

Paradise Forsaken

by tonksinger

AU from HBP. Severus is on his own side, but he needs to take down both Light and Dark to feel free from his two Masters. Hermione figures in his plot, but temptation may work both ways.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 11

AU from HBP. Severus is on his own side, but he needs to take down both Light and Dark to feel free from his two Masters. Hermione figures in his plot, but temptation may work both ways.

AN: Many, many thanks to the two ladies who worked on this chapter, astopperindeath and luvsev. Further thanks to Milton, for piquing my interest and allowing me to draw parallels between Satan and Eve and a certain OTP... As always, I own nothing.

But I shall rise victorious and subdued

My vanquisher.

Paradise Lost, Book III

Every breath was a fight and every long stride a war. As he ran, Severus reflected that walking around the corridors of Hogwarts was not adequate physical preparation for fleeing for one's life.

He was almost at the boundaries of the Hogwarts grounds. Maybe a hundred feet further and he and Draco would be able to Apparate to safety.

Relative safety, at least. Any place containing the Dark Lord was not "safe," not even for his followers. At the moment it would be safer, since there would be nobody actively trying to kill him.

"Se...Sever...us, I think we're al...almost there!"

Draco's voice, its usual aristocratic drawl roughened by terror and exhaustion, came from Severus's right. Draco was holding up very well, in Severus's mind; the expected whining had not yet raised its sleek, coiffed head. Thank Merlin enough morals resided somewhere in the boy that he had not killed Albus himself. Draco was young, innocent; with luck, he could be kept so during the war, and thus kept out of Azkaban. Not killing national icons was an important part of this.

Severus spotted the slight indentation in the grass indicating the edge of Hogwarts' protective spells. Stumbling over it, he seized Draco's arm and focused on the three D's. Infatigable, he knew, but he was so drained that it was the only way both of them would end up where they wanted to be in one piece.

Destination... Spinner's End. Determination... I don't want to fucking die. Deliberation...

The world lurched, then vanished.

"Harry! Harry, come back, he's gone, there's nothing you can do!"

Hermione pulled with all her might, trying to prevent Harry from breaking free and running after Snape. Ron was doing the same on Harry's other arm, big hands enveloping the smaller boy's thinner limb.

It was a scene transplanted from the year before, only at the Ministry it had been Remus holding Harry back as he fought to go after Sirius. What little rationality Harry had in the face of death was completely lost in his consuming need to catch Snape. To take his revenge for Dumbledore's death.

Hermione still couldn't believe it. When Harry had sprinted past them screaming about Snape killing Dumbledore, she, Ron, Ginny, and Luna had stood dumbfounded. It seemed ludicrous, impossible. Snape was a teacher, a spy for the Order. Dumbledore was the most powerful wizard in the world. None of it made any sense, and Hermione's logic fought it still.

But seeing Harry so enraged, and watching Snape and Draco fleeing across the grounds, Hermione started to doubt her logic. Dumbledore had trusted Snape and had always told them as much. But he had also admitted to being misguided about people in the past. If Snape was a good enough Occlumens to fool Voldemort, why couldn't he fool Dumbledore as well?

But what if Dumbledore's death was a small part of a bigger plan, one that the venerable Headmaster had designed to hide Snape's true allegiance from everyone?

But what if it was exactly what it looked like?

Hermione's mind railed against itself. Reading between the lines was a good skill to have, but sometimes all that was there was blank space.

"Let go of me! He killed him, don't you fucking understand that, Snape killed Dumbledore!" But Harry's screams grew hoarse and his struggles weakened. Exhaustion, frustration, and sorrow were sapping his energy. When a last pull failed to free him from the grasp of his friends, all spirit went out of him. His arm went limp under her hand, and she and Ron went from holding him back to holding him up.

"I'll find you, Severus Snape," he whispered, staring out across the lawns, where two distant figures stopped running and then vanished.

"Harry, mate, come on." Ron tugged at his arm, glancing over at Hermione. She saw exhaustion and terror in his eyes. Hermione knew he was worried about his family. Maybe they were all fine, but there were a lot of them to worry about.

"Come on," he repeated, moving in front of Harry to look at him. "We need to go find D-Dumbledore." He choked on the name. According to Harry, Snape had blasted Dumbledore off the tower; find him they would, but in what state, Hermione didn't want to think about. Ron did not seem to be any more optimistic than she.

Each leaning on and supporting the others, the trio trudged over the lawns, heading back to the castle. Hermione tried hard not to look at the sky over Hogwarts; the Dark Mark still hung there, an aberrant constellation amongst the stars.

"Where was it, Harry?" she asked as they approached the castle. Smoke drifted from a few broken windows, and vague shapes were rushing in and out of the main entrance.

He pointed to the Astronomy Tower.

He wasn't wrong. Stunned at the cold, hard evidence of Dumbledore's death, the trio huddled next to the body. Hermione took Harry's hand, feeling it tremble. All of them had loved Dumbledore, in the way one loved a wise uncle, but Harry had seen the Headmaster as a surrogate father.

Heavy footsteps behind them made her turn. Hagrid was there, sooty, with a few inches of his beard singed off.

"Hagrid!" She lifted her hand in a not-quite-wave. "Are you all right? Is Fang all right? What's happened?"

"I'm fine, Fang's fine, no one's dead that we know of," he said. His pink umbrella looked the worse for wear.

She tried not to flinch at that last bit. "Hagrid..." But the words would not come. Beside her, Harry sobbed.

"Been lookin' all over fer you three. What's got ye over here...?"

His voice faded away as he came abreast of them and saw what they were looking at.

"No... no, it can't be..." The ground shook as the great man collapsed to his knees, uttering a wail of grief. "Not Dumbledore..."

Ron put a hand on Hagrid's shoulder. The four of them stood for a time, Hagrid's sobs echoing in the air.

It was the gamekeeper who tenderly scooped up Dumbledore's body to bear it to the castle, with Harry, Ron, and Hermione walking alongside. There was no need to trot to keep up with him; sorrow kept his steps slow.

They met McGonagall on the steps to the main entrance. Seeing Hagrid's burden, she clutched a hand to her chest and swayed on her feet, recovering enough after a moment to accompany them to the Hospital Wing. But tears glimmered in McGonagall's eyes, and more than once, the emerald-cloaked shoulders jerked and shuddered.

Hermione couldn't help but notice that Harry had yet to reveal who had killed Dumbledore. But, she reasoned, it might be better to give everyone a few minutes to get over one shock before handing them another. Her logic was supported when Ron fled into the grasp of his family, all of whom were grouped around Bill's bed. She stood alone for a time as Harry embraced Ginny and everyone else hurried around the room, with Madam Pomfrey snapping out rapid orders. Harry would wait, she knew, until he was asked.

Severus stared at the grimy kitchen window of Spinner's End, wondering if a hot bath was worth the trouble of Transfiguring himself a tub. It had, after all, been a long, hard night. Steeping in hot water might help with the migraine that was prodding at the backs of his eyes. Sighing, he went to find some piece of furniture that would benefit from claw feet.

He had deposited Draco into the clasping arms of Narcissa at Malfoy Manor. After giving a report to the Dark Lord confirming Dumbledore's death at his own hands, Severus had pleaded exhaustion and asked to be excused. The Dark Lord, being pleased with him at the time, had acquiesced. Severus only hoped that Draco would not suffer unduly for failing to complete the task set for him. With luck, his Lord would be pleased enough with the death of his nemesis that he would not care overmuch who had killed him.

