve desperation, she would do something that would change both of their lives forever.

*****End Flashback*****

~TBC

A/N: And so it began...

Please tell me what you think! I'm sorry this one was so short, but I couldn't make it go on any longer. It needed to end itself here. Reviews are love and I thank everyone for reading!

I searched Handa Island on the web, so if the location is wrong, please correct me. :)

Handa is an island of the west coast of Sutherland, Highland, Scotland. It's renowned for its birdlife.

Dark Horses

Chapter 14 of 15

A meeting, a memory, and the beginning of a mission.

Disclaimer: See Prologue

Thank you to my wonderful Beta, Toblass, because without her help this chapter would still be sitting idle on my hard drive.

Enjoy!

~*~*~*~*~

I've made my mistakes,

I've seen my heart cave in

I got my scars,

I've been to Hell and back again

Born for the blue skies,

We'll survive the rain,

Born for the sunrise,

We'll survive the pain...

~ Switchfoot, "Dark Horses"

~*~*~*~

Deep within the Ministry of Magic, in the Auror Department, Harry Potter sat in the small office he shared with his field partner, Ron Weasley. His eyes were thoughtful behind his glasses as he watched the small ball of parchment that hovered just above his desk. It burned silently, the blackening edges curling slowly inwards, filling the small workspace with the sharp smell of woodsmoke and herbs. As he watched the smoldering remains of Hermione's letter drift slowly to the desktop, his scarred brow furrowed in thought.

The Boy Who Lived knew without a doubt that he now owed Hermione a **Very Big Favor**. Severus Snape had agreed to provide assistance on a mission that could take months, or, God forbid, years. Harry snorted; as if he didn't owe Hermione enough already. He was old enough now to realize that he had been a complete and utter arse over the past two years, and that he deserved whatever punishment Snape and Hermione decided to unleash upon him.

It really had been foolish, he realized in hindsight, walking into their lab unannounced he should have at least knocked but in a way it had been cathartic, letting the old git have a go at him. It cleared some of the muck from Harry's conscience; not completely, mind, but it was a start. He rubbed unconsciously at his neck, still unable to shake that thought of how lucky he was that Snape hadn't killed him. Funny that...

Come to think of it, the whole situation Hermione and Snape was funny. Not in a 'ha-ha' sort of way, but in a 'What the hell is going on *there*?' way. Obviously they had been... together before Harry cringed at the thought but what were they to each other now? He had heard through certain channels that they had separated at the beginning of the year, but from what he could tell as his Auror training had included extensive classes on 'reading' body language they were on slightly more familiar terms than simply master and apprentice. Had they mended things? Were they back to shagging again?

As an image that he did *not* want to think about flashed across his mind, Harry shook his head and sighed harshly. It didn't matter; Hermione was her own woman... she always had been. She could be fucking Snape's brains out on the Head Table every night before dinner for all Harry cared. As long as she was happy it was none of his business. Besides, he doubted he had the right to make it his business even *if* the greasy git was stupid enough to hurt her.

Again... Harry thought angrily. One thing was for certain, Harry wouldn't allow himself to make that same mistake twice.

However, the time for reconciling would come later. Putting his relationship or lack thereof with Hermione on the backburner, he turned to the matter at hand. The fact that Snape was actually going to assist on this... *hunt*, for lack of a better word, meant that things must be far more serious than Dumbledore had let on. As much as he hated to admit it, the thought filled the young Auror's stomach with a cold knot of dread.

Harry sighed heavily. Now that things were progressing, he had to talk to Kingsley, and then he would have to find Ron and let him know what was going on as well. He snorted; *that* was going to be an interesting discussion. With a determined nod, Harry rose from his desk, vanished the remains of Hermione's letter with a flick of his wand, and strode from his office.

He had work to do.

~*~*~*~

The next evening, Severus sat reclined in one of the armchairs by the fire in the Headmaster's office, his long legs stretched out in front of him. His hands rested on his stomach, his eyes were closed, and his head sagged bonelessly against the low back of the chair. The furrow in his brow, however, bespoke of a tension that was held neatly in check.

Hermione stood behind him, combing her fingers gently through his dark hair, trying her best to calm him while they waited on the other members of their party to arrive. She knew that Severus was allowing the small intimacy only because they were alone at the moment, and she was taking full advantage of the opportunity.

"I could do this all day," she commented softly as the dark locks slid through her nimble fingers.

He answered her with a dark, rich chuckle. "I can think of one or *two* other things you could do all day..." he said, tipping his head back.

"Wicked man..." she laughed before leaning down and giving him a soft, slow kiss.

He returned it with fervor, bringing a hand up to twine in her unruly hair, and she was instantly lost in the warmth of his lips, and the insistent flick of his tongue against hers. Uninhibited desire threatened to overwhelm her, and she fought against the base instincts telling her to simply have him then and there, public decorum and the headmaster's upholstery be damned.

She tamped the feelings down for the time being, and she and Severus spent several quiet minutes simply reveling in the feel of their mouths moving together, before the grinding of the spiral staircase broke apart the moment.

They pulled apart reluctantly. "Game on, love," Hermione whispered, smoothing Severus' hair out of his face before moving off to stoke the fire.

He acknowledged her with a soft grunt and a knowing look before sitting up and straightening his robes. He then assumed an easy yet professional posture: legs crossed ankle over knee, fingers steepled, back straight, head up.

