

# The Subtle Nature of Sin

by *BulletTimeScully*

Demons from the past throw two haunted souls together in the most unlikely of circumstances. In order to move forward, they must each confront what they tried to leave behind.

## The Diamond Doll

*Chapter 1 of 7*

Demons from the past throw two haunted souls together in the most unlikely of circumstances. In order to move forward, they must each confront what they tried to leave behind.

Disclaimer: Anything recognizable is not mine.

I'd just like to say that after I post this, I'm going down to my local feed store and buying every critter trap I can find! These darn plot bunnies are everywhere! I've been Imperiused, I know it!!

Thank you Delilah!

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*"Sins become more subtle as you grow older: you commit sins of despair rather than lust."*

*-Piers Paul Read*

The tall, dark-haired man thumped the ashes from his cigarette as he walked slowly up the street. His black boots scuffed softly against the pavement. People who passed nearby gave him a wide berth as they took in his scowling countenance and intimidating air.

He wore a long, black, duster jacket over black leather pants and a dark crimson shirt. The first few buttons of the shirt were undone, revealing a light sprinkling of black chest hair. The hair atop his head was also black. It fell about his shoulders and down his back like ribbons of oil. He had a patrician profile and pale, sallow skin. His complexion, mixed with his dark hair and clothes, made him a rather striking figure.

Approaching his destination, he crossed the street quickly, looking up at the gaudy neon sign as he took another long drag from the cigarette. He hadn't been back here in several weeks. Trying to kick the habit, as it was.

Tonight, however, had brought up memories that he did not care to think about. He had tried to push them out of his mind, but they kept creeping around his defenses, harsh and vivid. So he had given into temptation and made his way back to The Diamond Doll. The place would be called seedy at the best of times. It wasn't a pub or even a nightclub. A back alley strip joint that served alcohol would be a more accurate description, one of London's less than savory gentleman's clubs. Then again, he was a less than savory gentleman. Like calls to like, and other such rubbish.

He could hear the muffled thump of music as he made his way towards the front door, manned by two shaven-headed, tattooed brutes. There was a line at the door as men of every description waited to spend their week's pay on a few glimpses of glittering flesh.

He strode up to the two guards. They simply nodded their recognition and let him pass, much to the disgust of the waiting masses. He ignored their shouts and curses.

As soon as he opened the door, he was assaulted by loud music, cigarette smoke, flashing lights, and the smell of stale sweat. Pushing his way through the crowd, he made his way to the bar. He shrugged out of his long leather duster and folded it over the seat next to him. Running a hand through his hair, he pulled his pack of fags from his trouser pocket.

Sitting carefully on the swiveling stool, he ordered a triple shot of whiskey and a beer. He pushed his money across the bar at the scantily clad bartender, who leered openly at him. Licking her lips, she let her fingers trail over his as she took the proffered cash.

He smirked at her, watching her backside sway beneath her micro mini-skirt as she tucked the cash in her cleavage and headed for the next customer.

A little while later, he had finished two fags, downed his shots, and was nursing his beer when he heard someone call, "Tobias!" He swiveled his barstool around and was met with a resounding clap on his shoulder. "Tobias! Where the hell have you been, mate? We've missed you!"

"Missed my money is more like it," the man known as Tobias growled, even though a grin had formed on his face. He clasped hands with the man in front of him. Jack was his name. He was short, balding, and dressed in a horrible orange leisure suit. He was also the owner of The Diamond Doll.

"Say, old man," Jack whispered conspiratorially, "you've not been here in a while, and I've got a new girl one hot piece of arse that I know you'd like."

Tobias raised a dark eyebrow at the leering man. "Do tell," he said before placing another fag in his mouth and lighting it.

Jack leered even more. "Oh, she's one hot piece! Damn, but does she have the best body. Not a real mouth-runner either, which I know you can appreciate." He thumped Tobias in the ribs with his elbow. "She's our top billing. All the fools outside," he gestured to the front doors and the waiting mob, "they're here to see her. Actually," Jack said, glancing at his rather garish wristwatch, "her act is up next." He pointed towards the raised catwalk at the far end of the room. "Come on," Jack grabbed Tobias by the elbow, "let's get you a front row seat before the mob gets here."

He barely had time to grab his things before Jack dragged him through the throng of people. The eager man took him to the edge of the stage, right across from the tall silver pole that jutted from the middle of the platform. He found himself planted in one of the plush chairs set aside for the 'VIP's the people that spent the most money.

He draped his jacket over the seat next to him and leaned back casually. He heard Jack say in his ear, "I'll have your usual room open after she's done. Head over there and I'll send her in. Trust me... you don't want to miss out." With another rough clap to Tobias' shoulder, Jack disappeared into the crowd, no doubt rounding up other potential money spinners.

He crossed his arms over his chest and took a long pull from his fag. The throng outside had finally been allowed in, and were quickly crowding around the stage, money overflowing in their eager hands. After a moment, the lights dimmed, and Tobias could feel a murmur of excitement roll through the waiting crowd.

With a flourish of lights, the music started.

**"Ho oh oh oh oooh oh oh oh oh... Caught in a bad romance..."**

The woman appeared through the curtains at the back of the stage. She was wearing a long black cloak and a silver demi-mask. Tobias' heart leapt into his throat as visions of his past came crashing back. He had to shake his head and remember where he was... or perhaps where he wasn't. Quickly, he summoned a waitress and ordered two more triple shots of whiskey. 'That ought to get rid of them,' he thought to himself.

He turned his attention back to the woman. She was walking smoothly to the center of the stage, her long cloak flowing behind her.

**"Ho oh oh oh oooh oh oh oh oh... Caught in a bad romance..."**

Her hands appeared through the split in the front of the cloak. One took hold of the pole while the other undid the clasp at her neck. With a flourish, she spun the cloak away from her. Tobias' mouth dropped open as he watched the woman wrap her body around the pole.

**"Rah rah ah ah ahh, rah ma rah ma ma,**

**Gaga oh la laa, want your bad romance..."**

Her body was covered in glitter; there wasn't a part of her that didn't shimmer.

**"I want your ugly, I want your disease,**

**I want your everything as long as it's free..."**

Tobias tilted his head to the side as she squatted next to the pole, rolling her hips against it as she slowly stood back up. She wore the tiniest pair of panties he had ever seen. They were merely a piece of sheer black fabric being held up by two tiny lines of glittering black rhinestones.

She was curvy, there was no doubt about that. That was alright with Tobias; he had always liked his women what few there had been with a bit of flesh about them. Her breasts were full, which was also a plus. Her hair was dark and fell in rivulets down her back. A pair of black stilettos adorned her small feet, and he thought he could make out the outline of a small tattoo on her right ankle. A serpent?

**"I want your love..."**

**Love, love, love, I want your love..."**

She performed another gravity-defying move before spinning to her knees on the stage. She rocked her hips back and forth, running her hand down between the vee of her legs. Her lips were parted, but her face was wholly unreadable beneath the silver mask.

**"I want your drama, the touch of your hand,**

**I want your leather-studded kiss in the sand..."**

She spun quickly to her hands and knees, slinging her hair from side to side. She searched the crowd, and after a moment her gaze locked on him. Tobias thought he saw her mouth gape in surprise, but it passed so quickly he must have imagined it. He watched as she crawled slowly across the floor towards him.

**"I want your love..."**

**Love, love, love, I want your love..."**

Twisting around to sit on her bum at the edge of the stage, she extended one long leg towards him. Her foot came to rest on his chest, and he could feel the sharp point of the black stiletto as it dug into his sternum. Smirking, his hands moved up languidly to caress the soft, shimmering skin of her calf. There was indeed a serpent tattoo on her inner ankle. The creature was twined around a long staff, looking for all the world like the Staff of Asclepius. Somehow he knew it wasn't. It was something else entirely.

He narrowed his eyes at her.

She looked back at him from beneath her mask. It was so dark that he couldn't make out the color of her eyes. Her lips, though, were red and full, the color of fresh blood or cherries.

**"You know that I want you..."**

**And you know that I need you.**

**I want it bad,**

**Your bad romance..."**

Ignoring his suspicions, he grinned lecherously as his hand slid up to her inner thigh. To his great surprise, he was met with a painful static shock. He pulled his hand back quickly, shaking out the offended appendage. He saw her wag her finger at him. 'No, no...' it seemed to say. Her gaze locked with his again slightly longer than necessary before she spun back to the stage.

The rest of her act was just as breathtaking as the beginning. Tobias watched as she swayed and danced around the edge of the stage, letting men stuff pounds into the sparkling straps of her g-string. Occasionally, she would take a larger note from them with her mouth, running her hands suggestively over their chests and faces. He smirked as he watched her twist away from their groping hands. She was wily, this one. She got what she wanted and moved on.

There was one thing he did find odd about her. He had always been adept at reading body language, and he quickly noticed that she never looked any of the men in the eye. What unnerved him was that she had looked right at him. Why was he worth her full attention?

Unfortunately, the music ended before he could come to any kind of conclusion. He watched as she gathered any fallen bills and sauntered back through the curtains, followed by a round of raucous applause.

*This should be interesting,* he thought to himself. He grabbed his coat and headed towards the back of the club, hoping that Jack would be good on his promise.

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He pushed the velvet curtains aside and stepped into the relative quietness of the private room. It was furnished with a single couch, an armchair, and a table with a gaudy tasseled lamp that emitted a dim red light. *Fitting,* he thought crudely.

He tossed his duster onto the armchair and pulled another fag from the pocket. He lit it as he sat on the couch, wondering idly when the upholstery had been cleaned last.

He didn't have long to think, because just then his private show walked in. She wasn't wearing the cloak, but she still wore the mask. It shimmered red in the dim light.

"So," she spoke softly, sounding almost disconnected, "I suppose you're Tobias."

"I am." He took another drag, letting his eyes roam over her lithe body.

"Well, 'Tobias,' I'm 'Jane.'" She walked towards him, her hips swaying with each step.

He was drunk, he knew that, but he suddenly had the unsettling feeling that he would do anything she asked of him. She looked at him for a long moment before speaking: "Do you think I'm pretty, Tobias?" she asked innocently, stepping between his splayed knees.

"Yes," he answered quietly, running one hand up the outside of her thigh.

She smiled woodenly and moved to straddle him, pushing him back into the cushions. Reaching out, she took the fag from his fingers and brought it to her own lips. After inhaling deeply, she leaned forward. Her breasts rubbed against his chest as she pressed her lips to his and exhaled the smoke into his mouth. He inhaled, taking a handful of her hair tightly in his fist as he did.

"Mmm," she groaned, rocking her pelvis against his.

His eyes rolled back as he exhaled. It had indeed been too long; he was rock hard already.

'Jane' ground her pelvis against him again. When he groaned, she leaned in and placed slow, open-mouthed kisses along his neck and jaw. Her tongue flicked out as she licked the sweat from his skin. His lips parted as his breath came faster, and his hands moved to grip her hips as she continued to grind against him languidly.

He felt her smile against the skin of neck. Her mouth moved up to his ear as one hand found its way to his groin, cupping him firmly. "Do you like that?" she asked, her voice low and husky.

He nodded.

"For fifty pounds, I can make you scream." She ran her tongue along the edge of his ear.

His hands convulsed around her hips. Twisting one hand into her hair again, he turned his face to hers and kissed her roughly. He didn't really care about how she felt; she was a nobody, a tool sent there to pleasure him. His other hand moved to his belt, making quick work of the buckle, as well as the buttons on his leather trousers. He then covered her hand with his own and pressed it harder against him. She pulled back, grinning lasciviously.

His eyes were hooded with his own need. He countered her offer. "Take off the mask and I'll make it £100."

Her grin widened and she licked her lips. "You drive a hard bargain... but I think I can manage." She stepped back from him and knelt between his legs. Her small hands rubbed circles on the smooth fabric covering his inner thighs. He leaned his head back and allowed her to take over. It was what he was paying for, after all. He felt her breasts rub against his hardness as her hands moved to unbutton his shirt. Her lips were warm and soft against the flesh of his stomach.

Again came the strange compulsion that he would do anything she asked, just to feel her lips and hands on his body...

Any coherent thoughts were swept away as he felt her hand reach into his trousers and close around his length. He raised his head so he could see her as she pulled him free. He panted with need as she started pumping him slowly in her small fist. She looked up at him, and he almost came right then and there as her pink tongue darted out, swiping the small bead of liquid from the tip of his cock.

He was barely able to speak, "The mask..." before she licked at him again.

"Don't worry, I haven't forgotten." She pulled herself up straight and leaned into him. His cock was pressed against the warm skin of her breasts, and then her stomach, as she licked a line up his belly to his neck. She gave him a light nip on his earlobe before pulling back. "You do it," she whispered, and bowed her head so he could reach the white ribbon that held the mask in place.

His eyes clouded with lust, the man known as Tobias reached towards the woman who called herself 'Jane.' He took the edge of her glittering silver mask between the fingers of one hand, while with the other he reached back and pulled the ribbon loose. He pulled it up and away, careful not to snag it in her long brown hair, and tossed it next to them on the sofa.

When she finally turned her uncovered face up towards him, he instantly knew that his life had just taken a horrible turn for the worse, if that were even possible.

Staring back at him, her eyes clouded with something he couldn't place, not lust... something darker was a face that he had not seen in ten perhaps even fifteen years.

Hermione Granger.

~TBC

A/N: Well? What do you think? Let me know!

The Staff of Asclepius is an ancient symbol of the medical profession: a single serpent wrapped around a wooden staff.

The song lyrics represented by the bold type are from *Bad Romance* By Lady Gaga.

## The Consequences of Avoiding the Inevitable

*Chapter 2 of 7*

The beginning...

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

I'd just like to say that I'm ecstatic about the hits and reviews my little story has gotten in the first few hours! Those of you that responded I can't thank you enough! Those of you who read but didn't review... I love you all too! I hope this chapter meets your expectations.

Thanks, Delilah, for the unending support and encouragement!

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*"There will come a time when you believe everything is finished. That will be the beginning."*

-Louis L'Amour

Staring back at him, her eyes clouded with something he couldn't place not lust... something darker was a face that he had not seen in ten perhaps even fifteen years.

Hermione Granger.