Luck, of course, was not a phenomenon upon which any of Voldemort's associates depended. Not if they wanted to become senior associates, anyway.

There. That chair was more hideous than the rest of his furniture. It would look nice in porcelain. Raising his wand and summoning some reserves of strength, Severus created a large, deep, clawfoot tub. Another spell filled it with water, which a third charm heated to the perfect temperature. After a moment of consideration, Severus went back into the kitchen and retrieved a large bottle of elf-made wine and two wineglasses.

He had just sunk in up to his neck, glass in hand, when he became aware of another person in his living room. As expected, though he had hoped for a bit more time to sort himself out. Sitting up, he poured a small amount of the red wine into the other glass and proffered it to the apparently empty room.

"Good evening, Headmaster. Finishing off a long night with a peep show?"

Albus Dumbledore was suddenly reclined on the moldering sofa, looking wrung-out while still reaching for the wine. A resigned look was all Severus received for his jibe. Dumbledore's sexuality was not generally a target for Severus's snide remarks, but he felt he'd earned it that night. Frankly, Severus didn't care if Dumbledore was into men, women, or the Giant Squid, and he cared even less about the old coot getting an eyeful. Remind him of what he probably hadn't got in decades.

Severus ignored the mental reminder that the last *he'd* got had cost ten Galleons an hour. He polished off his wine in one draught and reached for more.

"I am surprisingly well for being dead," Dumbledore said. "One would almost think I hadn't been killed at all, just Levitated off a tower in a flash of green light."

Severus nodded, and contemplated how close Dumbledore had come to being actually dead. All it would have taken was a real Avada Kedavra; Merlin knew Severus held enough anger towards him for it to work.

"I saw the golem of me you made, Severus. The resemblance was remarkable."

"Thank you." *You will never know how enjoyable it was to fling it from the top of the tower.* He had inspected it after, and had been forced to break its neck for added verisimilitude.

"Is Draco safe?" Dumbledore looked intently at Severus. "Twinkling blue diamonds," people said of his eyes.

Diamond, Severus always thought when he heard this, was the hardest substance known to mankind.

"He is sharing a house with the Dark Lord," Severus snapped.

Dumbledore sighed, and Severus thought he heard him mutter, "*Like asking questions of a sphinx...*" into his wine glass as he sipped. Aloud, he said, "Was he alive when you last saw him, and do you think he will continue to be so for the foreseeable future?" There was an edge to his voice, and Severus decided that provoking the most powerful wizard in the world after a long, hard night was perhaps not very wise.

"Yes, Albus. He was alive, although possibly in danger of being suffocated by Narcissa."

Albus smiled slightly. "Her devotion to her son is rather admirable. She has gone to great lengths to protect him."

And once again, I find myself between the son of a friend and the Dark Lord Severus thought, scowling. He had no doubt that Dumbledore had mentioned her parental strengths to remind him of Lily. Another little test of loyalty; a quiet *aide memoire* to why Severus was here.

Damn the old man for knowing his weak spot! The power that Dumbledore held over him rankled him. He wanted the controlling forces in his life...good or evil...to be gone, dead, vanished. But to do that he had to work with the (former) Headmaster to first defeat the Dark Lord. After that, however, Dumbledore's life was expendable. The world would be a better place, and not only for himself, without the meddling old man who played games with other people's lives.

Speaking of meddling and protecting brats from the Dark Lord...

"So, Albus, when should I send Granger and Weasley away for safekeeping?"

Dumbledore pursed his lips slightly at the question, looking thoughtful. Severus got through half his glass of wine before he answered.

"Next Friday. Three o'clock in the afternoon should be a good time." He frowned. "I shall have to amend my will to include the taking of the Portkeys at that time, along with a note to Minerva explaining what's happened to them. The poor woman will panic if her students vanish right in front of her."

"Don't you think they could possibly find it a bit odd that your will dictates that Granger and Weasley are handed a book and a Deluminator, respectively, at one minute to three on the tenth of May, this year?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "No doubt they will attribute it to either my infinite wisdom or infinite eccentricity." He sipped, smiling. "Thank you for the wine, Severus. It is quite palatable."

"It should be. Lucius gave it to me."

Severus had to applaud Dumbledore's poker face. There was a slight bit of paranoia in the suddenly tight smile, alongside the revulsion at having enjoyed something Lucius had selected. He did set the glass down and stand up with a good inch of wine remaining.

"Well, do not give him my thanks. It might seem suspicious to enjoy his cellar posthumously." He stepped over to the fireplace and reached into the small jar in which Severus kept Floo powder.

"I shall be in touch, Severus. Good night. And get out of the bath before you grow wrinkly like me." With that and a parting twinkle, he flung the powder into the fireplace, stepped into the green flames, and shouted something in Italian. He had a secret vacation cottage in Italy, near a beach in Napoli, and had decided to remain there for however long he was supposed to be dead. It was a good hiding place. There were few wizards there. Hopefully Potter would be distracted enough by the sunny weather and Italian girls (or the Weasley girl, if she was thrown in as a consolation present) that he wouldn't ask inconvenient questions, such as "What the fuck is going on?"

Hmph. Wrinkly, indeed. Severus heated the water a bit more and sank in up to his chin. A flick of his wand turned on the ancient radio in the corner, which emitted dust from the speakers with every blaring brass interlude Chopin had to offer.

Wine, women, and song. Two out of three wasn't too bad.

And if he played his cards right, the third could be right around the corner. He smiled and reached for the wine bottle for a large swig. Seducing her was not strictly necessary for his plan to work, but it might make the process easier and certainly a good deal more pleasant. She could be something of a perk, bushy hair aside.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 11

We see what Dumbledore had in store for Hermione and Ron...

AN: Huge hugs to my beta team on this chapter, astopperindeath and luvsev. Continued thanks to Milton and Rowling.

To all delight of human sense exposed

In narrow room, Nature's whole wealth, yea more,

A Heav'n on Earth, for blissful Paradise

Of God the garden was

Paradise Lost, Book IV

The flames from Dumbledore's pyre still scented the air. Hermione could smell it, even with her face buried in Ron's shirt and mucus coursing from her nose. It was more scorched ozone than anything; the power of phoenix flame must instantly incinerate, though the marble tomb was a bit of a mystery.

No. Magic, not mystery. *Probably a transfiguration spell on the logs. Professor McGonagall would know, I'll ask her...*

She choked on the giggle that arose in her throat. *Always the researcher, the bookworm, aren't we? Even when someone has died.* The giggle turned to a sob. So similar, the two reactions.

The hand that had been stroking her hair stopped. Ron murmured, "Scrimgeour's coming back. Let's go talk to Harry, eh?"

Hermione pulled away and nodded, wiping at her eyes. As they brushed past the leonine Minister, who looked as though he'd been promised dessert and presented with a stale biscuit, Hermione pondered what was to come. Harry wasn't coming back. She knew that. There was too much pain and too little to do at Hogwarts, and action had always been his best relief. Also, he wouldn't want to endanger the other students by returning. Hogwarts was no longer a safe haven from Voldemort. The Dark Lord would tear each and every student apart if it meant killing Harry.

But she was damned if she would let him gallivant off on his own, which, he stated a minute later, was exactly what he planned to do. Even as they returned to the castle, she wasn't sure if he would listen to them. He'd have to be watched, to make sure he didn't try running off to find Horcruxes without them.