Hermione smiled despondently as she watched Severus draw the façade back around himself. Anyone that walked into the room now would see only the dour, scowling Potions master and his brilliant, dutiful apprentice, both patiently awaiting the Headmaster and his guests.

When they had finally discussed things between them properly a few weeks ago, the two of them had chosen not to broadcast their newly rekindled relationship to anyone just yet, with the Headmaster being number one on the Do Not Tell list. Admittedly, Hermione had been a bit confused when Severus had been so adamant on that point, but when she questioned him he had simply asked her to trust him, promising that he would explain everything soon.

So she had dropped the subject for the time being; she knew that Severus loved her and wasn't ashamed of being with her, so he must have a valid reason for keeping things low on the radar at the moment. She had mentioned the fact that Harry might have an idea of the true nature of things, what with Severus' display earlier in the week, but Severus didn't seem too worried, so Hermione wasn't going to lose any sleep over it.

Sadly, worrying about who knew about their relationship and who didn't wasn't high on their current list of priorities. First things first they had to help the boys find these things, these... *horcruxes* that the Headmaster was after.

The thought that Harry and Ron would be there in a few moments set butterflies rolling in Hermione's stomach. She hadn't really seen either of them her last encounter with Harry notwithstanding since the day she had told them of her pregnancy, almost two years ago now. She snorted and flicked her wand angrily at the fire, stirring the flames violently, which earned her a concerned glance from Severus. She didn't notice, however, lost as she was in the ghosts of her past. The words she had traded with her two childhood friends ... Ron mostly ... that day still held a bitter place in her memories.

Harry had been too stunned to be angry; Ron, however... Ron had been angry enough for both of the young men. In truth, she had expected him to be angry he had never held any great love for Severus, especially after Hermione took up as his apprentice but nothing could have prepared her for the vitriol that he had thrown at her that day.

His face had turned the color of the Gryffindor House banner, and if she hadn't known him better, she would have sworn that he had wanted to strike her. More the fool him if he had; Severus would have killed him. As it was, he had called her a whore and a traitor; he had called her child a bastard and had literally spat at her before abruptly Disapparating.

From what she had found out later, Ron had apparently been under the delusion that she still wanted to be with him, which was entirely untrue and ridiculous in the extreme, especially considering how they had parted ways.

First and foremost, they had never *officially* dated, meaning most importantly that he had never asked her to be his girl. They *had* managed a few heated snogging sessions throughout the year, and several awkward, heavy-handed attempts at mutual pleasure that had ended in less than satisfactory results, at least on her part. Ron seemed to be of the mind that if he had found release ... however quickly ... then surely she had as well.

Apparently, he hadn't been familiar with what the Muggles say about *assuming*...

They *had* gotten very close to actual sex once, so close in fact that Hermione wondered later why she hadn't simply gone through with it.

At least it would have shut him up.

It had happened during their seventh year. They had all been staying at the Burrow over Easter holidays, and that evening there had been a party to celebrate the occasion. Somehow, Ron had managed to find his way into a bit of Firewhiskey Hermione suspected Fred and George, but could never prove it and had succeeded in drinking himself silly.

Things had gotten a bit out of hand when the twins' jibes about his manhood had apparently prompted Ron to prove them wrong, and to the utter humiliation of his mother he had dropped his trousers in the sitting room, ordering them all to 'Check out the goods' if they had any doubt about things.

Mrs. Weasley had promptly sent him off to bed, her face flushed with both fury and embarrassment. "Boys will be boys," she told Hermione, attempting to make light of the situation as she watched her youngest son stumble up the stairs. Hermione simply nodded and went back to the party, trusting that Mrs. Weasley knew what she was doing.

Later that night, after everyone was in bed, Ron had snuck into the room she was sharing with Ginny, after the younger witch had already crept off to see Harry, and Hermione had welcomed him. She hoped this would give them the opportunity to discuss some things that had been bothering her lately. Ron, however, had no intentions of *talking*.

He immediately climbed beneath the covers with her, finding her mouth in the darkness and kissing her clumsily. Hermione didn't mind too much; she'd had a bit of butterbeer, and while she was in no way, shape or form inebriated, it had made her feel a bit more relaxed than usual. So, she let him continue, breaking the kiss and tilting her head back to give access to her neck. He obliged her, and his hands moved to roam over her chest, working the buttons of her nightgown. She let him continue, and eventually he managed to coerce her out of all her clothes.

His mouth on her breasts had felt nice when he wasn't using his teeth ... and she had smiled at the moan she had drawn from him when she raked her nails over his back. She could feel his raging erection pressing against the outside of her thigh, hard and insistent through his cotton pajama pants, but had made no move to touch it. After a few more minutes, he had started grinding it against her hip, muttering things like "Mione... so good. So fucking good..." and while she knew she should have felt *something*... a growing sense of trepidation certainly wasn't it.

But she had let him continue on, being a practical girl, in hopes that the right feeling whatever it was would come to her eventually. Soon, his hand had moved down her stomach to rest at the apex of her thighs, and she parted her legs for him willingly, hoping that this time he would get it right. He had rubbed his large, meaty fingers against her for a few minutes, and while it hadn't felt bad exactly, it hadn't felt any better than the last time either. She was about to speak up and tell him where her clit was *actually* located when things had taken on an entirely new edge.