He would know her if it had been fifty years instead of a mere decade or so.

His reaction was instant and involuntary. He jerked upright and tucked himself back into his pants in a flurry of hands and buttons. "What's wrong, Tobias? Not going soft on me are you?" he heard her say in that decadent, husky voice. She started to crawl back into his lap, but he shoved her aside roughly. He shot from the couch and quickly retrieved his duster, preparing to leave. He wanted to put her and everything she represented far behind him.

As his hand was reaching for the curtains, he was once again overwhelmed with a helpless compulsion towards the woman lying on the floor. He bowed his head. He would not allow this to take control of him! Pushing violently through the curtains, he stormed towards the exit. He didn't get far. He had taken less than five steps when he was pulled up short, unable to move forward. It was like trying to walk through a brick wall.

*Fucking shite!* he swore to himself. He tried several more times to make it to the door, but his attempts were unsuccessful. A few people had even turned to stare at his odd behavior: one step forward, two steps back, as it were. He ground his teeth together in frustration before spinning around and storming back into the private room.

Hermione was still sitting where she had fallen, holding herself up with both arms. He could see that she was breathing rapidly. Her bare legs were stretched out to the side, and her head was bowed. Her long wavy hair hung nearly to the floor as it obscured her face.

She looked... helpless defeated.

It was pathetic and it made him furious.

He walked slowly to her side and looked down at her with a disgusted sneer. When he spoke, his tone was soft, but there was something else: an edge cold, hard, and merciless. "How the mighty have fallen. Wouldn't you agree... Miss Granger?"

She didn't move, but he saw a shudder pass through her nearly nude form.

"Well?" he continued, becoming angrier with each passing second. When she didn't answer, he sighed heavily. "I knew this day would come... no matter how hard I fought against it." He knelt on one knee and leaned over to speak into her ear. His voice was cold, bitter and scathing. "I knew *knew* that our paths would meet again, despite my best efforts to the contrary."

He sneered at her once more as he let his eyes roam over her body. "What does it matter... my life has never been truly mine. Why should things have changed?" He pressed his fist to his forehead. There was a moment's pause before he spat: "Fifteen years?! Fifteen *fucking* years and it happens now?!"

Still she remained motionless, her heavy breathing the only indication that she was even alive. His rage had come to the boiling point. "Look at me, girl!" he spat, spittle flying from his mouth. When she was still unresponsive he snatched her by the hair. "I said *'look... at... me!'*"

Hermione let out a small whimper of pain as she came to her knees under the strength of his hold. Her eyes rolled back to meet his as he pulled her head back harshly. His rage tempered as his blood went cold. Her face was inches from his, and only now did he realize the full scope of the situation. The eyes he remembered soft brown, dotted with flecks of gold, full of compassion and intelligence were empty. Her gaze was as emotionless as that of a porcelain doll.

He stood, pulling her by her hair. "Get up!" he growled.

She complied, tripping over her own feet and falling against him. He heard her laugh deep in her throat just before she slid her arms around his neck and kissed him. Her mouth was warm and soft against his his grip on her hair lessened. She groaned against him as her hands found their way underneath his open shirt, swirling through the dark hair on his chest before encircling his waist. He reinforced his grip on her hair as she slid her nails softly up his spine. He pulled her lips harshly from his, but not before her nails raked sharply down his back - she thrust against him again.

God, she felt so fucking good!

Again came her emotionless, throaty chuckle, "Is that how you like it? Rough?" She nipped his earlobe. A hand crept down his stomach and into his partially buttoned trousers. "Dirty?"

He gasped as her hand closed around him. He felt himself harden again. For one languid, desperate moment he debated letting her continue. An instant later he cursed himself for being so weak-minded.

Drawing upon all his willpower, he took her roughly by the arms and pushed her back down on the couch. She giggled. "Is it my turn?" And spread her legs invitingly. She licked her lips as she stared at him with those eerie, blank eyes. Furious beyond description, the man everyone knew as Tobias looked upon the girl no, woman before him and cursed himself inwardly as he redid his trousers.

After so many fucking years...

"God dammit!" he growled to himself as he finished with his buckle.

He threw his jacket back across the chair and paced the room several times. He mumbled to himself, gesturing violently. Finally he stopped, clasping at his hair as if struggling with some life-altering decision.

"Fuck it!" he said with finality. Turning slowly, he narrowed his eyes at the woman lying spread-eagle on the couch. Her lower lip was twisted between her teeth as she beckoned to him with a manicured index finger. He had to look away. He must not think of her like that! It was... *is...* forbidden. Closing his eyes, he steadied his resolve. There was a pregnant pause as he held his breath. He let it out quickly as he waved one long-fingered hand sharply in Hermione's direction. His voice was laced with contempt as he softly spoke two words he had not used for more than a decade: "*Finite Incantatum!*"

With a violent jolt that arched her back and made every muscle in her body rigid as steel, Hermione Granger was released from the confines of the Imperius Curse. He turned back to her and watched as her eyes slowly bled back to normal. When she finally looked up, the blood drained from her face as she found herself once again staring into the cold, black eyes of the last man she had ever thought to see again: Severus Snape.

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Hermione Granger was a smart woman. At least she used to be.

She remembered eating dinner alone at her flat. She remembered feeding her cat before she left for work earlier that evening. She remembered ~~driving~~ to work. Most of all, she remembered seeing *him*... sitting in the crowd, staring at her like all the rest. Strangely, she had been overwhelmed with a compulsion to let him know who she was. So, she had shown him her tattoo. He was a smart man, or had been surely he would figure it out.

She shook her head, confused. The *last* thing she remembered was seeing Jack walk towards her as she was securing her earnings from her last performance. Then... nothing.

Until now.

As she slowly came out of the fog, she saw *him* again, staring down at her. His face was different than it had been earlier. Where before it had held a bit of softness longing even it now held a cold loathing a hatred so deep that his eyes glittered with the heat of it.

She raised her chin, unashamed. "Professor," she greeted.

He narrowed his eyes at her as he began buttoning his shirt. "I think *Hermione*, that since you were about to *suck my dick*, as it were... that we can do away with the pleasantries." He finished with his shirt and grabbed his duster. Reaching down, he hauled her up from the couch by her upper arm. "We're leaving," he said with finality.

"What?!" she shrieked as she snatched her arm away.

"Are you deaf as well as daft? I said *'we're leaving!'*" He grabbed her again and dragged her through the velvet curtains into the chaos of the club. Nothing stopped him this time. He knew exactly the reason, as she even now struggled against him. His grip was like iron, and her efforts did nothing but bruise her skin.

"Let go, you asshole!" Hermione screamed at him. She tried to pry his fingers loose with her free hand.

She was causing quite a commotion, and people were starting to stare. Severus really couldn't give a rat's arse. He continued to drag Hermione *nude* Hermione roughly towards the exit. He could see two big brutes starting to slowly move in on them as he drew closer to his destination. He still couldn't give a fuck. What were they going to do? Forcibly remove him? He snorted at the absurdity of it all.

"My things, Professor! I can't go about in public like this!"

He stopped short as she almost broke away. He reaffirmed his grip and snatched her closer. "It's what you get paid for, is it not?"

He barely had time to register the look on her face before her palm met his cheek. The resounding 'crack' had several more heads turning their way.

"*Fuck you!*" she snarled, pointed a manicured finger underneath his nose.

He closed his eyes as he let the pain from her slap subside. When he turned back to her, she was seething with a rage that equaled his own. He stepped closer. In a low voice, he whispered so only she could hear: "If you *ever*... hit me again... you will regret it."

This only served to make her angrier. "Will I? What will you do...*sir*? Punch me? Slap me? ...*Rape* me?" This caught his attention. The fucking bitch! Did she actually think... ?

"If I remember correctly," he sneered, "it was *you* who offered yourself to *me*, not the other way around."

"I was obviously forced! It *would* have been rape!" she screamed in his face.

He simply glowered at her.

"Let me go," she said. Her naked breasts heaved against him.

"I think not. We have much to..." he let her see him leer at her chest, "discuss, you and I."

"I *know* that, you fucking bastard, but if you think I'm leaving here without my things or my pay you're *rénsane*. Besides, now that you've *found* me so to speak I doubt either of us will be able to get very far without the other." Her eyes searched his. She really did need to get her money. She was broke. She needed it to get through the week. When he didn't say anything, only continued to glare at her, she sighed wearily. "Please..." she whispered desperately.

He glared at her for another pregnant moment before releasing her. She rubbed her arm where pale bruises were already starting to form. "Thank you," she bit out. She turned and started away. "Wait for me at the side entrance. Then we can go someplace and talk," she called back over her shoulder.

Severus watched her go, her skin shimmering in the lights of the club, and cursed inwardly. Things were quickly getting complicated.

He pulled another fag from his pocket before moving towards the exit. As he took his first drag, he spotted the two henchmen that had been waiting to kick his arse just moments earlier. They narrowed their beady eyes at him, committing his face to memory in case of any future encounters. He raised an eyebrow at them and gave them the finger before sweeping out into the night in a cloud of cigarette smoke, his black duster billowing behind him.

As he headed to meet Hermione, the only thought running through his mind was that his life had just gone tits up literally. The question was... what was he going to do about it?

~TBC

A/N: Once again, thanks so much for reading! Let me know what you think!

## We Have A Problem

*Chapter 3 of 7*

Severus and Hermione have a little chat...

"Do not mistake consequence for fate."

-Kirstin Brown

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Severus was sitting on a bench across the road, under a blown streetlamp, when she emerged from the back door of the club. Instead of going to meet her, he stayed where he was and watched her for a moment. She had a well-worn, gray gym bag slung over her left shoulder, and her previously untamed locks were now pulled back into a loose ponytail. She wore a black track suit and a pair of white trainers that had both seen better days. Even from across the street, he could still see the faint shimmer of glitter on her eyelids and cheekbones. Absently, he brushed at the front of his shirt, where some of the shining accessory still lingered from earlier.

He saw her look around, slowly scanning the street. Finally, her eyes locked on the dark patch of sidewalk where he sat. He thought he saw a look of relief cross her face for a moment. It passed too quickly for him to be certain. Instead, she looked troubled as she walked towards him.

"Still lurking in the dark, I see," she said irritably as she stepped lightly onto the curb.

"Still blatantly stating the obvious, I see," he shot back as he flicked his cigarette into the gutter.

She glared at him, but kept her mouth shut. This was going to be hard enough as it was. "So," she began, "your place or mine?"

He crossed his arms and looked up at her from beneath his raised brow. "I beg your pardon?"

Heaving a weary sigh, she crossed her arms, mirroring him. "I said, 'your place or mine?' Meaning, are we going to your flat to discuss this..." she waved a hand vaguely through the air, "whatever it is... or to mine?"

He chuckled darkly at her ire.

She watched him impatiently, tapping her foot as he contemplated for a moment. "As you wish," he said finally.

In a swirl of black trench coat, he stood gracefully and motioned for her to lead the way. She rolled her eyes as she turned and started walking quickly up the poorly lit street. Severus followed behind, stuffing his hands deep into the pockets of his coat. A scowl crept onto his face this was definitely on his list of **Things I Never Want To Do**. He had avoided it and her for fifteen long years. He had known that eventually the past would catch up with him *with* them.

As they walked, Severus thought back over the last several months almost an entire year, actually and the events that had lead up to this evening. Things were now starting to fall into place. He had been content at his small if somewhat shabby home in Spinner's End. A contract with a Muggle pharmaceuticals company kept him well-financed, and there were really no neighbors to speak of, so he was left in relative peace and quiet. Then one day, he suddenly started having this nagging feeling that he needed a fresh start, a new place to call home. He brushed it aside as a midlife crisis he was almost 53 years old and pushed it to the back of his mind. It stayed there, forgotten, for about a week.

Then, one day he was walking down the hallway on the second floor and suddenly found himself six inches shorter his foot had fallen through a weak spot in the floorboards. He had cursed the derelict house as he carefully pulled his booted foot from the gaping hole. He would patch it up later. He then went downstairs to make a pot of tea, but strangely enough, the range had stopped working. He had choked it up to old age the damn thing was a relic from the seventies, after all and had settled for a glass of wine instead.

That would have been the last of it, except later that night he had turned on the shower, and had nearly been covered in foul-smelling, mud-colored water. He nearly broke his neck as he leapt away from the stinking stream.

So, unable to cook or bathe, he had called a contractor, who came by at the break of dawn the next morning and conducted a thorough inspection of the house. Four long hours and one throbbing migraine later, Severus was sitting in his living room with a huge tumbler of whiskey, holding a contractors inspection bill, plus the estimates for all the repairs his home needed. He couldn't bear to look at the huge figure again all the zeros made his head throb even harder. Tossing back the rest of his drink, he threw the estimates into the fireplace and snatched his jacket from the back of the couch. Fuck it he had never liked this neighborhood anyway.

He was brought back to the here and now when he caught a whiff of Hermione's perfume lavender, with a hint of vanilla as the early fall breeze blew gently against his

face. Her long ponytail bobbed in the evening gloom as she walked. Despite the circumstances, Severus could not help but watch her bottom appreciatively as it swayed beneath the cotton of her black track suit. He may have been on the darker side of fifty, but he was not dead. Not yet. Still... the night was young. *If the current situation is any indicator of things to come*, he thought snidely, *perhaps I should compose an epitaph*.

They continued to walk in silence, the only sound that of their shoes scraping the sidewalk. About a block from the club, Hermione abruptly stepped off the curb and crossed back to the other side of the street. She walked quickly into a nearly vacant lot that took up the entire corner of the street. It was surrounded by a decrepit chain-link fence which sagged in more places than not. Weeds grew up through the bottom, as well as through cracks in the pitted and broken asphalt.

Severus looked around with disdain. His lip curled in disgust as he watched an emaciated dog rummage through a pile of trash at the corner of the lot. Police sirens whirled in the distance as he heard Hermione's voice. "Professor," she called expectantly.

Giving the dog one last disgusted glare, he turned his attention back to his current problem. She was standing next to a battered looking, non-descript, tan sedan. Severus raised his eyebrows at her. She just glared at him as she propped her elbow on top of the open driver's side door. "Unless you want to walk the fifteen miles to my flat, I suggest you get in." With that, she got in the car and slammed the door. The engine sprang to life with a squeal, and a small puff of smoke shot from the tailpipe.