A treacherous little voice in her mind pointed out that, without her there to solve puzzles and provide walking dictionary service, he probably wouldn't get very far.

They spent the days after the funeral packing and sitting around. Boredom was a deadly thing, especially when it was self-inflicted. Harry didn't want to talk about Horcruxes or Voldemort, Ron only talked about his family, and everyone else talked of nothing but Voldemort. Hermione retreated into her books, when she wasn't badgering Professor McGonagall to let her help with castle repairs or making potions with Slughorn for the people still recuperating in the Hospital Wing.

Being in the Potions classroom was odd. Even after a year, she still associated the dank dungeon with Snape. As she chopped and stirred, theories regarding the dark man and his true allegiance ran through her head. Snape's work for the Order, his efforts on several occasions to protect Harry, his efforts on others to have him expelled, and Dumbledore's continuous trust in the dark man combined and conflicted in her mind. Always she came back to taking the situation as it appeared, though it irked her to condemn a teacher thus.

But she did promise herself that, if she ever encountered Snape and survived to speak to him, she would ask. Indeed, she probably wouldn't wait to assuage her curiosity. An image of her raising her hand before shouting questions to him as she dodged curses made her laugh. Slughorn gave her a questioning look, which, as it was similar to being silently interrogated by a robed walrus, only made her laugh harder.

Laughing felt wonderful. She was too sensible to feel guilt over laughing in the days after someone had died; memories of Dumbledore's odd sense of humor helped. She spent the rest of the half-hour her potion had to brew (with three clockwise stirs every three minutes) occasionally stifling giggles.

It was a week after the battle when Professor McGonagall came to the common room, holding a sheaf of paper and a small pouch of embossed leather. Harry, Ron and Hermione were the only ones there, having their daily afternoon session of Moping Around and Not Talking, as Hermione had come to think of it. Ron quelled the chess game he'd been playing with himself, cutting off the clanking of tiny armor. Harry and Hermione both put down their books. The older woman sat down in a nearby armchair, and they reshuffled themselves to face her. Hermione ended up on a settee with Ron, and Harry pulled a wooden chair from one of the tables.

"Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger," McGonagall said when they were seated, looking at each of them in turn, "I have here Dumbledore's will." She presented the sheets of parchment, covered in the familiar loopy handwriting, and set them on a small table. None of the trio moved to take them.

"The H-Headmaster," she continued, only the slightest catch in her burr betraying grief, "has bequeathed some small personal items of his to each of you. He specifically requested you receive them a week after his death...and no, Miss Granger, I don't know why."

Hermione had indeed been about to ask, and she flushed slightly.

Briskly, McGonagall untied the leather thong that held the pouch closed. When she reached in, her hand made no impression on the shape of the pouch and seemed to go in farther than the small purse should allow. Hermione smiled at the Mary Poppins effect the purse had. Minerva in her youth might well have been like the clever, acerbic governess.

She handed Hermione, who was closest, a slim book. The leather cover left a film of dust on Hermione's hands, and she could just barely make out the runes embossed on the front.

"To Miss Hermione Jean Granger, I leave my copy of The Tales of Beedle the Bard."

Ron got what appeared to be an ornate, silver cigarette lighter.

"To Ronald Bilius Weasley, I leave my Deluminator."

"Don't click it," Harry said as Ron turned the gift around in his hands. "Unless you want all the lights to go out, that is." He turned back to McGonagall, who reached in to the sack a third time and pulled out a small, golden orb. As it lay in the palm of her hand, wings fluttered weakly at its sides.

"To Harry James Potter, I leave the Snitch he caught in his first Quidditch match at Hogwarts."

Harry took the Snitch from her.

There was a quiet moment as all three of them stared at their gifts. Hermione flicked through the book, finding nothing but runes all the way through. They were in an old style, a bit different from what she had studied at Hogwarts. In a way, she was glad of it, for a few nights of translation work would be a welcome reprieve from doing nothing. But she doubted that Dumbledore would give her a book simply to provide her a bit of entertainment. Were the runes a kind of code? Maybe he wrote it to explain everything that had happened in a way that not everyone would be able to read.

The battered leather cover held new excitement now. She licked her lips, mentally running through various books that could help her translate these runes.

She jumped when McGonagall cleared her throat. The stately witch was standing up, trying to hide a slight grimace as she did so. She winced outright when a vertebrae popped. It always shocked Hermione when McGonagall showed her age; her dignity and clipped voice always made her seem powerful and younger.

"There is a note here to me, apologizing for any shock I might get when I present these to you. I have no notion what the man is talking about," she muttered, gathering the papers of the will and scanning them.

The clock chimed three.

Hermione felt a great jerk just behind her navel. The last thing she saw before the swirling vortex of a Portkey whisked her away was McGonagall clutching at her chest, white with alarm.

The breath was smacked out of her body as she hit the ground. Gasping, Hermione rolled onto her back. There would be bruises on her right shoulder and ribs in the morning, she knew, but nothing felt broken. Close on her right, someone groaned and shifted.

Fighting the urge to curl into a ball until the ache resided and her lungs worked, Hermione levered herself up until she was sitting upright on the *Floor?*

Hardwood panels met her inquiring eyes, disappearing under a plush hearthrug about three feet in front of her. *Of course I couldn't have landed there*, she thought. She looked to her right and found Ron starting to sit up as well, rubbing his left arm and scowling.

"Ron? Are you all right?"

"Yeah, think so," he said. "You?"

"Fine," she replied. "Ron, we're indoors, in a house or something."

"The roof was a bit of a clue, Hermione."

He stood up, wincing occasionally, and brushed himself off. She followed suit before he had a chance to offer (or not; this was Ron after all) assistance.

They were inside a small sitting-room, nearly square, with a doorway in the walls on either side of them. The polished hardwood floors that cushioned their fall were a smooth contrast to rough stone walls and a red brick fireplace. A sofa was placed against the wall behind them, and two armchairs had been pulled up to the blue shag hearthrug. Hermione turned around and banged her shin on the edge of a low coffee table, made from a single slab of wood, knots and all, polished until it glowed. The walls behind the couch had bookshelves built into the stones and were packed with varicolored tomes. A single window amongst the shelves shed a square of light over the couch and table.

All in all, it was rustic, plain, and completely unfamiliar.

"What," said Ron, to no one in particular, "in the name of Merlin's saggy balls is going on?"

"We were sent here. Those items Dumbledore gave us, they were Portkeys to this place." Hermione planted her hands on her hips and scowled at the room. They had been deposited here like packages in the post and no amount of welcoming interior décor was going to appease her.

"Well," she said, dropping her hands and turning to Ron, "let's have a look around. I don't think Harry's here with us. We'd have heard him shouting by now." Ron snorted at that, but followed her through the door on their right.

It led into a small hallway, with three more doors. Stepping forward, Hermione turned the iron handle of the door closest to her; Ron took the other one.

A bedroom, slightly smaller than the sitting room, met her eyes. The hardwood floor was almost completely covered by a deep green rug, as plush as moss, which in turn peeked out from under a four-poster bed and a small nightstand. The linens were a lighter green than the rug; at a touch, they proved to be fine cotton. Someone had gone to considerable effort to give the impression of rustic luxury.