In the span of a second, he had moved his entire body between her legs. At the sudden and inexplicably foreign sensation of his naked cock *Where had his pajamas gone?* pressing against her sex, her legs had snapped together of their own accord. She knew instantly that this was not what she had signed on for. "Ron..." she said, putting her hands on his bare, flushed chest to push him away as she quickly sat up. "Ron, no."

He looked up at her then ... his lips wet with saliva, pupils dilated with lust, his insistent cock bumping heavily against her shins ... and gave her a questioning look. "Mione?"

"I... I don't think we should," she had stammered, pulling the sheet up to cover herself. She didn't want to make him angry, but she also knew that she most definitely did *not* want to Do This.

Of course, he *had* been angry. "Why the bloody hell not? You've only been teasing me for the last..." He glanced at the clock next to the bed. "...twenty minutes. What'd you expect me to think?"

"I'm sorry! I just don't feel comfortable..."

He didn't let her finish, and rose sharply from her bed, pulling his pants back on in the process. "Yeah, well... that's not the only thing you don't *feel*..."

Righteous indignation had risen up in her then, and they'd argued. He'd called her a cold fish and an ice queen, asking her why she simply didn't loosen up and have some fun. She had countered just as fiercely, asking him if rubbing his cock clumsily against her crotch while manhandling her breasts was his idea of giving her a good time.

She wasn't a cold fish... she wasn't! Her virginity was never something she had held onto purposefully. The right situation and person had simply not presented themselves. It had never felt *right*. For Hermione, it was about being in love, about wanting to give your entire self to another person, not simply getting off. (Severus would have called her a hopeless romantic ...the git ... but it was true.)

With Ron it felt... well, to be honest it felt *wrong*. She loved him, she was sure of that, but she didn't know if she was *in love* with him. Their argument had escalated to the point where she was afraid someone would overhear them, so she had asked him to leave. He did, but not before giving her a disgusted look and shaking his head in obvious disappointment. "I expected more from you, Hermione."

She watched him go, and it wasn't until she was alone that she let the tears fall. "And I from you, Ron..." she whispered to the cold, dark room. Things were never really the same after that night. They returned to school after the Easter break, and although Ron seemed to have forgotten about the incident, he treated her with a slight wariness

that hadn't been there before.

Hermione didn't pay him much attention, honestly. NEWTs were fast approaching, and once again she immersed herself in her studies. She hardly ever saw either of the boys, only in shared classes or at meals, and when they were together, she still had her head buried in a textbook, revising one thing or another. Neither one questioned her, being used to her obsessive tendencies by now, but she was observant enough to see the disappointment on Ron's face each time she blew him off. Sadly, she couldn't bring herself to care.

Finally, NEWTs came and went, Hermione was accepted as Severus' apprentice, and their Hogwarts education came to a close. The boys were accepted into Auror training after their exam results came in, and it was on the eve of the celebration of this occasion and only a week until the ceremony that would bind Hermione as Professor Snape's apprentice for the next four years that she had *officially* broken things off with Ron.

In hindsight, there really hadn't been anything to break off. She and Ron hadn't spoken on any grand level in weeks not that they ever did and she certainly hadn't let him touch her as before. The occasional kiss or caress she let slip, just to put off an argument, but nothing more.

He had been angry when it happened. Come to think of it, he had been angry a lot back then, and she had, on more than one occasion, found him drinking more than he could handle.

"What is it, Hermione? Got a thing for ole Snape, have you?" he had slurred at her that night. "It's all you talk about... I can hardly get a word in edgewise for all you're going on about him." Ron's voice had taken on a snooty, high-pitched tone: "I wonder what the first lesson will be like? I wonder if he'll let me try to brew Wolfsbane? I wonder if he'll let me watch *him* brew? He's a remarkable potioneer... have you seen him?" Merlin, Hermione... I'm so bloody sick of hearing about him! What does he have that I don't?"

The mean-spirited, vindictive side of her wanted to scream, *A brain!* but she let it pass. "First of all Ronald, I *donot* sound like that, and secondly this has nothing to do with Professor Snape. You and I have been falling further and further away from each other since that night at the Burrow."

"You mean the night I realized what a frigid bitch you are?" he sneered.

Hermione's mouth gaped at the sudden vehemence in Ron's voice; where had this mean, hateful man come from? Had it really hurt him that much when she had turned him away?

No. This was *not* her fault! She gritted her teeth. "I'm going to let that one go, Ron, but if you ever call me that again, I'll hex your balls into oblivion. Do you understand?"

He snorted at her. "Whatever..." and had walked away. "Enjoy your *apprenticeship* with the old bat... I hope he gives what you need..."

And she hadn't spoken to him again until almost two years later.

Harsh reality came crashing back with the opening of the office door. Hermione took a deep, steadying breath as the Headmaster strode in with Harry and Ron at his heels. The latter two were professionally garbed in red Auror robes, and Hermione could tell that Ron had put on muscle since she had seen him last.

Neither of her former friends were novices any longer, having been out of training for more than a year, yet their faces and body language betrayed their relative inexperience.

Harry shifted from foot to foot, crossing and uncrossing his arms, and hadn't spared a glance for either Hermione or Severus since entering. Ron, on the other hand, zeroed in on the two of them immediately. He seemed surprised to find her standing at the hearth while Severus sat opposite. What did he expect? Were they supposed to be snogging like a couple of teenagers? She snorted; he should have been here five minutes ago.