When she put the car in reverse, he decided he should probably get in. What he couldn't decide on, as he opened the passenger side door and sat down, was whether or not he should tell her he lived only two blocks away.

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In the end, Severus finally conceded to telling her that he lived just down the street. Mostly, it was to save himself the torture of her company for an extra fourteen and a half miles. Not to mention the fact that he would either have to ask her to take him home later that night, or walk. Neither option sat well with him.

So it was that they were now standing at the door to his flat. Hermione leaned against the wall, looking fairly uncomfortable as he pushed the key into the lock and opened the door. With a mock bow and a sweep of his arm, he gestured for her to enter first.

Once inside, he shut the door behind them with a slam. She started slightly and turned to glare at him, but he was already shrugging out of his coat at the other end of the room. She watched him toss the black duster over the back of a leather armchair situated beneath a large picture window before he moved off to one of the adjacent rooms. The kitchen, she assumed.

A few moments later, the clink of cups and dishes confirmed her assumptions. Shaking her head at the absurdness of it all, she turned her attention back to the room she was standing in. There was a decent sized fire place on the wall facing the street. It was flanked on either side by two floor to ceiling windows, each covered in long black drapes. A matching sectional sofa sat in front of the fireplace, decorated here and there with pillows in muted earth tones. A small round table sat in the 'U' of the sofa. Hermione noticed several magazines: *Science Weekly*; *Chemistry Today*; and *National Geographic*. The corners of her mouth lifted in a small smile when she noticed the wire rimmed eyeglasses sitting atop one of the latest issues. *Severus Snape wears reading glasses. How utterly... normal*, she thought with a laugh.

She continued her perusal of his flat. It was sparsely decorated, but tastefully so. The back wall of the room contained two windows that mirrored those at the front, with a large mahogany desk situated between the two. The desk was littered with papers, documents, and manila folders. Surprisingly enough, a flat screen computer monitor sat to one side of the desk, its bottom edge lined with yellow sticky notes. As Hermione came closer, she could see that the sticky notes were covered in thin, spiky handwriting *his* handwriting.

On the wall above the desk hung a painting: *The Lady of Shallot*. Hermione found herself thinking that she was the antithesis of the fictional woman in the portrait, who had died for her love of the knight Lancelot. Hermione huffed. She knew that love was overrated it only brought heartache and pain.

Sighing, she turned away from the portrait, back towards the front of the room. Her attention was drawn to the wall directly across from the entrance. Her mouth dropped open, and her feet moved of their own accord as she greedily eyed the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. They sagged in the middle, literally overflowing under the weight of hundreds of pounds of paper and binding. She moved closer and ran her hands reverently over the leather and canvas spines, ticking off the gilded names in her head: Shakespeare; Hemingway; Austen; Bronte; Tolstoy; Machiavelli... just to name a few. She was seconds from pressing her nose to the bindings and inhaling the intoxicating scent when she heard Severus' voice:

"Find anything interesting?"

Hermione did not take her hand from the shelf as she turned to look at him. She smiled sadly. "Yes, actually you have a marvelous collection, Professor." She turned her face back to the books, running her hand reverently over a leather-bound copy of *The Divine Comedy*.

An uncomfortable silence followed. After watching her for a moment and feeling somewhat confused as to her behavior Severus cleared his throat. "If you are quite done manhandling my possessions, I suggest we get on with our... discussion." He pushed away from the doorframe and walked to the fireplace. He knelt down and in only a few minutes, he had a small, cozy fire going. It was just enough to push out the chill of early fall, but not so much as to make it uncomfortable.

He stood and dusted his hands off before turning back to her. She was still looking around, ringing her hands and chewing on her lower lip, unsure of what she should do next. "You may sit you know. I'm not going to make you stand all night." He gestured at the sofa. She nodded a curt thank you and chose an end nearest the fire. Just then, Hermione heard the whistle of a kettle. "Pardon me for a moment," Severus said before walking off towards the kitchen.

Hermione sighed and laid her head against the back of the sofa. She was exhausted. She looked at her watch it was midnight. "Wonderful," she said with sigh. She was really not in the mood to discuss... things... with this man, but it seemed that she really had no choice. Fate had finally caught up with them, after they had both run from it for so long. She snorted. Perhaps 'run from' was not the proper description. It was more like 'denied the very existence of.' She huffed again. "Like hell..."

The fire popped and she jumped. "Fuck," she cursed softly, sitting forward and putting her head in her hands. Her eyes fell closed as she massaged her temples she was beginning to get a headache. All she wanted to do was go home, take a scalding hot shower and curl up in bed with Cheshire, her cat. She laughed darkly. How long had it been since she had actually done something she wanted to do? A couple of years at least ever since she had moved into her current flat. Hard times came to everyone, but for Hermione they had become permanent house guests, and did not seem to be packing their bags any time soon.

She did not have time to linger on thoughts of all her misfortunes, because just then Severus returned with a tray of tea and scones. Her elbows were propped on her knees, and she raised her aching head as her hands slid down to cover her mouth, hiding a frown. She did not know if she could do this. Hermione was thirty-three years old. She had not seen Severus Snape since she was eighteen just a child.

She watched as he sat the tray down on the table. His long, pale fingers wrapped around the plain white teapot. He lifted it and poured a thin stream of steaming brown liquid into both of the white teacups sitting next to it. He sat the pot down and gripped one of the cups by its rim with the tips of his fingers, before holding it gracefully out towards her. She looked at it for a moment before accepting it with a tight smile.

As he sat down and picked up his own cup, Hermione took a tentative sip of the dark brown liquid. It was good very good actually. Her eyes closed as she let the warmth of the cup take the chill from her hands. The bitter taste of the tea mixed with the sweet tang of honey was wonderfully relaxing, and she found herself slightly less anxious about the coming conversation.

She took another sip before chancing a glance at Severus. He was sitting back in the cushions, his left arm across the back of the sofa, the right one holding his own cup to his lips. His right leg was propped on his left, ankle over knee, and he was staring straight ahead. All she could see of his profile was the tip of his long nose. It was strangely comforting.

Aside from the clothes which were a shock in and of themselves and his spacious flat, the dour man from her youth had not changed much. His countenance was just as

scowling as she remembered; he was just as sour and mean; his temper was just as hot, and his tongue was just as sharp and sarcastic as in her school days.

There were a few things that Hermione noticed about him that *were* different. His hair for one: she remembered it being about shoulder length when she was in school. Now however, it fell down between his shoulder blades. It was still as black as pitch, with not a gray hair in sight, but instead of looking greasy and lanky, she could tell that it was most likely very soft and baby fine.

He was still thin and pale, but not to the extent she remembered. He seemed to have filled in a bit over the years, in a healthy way.

"See anything interesting?" he spoke quietly from behind his dark curtain of hair.

She paused for a moment, a deer caught in the headlights, before sitting her cup down on the table. "I was just thinking about how little you've changed since I was in school."

His cup followed hers onto the table before he turned to face her. "Well, Hermione," he began, "I can hardly say the same for you." He raised an eyebrow as he let his eyes roam over her.

"Yes, well, we aren't all so fortunate, *Severus*." He had fired her temper again. Good. He liked a little fight in a woman. It made things interesting. Although, if he were honest, the situation really did not require any assistance it was complex enough without his help.

A small smirk crept up the corners of his mouth. "So... shall we avoid the inevitable for the rest of the night, or shall we 'get down to it,' as they say?"

She glanced at her watch again. "Let's get this over with so I can leave. I have to be at work at seven."

He raised an eyebrow. "Were you not just *at* work?"

An angry huff exited her nose. "Yes, I was. I have to be at *my* *ther* job at seven."

His other eyebrow joined the first. "I see," was all he said.

"Do you?" she said, her voice laced with sarcasm. "Because I really don't think you have a fucking clue." She stood then, pacing angrily in front of the fireplace. Severus watched her. His index finger rubbed anxiously at his bottom lip, but he said nothing.

Finally, she stopped, and her head fell into her hands. For a few moments, she stood there silently, but then that silence was interrupted by a heavy sigh... and a defeated sob. Tears were streaming down her face when she looked up. Severus' brow came together in confusion.

"For fifteen years," she began, swiping angrily at the moisture rolling down her face, "I've dealt with... *this!*" She gestured between the two of them. "Every night in my dreams my nightmares *I... see... you!*" She pointed a finger angrily at him.

His lips parted in genuine surprise.

She slowly continued her story. "I see your face... your eyes..." Her voice trailed off, and for a moment she simply stood motionless, staring into the glittering pools of liquid obsidian that had haunted her for almost half her life. She looked away when she spoke again. "But most of all I see your hands *my* hands covered in your blood. So much blood..." Her eyes went out of focus as she trailed off once more.

Involuntarily, Severus' hand moved to the twin scars on his neck. Slowly, he stood and walked towards her. She seemed not to notice him as he came to stand beside her. It was not until he took her by the elbow that she realized he had even moved.

"Look," he commanded softly. She turned her tear swollen face up to his, her brow furrowed in confusion. His dark eyes flashed, but not with anger or hatred. No, it was something deeper than that. When she didn't move, he swiftly reached out and took her hand. "*Look*," he commanded again, in the stern voice she remembered from her childhood. Slowly, he brought her hand to his neck. When her knuckles brushed his jaw, he released her. Unsure of what to do next, she pulled away slightly, looking at him for guidance.

Severus' lips were pressed tightly together as he tilted his head to the side. He turned his head away and his eyes closed as he exposed the pale line of his neck. Gathering her courage, Hermione slowly reached back towards him. A lock of his dark hair had fallen forward, obscuring her view, so she brushed it back behind the open collar of his shirt. The dark strands were soft and very fine, just as she had imagined.

Pushing thoughts of his hair aside, she turned back to his neck. There it was, standing out in jagged white lines, even against the paleness of his skin: Nagini's mark. Slowly, ever so slowly, she reached out and ran her fingers lightly over the raised skin of the scar that bound the two of them.

Severus was warm, but Hermione saw goosebumps rise on his heated skin at her touch. She could feel the heavy pulse of his life's blood as it coursed beneath his skin. That same blood had once covered her hands as it pumped from his body onto the floor of a derelict building in Scotland, taking with it any second chance he may have had... any hopes or dreams.

She traced the glistening white lines once more before letting her hand slip down over his collarbone. She felt the coarse hair on his chest brush against her fingertips as her hand fell back to her side.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, still staring at his neck.

Looking at her once more, he adjusted his collar. "Do not be."

"Why?"

He stared at her for a moment. "Because *I'm* not."

Again, she was confused. He stepped past her, returning to his place on the sofa. Sitting heavily, he leaned forward, running his hands through his hair before clasping them in front of him, elbows on his knees. "When I realized," he began softly, looking up at her, "that the Dark Lord knew the Elder Wand would never work for him, I knew my life was forfeit I knew it was the end."

She stood motionless.

He sighed. "Please sit. I'd rather not have you hovering over me while I spill my soul, as it were." She sat, never taking her eyes from him.

His next words were nearly inaudible as he cast his gaze to the floor: "I almost welcomed it... death."

Hermione's breath hitched in her throat, and she had to cover her mouth with a hand to hold in a fresh sob.

"*Almost*," he emphasized, lifting his head to gaze at her again.

"Almost?"



"Yes. For a moment, I felt... relieved... that I wouldn't have to worry anymore about anything. I welcomed the coming oblivion with open arms. Then a thought crossed my mind: I had committed almost my entire life to protecting this... *boy*... and now that it came to the final hour, I'd never know whether or not my efforts would bear fruit, so to speak."

She dipped her head into her hands again.

"That was about the time that you and your little rabble showed up," he said. His voice was soft the condescending tone she had expected was not there.

Her voice was muffled from between her hands: "And then you gave Harry your memories." She looked up at him again, and a single tear slid down her cheek. "And I saved your life."

He nodded.

She returned the nod. "And now... since we've avoided speaking of it let alone doing anything about it for over a decade, it has called itself into play."

"Yes."

"Fuck!" she cursed, slamming her palms against her legs.

"Indeed," was his only reply.

"That's all you have to say?" Her breath came in ragged gasps as she raised an accusing finger at him again. "I have to live the rest of my life with your image in my head! I... *feel* you... every single minute of every single day! I have to drug myself to sleep, because if I don't I wake up every single night from nightmares so vivid that I cannot sleep for fear of them!"

She lowered her shaking hand back to her lap. She waited on the string of harsh words and cruel chastisements. It never came.

Instead, Severus broke eye contact and lowered his head. He ran his hands through his dark hair again before slowly beginning to speak. "Hermione... it is not without... difficulty... that I am telling you this. It is not in my nature to admit my shortcomings. You literally held my fate in your hands all those years ago. You chose to give me life, even after nearly seven years of my prejudice and hatred. When that night was over, and I had recovered enough of my senses to realize what had actually happened, I became... *desperate*... for a second chance. A second chance at...something...*anything*."

"Severus, I"

He did not let her finish. "What happened between us was a mistake, Hermione. I know that in my... desperation... I took something very precious from you. I cannot give it back, no matter how much I may wish it so. It never should have happened, and I live with that fact every single day of my life."

His words sobered her a bit. "Make no mistake, Severus. You took nothing from me that wasn't willingly given. I agree that what occurred between the two of us the night you came home from St. Mungo's should never have happened, but that doesn't change the fact that it did! No matter how precious that part of me was, nothing is more precious than *life*, Severus. I gave you that! I gave you that when no one else would! You owe me a life debt!"

"Yes."

"Stop doing that! Must you be so insufferable?!" She shoved up from the couch, her patience at its end. "I've got to go. It's a long drive back, and I'm exhausted. Thank you for the tea and for... being honest."

She was making her way to the door when he grabbed her by the arm, spinning her around to face him. "Let go!" she growled as she tried to pull her arm from his grasp.

He ignored her and tightened his grip. "It's not going to go away, Hermione. Like you said, no matter what happened between us all those years ago, I still owe you. Magic does not forget... no matter how hard we may try to."