A wooden dresser stood against the wall that adjoined the other room. The top drawer contained plain shirts in several colors and a few pairs of jeans which, when held up against Hermione's curvy hips, proved to be too large. She frowned as she put them back, wondering why they had been placed there. They were clearly too big for any member of the trio. It occurred to her that they could be Transfigured to fit. A clever way of providing them with near-perfect clothing without having to ask for measurements.

More filled bookshelves and a window in a similar design to the sitting room were all that room contained. Hermione stepped back out into the hall. Ron was already there.

"Bedroom?" he asked.

"Yes. The theme was green. Yours?"

"Blue. What are the gigantic clothes for? Are they trying to fatten us up?"

Hermione snorted as a Hansel and Gretel image came to her. Pushing Dumbledore into an oven was looking better by the minute. "No, Ron. We can transfigure them to fit us, though I do hope they send our trunks. All my underwear is in mine."

Ron's ears went a bit red at that and she sighed inwardly. Getting Ron thinking about her underwear when they were alone in a house was not on high on her priorities. Brushing past him, she inspected the third door—a bathroom, opulent as the rest of the house.

They went back through the sitting room. The other doorway led into a kitchen, fully furnished with the usual Muggle apparatuses. A small breakfast nook was off to the left. On the other side of the room was another door. This proved to be the front door, opening to a small stone path winding through a fenced-in vegetable garden. Outside the white picket line and the clearing the house lay in were widely spaced trees: an open, friendly forest.

"Hermione!" said Ron suddenly. She turned from inspecting the landscape to find him reading a small piece of parchment. She darted to his side and he handed over the paper. The loopy handwriting was entirely too familiar at this stage.

Dear Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley,

First and foremost, I most sincerely implore your forgiveness for setting you both here without so much as a by-your-leave. I am truly sorry for the underhanded tactics I used to transport you here. I knew there was no other way to get the two of you here, especially without Harry, but my actions are still unforgivable.

If you are reading this, I am dead, and so can no longer protect the three of you. It is for your safety that I have placed you here, and for Harry's safety where I have placed him. Voldemort knows of you two, and you would be primary targets through which he would try to get to Harry. He learned from the incident at the Ministry last year that Harry will immediately rush to save those he loves if he learns of their peril. For your sakes and his, I had to send you into hiding and had to prepare for it to be postmortem. I hope you understand my reasons.

This cottage was designed and built by me, with occasional aid from house-elves (I apologize, Miss Granger). A trusted colleague and I created the protective spells that encircle the cottage and the forest. They are embedded in the stones and ground; even if we both die, they will remain. My portrait at Hogwarts will tell whoever is available how to release the spells when the war is over. Hopefully, it will not be too long.

As to your stay here, I endeavored to provide as many comforts as possible. The refrigerator is connected to the Hogwarts kitchens. Should you need anything in particular, simply open it and Summon your groceries. Otherwise, it will replenish itself of staple foods as you run out.

The books are for your use. I hope they bring some diversion. Under the coffee-table are a wizard chess set, Gobstones, and an Exploding Snap deck. There is a wizard radio in the nightstand of each bedroom. Two broomsticks are in the garden shed. If you explore the woods, I am sure you will encounter a number of pleasant surprises.

Letters have been sent to both your families explaining where you are and why. I am afraid that regular communication would be a danger to all of you, though Harry will be able to contact you occasionally. Rest assured that Voldemort will be defeated and that you will be safe while that process is undergone.

Again, my deepest apologies for any concern or alarm on your part. Please understand this is for the greater good.

Sincerely,

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore (Prof.)

The edges of the parchment were now a crumpled mess, as Hermione's grip had tightened with each paragraph.

Logically, it all made sense. Dumbledore's analysis of the situation was perfect. Voldemort had exploited Harry's protectiveness before now, and with Dumbledore gone, anyone known to be close to the Boy Who Lived was in danger. And the side of the Light could not afford to have its mascot, its only hope, haring off to rescue his kidnapped friends and getting himself killed. Keeping Harry safe meant keeping them safe, and vice versa.

But it would have been nice to be asked about it. They had agreed to reasonable covenants to protect Harry before. True, this way there was no arguing, no doubt about them being safely and secretly delivered to their little holding pen, but Dumbledore's "move pawns first, explain strategy later" actions angered her deeply.

"Well?"

Ron's voice interrupted her thoughts. Hermione sighed and turned back to him, dropping the letter on the counter.

"I don't like it, but it makes sense, in a way," she growled. Ron looked worried, but shrugged his shoulders with his idiosyncratic acceptance of situations out of his control.

"I guess. Well, at least it's not a bad place to be, eh?" Her expression must have shown a tremendous amount of worry, for he stepped forward and gently wrapped his arms around her. She forced herself to relax into the embrace. A few tears escaped her, and she blotted them on his shirt.

"I suppose. But we're going to hate each other within a week," she said. Ron might see this as a paradise, and it was in a sensual manner, but perfection is boring. Hermione knew the monotony and claustrophobia would get to them sooner rather than later.

Add to that the unmistakable swelling in Ron's trousers she was starting to feel pressing against her hip and you had a recipe for all sorts of problems.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 11

Sleep on Blest pair; and O yet happiest if ye seek
No happier state, and know to know no more

AN: Many thanks to astopperindeath for her invaluable comments!

Sleep on

Blest pair; and O yet happiest if ye seek

No happier state, and know to know no more.

Paradise Lost, Book IV

The Dark Lord's Legilimency was a scalpel in Severus's mind. Deftly, it sought out imperfections, mistakes, anything that might indicate corruption of what should be there. Severus concentrated on the image of Dumbledore's doppelganger lying broken at the foot of the tower. Over and over he mentally intoned, *Dumbledore is dead. I killed him.*

The scalpel turned, cutting to the scene at the top of the tower. Severus felt the validity of the memory being probed: was the green flash the correct shade of green? Did Severus say the proper words?

Dumbledore is dead. I killed him.

Voldemort did not become a Dark Lord without a healthy amount of paranoia. He reviewed the memories several times. Severus never allowed himself a flicker of doubt, never permitted himself to think of Dumbledore not being dead. The tiniest slip would mean his death.

Eventually, the Dark Lord left his mind. Severus returned to the world around him in time to see him relax back into his chair at the head of the Malfoy's dining table. Pale grey fingers tapped against nonexistent lips, and Severus coolly met the cold red eyes.

"I commend you, Severus," the Dark Lord said. "Your loyalty and quick action in a moment of crisis will not go unrewarded."

Severus inclined his head, trying to emanate modesty. "I did my duty, my Lord, nothing more." This was always tricky; the Dark Lord did not appreciate obsequiousness in his followers. To deny the part you played too strongly could anger him nearly as much as arrogance would.

Of course, the definitions of "obsequious" and "arrogant" could change in a moment and condemn words that were approved of a minute earlier. Dealing with the Dark Lord was much like dealing with the Dark Arts. Tactics had to change each day as variables shifted; what worked previously might not work now, but could possibly work

tomorrow. It was not for nothing that Severus had lectured his students on the mutability of the Dark Arts. With any luck, some of it would stick in their heads and they would stand a better chance.

"Very well." Voldemort stood, his body undulating with every movement in a manner remarkably reminiscent of Nagini. Severus quickly got to his feet. How he hated these little gestures of servitude, the careful bowing and scraping and tugging of forelocks that were implicit upon swearing fealty to the Dark Lord. Dumbledore might be a meddling old bastard, but he at least did not require the staff to kneel when he entered a room.