Better luck next time, Ron, she thought. She did, however, move away from the hearth to stand next to Severus' chair. It was a simple gesture, letting the others know that the two of them were a unified front, but a small part of her delighted in the way Ron's lips pressed tightly together as she leaned her hip against the armrest, casually coming into contact with Severus' arm in the process.

Severus, in turn, smirked at Ron when the boy's eyes flicked to the dark wizard's face. *See Weasley, she enjoys my touch... wants it... needs it. How does that make you feel? Angry? Disgusted? Oh, if you only knew some of the things we've done... you would...*

"Now that we're all here, let's not waste any time, shall we?" the Headmaster's voice rang out, interrupting Severus' thoughts.

No one voiced a protest, so the Headmaster continued. "I won't insult the intelligence of anyone present with a long, drawn-out monologue." He paused, pinning them each with an eagle-eyed stare before getting to the point. "Horcruxes: seven pieces of Lord Voldemort's soul violently cleaved from his body through acts of cold-blooded murder and placed into seven magically significant objects, making him virtually immune to harm. Immortal, if you would.

"Two have been located and destroyed: Tom Riddle's diary..." He tossed a battered, leather journal onto his desk, which Hermione instantly recognized from their second year. "... and a ring owned by Voldemort's grandfather, Marvolo Gaunt." A small ring with a dark, diamond-cut stone clattered to a halt next to the diary. "That leaves five more." He paused again, and regarded each of them carefully.

Harry looked stoic and determined; apparently he already knew. Ron looked ill; his face had gone white, but he still tried to hold his posture like any new, supposedly well-trained Auror.

Severus looked murderous.

His thoughts were roiling. How could he possibly have been unaware of such a thing? He had been at the Dark Lord's side for years, and yet not a whisper of anything remotely like *this*. He knew what a horcrux was, but never in his wildest dreams had he imagined that he would one day have to find and destroy one.

And there had been seven... with five yet to be found!

My God...

He glanced at Hermione, whose hand had automatically gripped his arm at the Headmaster's pronouncement, a gesture which did not go unnoticed by the other three in the room. Of the four of them, she was the only one that looked truly fearful, and in Severus' opinion that made her the smartest of them all.

Hermione wasn't afraid for herself, however, but rather for Severus. What did this mean for him? How would he be able to assist in destroying such vile creations while in turn remaining 'faithful' to the Dark Lord? If he were found out, he would be killed. She felt her breathing start to quicken as the possibility of truly losing him not simply as a lover, but truly, irreversibly *losing* him was realized. Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes, and despite the knowledge that she and Severus had agreed to keep their true circumstances a secret, she opened her mouth to speak. Fortunately, she was cut off as the Headmaster spoke again.

"We must find them, we must destroy them, and we must make haste before Voldemort becomes aware that we know." He glanced at Severus, and an understanding passed silently between the two men. The Headmaster was worried as well. The question was, did he worry for Severus personally, or was he worried about losing his spy, his pet Death Eater?

Sadly, Hermione was leaning towards the latter.

The Headmaster turned away for a moment, reaching down into one of the drawers of his desk, and Severus took the opportunity to reach up and lay his hand gently over Hermione's, letting her know he sensed her distress. He removed it just as Dumbledore turned back to address them.

"We believe we have traces on at least one more at the moment an ancient locket that belonged to Salazar Slytherin himself, and was once owned by the Black family. Now I believe it to be hidden somewhere in Albania," He paused slightly, tossing a piece of rolled parchment a map -- onto his desk, and Hermione almost rolled her eyes at the overdramatic gesture, "which is where you all will be going."

"Albania?" Severus sneered. "Have you lost what little sense you have left, Albus? I can't simply up and leave to go on some *excursion* in the backwoods of Europe. In case you haven't noticed, I have classes to teach, an apprentice to train..."

The Headmaster had apparently been expecting this and held up his hands placatingly. "I know exactly what responsibilities you and Miss Granger each hold, Severus. That is why Mr. Weasley and Mr. Potter will leave at the end of the week, and you and your *apprentice* will leave as soon as Christmas break begins."

Severus didn't miss the Headmaster's stress of the word apprentice, but ignored the jibe. Instead, he sighed heavily. "No one will question two Aurors on a field mission, but what of us?" He gestured between himself and Hermione. "I suppose you've devised a way to explain our sudden absence, even if it is the holidays?"

The Headmaster nodded sagely. "I'm sending the two of you away on school business. We're running low on some of the more important potions ingredients for the infirmary, and I do believe Miss Granger needs experience with medicinal plants, yes?"

Severus sighed and closed his eyes, rubbing the bridge of his nose as he tried to ward off a rapidly forming headache. "Yes, but a... a *field trip*? In the dead of winter? In Albania? You must be joking."

The older wizard shook his head. "No, I dare say I'm not, my boy. It's the perfect opportunity for you to be away without questions from...*others*." He gave Severus a pointed look.

"Yeah, wouldn't want the *Dark Lord* to get wise about things, now would we?" This came from Ron, who had been silent up until this point.

"Ron," Harry chided, an edge of warning in his voice.