"I don't want or need your help! Or anyone's!" She snatched her arm again, and this time he let her go. "I said I would talk to you and we talked. I *cannot*... deal with this right now. I'll come by next week sometime." She made it to the door, but her hand paused on the knob. She spoke softly, her head bowed. "We've waited fifteen years, Severus. What's another day or two?" And she was gone.

Severus stood there staring at the door. Her parting words rang in his ears: another day or two? If he was correct and he knew he was then another day or two would only make things worse, not better. There was also the matter of their little escapade at The Diamond Doll, and the circumstances which brought it about. He would find out what was going on there, that much was certain. As for the current situation, well, he would just have to wait and see.

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He didn't have to wait long. Less than five minutes later, just as he was putting away his tea things, someone knocked on his door. He walked over quickly and looked through the peephole.

He frowned. *What in the world...?*

He stepped into the hall to find Hermione sitting on the floor next to the door, her left hand clasped tightly against her forehead. As he watched, a small trickle of blood made its way from underneath. It ran down the side of her nose and down her cheek to her jaw, where it started dripping onto her chest.

She looked up at him, and he could see the desperation and fear shining in her soft brown eyes. "We have a problem."

He sighed and ran a hand over his face. God, he hated being right all the time.

~TBC

A/N: Intrigued? I certainly hope so! Things *are* getting a bit complicated, aren't they?

Thanks for the R&R! You make my day and I love you all!

## Regret and Repentance

A bit more of the past is cleared up...

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

Thank you, DelilahKelley, for all your help!

~\*~\*~\*~

**They painted up your secrets**

**With the lies they told to you**

**And the least they ever gave you**

**Is the most you ever knew**

**And I wonder where these dreams go**

**When the world gets in your way**

**What's the point in all this screaming**

**No one's listening anyway**

**~ Goo Goo Dolls, "Acoustic #3"**

~\*~\*~\*~

*She looked up at him, and he could see the desperation and fear shining in her soft, brown eyes. "We have a problem."*

*He sighed and ran a weary hand over his face. God, he hated being right all the time.*

With an irritated huff, Severus reached down and grabbed Hermione roughly by the upper arm and pulled her to her feet. She grunted in pain. "Stop doing that!" she growled as she tried to snatch her arm away.

His lips thinned in annoyance, but he released her with a shove towards the open door. "Stupid girl..." he growled.

"Hardly..." Hermione muttered indignantly.

"Is that so?" he retorted as he swept past her, heading towards what she had earlier assumed was his kitchen.

"Yes, Severus, it is so. I haven't been a stupid girl in a long time, or have you forgotten?" she spat irritably as she followed behind, still clutching her forehead.

"Could have fooled me," he muttered as they passed through the doorway.

The room was sparse but elegant, just like the rest of the flat. The design was simple: a long counter ran down the wall on both sides, ending at a doorway on the left and a large window on the right. A small breakfast area containing a dark-colored, square table and two matching chairs occupied the far end of the room. A single light hung over the table; its tasteful blue cover lit up as Severus flicked the switch.

To Hermione's immediate right was a stainless steel refrigerator, flanked by a sink and dishwasher of the same color. Under the counter to her left was a large wine rack, filled to the brim with expensive-looking, long-necked bottles. On the wall above the counters hung long rows of glass-fronted cabinets the section directly above the wine rack held innumerable bottles of liquor, only a few of which Hermione recognized. Pristine crystal glasses sat in the adjoining section, waiting to be filled with something dark and expensive. Hanging underneath the cabinet were a dozen more glasses of varying shapes and sizes: long, fine-stemmed wine glasses; short, fat-stemmed brandy snifters; she even spied the triangular top of a martini glass.

Hermione snorted at the ludicrous mental image of Severus Snape leaning against a casino bar, dressed to the nines in coat and tails, and sipping a vodka martini, shaken, not stirred.

"Something funny?" she heard him ask.

His condescending tone brought her back to reality, and she snapped out, "No!" a little more harshly than she intended.

This time it was Severus who snorted in amusement. He tipped his head towards the table at the back of the room. "Sit," he commanded harshly.

She ignored him and continued to stand in the doorway, her hand still clasped to her bleeding forehead. Her eyes narrowed menacingly. "You truly are a bastard, aren't you?"

Severus simply raised an eyebrow.

Hermione let out an exasperated breath. "After all this time... While I admit you aren't the anal retentive hermit that I remember aside from the expensive flat and the expensive clothes you're still the same mean, sarcastic, ill-tempered, git of a man from my school days."

"You seem surprised," he said casually.

She stared at him for a moment. "Yes, I am actually..." Her gaze drifted to the floor, and her voice was barely audible as she continued, "Because I once knew the man underneath."

Severus snorted and leaned back against the counter, unconsciously crossing his arms over his chest.

Hermione looked back up and took a cautious step towards him. Her eyes filled with what Severus could only describe as longing pleaded with him as she asked, "Where is he, Severus?"

He turned his face away away from the questions shimmering in her eyes, away from the long-buried hurt and sorrow that he saw in their warm, brown depths. Even after all these years, it still frightened him to his very core that simply looking into her eyes could affect him so. It made him feel... angry.

Weak.

Vulnerable.

Alive.

His thoughts were interrupted when she spoke again. This time it was her voice that pleaded with him. "Where is the man who became my... my friend all those years ago?"

Severus took a deep breath and let it out slowly, still avoiding her gaze. "That man is dead."

She took another step towards him, the longing in her voice changing to anger as she gestured wildly with her free hand. "I don't believe that! For God's sake, Severus, I saw him I fucking *talked* to him... poured my heart out to him not fifteen minutes ago!!"

Severus felt his anger flare up. How dare she come into his home, invade his privacy, and scream at him in such a manner!

Before he knew what he was doing, he shoved away from the counter fast enough that it caused Hermione to physically flinch. Her legs moved of their own accord, desperately backing her away from the furious man storming towards her. She was brought up short by the doorjamb, and she cried out as her spine twinged painfully at the sudden hard contact. Her eyes widened as Severus rapidly closed the distance between them, slamming his fists on either side of her head as he leaned in. He was so close that she could smell the lingering scent of tea on his breath. He spoke slowly, a trace of malice lining each word. "Do *not* presume to know me, *girl*. You know nothing about me..." He raised one long finger and jabbed it angrily in her face. "...*nothing*!" he finished before pushing himself upright and turning away. Hermione stood frozen as she watched him run his hands swiftly through his hair, his long fingers brushing the dark locks angrily from his face.

A bit shaken by the suddenness of his outburst, Hermione took a deep, calming breath and let it out slowly. She was not really frightened by him she had seen far worse in her time but she knew that she was treading on dangerous ground. The man was most definitely volatile, if not truly violent.

Even with the knowledge that the line she was walking was as fragile as gossamer, capable of disappearing at any moment, it took all the willpower she possessed to hide the anger and resentment that pulsed just below the surface of her skin. She wanted nothing more than to lash out, to scream and throw things, to pummel his stubborn head in with her fists, but she knew it would only make things exponentially worse. Now that she was here, there were things that she wanted to know *needed* to know and she would do whatever it took to get those answers.

When she spoke, her tone was soft and complacent, belaying the icy fury boiling underneath. "May I ask you something?" When he didn't reply and simply stood in the middle of the kitchen, his head bowed into his hands, she took that as a yes. "How is it that your life is so... well, almost *normal*, when my life is complete shite? How are you the practically the exact same person when I can't even recognize myself?"

He gave a short, harsh bark of laughter as he lifted his head and peered at her over his shoulder. "Like I said... you don't know *anything* about me. My life has never been and never will be normal, Hermione. I am simply living with the consequences of the choices I have made."

"Is that so?"

"Yes... it is."

"So, does that mean that my situation is also entirely my fault? That I choose to do what I do?!"

He sighed and moved to lean against the counter once more. "It is your life, is it not? Who else is there to blame?"

A look of utter bewilderment passed over her face. "How about the whole of fucking society?! What am I going to do out here... in this world? I have no real education, no references or credentials... none that count out here at least. I had no other option, Severus, not if I wanted to survive."

"There are other places of employment."

"Don't you think I tried that? I worked at a big bookseller in London for almost *five years*, making minimum wage and barely scraping by. I was hoping to work my way up to management some day, but out of the blue I was fired and replaced by someone prettier and perkier than me."

Severus simply glared at the floor.

"After that, I suppose being a waitress in a shitty little diner that caters to drunks and whores was my next life's ambition? I've been there for eight years eight horrible, miserable, God-forsaken years, Severus!"

He shifted his feet uncomfortably.

"I would have swallowed my pride and asked for help by now, but my parents are the only ones who might have given me the time of day... and they're gone. They were killed in a fucking car crash before I could return their memories to them after everything was finally over. A car crash! They never even knew they had a daughter..." Hermione stared off into space, her face contorted in anguish.

There was a pregnant pause, the only sound the humming of the refrigerator in the corner. When Severus spoke, there was no sneer in his voice. "I am... sorry for your loss."

She laughed bitterly. "Are you?"

He looked up sharply. "Yes. I do know what it is like to lose those you care about. However, unlike you, I had no friends in which to seek comfort."

Another bitter laugh. "My *friends* have been gone for years, Severus. They abandoned me after I told them about *you*." She looked at him as she said the last word.

A shadow passed over his face and he quickly returned to studying the floor. "You told... *them*?" he asked as he restlessly shifted his weight again.

"I had to tell someone, didn't I? It was tearing away at me... and who better to understand than my best friends, right?" She finally moved past him to sit at the table before continuing. "Ron," she sighed, leaning back in the chair. "I tried to move forward with him, I truly did. It was always expected that we would be together, even though we had never *really* talked about it. When I told him what happened between you and I... well, even though it was almost a year later, and he knew you were on our side, he never forgave me for *betraying* him, as he so eloquently put it. He was absolutely furious that I had given *you*..." Her voice lowered enough that Severus had to strain to hear her, "...what he thought should have been his."

Fuck.

Severus ran a weary hand over his face again. Never in a million years had he imaged the fallout from one single night of foolish, desperate weakness. If he could go back... he would change things.

Wouldn't he?

The answer that came to his mind was not the one he had sought, despite his earlier confessions *No... no, I wouldn't*.

His train of thought was interrupted as Hermione continued, "The last thing he ever said to me was that I was a whore... and that I deserved you. I haven't seen nor spoken to him in almost thirteen years."

"Then it is his loss." Severus said quietly, almost to himself.

She seemed not to hear him. Her eyes were unfocused, moving absently back and forth as she watched the phantom shapes of her past play out across the ceramic tiles of his kitchen floor. "Harry tried to understand he was always good at that but in the end between Ginny, Ron, and all the others... he chose them over me."

Her eyes narrowed in contemplation. "I don't think he ever really hated me for what happened, but he was in love with Ginny, and she came before me." She shrugged. "I don't blame him. I would probably give up everything I have which isn't much to have someone love me like he loved her. Still does as far as I know." She paused, wiping at a stray tear with her free hand.

Severus' brow furrowed in empathy. He knew first hand what it felt like to want that kind of love... to yearn for it...

She sniffed as she continued: "Anyway... losing Harry was the final straw. If my best friend, the savior of our world, didn't believe in me... who else would? I knew what had happened between you and me would spread like wildfire thanks to Ron's hatred and Molly Weasley's big mouth. I also knew that the facts would be twisted... tainted to make you look like some pervert who took advantage of a young, vulnerable girl... and that I in my naivety let you. Both our reputations would be ruined. You were a hero, Severus, and so was I, but one moment in time, no matter how much I we wanted it, ruined my entire life."

He was still leaning against the cabinet, his long legs stretched out in front of him and his arms still crossed defensively over his chest. She looked at him, but he would not look at her. "Do you know what the worst part of the whole fucking situation is?" There were several heartbeats of silence before he met her eyes.

"It's the fact that I'm selfish enough to..." She paused, not knowing whether or not she should finish her thought.

"Go on," Severus said harshly, already knowing the words that were about to fall from her lips.

Hermione took a deep, shaky breath. "I wish some nights that I... that *had* let you die... that I *had* let you bleed out... that I had simply stood by and done nothing. Maybe then I would still have my friends, perhaps even my family the life I was *supposed* to have instead of the fucked up, twisted version that I'm forced to endure."

His response was simply to nod and return his gaze to the floor tiles.

She continued, a new anger rising in her voice. "But it won't ever be like that, and I realized that a long time ago. So I said fuck them! Fuck that world and their biased views and hatreds!" She slammed her fist against the table, and Severus looked up sharply.

She returned his gaze. "You were my *friend*, Severus perhaps something more after that night and my heart told me you would never abandon me. I *was* so certain you would be there when I woke up." She laughed cynically, shaking her head slowly. "I was so naïve. I walked around that house looking for you like some fucking love-sick puppy, but when you were nowhere to be found, I assumed the worst: I fled because I thought you were at best ashamed, or at worst had gotten a good, quick fuck and now had no further use for me. I would have taken the rejection a lot better if you would have told me to my face, instead of slithering away while I slept!"

He spoke softly, his voice stilted. "I truly did not expect to find you gone, Hermione. I had stepped out to run a quick errand, and when I returned that morning to an empty house, I..." He sighed. "My previous fears had come to fruition: I thought it was *you* who had fled in shame."

She nodded, and the anger bled from her face, turning into a mixture of sadness and regret. After a moment, she forced a sad, one-sided smile. Her fingers traced along the grain of the wood tabletop. "Do you know that I was desperate enough to seek you out after my friends turned their backs on me? The man who had been my friend and then turned his back on me so cruelly..." He scowled at this comment. "...or so I thought. My life had been turned upside-down, and I didn't know what else to do.

Hermione Granger the most brilliant student of her age was lost when put out on her own. In my naïve desperation, I thought *you* might want to see me. You weren't there or you didn't care that I was on your doorstep, pleading with you to let me in, or to at least speak to me. I sat there for hours, Severus, in the cold, but you never showed."

He was silent as she continued.

"Well, after that I left and never looked back. You know the whole story up until about three months ago. I suppose going to work at the *Doll* is the only choice I've made recently that's actually benefited me..." She chuckled darkly, shaking her head. "I still wonder if it's worth it sometimes, letting men try to fondle me and stuff pounds in my crotch. It all started when one of the regular girls who comes into the diner, Jacqueline, told me that I was 'too pretty' to be working at some cheap grease-trap. She told me she knew where I could make tons of cash. She gave me her card and told me to give her a call if I was interested. I almost threw it away, but when I got home, my lights had been shut off."