"You may go, Severus. I shall call you when I require you. I think," he continued, gliding past Severus to move into the opulent entrance hall, "that we shall have to take the Ministry before the search for Potter begins in earnest. Once I am the only authority the wizarding world answers to, no one will dare harbor him. Also, there is the future of Hogwarts to consider. Shutting down my dear alma mater simply will not do." He laughed, high-pitched and hissing, a sound that still pricked the nerves of Severus' spine.

"My time is at your command, my lord." Swiftly, Severus knelt to kiss the black fabric at the hem of the Dark Lord's robes before standing and backing out of the hall.

He breathed a sigh of relief when the heavy doors of Malfoy Manor shut behind him. Having furniture, walls, doors, or preferably a planet between him and his supposed master always made him feel slightly less on edge. It lessened the immediate threat of death, though Severus was beginning to suspect that he was growing less and less expendable in Voldemort's demonic eyes. Both hints of rewards to come and nary a threat for the past few months indicated his growing usefulness. He would have to cultivate it without, of course, actually assisting the Dark Lord's plans to any great extent.

When all this is over, Severus thought, striding through the lush gardens towards the gates, *I am going to buy myself a warehouse of Ogden's Finest.*

He vented his frustration for the moment by Transfiguring one of Lucius' prized white peacocks into an azalea bush. A flick of his wand ensured that it would wear off in an hour or so. Bellatrix, he recalled, was violently allergic to azaleas. The thought of her haughty face swollen and blotchy, with tears pouring from eyes and nose, lightened his spirits slightly, and he smirked as he Apparated home.

The next evening after dinner, Severus stepped outside his house and into a dark alley next to it. No crickets provided a symphony in this skeleton of an industrial town, so his complex incantation hung alone in the stillness. With his wand, he tied a glowing blue knot in the air. Two sharp words, accompanied by violent slashes, and the knot unraveled into a clean, hovering oval.

But inside the glowing curves could be seen, not run-down buildings, but a quiet forest, highlighted in silver by a bright moon. It was a perfect forest, in fact, with picturesque trees spaced fairly evenly apart, and no straggly or thorny underbrush to inconvenience a wanderer. In fact, it looked like a forest that had been made to look exactly as people imagined forests *should*, and nothing like they do.

Severus stepped through the doorway as though walking into a grocer's. It closed behind him without a sound. He was used to the process by now; he had been slipping into the magically enclosed haven every other day for three weeks. Spying on Granger and Weasley was simple compared to his usual espionage situation. The information needed was minimal, and he had already gleaned most of it. Everyday patterns had formed in the three weeks since his ex-students had been placed here, and he had their usual schedules practically memorized. His work now was to attempt to discern the emotional state of the pair; every fight, spat, and interaction he viewed from afar could give him more weapons to use against the girl.

He cast a Disillusionment Charm over himself, nodding in satisfaction as his outstretched arm took on the colors and shapes of his surroundings. Quietly, he made his way through the woods.

When the trees thinned and he could see the cottage, he stopped. Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew a fleshy string. He sent one end of it scuttling across the grass like a snake, while the other he placed against his ear. Annoying little brats though they were, the Weasley twins came up with some very useful products.

The mug of tea warmed Hermione's hands, though they hardly needed it. The night air was balmy, the residual heat of a very warm day keeping the chill from it. Hermione was perched on a wooden bench in the front garden, staring up at the glittering stars. She had counted three meteorites in the past hour. Whoever had designed the sky (Dumbledore, she assumed) had programmed it to behave idyllically. At least the moon waxed and waned, and each night the shooting stars were in a different part of the sky, but she couldn't help but feel a new videotape was put in at sundown and some omnipotent finger pressed "play."

Did Dumbledore think I wouldn't notice? she groused to herself, setting her mug down on the wood slats beside her so she could cross her arms *Or did he not care that I would notice?* Three weeks she and Ron had been here, and God only knew how many more were to come. Surely Dumbledore's brilliant mind would have foreseen the cleverest student at the school noticing the odd astronomical tendencies.

She had to admit that considerable effort had gone into making this ersatz world somewhat realistic, but in some cases the design stopped short of unpleasant aspects of reality, yet in other cases embroidered upon nature. The deer in the woods moved correctly, and one small doe even limped, but no droppings were to be found anywhere, nor did the flora look nibbled-upon. The waterfall in the woods fell into a deep pool, but the last time she checked, there had been stairs and seats carved into the rock, and the water was perfect swimming temperature. A smaller pool some ways off resembled a mineral hot spring that Hermione had read of once in a book on American geology...it was the perfect level of hot for a good soak. The whole place was a haven, a paradise, and she instinctively hated its perfection. It reminded her of a resort she'd stayed in when she went to the South of France: your every need was catered to, which was fun for a time, but soon became dull.

However, it wasn't as though she had any choice about what programmed sky to look at. Or what small, fairy-tale cottage to live in.

She heard the front door creak open behind her.

Or what housemate to have.

"Hermione?"

She didn't turn at his call. Maybe Ron would work out that she wanted to be left alone.

No such luck.

"There you are." Footsteps on the flagstones came towards her. She saw him in the corner of her vision. He was bare-chested. The moonlight almost hid his freckles, leaving only pale skin. He still smelled of the roast beef he'd eaten for dinner; Hermione had opted for a salad of spinach, walnuts, and goat cheese, with a sharp balsamic vinaigrette. Her appetite for rich food had vanished in the stifling atmosphere.

For a second she thought she might have to rescue her mug of tea from Ron's rear end, but he remembered to look before he sat. She did snatch the cup from him before he could set it on the ground, but did not acknowledge him any further. It was rude and she was fully aware of it. Living with Ron for three weeks had that effect.

"It's a nice night," he offered, after a few minutes of silence. Hermione nodded.

He sighed gustily and turned to her, placing a hand on her arm. Forced to recognize him, she looked over.

"Hermione, I'm trying," he said, eyes pleading. "I know living with me can't be fun, we've nothing to talk about, but I'm bloody *trying* to be bearable!" He snapped off the end of his sentence and glared at her.

"You haven't spoken three words to me today," he continued, releasing her arm so he could gesture with both hands. "I'm not a mind reader; I don't know if you want to be left alone or hugged or kissed or *what*, and unless you tell me what you want, I won't just vanish until you're in a better mood. We're stuck here together," he concluded.

She bit her lip and looked away. It wasn't fair to cut him out like this; he was used to being surrounded by family and friends. Solitude would never be a haven for him like it was for her. Running to the borders of the space they shared wouldn't get rid of her confusion or her irritation.

"Ron, I- I'm sorry," she said, more to the ground than him. "This place puts me on edge in an odd way, and you're the only person to take it out on. Nothing's real here!"

A hand brushed her cheek, vanished, and then reappeared lower down to slide into her own hand.

Oh, no, Ron, don't set yourself up for this, don't make me hurt you more...

"I'm real, Hermione. What I feel is real."

She wanted to run, wanted to slap him and tell him he was mad to think she wanted him. Whether he realized it or not, he was taking advantage of her being lonely and unhappy and she hated him for it. But it was, she thought as she looked back into those begging brown eyes, like hating a puppy for wanting to be fed.

Maybe she could have reality for a night. It was hard to be more real and down-to-earth than Ron without being a boulder. It was possible that sex would fuck everything up, but at least there could be a solid problem to have actual fights over, not this vague sense that everything was wrong.