"What?" Ron whispered vehemently back at his partner, "He's a fucking *Death Eater*, mate. Hell, she might be too... mucking about with him and all."

"I said *enough*, Ron." Harry's tone brooked no argument this time. Ron backed down, but not before turning his gaze accusingly on Hermione and Severus.

Severus simply glared at the redheaded Auror, wanting nothing more than to flay him alive for his ignorance. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that Hermione's face was twisted into a pale rictus of both fury and shock. Her fists were clenched tightly at her sides as she glared daggers at her former friend. When the first faint red sparks sizzled and danced across her knuckles, Severus knew it was time to leave, and quickly. The damned fool had upset her immensely, and she was fast losing control of herself. As it was, he and Hermione already had much to discuss later this evening, and he really did not wish to add the sticky deaths of two fledgling Aurors ... or the ensuing mountain of paperwork that would follow ... to that list.

"Is that all, Headmaster?" He stood, crossing his arms over his chest casually as he sneered at the two younger men. *Some* of us have to be up early."

Wisely, neither Harry nor Ron chose to say anything this time.

After another moment of tense silence in which the air had started to sizzle with Hermione's angry, repressed magic the Headmaster nodded. "You and Miss Granger are dismissed, Severus. I'll fill you in on the particulars in a few days."

Without a backwards glance, Severus headed for the door, holding it open for Hermione. She preceded Severus out of the office, and neither one spared a single thought for the three sets of watchful, narrowed eyes upon their backs as the door slammed shut in their wake.

~ TBC

A/N: Thanks for reading. Let me know what you think!

Turas Sábháilte (Safe Journey)

Chapter 15 of 15

The beginning of the end.

~*~*~*~*~

Under the heavens, we journey far

On roads of life, we're the wanderers

So let love rise, so let love depart

Let hope have a place in the lover's heart...

Hope has a place in a lover's heart

~ Enya, "Hope Has A Place"

~*~*~*~*~

The moment the door closed behind them, Severus took Hermione by the wrist and pulled her quickly down the spiral staircase. "You must control your emotions," he whispered calmly as they descended, though he was becoming ever fearful of what may happen should her already fragile hold on her magic slip any further.

Hermione knew he was right; she could feel it building and roiling inside her ... the overwhelming urge to simply... burst ... to let loose her magic on anything and everything around her. She knew that she would probably harm Severus if that were to happen, yet she couldn't push Ron's accusing words from her mind, nor could she rid herself of the image of his bitter, horrible face as he had said them.

Gods, she wasn't a Death Eater; Severus was not a Death Eater, not truly. Death Eaters had tried to murder her; they had succeeded in murdering her unborn child... Severus' child. While she couldn't deny that Severus could be mean, spiteful, and vindictive, neither could she deny that Severus loved her, and that he too had mourned their loss. He would never harm her, or any child they may have in the future, even if it meant his own death.

The thought of losing him only served to make Hermione's head throb painfully, and even though she drew breath after rapid, trembling breath, there simply was not enough air. She became light-headed, her entire body trembling with the dual efforts of trying to remain conscious while containing so much raw power. More than once she stumbled as she and Severus made their way through the castle, his iron grip on her wrist the only thing keeping her upright.

By the time they made it to the dungeons, the air around them was pulsing. It reeked of sulfur, and the torches along the walls flared as the couple passed by, the flames reaching outward as Hermione's magic surged over them. Whorls of angry red lighting crackled and sparked along the young witch's body, snapping haphazardly at the floor and walls. The more aggressive bursts were soon chipping away at the ancient rock, sending fragments of razor-edged shrapnel flying around the corridor. The air rang with the *ping* of flying stone and mortar, and more than once Hermione was hit. To her dismay, she heard Severus hiss in pain as he was also struck.

"Make it stop... please... *please*... I don't want to hurt you...," she sobbed. Her voice was hard to discern over the now constant crackle and hum of the atmosphere around them. Her hands gripped his robes convulsively, threatening to drag him down should she stumble again.

"Please, Severus... *please*..."

Although he would never admit it, the dark wizard was truly shaken. He and Hermione were both bleeding from cuts to their faces and hands, yet he didn't dare cast any charms to shield them; who knew how the magic would react if given another conduit upon which to latch itself. No, he only knew that he needed to get Hermione somewhere safe, and that one day he would beat Ronald Weasley within an inch of his miserable, pathetic life for causing her such pain and distress.

Calling Hermione a Death Eater? Never had a more untrue phrase been spoken. She was no more a Death Eater than Severus was a fairy king. And that blasted little rotter knew that just as well as anyone. It had been a purely malicious comment, one meant to hurt, to shame. Well, the boy would get his in the end, one way or another. Severus would see to it.

Coming back to himself, he pushed all thoughts of revenge aside and tightened his grip on Hermione's wrist as he walked faster. They managed to make it to his rooms without further incident, but the door had barely closed behind them before Hermione fell heavily to her knees. Despite Severus' best efforts to remain standing, she brought him down with her this time, and he fell heavily against the closed door.

"Get up, Hermione," his deep voice commanded as he tugged gently on her wrist.

When she stayed where she was, unwilling ... or unable ... to do as he asked, he leaned forward on the cold stone floor and gently took her face in his hands. Her hair was wild, the curls undulating around her panic-stricken face, sparking and crackling with angry magic. Tiny, sizzling embers encircled and snapped their way along the brown ringlets, meeting Severus' hands where they were buried. The sparks ran along his fingers, twining and slithering their way beneath the cuffs of his shirt. They made his skin tingle strangely, but the sensation was not entirely unpleasant.