Severus sighed. He felt a pang of sadness for her for a life so wasted because of a single, fucking misunderstanding. If only he had woken her before he stepped out that fateful morning... where would they be now? It was obvious now that neither had intended to reject the other all those years ago. Sadly, Fate had not intended their paths to be quite so easy, and in the end they had each assumed the worst of the other. Well, Severus knew first hand what was said about assuming...

Hermione continued, "I went for an interview at the *Doll* the next day. Two weeks later I had my first show. I was so terrified that I had to get drunk before I could even go on stage. But then I thought that those men were there to see *me*. They wanted to pay me to walk around and shake my arse, so why not let them. After that first night, I realized just how much money I could actually make I never had to drink again before I went on."

She sighed. "It doesn't matter though. No matter what I do, I can't really get ahead. The lights stay on, and I always have something to eat, but the flat is still horrible: I pay £700 a month for a tiny hole in the wall, with a sink that drips *all* the time, a furnace that works *some of the time*, and rats the size of Pekingese that scare the hell out of me *whenever they choose!*"

She cocked to her head to look back at the man leaning against the counter. "So tell me Severus, am I still the same *stupid girl* you knew all those years ago?"

"I stand corrected."

"You're fucking right you do!" She sat there in the dim light of his kitchen, her chest heaving as she watched him.

After a moment, he spoke, "If you will...*please*," the word seemed strained, unfamiliar, "let me, I'll take care of that for you." He motioned to her forehead, where during her speech, more blood had worked its way from under her hand. It was mixing with the other to trail down her cheek and drip off her jaw onto her shirt. "It would not be wise to let it fester any longer than it has."

Glaring at him once more, she threw up her free hand up in resignation. Severus nodded and turned to the row of cabinets behind him.

"So," he spoke tightly after a moment, "how far did you get?"

"What?" she said irritably, cocking her head as she watched him open one of the cabinets and rummage through the contents.

"I asked," his voice was muffled from behind the cabinet door, "how far you were able to run before being brought up short." He closed the door and walked towards her, a clean cloth, some ointment, and a small bandage in his hand. He set them down on the table. Going back to the cabinet, he pulled out a small bowl which he filled with warm water from the tap. He set it to the side and washed his hands thoroughly before coming to sit opposite her.

He reached for her hand, but Hermione snatched away.

"I do not intend to let you exsanguinate yourself in my kitchen, Hermione," he said firmly.

She sighed in irritated acquiescence, and he once more reached towards her. She watched him warily as he wrapped his long, fine-boned fingers around her own short, blood-stained ones. She could feel small calluses on the tips of those fingers as she reluctantly let him pull her hand away.

He frowned. She had a thin, superficial gash that started at her hairline and ran down over her left eyebrow. Blood had already crusted in her hair, matting the brown locks into a sticky mess. Severus huffed and reached for the cloth. As he dipped it into the bowl of water, Hermione noticed the blood smeared across the pale skin of his hand. She had to shut her eyes against the vivid flashes that reminded her of the last time she had seen those delicate hands stained red.

As the memories faded, she opened her eyes and watched him work as best she could from her angle. His brow was bunched in concentration. In the soft light from the hanging lamp, Hermione could just make out the beginnings of a five-o'clock shadow on his chin and cheeks. He still wore the crimson shirt and leather pants from earlier. The shirt was buttoned incorrectly the topmost button was one slot too low. The perfectionist in Hermione had to fight the impulse to reach out and fix it.

She resisted, and they sat in silence until: "One block."

Severus' hand paused a moment, and she could see that he was thinking. "That far?"

Hermione nodded. "I suppose I'm lucky I hadn't gotten up any real speed. My car simply... stopped. It was like hitting a brick wall, and then my head hit the fucking steering wheel. It was all I could do to turn around and drive back here. I thought I was going to black out at one point."

Severus simply nodded, concentrating on the task at hand.

"It's the life debt, isn't it?" she asked. "It's not going to let me leave." There was an edge of panic to her voice.

"Ever the master of the obvious," he said as he continued wiping gently at her forehead.

"No!" she exclaimed as stood up suddenly. Her chair fell to the floor with a clatter. Severus set the bloodied rag down passively. Hermione had a frantic look about her, which concerned him. Should she bolt, he would have to restrain her lest something else in all likelihood something detrimental to life and limb happen. He crossed his arms as she started to pace, muttering rapidly.

"I *cannot* be stuck here! Not with you! *You* owe me! Why the *fuck* should I have to suffer? There are things I have to do... I have... I have responsibilities!! What about my jobs? Who will cover my shift if I don't show? I'll get fired! What about the club? Jack will be furious if I don't come in! I can't afford to lose all that money! I'm barely getting by on double time as it is! Oh God... Cheshire! What about my cat? Who's going to feed him? What about... what about..."

Hermione's face suddenly went white, and her voice faltered as she staggered forward. One hand covered her face while the other reached out in vain, grasping at nothing but empty air as her body instinctively fought to steady itself.

Severus barely made it out of his chair in time to catch her as she fainted.

~TBC

A/N: I'm so sorry for the long wait! This chapter has been with my wonderful beta, and I have been fussing over it for about a month now. Originally, it was much longer, coming in at around 9000 words, and after much deliberation I finally decided to split it into two chapters. I hope this explains more of their past, and I hope I'm not confusing anyone.

The next two chapters are complete, and another is mostly done, so the wait shouldn't be near as long this time. Thank you so very much if you've taken the time to read! Please leave me a review if you get a moment. It fuels the Muse and keeps me writing.

The chapter title is based on a quote by Guru Gobind Singh:

"What face will they show, when they go there? They will regret and repent for their sins; their actions will bring them only pain and suffering."

## Time Cannot Erase...

*Chapter 5 of 7*

What really happened between Hermione and Severus all those years ago?

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

Thank you, Delilah!!

~\*~\*~\*~

**I'm so tired of being here**

**Suppressed by all my childish fears**

**And if you have to leave, I wish that you would just leave**

**'Cause your presence still lingers here**

**And it won't leave me alone**

**These wounds won't seem to heal**

**This pain is just too real**

**There's just too much that time cannot erase...**

**Evanescence, "My Immortal"**

~\*~\*~\*~

Hermione was dreaming fitfully...

*She could feel the frantic thumping of her heart as it pounded in her ears, and could taste the sweat, dirt, and blood that covered her hands as they desperately covered her mouth, holding back the scream she knew would come if she removed them.*

*She could hear muffled words... a horrible reptilian hiss... a blood-curdling scream...*

*... a resounding thud as something heavy fell to a dust-covered, dilapidated, wooden floor... a horrible gurgling sound, as if someone was dying... choking to death on their own blood...*

*Wait...*

*...someone was.*

*Hermione looked on in abject horror as Professor Snape lay on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, his life's blood pouring from the viciously torn skin at the junction of his neck and jaw a mortal wound... an almost certain death. Harry and Ron were there beside her, their eyes wide with fear and disbelief, but she paid them no mind. She had eyes only for the trembling, gasping man before her. Her teacher of near seven years, a man she had always had great respect for despite his reputation, despite the rumors and speculation was dying before her very eyes.*

*She watched as his life gurgled and pulsed from his body the shockingly red essence saturated the once pristine sleeves of his robes and stained the pale skin of his hands as long fingers clasped desperately at the horrible, ragged gash that bisected his flesh.*

*She barely registered the fact that the Professor was trying to speak to Harry... that one of his blood-stained hands now grasped desperately at the front of her friend's tattered shirt. She hardly noticed the silver-blue, mercury-like liquid that was flowing from the dying man's eyes, ears, and mouth. She didn't remember conjuring a tiny, glass flask and then handing it to Harry. What she did remember as she watched the blood start to pulse more slowly over the long, pale fingers, and the light in the fathomless black eyes start to fade was sending Harry and Ron on ahead, assuring them that she would be right behind them.*

*They left reluctantly, and she turned back to the now motionless form before her.*

*He could not be dead. It was simply not possible. "It's not fair, dammit!" Hermione cried.*

*As her mind failed to process that the man before her was gone, she found herself desperately searching for a solution, however impossible. She gasped, cursing her own stupidity as a realization suddenly swept over her. A tiny ray of hope sprang anew in her chest as she started frantically undoing the buttons of Professor Snape's ruined topcoat. Her fingers were slippery with blood and made for slow going, so she found herself ripping desperately at the fabric, sending the round pieces of ebony skittering across the floor of the Shrieking Shack as the buttons ripped violently from their moorings.*

*Surely he had seen this coming. Surely a man as brilliant as Severus Snape had been prepared for just such an event... for the inevitable betrayal of a madman...*

*Hermione reached inside the coat, forcing back tears as her hand came into contact with fabric still warm from his body heat. She searched the lining, feeling for the telltale outline of the tiny flask that she knew was there it must be... it had to be...*

**There!**

*Her fingers brushed over the elongated lump in the right, inside breast pocket. She pulled it out and popped the cork. Moving quickly, she tilted the lifeless man's head back and forced the vial into his mouth, pouring the green liquid down his throat, praying that there was still some small spark of life left in his motionless body.*

*When the phial was empty, she stuck it in her pocket and waited for something anything that would tell her she had succeeded, that she was not too late.*

*She waited. She prayed. She held his cold, pale, blood-stained hand, wishing him back from the edge of death. It was not his time. It couldn't be.*

*Despite his seemingly cruel persona, she had had faith in this man for quite a while ever since her fifth year when she found out he was a spy, a double-agent working for Dumbledore and the Order. Even after the events of the last year after he had supposedly murdered a man that many had thought of as the touchstone in a dark and violent world Hermione knew with all her heart that this man lying before her was no cold-blooded killer. She could not say how she knew such a thing, but she would bet her life on it.*

*So she willed him to come back... willed him to live. She screamed his name to the darkness; she pounded her bloody fists against the fabric covering his chest; she called him a coward and a bastard for leaving them just when they needed him most.*

*Nothing.*

*After ten desperate minutes, Hermione hung her head, wiping the tears from her blood-streaked face with a shattered sob.*

*She had failed.*

*The antivenin was delivered too late.*

*Professor Snape was dead.*

*She placed a hand on his chest, between the lapels of his torn overcoat, and caressed the soft white linen of his shirt.*

*She spent several long minutes whispering sorrows and regrets, heartfelt apologies and admirations, knowing that no one but she would ever hear them. She said a silent prayer to whoever was listening, asking them to watch over his soul in the afterlife.*

*At least he would finally find peace.*

*Finally, after brushing his dark, lank hair back from his eyes, Hermione knew that it was time. She would join her friends for the finale... for better or for worse... for the end.*

*She made to stand, but her progress was interrupted. An involuntary scream tore its way from her lungs as a cold hand gripped her viciously around the wrist. All the breath left her body, and her faith in a higher power returned as she looked down into the dark, fathomless eyes of a very alive Severus Snape.*

*Now Hermione's dream sped forward. Flashes of people Harry and Ron, Ginny, other members of the Order as well as places the Burrow, Hogwarts, and Grimmauld Place flew through her mind's eye. One place stood out, and it was here that her dream resumed...*

Hermione walked down the corridor of St. Mungo's Transitional Care Unit, nodding at the nurse behind the desk as she passed. She stopped at the door to Room 33 and knocked. A gruff, "Enter," came from within.

Smiling, she pushed open the door and let herself into Professor Snape's room. He was sitting in bed, reading as usual, and did not acknowledge her as she entered. Typical, she thought.

She liked to think that she and her former teacher were good acquaintances by now, perhaps even friends. She had felt that it was her responsibility to look in on him after everything was over, seeing as how she had technically saved his life. The fact that it had been she that had cared for him for the first few months of his stay was a subject they did not speak of.

Professor Snape had lapsed into a coma almost immediately after being brought to St. Mungo's, and the first time Hermione had been able to really visit about two weeks after his arrival she had been shocked at his appearance. He was thoroughly untended: his hair was overwhelmingly dirty and to Hermione's utter horror and disbelief still matted with dried blood, and his face hadn't seen a razor in weeks.

The rest of him was no better. Hermione suspected he hadn't been bathed since his arrival the poor man reeked of stale sweat, old blood and general uncleanness. His gown, sheets, pillow, and blanket were all filthy and stained with what, Hermione did not care to find out and the whole room literally swam with the pungent smell of neglect. Surprisingly, the bandage around his neck looked well-tended, although it was soiled with a small amount of dried blood. She huffed indignantly other than making sure he didn't outright die from sepsis, the healers and staff obviously had no interest in the well-being of a murdering Death Eater.

The anger Hermione had felt rising within her was frightening. She had exited her former teacher's room, wand in hand, and made her way to the nurse's station just down the hall. She politely asked to speak with the Healer in charge of the Professor. When the smug little witch behind the counter had told her that he was unavailable, and would be for quite some time, Hermione had nodded demurely... and put the tip of her wand between the woman's eyes.

"Now," Hermione said calmly as the woman went pale, "I would like to speak to the Healer who is overseeing the care of Professor Snape, and I would like speak to him now." The mediwitch's mouth tightened stubbornly. A few red sparks from Hermione's wand changed the woman's tune, and she was soon running down the hall in search of the Healer, batting frantically at her delicately plucked, now-smoking eyebrows.

When the Healer finally arrived a short, balding man wearing bifocals and looking utterly harassed Hermione let into him. She offered up her many varied and colorful opinions on the state of the patient in question. The nurse and Healer both blushed fiercely at some of her more vivid statements. She promised that the entire staff would have their licenses revoked and would be spending several long years in Azkaban if something wasn't done... immediately. She did have friends in high places, after all.

After a good ten minutes of verbal lashing, in which a small crowd had gathered to watch, Hermione finally told yes, told the Healer that she would be taking over the job of caring for Professor Snape. The mediwitches would have minimal contact with him, and the Healer would see him only as necessary. After procuring directions to the supply room, Hermione had stormed off to get started. She realized with a small wave of sadness that it had been far too easy for her to take over the man's care.