Also, Hermione was desperately, insanely *bored*. If nothing else, sex was something to do. Or rather...and she kicked herself for this...Ron was someone to do. If all hell broke loose, she could go back to ignoring him.

Slowly, she leaned over and pressed her lips to his.

It was clumsy and awkward. He kissed her and she let him; she did not object when a large hand squeezed her breast. She slid her hands up his back and swung a leg over his lap to straddle him.

It took fifteen minutes of kissing and fondling before she felt even slightly aroused. She gave up enjoying the process as a lost cause and decided to get it over with. Standing, she grabbed Ron's hand and began to drag him toward the cottage. No clothing was shed until they were in his bedroom with the door locked: an instinct, she supposed, that came from living with six other people.

She stood naked before him. She would have been shy of her plump thighs and soft stomach if she'd cared enough. But he didn't care; his hard penis was proof of that, and he touched her eagerly. He was rough with desire, which did nothing to help his bedroom talents, such as they were. Fingers fumbled in her vagina and rubbed at absolutely nothing of importance.

When he was propped up on his elbows above her, poised to enter, he asked her if she was a virgin.

Hermione looked up at him, weighing her response carefully.

"No," she lied. He looked disappointed, or at least as disappointed as any seventeen-year old boy who was about to get laid could look.

"Are you?"

He looked slightly insulted at the question. "Nah, me'n Lavender..."

She knew he, at least, was telling the truth. Slightly alarmed at the thought of sleeping with everyone Lavender had slept with, she took a few minutes to wrestle a condom onto him. He made faces the whole time, but didn't protest too much.

It hurt a bit when he pushed into her. She wasn't wet at all, which didn't help, and he was ignorant of the new abuse her inner flesh was taking. He panted away above her, occasionally pausing to kiss her roughly. She went along with his kisses and faked her sounds of pleasure, though every once in a while, he would hit a spot inside her that pulled a genuine gasp from her lips.

But those moments were brief and far between. They disappeared entirely as his movements grew more and more erratic, and his groans louder.

"Oh, Hermione... I'm gonna... *unh!*"

Ron thrust into her one last time, his freckled face scrunched up with orgasm. Gradually he relaxed, peppering her face and neck with kisses before collapsing onto the bed next to her.

Hermione waited until his snores rang in the room before slipping back into her own chamber and climbing into her own...blissfully empty...bed. She was sore and tired. Sleep took her quickly, giving her little time to reflect on the mess she had just made of her current living situation.

I bloody hope sex improves with time, was her last thought before she drifted off.

Standing at the edge of the forest, Severus wiped tears of silent laughter from his eyes. He didn't need x-ray vision to know the general idea of what had gone on inside the cabin for the last twenty minutes or so. With any luck, Weasley would be as inept at sex as he was at everything else. A frustrated and curious Granger would be of great benefit to his machinations.

Still smirking, Severus recoiled the Extendable Ear and turned back the way he came.

Severus spent the rest of that night carefully sculpting his plan for Granger. The more he outlined and researched, the more he realized that she could be genuinely useful to him. Originally, he had simply needed someone to be a decoy, a bodyguard for Potter to ensure that Voldemort had his hands full. Now, he saw, Granger had potential to aid him considerably in his plan to rid the world of two meddling megalomaniacs. Those on the side of Light wouldn't touch her, those on the side of Dark would underestimate her (at least, they wouldn't take into account a whole summer of his personal tutelage), and hopefully, she could end up, at least partially, on the side of Severus Snape.

And there was the matter of seducing her. It wasn't necessary, by any means, but one so young and innocent would place great importance on sex (and after the scene he had just witnessed, on *good* sex), and by inference, on those involved in it. It was another level of attachment, an emotional one, that Severus felt could benefit him greatly. He wouldn't force her...Merlin, no; he might be a bastard, but he was no rapist...but delicate hints and perhaps some carefully pointed comments could have her in his bed, willing and eager.

He saw Granger as being a Gryffindor woman of a polar opposite to Lily. Granger was pretty enough and plump; Lily had been slender and stunning. Lily had been untouchable to Severus, nearly sacred, which was why he hated Harry so; Harry was proof that a man had dared to lay hands, mouth, and even cock to Lily Evans. But Granger, well...

She was eminently fuckable. She was flesh, plain and simple; she was human to Lily's angel. Granger would ultimately fall to his seduction, and thus would allow him to shake Dumbledore off his marble throne.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 11

Consequences, and the meeting of the minds.

AN: Many thanks to astopperindeath for her tireless beta work!

Chapter 4

Who first seduced them to that foul revolt?

Th' infernal serpent...

Paradise Lost, Book I

At eight o'clock in the morning, Hermione's wand started spinning on her beside table, emitting a series of whistles, which, upon close listening, proved to be scales in G. With each thirty-second interval, the volume increased.

It took Hermione a few tries before she successfully slapped her hand down on her wand, silencing the Sonne Matine charm she'd set on it. She sat up, brushing grit from her eyes, and blinked at the sunny scene outside her window. Birds tweeted cheerfully from the small cherry-blossom trees in the garden as butterflies feasted on the hydrangeas.

Another day in paradise. Huzzah.

When Hermione moved to slide her feet to the floor, she winced. Her inner thighs were a little tender; there was also an ache ~~inside~~ ^{beside} her, a soreness where there should be nothing.

Oh, no...

She clapped a hand to her mouth, as though stopping herself from voicing her next thought would somehow make it less painful.

I had sex with Ron. Oh, sodding hell.

She clasped her hands together, twisting her fingers as she gnawed at her bottom lip. This was not good. This was really, really not good. Having sex with one of your best friends when you did not reciprocate his romantic feelings was bad enough. Doing so when you were the only two people living in a small house was worse.

Doing so only because you were bored... This cut entirely too close to the label "scarlet woman" that Molly Weasley had hinted at two years ago. Granted, it was not Hermione's intention to toy with Ron's affections, but that was exactly what she had just done. He had told her how he felt, and she, though she said nothing about requited emotions, had followed a course of action that certainly would not disenchant him of the possibility.

All because she had wanted something interesting to do. Because she was curious.

Ron might be a bit of a twit at times, but he did not deserve this. Hermione cringed at the apology she would have to make, and soon, if there was any chance of fixing this situation. Time to think, prepare, and consider was needed, and doing so alone was a must; fortunately, it wouldn't be hard. Ron generally didn't wake until ten or so, and he was used to her going for solitary walks that often lasted until noon...it was a ritual that had developed over the weeks.

There was a smear of blood on the toilet paper, but aside from the slight soreness that accompanied every movement, there was no other sign that she had lost her virginity the previous night. Hermione took a rapid shower. She felt... not dirty, no; she was ashamed of some of her actions, but not of losing her virginity. Confused and guilty. Hot water didn't erase the feelings, but it took some of the evidence away.

As she brewed coffee and inhaled a bowl of cereal, Hermione considered the one choice she'd made last night that she didn't feel bad about: lying to Ron about her virgin status. When he'd asked her, it had been instinct (*good, honest Hermione Granger instinct*, she thought with a grim smile) to tell the truth, but something stopped her.