"Tell me....," he whispered, trying to keep the fear from his voice. "Tell me what to do."

For one long, singular moment, she looked into his eyes ... his beautiful, dark, beseeching eyes ... and then, without warning, she reached for him, wrapping her hands in his hair and pulling his mouth to hers.

The kiss was frantic, her small fingers gripping him tightly, desperately, as she shoved him bodily onto his back and straddled him. Her magic licked at his robes, twining itself into the tight spaces between fabric and skin. He gasped against her mouth as it pulsed, making his body sizzle and throb with need .

"Please," she panted, nipping his lower lip as she shifted her hips wantonly against his. "Please, Severus..." She kissed him frantically, her tongue licking greedily at his own.

For a brief moment, he lost himself to the heady sensations careening around him lust and need and fear and desperation. He knew that they couldn't do this, not now. He had no idea what would happen should the both of them lose control while the situation was already so unstable. It took an enormous effort to pull himself away from her ... away from the wanton look in her eyes, away from her heaving breasts and kiss-swollen lips ... but pull away he did, if only just.

She tried to protest, but his finger on her lips stopped her. "Hush," he said softly, and against his better judgment, he slowly leaned in and kissed her once again, chastely this time. Both of their worlds narrowed to the spot where their lips met.

Hermione, too, could feel the power raging around them, could feel the pulse of it in her core, and was instantly bereft when he pushed her gently away again.

He sat up and met her gaze. "Listen to my voice...," he whispered.

She opened her mouth to speak, but he cut her off.

"Listen." His words were calm, serene...

Finally, she nodded and closed her eyes, focusing on the feel of his hands trailing lightly down her arms.

"Remember who you are." His voice was dark velvet, caressing her, distracting her from her anger at Ron and making her focus on him instead. "Remember what you have survived..."

His hands had reached her waist now, and his strong fingers squeezed her hips gently. "This," he gave another squeeze for emphasis, "this is nothing. It is your magic... born of your own mind, your own body and soul..."

"This magic is a part of you, Hermione, and you are a part of it. It cannot harm you, nor can it harm those you love." Severus watched as Hermione's brow furrowed in concentration, and the magic pulsed once more. He couldn't help but smile softly as the angry red morphed slowly to a deep, serene purple.

Hermione's breathing had slowed as she had listened to Severus speak. Slowly her head tilted forward, coming to rest against his shoulder. He reached up to caress her hair, and while the tendrils still popped and sizzled against his face and hands, they felt softer now, more delicate, caressing... not commanding. After a long moment, she reached up to touch his hand where he still held it against her hair. "Thank you."

She opened her eyes, and Severus could see that she was once more in control.

"Are you alright?" he asked anyway.

"Yes, I'm fine, just tired." She reached up to push his hair out of his face. "Can we please go to bed?"

He watched her for a moment before he sighed and stood, holding out his hand. "Come on then."

They entered his bedroom and slowly stripped out of their clothes.

Hermione climbed in first and held back the sheets as he climbed in behind her.

"Severus?"

"Mmm?" he replied, his breath warm against the back of her neck.

"What will happen when everything is over? When the Dark Lord is gone for good?"

He was silent for a long moment, so long that Hermione thought that perhaps he hadn't heard her.

Finally, he said, "I can only tell you that no matter what happens... I will do everything in my power to keep you safe."

Hermione couldn't help but smile at that. She brought his hand to her lips and kissed it. She felt him smile softly against her neck as she tucked his hand under her chin and closed her eyes.

They both slipped exhaustedly into sleep.

~*~*~*~*~

It was snowing when the day finally came for them to depart. It was the first day of the Yule holidays, and the students were gone until the New Year. The few that had stayed on were already in their common rooms for the evening, so there was no worry about anyone seeing them leave. Not that it mattered. No one cared about the wanderings of the Potions apprentice and her Master.

Not a soul.

Their supplies had been shrunk and stowed away safely in their pockets, and they were dressed for the cold in thick, woolen traveling cloaks and gloves, and each wore a pair of sturdy dragon-hide boots. Hermione's beaded bag was full of anything and everything they could possibly need, except for their shelter, which was currently in Severus' pocket; their translation charms were in place the fact that Severus could speak Albanian being irrelevant, since Hermione couldn't, and she refused to be out of the loop during any impending conversations and their instructions from Dumbledore had long since been committed to memory.

As it was, Hermione now stood just outside the front gates of the castle with Severus and the Headmaster, wishing more than anything that she could go back to the warm bed she had left only a few short hours ago. Her lips turned up in a secret smile as she remembered the events of the previous night. Their lovemaking had been desperate and heated, both of them feeling the extreme stress of the situation and needing to forget, if only for a moment, that the fate of their world was lying in the balance. They had lain awake long afterwards, twined around one another, talking softly, and eventually Severus had spoken to Hermione about the Horcruxes. She had been horrified when he explained the exact nature of the items in question, whatever they might turn out to be.

Her smile faded. That had been a conversation she would love to forget. What kind of person would split his soul... murder innocent people to ensure his own immortality? Both concepts were against nature. Hermione shuddered and stepped closer to Severus.