"What do they know, anyway... ignorant bastards," she mumbled to herself as she gathered the needed supplies.

So it was that Hermione's one time visit had turned into a daily ritual. Not too long after that, news of Professor Snape's miraculous survival had spread. As expected, there was much speculation over the dark wizard's true loyalties. That all changed, however, when to the utter surprise of everyone Hermione included Harry Potter had stood before the Wizengamot and attested to the man's innocence. That was all it took. If The Boy Who Lived Twice the Chosen One believed Severus Snape to be innocent, then he was. End of story.

Hermione had always known in her heart of hearts that he was innocent, but to hear the entirety of the British Wizarding world proclaim it from the hilltops, as it were, set her soul at ease. Perhaps the Professor's life would be different now. Perhaps he could be happy.

One evening, as she was changing the bandages on his neck and talking to him about the current events of the day as she always did, Professor Snape had groaned and slowly opened his eyes. They were filled with a disconcerting mix of fear and confusion as he took in his surroundings. Finally, his frantic eyes had focused on her. She had smiled at him and quietly explained what had happened over the past month his exoneration by the Wizengamot and how she had been caring for him. Slowly the fear bled away, leaving only confusion, and perhaps a bit of relief. Being too weak to speak or protest in any way, he had simply closed his eyes and allowed her to continue.

Hermione was concerned at his demeanor, which was uncharacteristic of the man she had known or thought she knew for the past seven years. Her happiness at his awakening overrode her concerns, however, and she continued on.

Now, six months later, Hermione had another reason for visiting. She had something for the Professor a gift from the Wizarding world itself.

"How are you today?" she asked as she moved to sit in 'her chair' at his bedside.

He cut his eyes at her for a moment before answering. "Miserable. Just as I was when you asked yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that..." He tossed the book unceremoniously onto the bed, crossed his arms, and leaned back against the pillows with a resigned sigh.

Hermione watched him for a moment. He had recovered almost completely since that night in the Shack. Aside from the occasional dizzy spell which he had been told was only due to his lack of exercise and would pass as soon as he became active again he was doing brilliantly. In truth, he actually looked better than he had beforehand. He had filled in a bit and no longer looked deathly ill. The dark bags under his eyes were gone due to regular sleep, and his hair which he had let grow to just past his shoulders was now shiny and clean from regular washing. His complexion was no longer pale and sallow Hermione had been utterly shocked when she realized that he actually had olive-colored skin. She supposed that a lifetime of dark dungeons and nighttime espionage hadn't given him much chance to linger in the sun. More than once, she had caught herself thinking that he was a rather attractive man, if in an unconventional sort of way.

The only outward sign that anything was amiss was the bandage around his neck. He would be scarred for life, but he was alive. A fair trade, if she said so herself, which she did on the rare occasion she caught him staring morosely into the mirror, fingering the puckered skin which bisected his jugular and carotid. He mostly did it when he was bored, as he was now. Hermione sighed; surely he would be released soon. He was well past the point where St. Mungo's could help him.

Knowing he needed a bit of cheering up, Hermione pulled her reason for visiting out of her bag. "Well, I have something that may cheer you up." She held out a red velvet box. His brow wrinkled as he looked first at the box, then at Hermione. "Go on," she said softly, "open it."

Slowly, he reached out and lifted the box from her hands. He set it on his lap and paused a moment. After some internal debate in which the furrow between his brows deepened and his mouth opened and closed several times, he opened the lid. There, sitting on a cushion of red velvet, was an Order of Merlin, First Class. The gold medallion stood out in stark contrast to the red of the box. It shone brightly in the afternoon sunlight that filtered through the room's single window.

Hermione watched as Professor Snape ran one long, pale finger around the edge of the medallion, tracing over the swirling calligraphy of his inscribed name. "There's supposed to be a big ceremony and everything, but Harry talked them out of bothering you. He didn't think you'd like all the attention." He nodded slowly, and she could have sworn she saw his eyes start to shine, but he blinked and the moment passed.

"Thank you," he said finally, before gently closing the box and setting it on his bedside table.

That he made no cutting remark about the award's color scheme blatantly gold and crimson warmed Hermione's heart. He must truly be touched. "You deserve nothing less. Actually, you probably deserve a hell of a lot more, but you know what they say about beggars..."

The corners of his mouth lifted in a small smile. "Yes, I do know what they say. I suppose I should simply be grateful that it is not a posthumous award." He watched as her face flushed slightly and she looked down at her clasped hands.

An awkward silence settled in. He made to speak after a moment. "Miss Granger, I..."

There was a curt knock at the door a split second before it opened, allowing a maroon-robed mediwitch to enter.

"What in the bloody blazes is it now?!" Severus demanded caustically.

The witch huffed, her brown eyes flashing with genuine dislike of the man before her. "Professor Snape, you are cleared to leave. Here are your discharge papers. Sign where indicated and you're free to go." The mediwitch handed him the thick ream of yellow parchment and left as quickly as she had entered.

"Thank Merlin," he said, running a hand over his face in relief.

"That's wonderful!" Hermione exclaimed, watching as he retrieved a quill from the bedside table and starting signing immediately. He simply grunted at her in reply.

Such was his nature when he was involved with something. He reverted to one word answers, or in this case, grunts and gestures.

She watched him for a few moments before speaking. "Well," Hermione breathed, "do you need... I mean... would you *like* any help... getting home?"

"No thank you, Miss Granger." He continued to frantically sign the parchment before him.

She was unabashedly disappointed. "Well, then... I guess... I guess I'll just leave you to it."

As she stood to leave, she felt an overwhelming sense of loss wash over her. This couldn't be the end, not after they had spent so much time together. Hermione laughed bitterly to herself. What did she really think would happen? Did she think that he would be discharged and immediately declare undying devotion and love for **her** simply because **she** had come to care for **him**...

**What?! Oh fuck...** her mind screamed.

She felt her face flush at this sudden revelation, and before she knew what she was doing, Hermione had leaned towards the Professor and placed a chaste kiss on his temple. When her flesh touched his, her lips tingled madly and her belly writhed with an strange, unfamiliar heat. "Good day, Severus. I'm happy for you," she whispered quickly before heading for the door. Just as she was reaching for the handle, he spoke.

"Hermione..."

She looked back over her shoulder, mildly surprised at his use of her first name. "Yes?"

He set his quill down and crossed his arms over his chest, appearing uncomfortable with what he was going to say. "While I do not think I require any assistance in getting home, I would like to... show my appreciation for all... for your..." he sighed, unsure. After a moment, he spoke. "I would like to express my gratitude for your companionship and for the fact that I am still here, as it were."

Hermione smiled genuinely. "You don't have to thank me, Professor. I couldn't let you die... whether from snakebite or from utter boredom."

The corners of his mouth lifted again. He spoke the next words slowly. "Be that as it may, I would still like to thank you properly. Would you... would you come to my home tomorrow evening? It is not much, but I'd like to cook dinner for you, if that is acceptable?"

Her stomach fluttered in excitement. "Of course, Professor. I'd be delighted... if you think you're up to it, that is."

In a rare show of light-heartedness, he chuckled. "Hermione, after six months in this hellhole, I'd sell my soul to simply heat my own tea."

She laughed. "Alright, but only if you're certain."

"Very. How does 8:00 sound?"

"Perfect." And she was gone.

The dream sped forward again...

Hermione found herself on the doorstep of a small, two-story home in the neighborhood of Spinner's End. It was snowing lightly, being winter in Great Britain, and Hermione drew her cloak more tightly around her neck as she rang the doorbell. A moment passed... and then another. She was just raising her hand to push the bell again when the door opened.

"Miss Granger," Professor Snape greeted. He held the door open and motioned for her to enter. He was casually dressed, for him at least, in a pair of black slacks and a simple black button up. His hair was pulled away from his face and secured at the base of his neck with a leather thong. Hermione thought that it suited him as she allowed him to help her out of her cloak.

"How are you?" she returned as she watched him hang the length of blue wool on the peg next to the door. She gazed pointedly at the bandage covering his neck.

"I am as well as can be expected. You?" He gestured towards the door to their left, motioning for her to precede him.

Hermione walked into the room, which was lined floor to ceiling with books. A cozy fire crackled in the small hearth. It wasn't a large place, but it seemed cozy enough. "I'm fine," she said, rubbing her arms, "if a bit frostbitten. This weather is freezing!"

"Indeed it is. Please sit." He motioned to the sofa in front of the crackling fire. "Would you care for something to drink: tea, wine... perhaps something stronger?"

"Oh, um..." She had never really had anything stronger than butterbeer. "I'll try a glass of wine, please." He nodded and moved off to another adjoining room. Her stomach fluttered as she watched him walk away, noticing how his trousers hugged the trim line of his waist.

**Stop it you stupid girl! He's a grown man! He would never even think of you that way... let alone do anything about it** her inner voice screamed at her.



Why should she be so nervous? It was only Professor Snape... Severus. They had become friends these past months, hadn't they? Surely she wasn't afraid that he would harm her?

No... it wasn't that.

As she waited, Hermione took a moment to be completely honest with herself. She was... attracted... to her former teacher. In ways that were neither decent nor honorable. Her cheeks flushed at the memory of her thoughts of late: her darkest fantasies involved nothing more than soft sheets, a warm fire, and... him. Long, agile fingers touching her in places no man had ever touched... her cries of ecstasy mixed with his guttural moans as he made love to her... him saying her name as he spilled himself inside her... his muscles taught as iron, her legs wrapped around his waist in a vice grip, his lips...

"Miss Granger?"

She jumped. "Oh... God... I'm sorry! Just wool-gathering." She took the proffered glass of red wine. "Thank you."

He raised an eyebrow. "May I inquire as to the nature of said 'woolgathering'?"

She blushed furiously as he sat on the opposite end of the sofa, his own glass in his hand. "I'd rather you didn't."

He nodded and stared off into the fireplace, taking a slow sip of his wine. Hermione's tongue came out to wet her lips as she watched his own wrap around the rim of the glass. He swallowed, and she watched his Adam's apple move up and down. She looked away quickly, lest her thoughts become apparent.

"So," she said after taking a long, fortifying sip of her own drink, "what will you do now?"

"Now?" he asked, gazing at her out of the corner of his eye. He took another slow sip of wine.

"Well, now that you're no longer... you know... now that...**he's** dead." She dipped her head when he didn't answer right away. She thought she had offended him.

After a moment, he softly said, "I don't know."

Hermione looked up, confused. "What do you mean?"

He shrugged and shook his head. "I mean that I honestly have no idea what I want to do with my life. I've been someone's whipping boy for so long that I don't know where to start."

Hermione nodded, a sly smile playing on her lips. "What about teaching?"

He huffed. "Perhaps. Things would certainly be different now that I don't have to coddle the ignorant children of my brethren."

"Brethren?" she asked, sipping the red wine once more.

"Death Eaters, Miss Granger. Don't let it escape your mind what I once was... or still am."

She gave him a resolute look. "You haven't been a Death Eater in twenty years, Professor."

"Is that so?" He set his glass down on the side table. Hermione grew very still as she watched him roll up his sleeve. When he finished, he held his left forearm out to her. "Explain this, then."

The Dark Mark though slightly faded and blessedly unmoving still stood out in stark contrast against his skin. Without thinking, Hermione reached out and ran her fingers over the skull and serpent, tracing it's weaving pattern down his forearm. "What is there to explain?" she asked.

With slightly hooded eyes, he watched her fingers trail down his skin, leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake. "Why is it still there?" he asked softly.

Hermione shook her head. "I don't know. He's only been truly gone for six months. Perhaps it will fade even more with time... maybe even disappear completely. Even if it doesn't, it's just a reminder of the past."

"One that I would like to forget," he said softly as he rolled his sleeve back down.

"We all have our scars to bear, Professor. Even me."

"I doubt that."

She sat her glass down on her own side table. "Look," she said as she unbuttoned the top three buttons of her blouse.

"Miss Granger, what..."

"Here." She pointed to a long, angry looking scar running across her collarbone and sternum. "Department of Mysteries in my fifth year I was cursed."

He shook his head. "Impulsive, reckless children, the lot of you."

"You saved our lives that night."

He shook his head. "No. I saved the boy wonder's life... the rest of you were only happenstance."

She shrugged. "Doesn't matter you still saved us."

He cleared his throat. "Well, you're welcome."

Hermione laughed as she rebuttoned her shirt.

When she had finished, he stood and held his hand out. "Shall we eat? I'm starving."

She nodded and took his hand, letting him lead her into the kitchen.

Hermione's dream sped forward through dinner, through more wine and talk of the past, through flashes of Severus smiling and peals of her laughter as he made some comment or other. It slowed down just as they were clearing away the dishes...

"Professor! You're bleeding!" Hermione exclaimed.

"What?"

"Your neck... the bandage..."

He reached up a hand to feel tentatively at the white gauze. Sure enough, a small circle of blood had soaked through.

"Shit..." he whispered.

Hermione pulled out a chair. "Here... sit."

Surprisingly, he obeyed, pressing his hand to his neck as he told her where to find the supplies she would need to redress the wound. She collected them, and after washing her hands, stood over him and carefully removed the soiled bandage. There wasn't much of a wound left, but what was there had managed to bleed a bit. "It must be the alcohol," she stated softly.

"Yes, that must be it."

With a warm, clean cloth, she gently wiped away the blood. After adding a bit of the ointment the Healers had sent home with him, she placed a new bandage on top. A few pieces of surgical tape later, and everything was in order.

"Thank you," he said as he felt tentatively at the new dressing.

"You have some blood on your face," she said off-handedly. He sat motionless as she reached up to wipe the small stain from his cheek. When she touched his face, he reached up and grasped her wrist gently. "Professor, wha..." Her words were cut off when he pressed his lips gently to the inside of her wrist.

Her eyes closed and she felt that unfamiliar but welcome heat return to her belly. When she didn't protest, he kissed a soft line up the inside of her forearm. Her other hand came around to trace the contours of his face before running slowly back through his hair.

His free hand moved to her leg, and moved slowly up the outside of her thigh. Still, she did not protest. As his hand came to her waist, he removed his lips from her arm and looked up at her. His eyes were hooded, the pupils dilated. Instinctively, she stepped closer and settled herself in his lap, feeling a bit uncertain as her hips came to straddle his.