If I'd told him the truth, he would have... stopped? No she amended as she placed the dishes in the sink and set them to scrubbing themselves with a wave of her wand, *but he would have made an event of it. It would have made sex even more important to him.* The Weasleys were good people, but a bit old-fashioned in some of their thinking. Their reactions to Ginny's love life were proof enough of that. No doubt Ron believed a good girl only gave up her virginity to a boy she loved (whilst in no way holding himself to the same standard). If he'd known, her apologies today would be even harder.

But there was also the plain, simple fact that her virginity was her own to do with as she pleased. Some part of her didn't want Ron to be able to tell people that he had "taken it." It wasn't his to take.

Practicality over old-fashioned Victorian romance every time. She smiled for a minute as she stepped out the door and paced quickly through the garden, but the sight of her tea mug from last night, still sitting on the bench, sobered her. Her views on virginity aside, she owed Ron an explanation and an apology, and she needed to remember that.

Hermione mentally scripted her apology to Ron on her way to the forest. Like everything else she wrote, it received an outline, rough draft, edits, rewrites, and final polishes. She was at the stream by the time she'd finished it, and she'd been muttering it to herself, trying to get the sound of it clear, down to the last inflection.

"... and I'm truly sorry...hm, no, not enough... I'm *deeply* sorry if I misled you. You're my friend and you deserve, wait, no, you've earned better treatment. M'kay." Hermione paused in her soliloquy to ponder the effect her speech could have as a whole.

With no sound, no incantation, no warning, she was smacked off her feet and into the ground by what felt like a block of solid air. Before she could catch her breath and scramble to face her attacker, her wrists and ankles snapped together, and black, vine-like ropes wrapped tightly about them. More ropes snaked around her head, gagging her even as she opened her mouth to scream.

Panicked, she fought her bonds, squirming on the ground. She rolled over and nearly broke her nose on the toe of a polished black boot.

Severus watched, idly twirling her wand between his fingers, as Granger came eye-to-toe with his boot and froze. Her head whipped up, and he looked down into very wide brown eyes. A muffled noise that might have been an attempt at a scream came from behind the ropes covering her mouth.

Much as he would have liked to loom above her and gloat for a time, he had to act quickly if he was to salvage anything of her trust. Not even know-it-all Granger would think clearly when ambushed and bound by a man she no doubt believed to be a murderer and an enemy.

He stepped back a bit and dropped to one knee, which placed them, if not on equal ground, at a closer proximity. As a conciliatory gesture, he placed her wand down on a flat stone between his foot and her face. Her eyes flicked from the wand to him, narrowing in puzzled wariness.

"Miss Granger," he said, "please note that I have not killed you, nor have I done you any harm. I suggest you analyze this and deduce a logical explanation."

She frowned and blinked at him, probably confused by his curt, matter-of-fact tone, but he could see her considering the situation. Gradually, her breathing slowed, and some of the tension went out of her muscles. She almost certainly did not trust him, but she looked prepared to listen to him now that she knew she was in no immediate danger.

He cocked an eyebrow and received a slow nod in reply.

"Miss Granger," he said, "I am going to release your bonds, on the promise that you will not scream, flee, or attack me. Take it as given that if you attempt any of those courses of action, you will find yourself back at my feet in the same situation you currently inhabit, and I will be much less inclined to be amicable in further dealings. Is that understood?"

Nod.

Satisfied, but still alert, Severus stood up. He stepped back to give her room to rise before pointing at her with his wand...she flinched...and intoning, "Liberatus."

The ropes unwound and vanished with a crack. Granger seized her wand and scrambled to her feet. He could see her muscles quivering. Humans are animals, and fight or flight instinct will always direct their actions when under stress. Promise or no, if he made one wrong move she would run. And while having her gagged and bound had a certain appeal...especially the gagged part, he thought, as her mouth opened and questions poured forth...it would not make for a trusting beginning.

"Why are you here? How did you get here? Why the bloody hell shouldn't I hex you into next week?"

He snorted at that one. "As if you could."

She glared at him and stuck out her chin. "If I remember correctly, I did hex you once, and that was three years ago. Just think how much I've improved since then."

Damn. His lip curled at the memory of being Disarmed and knocked out by three fucking *teenagers*.

"But you're alone now, Miss Granger. Do you really think you could so much as scratch me, when I'm fully prepared for an assault?"

Petulant silence answered him. He smirked.

"Sensible of you. Now, as to why I'm here....,"

"Did you kill him? Whose side are you on?"

"Listen..."

"Show me *why* I should listen to you, Professor."

"I shall if you *shut up*!"

Her eyes widened again, the tautness returning to her muscles.

Severus clenched his teeth. *She doesn't know any better*, he reminded himself. *And if she had professed unconditional faith in me, I would have called her a damn fool!* He had to force back the anger, bite down the bile in his throat, if he was to keep from frightening her into running. Deep breaths, sucked in through his nostrils, gradually turned the boil into a simmer. There would be ample time to yell at her in the months to come, but first he had to keep her with him long enough to convince her of his constancy to the side of Light.

When he felt it was safe to speak, his voice came out cold and snarling.

"You want some proof of why you should listen to me, girl? You need the evidence shoved in your face, as always? Fine!"

He whipped around and raised his wand, ignoring her gasp. With a flourish, he sketched a glowing oval in the air before him; a sweeping wave filled it in with silver. A mirror now hung there, reflecting his angry visage and, if he adjusted the angle a touch, Granger's white face and clenched jaw. He needed her to be able to see the mirror, without being easily seen from within it. A quick tilt to the left and up fixed the problem.

The silver rippled as he tapped the tip of his wand against it and said, "Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore!"

An incoherent splutter came from behind him. No doubt she thought he was playing a sick joke, attempting to commune with the dead, and a grisly scene was in store for them both.

When Dumbledore's wrinkled, kindly, and most of all, *living* face appeared on the mirror, Severus heard a faint gasp.

"Severus? Is everything all right?" Dumbledore peered at Severus over his half-moon spectacles. His crooked nose looked rather sunburned and, upon closer inspection, the familiar spectacles had a tint to them. Apparently the Headmaster was enjoying his holiday on the sunny beaches of Italy.

"Perfectly well, Albus," he replied. "I simply wished to inform you that Miss Granger and Weasley seem to be thriving. In fact," he continued, a sudden bout of spite urging him to new depths, "I would recommend limiting the amount of sweets the house-elves send, as Transfiguring the clothes to make them larger only works for so long, and we will not be able to re-measure Miss Granger should she run out of trousers that fit."

Her squeak of indignation was music to his ears.

Albus gave him a stern look. "Your concern is touching, Severus," he said, in that completely nonsarcastic tone that plumbed the depths of dry wit. "Well, if there's nothing more to report, I shall return to my novel. *Highland Moor Passions*, it's called, and I must say the gentleman on the cover is a beautiful specimen, though the kilt is not very flattering. Good day."

With a last nod and a smile, Dumbledore's face vanished from the mirror. It returned to its silvery default appearance. Severus slashed through it with his wand, and it dissipated into the air like fog burning off in the sun.

"He...he's alive?"

"Yes, Miss Granger. Alive and well." *But not for long, if you cooperate.*

Severus glanced over his shoulder. He wondered if her eyeballs would fall from her head if she widened her eyes any further. They seemed to take up the entire upper half

of her face.

She licked her lips. "But... Harry saw you perform the Killing Curse on Professor Dumbledore, and we found his body at the foot of the tower. No one could have survived Avada Kedavra; even if he did, if you had missed or something, the fall would have killed him."