Apparently, the two wizards were finished with their conversation, as the Headmaster simply handed Severus an old, dirty beer bottle and said, "This will get you there initially." He looked at them each in turn. "After you arrive, find the *Red Dragon Inn*. The bartender will see you safely on your way."

Severus simply nodded and took the Portkey. "Shall we?" he asked, holding the bottle out to Hermione, who hesitated only briefly before grasping the other end.

"Turas sábháilte, my friends," the Headmaster said, raising a wrinkled hand in farewell just as the Portkey spun the two of them into the ether.

~*~*~*~*~

They landed in a small meadow covered in a white blanket of undisturbed snow. It was full dark, with the only light coming from the waning moon overhead. The trees surrounded them, a seemingly impenetrable wall of dark wood and unforgiving ice and snow. A chill breeze ruffled Hermione's hair where it peeked from beneath the hood of her cloak. She could hear the sound of branches creaking and tapping ominously in the darkness beyond her vision. The place instantly scared the hell out of her.

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep..." she heard Severus mutter.

Hermione snorted and glanced over at him. He was gazing around the clearing, his dark eyes shining in the moonlight as he surveyed the expanse of trees.

"Frost would not have been my first choice...", she said, eyeing the decidedly unlovely edge of the encroaching forest nervously.

Severus chuckled darkly, but continued to stare off into the distance. After a moment, he looked up at the sky, turned once in a slow circle, and then started walking. "This way," he said, motioning for her to follow.

They hiked for a long while, the only sound that of their boots crunching in the powder and the occasional snap of a branch as it gave way under the weight of too much snow. Once, Severus stopped, holding out a hand to indicate that Hermione should as well. She froze, her overwrought mind flashing with a memory of gnashing teeth and tearing claws. An involuntary shiver crawled up her spine. Were there Manticores in Albania? God, she hoped not.

Finally, Severus motioned her up beside him. She gave him a questioning look, but he merely shook his head. He did, however, take her hand tightly in his. Shaking away her fears, Hermione tried to simply enjoy the feel of his warm hand in hers as they continued their trek.

A long while later, she heaved a sigh of relief when they emerged onto a well-used road.

"There we are," Severus said, pointing down the way. Lights shone from a small collection of buildings in the valley below.

They descended the small hill, hands still clasped together firmly. Hermione could already feel the cold seeping through her warming charm, and cursed the Headmaster again for sending them on this Merlin be damned journey. She did take a moment, however, to look at their surroundings. The landscape was quite beautiful, covered as it was in a sheet of white and flanked by the night sky full of softly blinking stars.

The crunching of snow and gravel beneath their boots and their harsh breathing were the only sounds. If it hadn't been for the lights of the town, Hermione could easily have imagined that they were alone out here.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to her. "Severus... this is a magical village, isn't it? If there are Muggles about..."

He raised his free hand. "It's all right. It's a wizarding one, much like Hogsmeade. We'll be safe."

Hermione nodded, satisfied, and they continued on.

Once they neared the town, they could hear music and laughter coming from many of the buildings.

It seemed a cheerful place, with brightly painted shops and clean streets. People dressed in a combination of native Muggle dress and wizarding clothes nodded in greeting as the two of them passed by. Hermione thought they were probably accustomed to seeing travelers, although why anyone would come to Albania especially in the winter she didn't know.

When they finally found the *Red Dragon*, it was different than what Hermione had expected. Instead of being seedy and rundown like the Hog's Head, this pub was bright

and cheerful and full of patrons, all drinking and laughing. It was a warm place, literally and figuratively, and Hermione found herself smiling as they walked further in.

The man behind the bar was tall and thin, much like Severus, but unlike the dark wizard, the Dragon's barkeep had a head of long blonde hair and blue eyes. He was wiping the countertop down as they approached. He looked up, saw Severus, and paused a moment before tossing his rag over his shoulder and leaning against the row of liquor-filled shelves behind him.

Hermione watched as the men exchanged knowing looks.

"What'll it be?" the barman asked.

Severus pulled some coins from his pocket and laid them on the bar. "A Black Dragon, please."

Another look was exchanged before the barman took a bottle of dark, nearly black liquor off the shelf. He poured a healthy measure into a small glass and slid it across the bar to Severus, who raised it to Hermione and said, "Cheers," before downing it in one go.

The barman nodded and said in heavily accented English, "Perhaps you'd like to try something with a little more... kick, shall we say?"

"That would be appreciated," Severus said, and he and Hermione were soon following the man through a side door that led to a storeroom filled high with containers of foodstuffs and crates of liquor.

Hermione had a whole list of questions, but kept her mouth shut as she followed behind the two men.

The blonde man led them to the back of the storeroom where he flicked his hand and moved aside a large stack of crates, revealing a large wooden door set into the floor. It opened, and the man descended a pair of narrow stairs. "This way," he called back over his shoulder.

Without a second thought, Severus followed.

Hermione wanted to scream at him for going blindly into the dark, literally, but once again, she bit her tongue.

Sconces flared to life as they walked through the small tunnel. It was narrow, cold, damp, and it smelled terrible. Severus and the barman had to duck to keep from brushing their heads against the ceiling. More than once, Hermione's hair became entangled on a dangling root, and they had to stop while she unwrapped herself.