His hands moved to her face as hers ran through his hair. The thong was pulled loose and his dark locks fell around his shoulders and face.

Sanity and common sense were no longer a part of her world. "Please," she whispered, "kiss me."

He did.

Any fantasy she may have had about his kisses was lackluster compared to the real thing. His lips were soft and warm, tasting faintly of the wine they had consumed earlier. They weren't overpowering, but instead sought acceptance, which she eagerly gave. When the tip of his tongue swiped gently over her mouth, she opened slightly, cautiously giving his own lips a tiny lick.

Hermione could feel what she was doing to him and was emboldened by his reactions. He was pressed hard into her inner thigh, and she moved her hips instinctively. Snape groaned and grasped her around the waist, pulling her more firmly against him.

Now it was her turn to groan. Her vocalization seemed to bring him back to reality a bit. He gently broke the kiss and pressed his forehead against hers, cradling her face in his hands. "Miss Gra..... Hermione... I'm sorry... I should not have..." he started to say.

"Professor... Severus... please..." she begged, unable to deny herself any longer.

There was silence for a moment, in which he pulled his face from hers and looked into her warm, pleading eyes. Hermione expected him to tell her no, but instead she found him asking, "Why?"

"Why not?" was her equally unexpected reply.

He smiled softly. "You are so young, so innocent, Hermione. I could not take that innocence from you." She whimpered and rolled her hips. His breath caught in his throat. "No matter how much... I may want to."

"Severus, please..." she whispered against the skin of his jaw. "Please... for one night... let me show you how much I care for you... that I'm not just some little girl with a crush."

"No... not a little girl... a **warrior**," he said as she kissed the soft spot below his ear. "A friend..." he said as she kissed his jaw. "A savior," he said breathlessly just before he took her face in his hands and kissed her mercilessly. Months... years... **decades** of withheld emotions poured from his lips to hers. Never in his life had he been free to express this furious passion... this desperate need to touch another in such a way without fear of pain or humiliation.

Before Hermione could form a coherent thought, Severus' hands were lifting her, carrying her up the stairs. His bed was soft as he gently laid her down, covering her body with his. He kissed her for a while longer before pulling away and brushing her wild hair out of her eyes. "Have you ever?" he asked quietly.

She hesitated, wondering if she should lie, but knowing that he would realize the truth soon enough. "No," she whispered softly.

His head fell heavily to her shoulder. "Hermione, I don't think..."

She lifted his face to press her forehead to his. "I want this, Severus. More than I've ever wanted anything in my life. I... I care for you. Please... let me show you."

"There are other ways to show such things, Hermione. You have shown me many of them in the past six months."

"I know that... but this is how I choose to show you now... please..."

He raised his head and looked into her eyes again. Hermione thought she would be happy for the rest of her life, if only he would continue to look at her in such a way. When their lips met again, Hermione felt her heart burst. The river that swelled forth was one of disappearing fabric, soft caresses, and firm muscles beneath satin skin. He brought her fantasies to life she remembered the barest pinch of pain as he pushed into her that first time, but it was quickly replaced with a pleasure so great she thought she might black out.

*She tried to move with him, but she was inexperienced and had to rely on him to do most of the work. They didn't say much, letting their bodies say what words could not express. When finally her climax came, it was so unexpected that it sent tears down her face. Severus held her to him as his own climax overcame him. They fell limply to the sheets, bodies spent, trembling and covered in sweat.*

*They lay there in the light of a single candle, his body partially draped over hers, her hands running up and down his back. When he finally spoke, it was only to say, "Beautiful," and caress her face before falling exhaustedly into sleep.*

*She followed soon after, her thoughts only for the man lying next to her, knowing that he would be there, warm, alive, and safe, when she awoke.*

Sadly, it was not to be, and it would be fifteen years before either of them realized the horrible mistakes each had made that fateful morning. Mistakes that would irrevocably change both their lives.

Flash forward to the next morning...

*Hermione awoke... alone.*

*She dressed quickly, wondering where Severus could be. After searching the house for him and waiting much longer than she knew she should, Hermione finally determined that he wasn't coming back, at least not while she was there. Tears of hurt, anger, and betrayal coursed down her face as she finally stormed out, cursing him and her own naïve stupidity.*

*In the end, the only evidence that Hermione Granger had ever been at Spinner's End were the rumpled sheets of Severus Snape's bed... and the single, crimson stain of her lost innocence.*

~ TBC

A/N: Whew! After more than two months of working on the darn thing, I finally pulled up my big girl panties and posted it! I've looked it over again and again, and I don't know what else to do with it, so here it is. I hope no one is disappointed and that most of their past is cleared up now. That's not to say we won't see the occasional flashback, but for now, we're done with them.

If you read, please take a moment to leave something in the little box. Even big girls need encouragement now and then! Thanks from the bottom of my little heart!

## The Healing Dark

*Chapter 6 of 7*

A nighttime meeting...

"Compassion will cure more sins than condemnation."

-Willard Beecher

~\*~\*~\*~

When Hermione awoke her head ached miserably, but she quickly noticed that she was otherwise comfortable... and warm.

Tentatively, she reached up to touch her forehead. The gash was now covered with a small, gauze bandage. She fingered it thoughtfully, her mind drifting to earlier the last thing she remembered was feeling dizzy. Had she fainted? She must have she did not remember having her head bandaged, or lying down...

*Oh no...*

Suddenly fearful, Hermione sat up quickly and was rewarded with a fierce wave of vertigo. She pressed one hand over her eyes and the other over her racing heart as she waited for it to pass.

As she did, she realized that she was only wearing her tank top her outer jacket had been removed. *Shit!* She did not remember taking off her clothes either. Frantically, she tried her best to keep the vertigo at bay as she threw back the covers... and let out a sigh of relief. She was still fully clothed, sans jacket, socks, and trainers.

Hanging her head in shame, she ran a hand over her face. Did she really believe Severus capable of taking advantage of her in such a state or of intentionally harming her? Well, he had been more than willing earlier that night... hadn't he? Hermione gave a resigned sigh, admonishing herself for being so paranoid. If he was going to harm her, he would have done so already.

Still, it frustrated her to no end that she could not remember what had transpired between the two of them at the *Doll*. Apart from the crude comments he had tossed at her the contents of which had been both shocking and humiliating she did not remember much of anything from the time she left the stage. That is until she found herself lying wantonly across the sofa in one of the private rooms, spreading her legs and inviting her former friend and teacher for a bit more than a lap dance.

Pushing the implications of the evening's prior events to the back of her mind for now Hermione turned her attention back to the matter at hand and took a moment to look around the room she currently occupied. Like the main room, it was sparsely furnished: the bed was a double-sized sleigh bed done in a dark cherry-wood finish. The linens were white, and there was a large, red throw draped over the footboard. On her side of the bed was a small nightstand that contained a simple lamp with a black base and a white shade. A large wardrobe occupied the middle of the wall directly in front of her, with the door leading to the hallway on its right and a tall floor mirror situated in the corner to its left. On the wall to her right sat a small cherry-wood writing desk and chair. To her left there was another door in the center of the wall, which she assumed lead to the bathroom.

Absently, she looked down at her watch it was now well past one in the morning *Damn*, she thought.

Sliding from the bed, she padded barefoot to the bedroom door. With as much stealth as she could muster, she slowly cracked it open and peered out into the dark hallway. Seeing no one, she slipped out quietly.

The hardwood floors were cool under her bare feet as she crept along, one hand on the wall to guide her way in the darkness. Once at the end of the hall, she peeked

cautiously around the corner. Hermione could see that the once cozy fire had burned down considerably. The only sounds were the occasional soft pop and sharp crackle of the small pile of charred logs and red embers that lingered from earlier.

She looked around slowly. Where was Severus? Surely he had not gone out. He couldn't have the consequences of the life debt should affect him as well. She rubbed absently at her forehead he shouldn't be able to get more than a block away without her.

Sighing, and knowing she would not be able to sleep again just yet, Hermione padded over to the bookshelves she had spotted earlier. She smiled softly as her eyes roamed over the titles. They glimmered in the low light, each one promising adventure, intrigue, romance, excitement... escape.

Finally, she selected a well-loved, leather-bound copy of *Faust* and made her way absently around the edge of the sofa, flipping eagerly to the first page. A movement caught her eye, and she nearly jumped out of her skin when she saw someone lying on the couch. "Fuck me!" she nearly screamed before covering her mouth quickly with her hand.

It was Severus. He was stretched out on his stomach, asleep.

She stood rigid, afraid she might have woken him. When he did not move, Hermione sighed in relief and pressed the book to her thundering heart as she took in the scene before her. Severus' right arm was hanging off the edge of the sofa, long fingers brushing the floor, while the left was hidden beneath him. His dark hair fanned out around him, creating a black halo against the pale fabric of the pillow he lay on.

Hermione's breath caught in her throat as she realized he was shirtless. The pale line of his back stood out against the dark fabric of the couch like snow against a midnight sky. Hermione could not pull her eyes from him. She stepped closer, unable to stop herself...

... and inhaled sharply.

Although she had played nurse to the man for months, and even though they had once been intimate, Hermione had never really gotten a thorough glimpse of his body. Nothing more substantial than the front of his torso and legs anyway. While he had been unconscious, powerful cleansing charms had taken care of the more difficult and private aspects of Severus' hygiene. As soon as he had been able, he had taken control of his personal cleanliness.

She had noted a few marks on the front of his body nothing significant, mostly small burn marks and a few faint white lines but still, Hermione was astounded that she had never noticed the full extent of the damage. Severus' back was an intricate web of scars: old, white lines some clean-edged and almost surgical, some ragged and terrible crisscrossed his ivory skin. Something tightened in her chest, and she suddenly longed to reach out and brush her fingers across the puckered skin, across the reminders of his cruel and tortured past. She was overcome with a desire to soothe them... to heal them...

... to heal *him*.

She was startled from her reverie as he moaned, shifting restlessly.

Hermione watched him. He moaned once more... a low, desperate sound.

With sudden clarity, Hermione realized that he was dreaming.

*No, not a dream, she thought, a nightmare.*

Concerned, she moved closer and slowly knelt beside him, setting the book carefully on the floor. She could see a thin sheen of sweat covering the pale skin of his back and forehead. The tiny drops of moisture glimmered pale orange in the dying firelight. Her forehead bunched as she watched his inner turmoil play out.

His eyes moved frantically beneath his lids. His hands clenched and unclenched into fists. The muscles in his legs twitched and bunched beneath the dark fabric of his pajama pants. After a few minutes, his breath started coming in gasps, and his moans became more frantic... more fearful.

When the first silent tear rolled from underneath his dark lashes, Hermione could no longer stand it. He would probably be furious that she had witnessed him in such a vulnerable state, but at that moment she did not care. Let him rage at her... let him curse and belittle her she knew from first hand experience that no one should suffer such things alone.

Reaching out cautiously, she laid the backs of her fingers to his cheek. It was cold and clammy. "Severus," she called softly.

He did not wake.

She called his name again, "Severus..." as she brushed his sweaty hair back from his face.

Still nothing.

"Damn," she swore softly as another tear made its way down his cheek. Did she dare wake him? No... it was probably best not to.

Hermione sighed. If she were honest, her reasons for not waking him were much more selfish than altruistic. Who knows what kind of reaction he would have. What if he lashed out at her in his frightened state? He might hurt her, even though he would not mean to. She was no match for him physically, and yes, she was a bit afraid. So she let him sleep.

Still, she could not just sit there and let him suffer alone. Had the tables been reversed, what would she have wanted?

The answer came to her in a cold flash of memory: three friends huddled together around a campfire in the Forest of Dean cold, frightened, and literally at their wits end. She herself had been close to hysteria. She remembered a warm arm around her shoulders... a protective hand at her back... soothing words in her ear. She had calmed almost instantly.

Still on her knees, she hesitantly slid closer to the edge of the couch. If it had worked for her, it would work for him. Wouldn't it?

Slowly, her hand moved to Severus' back, coming to rest tentatively between his shoulder blades. Even in sleep, he tensed beneath her touch. She closed her eyes and froze, silently praying that he would not wake and rage at her. When he finally relaxed, but continued to moan, she started at the nape of his neck and trailed her fingers softly down his spine. He shivered, and goosebumps rose along the path her fingers traversed. When she reached the waistband of his pajama pants, she went back the other way, rubbing slow, soothing lines up and down his back.

Beneath her hand, she could feel the planes and ridges of the scars that lined his flesh. Each one, she knew, was a permanent reminder of everything he had worked and suffered for over a lifetime. He had endured unspeakable horrors so that their world the one they both left so long ago would have a chance at freedom. He deserved freedom as well freedom from the ghosts of a past life, freedom from vengeful demons... just freedom, plain and simple.

So she continued.

After a while, her knees started to ache, so she shifted. She turned around and sat, leaning her right cheek tentatively against his bare shoulder. Her left hand continued its ministrations. She closed her eyes and lost herself in the rhythmic movements of her hand. Where no scars lined his flesh, the pale skin was soft, and she concentrated on the feel of the dips and curves of his muscles, on the bony prominence of his vertebrae.

When she felt herself growing drowsy, she quickly opened her eyes. Searching for a moment, she smiled softly as she reached out and pulled the copy of *Faust* towards

her. She shifted again, sitting with her left side against the couch, holding the book in her right hand as her left rubbed absent-minded circles in the small of Severus' back. She flipped to the first page and started to read:

***"Uncertain shapes, visitor from the past***

***At whom I darkly gazed so long ago,***

***My heart's mad fleeting visions now at last***

***Shall I embrace you, must I let you go?***

***Again you haunt me; come then, hold me fast!***

***Out of the mist and murk you rise, who so***

***Besiege me, and with magic breathe restore,***

***Stirring my soul, lost youth to me once more."***

Hermione's breath trembled as the last words left her mouth. Was it Fate that had led her hand to close upon this particular tome? Goethe's words seemed to call to her... the undercurrent of feelings that thrilled through her body as she read the opening stanzas scared the life out of her.