Ten minutes later they emerged into a dense thicket. The moonlight filtered down through the trees, illuminating the area with a pale, ghostly light. "There," the barman pointed.

Hermione followed his directions and gasped.

There, tethered to a tree, was a Thestral. Its ugly black hide clung to its bones, each muscle and tendon clearly visible through the thin layer of skin. It glistened in the moonlight, and it looked oily... moist.

"That!?" she hissed, giving Severus an incredulous look.

"Yes, that," he said, already moving towards the beast. He laid a hand gently on its nose and spoke softly. The creature wuffed at him and stomped a foot, seemingly eager to be off. "Let's go." He held his hand out to Hermione, who didn't move. "Hermione..."

"No one told me I would have to fly." She crossed her arms over her chest petulantly.

"You have nothing to fear."

"Except falling to my death!"

"You forget who you're with... There is no way you will come to any harm while with me."

"How can you be so sure?"

He smirked at her expression. "You forget that I too, possess the power of flight. If you fall, I'll simply catch you."

She gave an exasperated snort. "You fly? Hell... of course you do ." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Alright, but if I die, I'm coming back just to kill you myself."

He chuckled and took her hand, leading her to the huge beast. He gave her a leg up, and then leapt up behind her.

"Show off...", she muttered.

Severus raised a hand in thanks to the barman.

"Thank you, my friend. We owe you."

And with a muttered command from Severus, they soared into the Albanian night.

~*~*~*~*~

When they finally landed, and Severus helped Hermione down from the Thestral, she immediately fell to her knees and retched. He had the decency to hold back her hair until she was done, and then offer her a handkerchief to wipe her face.

"I told you I didn't like flying," she muttered miserably.

Severus sighed and helped her to her feet. "I'm sorry. I mistook your reluctance for fear, not..." He gestured at the pool of sick, and after curling his lip in distaste, vanished the mess with a flick of his hand.

Hermione huffed. "Yes, well... you should have been there after the flight to London in fifth year."

Severus gave her a withering look, but chose not to comment. Instead, he gave the Thestral a pat and a soft word of thanks, and gestured for her to precede him up the small rise in front of them.

She started up without comment, pausing only to turn and watch when the Thestral launched back into the sky, its mournful wail receding into the dark night.

Hermione fought the urge to shudder.

They walked for a bit, moving around boulders and trees, but always staying close to one another.

The hill was a small one and sloped upwards gradually, so the going was easier than she had anticipated. At the top, there was a large flat area near the base of another large copse of trees. It was securely hidden and provided a break from the wind. Severus pulled the tent from his pocket, tossed the card-sized package on the ground, and flicked his wand to enlarge it to its proper size.

Hermione stared at it for a moment. "Is this...?"

Severus nodded. "The very same. I believe my bloody trousers may still be in here somewhere....," he quipped as he pushed inside the tent.

Hermione snorted in disgust and followed him inside. It was exactly as she remembered: the same sitting area, the same kitchenette and bath, the same bed.

They milled about for a few minutes, settling their things, before Severus stepped outside to place the wards. Hermione popped her head outside once, only to see him midway up the rise, wand in the air, voice low and soft as he cast spell after protective spell.

She sighed and slipped back inside. After the incident with the Manticore, Severus had made damn sure that Hermione knew how to cast truly impervious wards. She knew that nothing...neither man nor beast...would bother them this night, or any night they slept under Severus' shielding spells.

She suddenly found herself wondering about the boys, and whether or not they were safe. They had already been gone for weeks now without word. What if they had run into trouble? What if they hadn't made any progress in finding the Horcruxes? What if they were still completely clueless and empty-handed?

Knowing that she would drive herself crazy if she continue to think about the what-if's, she finished putting her stuff away before finally slipping into bed, adding a warming charm to go with the small fire she had started in the wood-burning stove. A little while later, just as she was drifting off, she felt Severus slide in behind her. He spooned himself against her back and slipped his arm around her waist, nuzzling his nose against her neck.

Hermione shivered. "Finally done?" she asked, twining her fingers with his over her belly.

"Mmm....," he muttered.

She could tell he was exhausted as well. They would probably take up watch in shifts after tonight, but for now they were safe. No one knew where they were except Albus, and he wasn't telling.

With an equally exhausted sigh, Hermione snuggled back against Severus and let sleep take her as well.

~*~*~*~*~

It was in the wee hours of the morning that something woke them. Hermione opened her eyes slowly, only to shriek as she came face to face with the blinding white gaze of a Patronus.

Severus had sat bolt upright when she had screamed, his wand raised, but quickly lowered it when he realized what was happening. He held up a hand to shield his eyes when the light from the figure flared even brighter as it spoke.

"We've found one," the silver stag proclaimed in Harry's voice, pawing at the air with one glowing hoof. "Send coordinates. Need to meet soon." And with that, it reared up and vanished in a wave of quicksilver smoke.

Hermione shared a look with Severus and instinctively reached for his hand.

He gripped hers tightly.

There was no more time for speculation.

It had begun.

~TBC

A/N: Holy hell, an update! The world must be ending. I realized what a complete derp I've been in updating, so everything will be current within the month. Toby, if you're still out there, sorry for the absence. Real life has been killer. Thank you all for sticking with me even though it's literally been a year since this thing was updated. It's not abandoned, and neither are my others, it's just slow in coming. Love you all!