Pushing those feelings aside, she continued on, and her voice lost its tremor as she neared the end:

***"... I tremble, and my burning***

***Tears flow, my stern heart melts to love again.***

***All that I now possess seems far away***

***And vanished worlds are real to me today."***

Oh, he was real. He was real and warm and alive and breathing beneath the skin of her hand...

... and he deserved peace... even if he was a bastard.

~\*~\*~\*~

Severus had not moved as he found himself pulled from the claws of his nightly demons. He had waited for the anger to boil over when he realized what was happening, but surprisingly enough, it never surfaced. Instead, it was replaced by a calm acceptance... and a subtle, quiet desperation.

How long had it been since someone had touched him with compassion... without ulterior motive? Years... decades even. The hands upon his skin were warm and soothing. They did not seem to seek anything, except perhaps to ease his suffering. They absently traced the lines of his back, undeterred by the hideous scars he bore. This in itself was enough for Severus to keep his eyes closed, feigning sleep.

On the rare occasions that he had brought a woman to his home he could count the incidences on one hand the moment he took off his shirt, the moment they got a good look at his ravaged chest and back, they made some excuse and were gone faster than he could blink.

So it was because of this that Severus fought to keep his breathing slow and even. If Hermione could stomach his scars, then he was not going to protest her ministrations.

He lay there, simply enjoying the feel of her hands upon his back. His breath caught in his throat when he felt her rest her head against his shoulder. The forgotten warmth of desire true, heartfelt desire, not the primal lust he had grown so accustomed to flooded through him as he felt her warm breath puff against his skin.

It had to be the compulsion of the life debt, for he was suddenly overcome with the overwhelming urge to wrap her in his arms and pull her onto the sofa with him. Why else would he suddenly want to bury his face in her hair, run his hands over her body and wrap her legs around his waist as he took her right there on the sofa? He felt his groin twitch at the mere thought of a warm, soft, willing body beneath his own. It had been so long...

*Bloody hell...*

He quickly pushed such thoughts to the back of his mind and concentrated on the way her skin felt against his. She was warm, and he could still smell her perfume from earlier. Suddenly, she moved away. Had she realized he was awake? No... she was reaching for something. Now she was repositioning herself.

Hands again warm, soft, soothing.

And now she was... reading. From *Faust*.

If he had not been feigning sleep, Severus would have laughed at the irony he was no stranger to making deals with devils. Still, her voice was soothing. This too stirred something deep within him. He had been a child the last time someone had read to him. His mother...

No... he would not dwell there tonight. Tonight, he would simply listen... and feel...

As Hermione continued to read, her soft voice seemed to calm the turmoil in Severus' mind. He drifted in and out, struggling to stay awake, but he was too tired to resist for long. When Morpheus beckoned him once again, he went willingly...

... and for the first time in longer than he cared to remember, Severus slept...

...and did not dream.

~\*~\*~\*~

Eventually, Hermione noticed that Severus' breathing had evened out. She watched his face for a moment, noticing how his features had softened. She smiled he seemed to be resting peacefully.

Carefully setting the book on the table, she reached over him and pulled a soft, cotton throw from the back of the couch. She covered him gently, tucking the edges around him so he would not catch a chill in the cool night air. She swept his lank hair back from his face one last time before settling herself on the adjoining section of the sofa.

Something inside her told her that she needed to be near him, just in case the nightmares returned. Elsewhere, something hidden, deep and forgotten, fluttered to life a subtle whisper that tickled her subconscious, suggesting that perhaps she wanted to be near him. As with everything else that had made her question herself that night, she pushed it aside, telling herself she would explore it later.

For now, she lay down and pulled another blanket from the back of the sofa. Covering herself, she lay watching the slow rise and fall of Severus' back for several long minutes. Fifteen years was a long time to run from one's past. Again, if Hermione were honest, she had grown weary of running a long time ago. Nothing good had come of it. Her life was shit relatively speaking, of course.

As her own eyes closed, her earlier concerns of getting to work on time were completely forgotten. Slowly, she drifted into a deep sleep a sleep which, like Severus', was blessedly devoid of dreams... and nightmares.

If Hermione *had not* been sleeping so soundly, then perhaps she would have awoken a few hours later in the wee hours of dawn, just as the sun broke over the horizon to find Severus' dark eyes watching her, filled with a forgotten fire that had burnt out almost fifteen years ago.

~TBC

A/N: The bold faced quotations are from the Dedication from *Faust*, by Goethe.

The chapter title is by Robert William Service:

*Some praise the Lord for Light,*

*The living spark;*

*I thank God for the Night*

*The healing dark.*

## An Unexpected Complication

Chapter 7 of 7

A situation arises that neither Severus nor Hermione are prepared for.

"Falsehood is cowardice, the truth courage."

- Hosea Ballou

Hermione awoke to the smell of cooking. Looking around, she realized that she was still lying on Severus' couch, but that Severus himself was no longer there. She rubbed a hand over her face, trying to scrub away the numbness of deep sleep. She stood slowly, remembering her last attempt at a quick rising.

Her muscles protested as she stretched, working out the kinks that came from spending the night on a sofa instead of in a bed. She took a deep breath, and her mouth watered at the smells coming from the kitchen. Padding quietly to the doorway, she leaned lazily against the jamb and took in the sight before her.

Severus was standing in front of the stove, working a spatula in a stainless steel frying pan. He still wore the same black sleep pants from the night before, but had managed to throw on a plain, gray t-shirt as well. His dark hair looked freshly washed and his face looked clean-shaven. A stray thought tugged at Hermione's subconscious: how many women had been privy to this side of such a private man? She could not possibly be the first, could she? No... it was naive to think so, and naivety was something she'd left behind a long time ago.

She started a bit when he spoke, not bothering to look up from his pan. "Are you going to stand there all morning, or would you like to help?"

With a slight frown, Hermione pushed away from the door and walked up to inspect the contents of said pan. "What would you like me to do?" she asked, peering hungrily at the mound of scrambled eggs sizzling against the hot metal.

He gave the eggs one final toss and turned the heat off, setting the pan aside. "Are you capable of making coffee?"

She smiled tightly and ran a hand through her sleep-tousled hair. "Sure. I could use a cup myself." She looked around. "Umm..."

"Middle cabinet, top shelf," he said, nodding his head towards the other side of the kitchen.

Hermione nodded and set about making a large pot of rich, dark coffee. She had just turned the timer on when she chanced a glance at her wrist watch: 7:30 a.m.

"Oh, fuck!" she shouted. "I'm late for work!" She looked around frantically. "Severus, where's your phone? I have to call the restaurant and let them know..."

"Already taken care of," he replied casually.

"I'm sorry?"

He took a deep breath and let it out. "I have already contacted your employer and informed them that you are incapacitated this morning. I believe you have a stomach bug." He pulled two plates out of the cabinet, oblivious to Hermione's look of utter horror.

"You called my boss and told him that I was sick?"

He nodded as he divided the eggs onto the plates, adding a piece of fresh toast as well.

Hermione was slightly taken aback. "Why? And how the hell did you get the number?"

"You have quite a few matchbooks in your purse," he replied offhandedly as he set both plates on the table.

Her mouth dropped open in outrage. "You went through my things? How dare you!"

He took a seat at the table and started in on his breakfast. "When you're through with your tantrum, your eggs are getting cold."

Tempered by his lack of response, Hermione simply glared at the back of his head for a moment before slowly sitting down. She picked thoughtfully at her plate. "Did they ask who you were?" she asked around a bite.

"Yes... they did," he replied, keeping his gaze lowered to his plate.

She waited. "And?"

He gave a long-suffering sigh. "And I told them I was... merely a concerned friend."

She eyed him thoughtfully while she chewed. "And are you?"

"Am I what?" he snapped.

She swallowed. "A concerned friend?" she asked quietly. She could see the tight set of his lips and the deep furrow of his brow. He was either angry or greatly disconcerted. She assumed the latter.

After a long moment, he looked up. "Does it matter?"

"Yes, it does. If I'm going to be stuck with you, I'd like to know that you'll at least try to be civil."

After giving her a long, calculating look, he nodded. "I suppose there is no use in trying to ignore the proverbial elephant in the room, is there?" he asked.

"I should think not." The coffee maker chose that moment to beep, so she stood and made her way to the counter. "How do you take yours?" she asked.

He glared at the back of her head before deciding against pelting her with the acerbic comment sitting on the tip of his tongue. Swallowing back the insult, he simply said, "Black," and went back to his eggs. Hermione nodded, unsurprised, and poured two large mugs, one straight black and one with two creams and two sugars.

After sitting the steaming mug in front of him, she settled back into her chair. "So... what are the facts?"

He took a long sip of the black liquid, both hands wrapped around the cup as he mentally sneered. *Still the studious Gryffindor... despite the fact that she's nothing more than a pair of tits to most people these days.*

Finally, he sighed. "First and foremost, we know that I owe you... a life debt. Secondly, we know that you are unable to get more than a block away from me..." He suddenly trailed off and sat his cup down.

"What?" Hermione asked, watching his face.

"Interesting," he mumbled.

"Severus, *what?*" she asked again.

He looked up, his eyes flashing. "Stay there." He pointed a finger at her.

She started to protest, but he threw her a look that suggested it would be to her benefit if she did what he asked. She heard him cross the living room and then heard the jingle of keys and the shuffling of his shoes before the door slammed as he exited the flat.

Shaking her head in exasperation, she turned back to her breakfast.

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Twenty minutes later, she heard the door slam again, and a moment later Severus reentered the kitchen, a light sheen of sweat on his brow and an unreadable look upon his face.

"Well?" Hermione asked from her position at the sink where she was washing up the breakfast dishes. She did not see Severus' questioning look as she scrubbed the frying pan.

He cleared his throat. "It appears that this is more complicated than even I realized."

"How so?" She set the clean pan on the sideboard and dried her hands before turning to face him.

"For starters, I was able to get almost two blocks from here... almost back to the *Doll*."

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest. "How is that possible? I barely made it one block."

He paused for a moment as he considered her question. "I think it has to do with intent. I had no intention of trying to 'get away from you,' as it were, so I was able to go farther than the other night when I could barely get fifty feet from you."

Hermione's brow bunched together as her mind started putting the pieces together. "So... because I was intent on running, the magic only let me get a block away before stopping me. Why did I get farther than you were able to when you were trying to get away from me?"

He mirrored her stance, arms over his chest, a gesture which she was fast coming to recognize as one of his trademark defense mechanisms. "I believe it is because it is I who owe you and not vice versa."

Hermione leaned absently against the counter. "So, let me get this straight: as long as I'm not intending to run away from... this... then I can probably get farther than two blocks?"

There was a moment's pause before Severus nodded.

Hermione nodded her understanding. "Right." She paused, bringing one hand up to tap against her lower lip, which was currently trapped between her top and bottom teeth. Suddenly, she looked back at him. "What if I change my mind? What if I get far enough away and decide to run for it? What then?"

Severus sneered. "I do not think that either of us would want to test that theory. However, we do know that I cannot get more than about fifty feet from you if my intent is to avoid things. We also know that you cannot get more than one block from me if you intend to avoid things. We have also just learned that I can get almost two blocks away, but only if I intend to come back. That leaves you." He gestured towards her.

"So... what? You want me to start walking until I can't go any further?"

He raised an eyebrow at her.

Shit... he was serious. Hermione sighed. "Fine, but I'm driving, not walking."

"Suit yourself," he shrugged.

She simply glared at him and stormed from the kitchen. A smirk crossed his face as the door slammed in her wake.

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Half an hour later, Severus was sitting at his desk when the knock he was waiting for sounded on his door.

It was Hermione... looking fairly disturbed.

He let her in and went back to his work. "Well?" he asked as he reached for his pen.

Hermione drew a shaky breath and walked past him to the kitchen. He heard her keys clink on the countertop and then the opening and closing of a cabinet door followed by the sharp clink of glass on glass.

Severus leaned back in his chair and peered over the top of his reading glasses. He watched as Hermione downed several shots of liquor in rapid succession. Only when she finally set the glass down and stood against the counter, her long hair obscuring her face, her body shaking, did he rise.

He discarded his glasses on the desk and walked slowly into the kitchen. Gently, he took the bottle of whiskey from her trembling fingers and replaced it in the cabinet.

She did not move, but her breathing was harsh and shallow.

"Hermione..." he spoke softly.

If he had not been somewhat expecting it, he would have been startled, but when Hermione screamed in rage and threw the crystal tumbler across the kitchen, where it shattered against the far wall, Severus simply stood his ground. Sparkling shards sprayed across the room, tinkling along the marble countertops as they flashed in the early morning sunlight. Several larger pieces slid silently across the tile floor, coming to rest at their feet.

Hermione sank to her knees and buried her face in her hands. She did not cry, but simply sat, her mind and body too overwhelmed to do anything else.

"Tell me," he demanded softly.

She remained silent.

*Damn her...* he thought. He knelt beside her, careful to avoid the glass shards, and leaned in close. "Tell me, Hermione, or I will be forced to find out for myself."

There was a heartbeat's pause before she looked up at him, her face contorted in rage.

Calmly, he continued. "You know I speak the truth... our situation allows no room for falsehood."

Underneath her anger, she knew he was right. She dipped her head again. "I only got about ten miles."

He nodded. "Much farther than I thought you would get."

"That's not the fucking point, Severus! My flat is nearly *fifteen* miles away!"

It took about half a second for the realization of what she had just said to hit him. The blood drained from Severus' face as he took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "That is a problem, isn't it?"

She let out a short bark of laughter. "No shit."

He was silent for a moment before clearing his throat. "Well, any suggestions as to how we are supposed to deal with this particular *setback*?"

Hermione laughed bitterly. "Either way you look at it, I suppose that one of us... has acquired a new roommate."

"Indeed," was his strained reply, his expression darkening as he scowled at the far wall.

Oblivious to Severus' growing anger and discomfort, Hermione simply stared blankly at the floor, shaking her head in utter disbelief.

~TBC

A/N: Man, it's been awhile, hasn't it? I feel okay about this short chapter, since it's mostly for transition. I needed something to get the story moving ahead, and this is what came out. Anyway, I hope you enjoy and thank you so much for reading! Also, concrit is always welcomed and appreciated!