Severus stepped to a nearby tree and leaned against it. Arms crossed over his chest, he prepared himself for a very long inquisition.

"Potter saw a flash of green light subsequent to my saying 'Avada Kedavra.' As you know, the Killing Curse...and all the Unforgivables...requires great force of will to be carried out successfully. Without the true desire to kill at that moment the spell is cast, the curse is merely words. I spoke the incantation, then used a nonverbal spell that produced green light combined with a strong Levitation spell to move Albus from the tower. I can't tell you exactly how he escaped, but I did place a broom on a window-ledge several stories below. Presumably, he slowed his fall and used the broomstick."

She nodded. He could see her running the story through her mind, seeing if all the facts lined up, which was exactly what he expected her to do. What he counted upon her to do, in fact.

"And the body... a golem? A Polyjuiced corpse? I mean, is it possible for Polyjuice Potion to transform a corpse, or would you have to administer it to a living person and then..." She trailed off, flushing at the accusation she was on the brink of throwing at him. Or Dumbledore. He wasn't sure which would have horrified her more: that a man she thought to be dead had killed someone and presented them as his own corpse, or the man who she, up until now, believed to have killed the other man had performed the murder and enchantment for him.

"A golem; clay, before you ask, and it required two months to perfectly sculpt it to look like Albus. No, I will not tell you which books contain the procedure for creating golems," he added, as her face lit with an all-too-familiar manic curiosity. She deflated slightly.

"Do you now trust me, Miss Granger? I do not wish to stand here going over every detail of my considerable alibi. If we have determined that I am on your side, then I shall move this conversation forward."

She cocked her head, considering him for a moment longer, and then nodded.

"I think I trust you, Professor."

"Good. Now," he continued, taking his weight off the tree and stepping closer to her, "you will return to this place next week, at the same time. Bring your wand. And do not tell Weasley of our meeting." With that, he turned and began to draw the outline of a doorway back to Spinner's End.

"Why not? And what are you and I going to be doing?"

He snapped around to glare at her. She raised an eyebrow and crossed her arms.

"I have a right to know that, Professor. I refuse to allow you to take me completely by surprise each time we meet."

"I shall be teaching you dueling, Miss Granger," he snarled. "And Albus doesn't want Weasley to know that you've been selected to be trained as Potter's bodyguard, should you end up in battle next to him. Apparently it would hurt Weasley's precious feelings, so Albus wants to keep the situation as sugar-coated as his sherbet lemons. Satisfied?"

Her jaw dropped. "Me?" she squeaked. "But what about the Aurors? Or Professor Dumbledore? Or you, or one of the teachers...."

"I will explain further next week, now shut up and go back to the cottage. Behave normally and keep your mouth shut, Miss Granger. For," he said, stepping close to her and leaning in, "if I so much as suspect that Weasley knows of this, I will Obliviate both of you. And I make no guarantee to be delicate about it. You can be useful to this war, but do not delude yourself about being essential to it. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," she said, quietly.

He sneered at her white face. With a flick, he completed the spell and stepped through the doorway to the ramshackle town beyond.

The glowing door closed behind Snape with no more sound than a gentle breeze, cutting off her view of him and leaving her mind whirling.

Hermione reached out for a nearby apple tree, arms shaking, and sagged against its solid wood. Confusion, fear, and an odd sense of triumph warred inside her mind.

Triumph, she realized, because her over-thinking the situation had been correct. Dumbledore had tricked the world again. Snape was not a murderer.

And she had been right to wonder and question.

Of course, in his typical swirling-robles-and-sneering-face manner, Snape had left more questions than answers. Hermione drummed her fingers against the tree trunk, picking at a rough spot in the bark with a nail.

If Snape could contact Dumbledore, could he also contact Harry? Or, she considered, teeth tugging at her lower lip, were they in the same place?

Now that was an interesting thought. The safest place in the world was generally regarded as wherever Albus Dumbledore happened to be, particularly if no one was going to be looking for said place, on account of Dumbledore being "dead." Where better to stow Harry, the Boy Who Lived? And by the sun-kissed look of the headmaster, it certainly was no place in England. Even better for hiding two faces that were instantly recognizable in the British Isles.

Well, she could posit her theory to Snape next week and see if he deigned to answer. Until then, she would comb the books in the cottage for any information on dueling. With any luck, Ron would notice the multiple nearly-empty coffee cups and rumpled attire and divine that she was in full research mode.

Hermione paused in her thoughts. For an instant, her fingers stilled on the bark of the tree.

Smack!

Leaves quivered in time with the stinging throb in her palm. She'd slapped it against the tree like punctuation to her thought...a visceral exclamation point.

Ron.

Damn.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 11

Hermione talks to Ron; he talks back. Conversations of friends, enemies, students, and teachers, with the first spells cast.

Thanks for your patience and to the wonderful astopperindeath for hers.

Chapter 5

Assaying by his devilish art to reach

The organs of her Fancy, and with them forge

Illusions as he list, phantasms, and dreams.

~Paradise Lost, Book IV

Hermione marched back through the forest. Determination to get the painful deed done with was all that kept her feet moving forward. Avoiding Ron was going to be impossible and avoiding the subject when she encountered him was more so. Best to state the facts as clearly as possible and then spend half an hour in a screaming match. This would be followed by a week of sulking and then, hopefully, reconciliation.

Of course, if any previous fights of theirs were indicative, the sulking could go on indefinitely. There was no Harry here to mediate arguments and try to talk them out of their separate corners.

"Oi! Hermione!"

A Weasley-shaped bird whizzed by over the treetops, turned a rapid loop-the-loop in midair, and shot back towards her. She hadn't even noticed the trees thinning and giving way to the meadow in which the cottage stood.

Ron dropped to the ground and dismounted. The wind had tousled his hair into a red bird's nest, and he was grinning like the Cheshire Cat.

The last time he'd been this happy was right after he'd won the Slytherin Quidditch match last year. His ebullience then had only been interrupted by Lavender and her voracious snogging.

"Back from your walk, then? How was it?" he asked. He took her hand and clasped it, rubbing his thumb over her fingers.

"I wish you'd at least stuck around this morning, Hermione," he continued, as she stared at him, too miserable even to object to the physical touch. "I mean, what with us, well, you know..."

He flushed slightly and wagged his eyebrows. The smile never waned.

To deliver that blow now, when he was so happy, was a measure beyond her capacities. He was still her friend. Maybe a letter or a quiet talk later that evening would suffice, but she could no more tell him of her mistake now than she could kill him.

She smiled weakly and squeezed his hand before pulling away.

"Yes, Ron. Yes, we did."

New tactics swirled in her mind as they walked back to the cottage. She did go so far as to slide her hands into her pockets before he could seek them out again.

She kept quiet through lunch, murmuring, "Mhmm" and "Really?" when it seemed appropriate. Immediately after the dishes had been set to washing, she immersed herself in a cup of coffee and a stack of books, setting them up like a barricade between her armchair fortress and the world. Ron passed through soon after, whistling. He paused by her chair to kiss her on the cheek before continuing on his way. She waited until the shower was running to drop her book to her lap and stare at the hearth.

His physicality, she realized, was his way of acknowledging the change between them. He didn't have to ask her questions; they'd had sex and therefore were in a relationship. No inquiries to her about her feelings were necessary, for wasn't that simply the way things worked? The possibility of nuances, of levels, of having a different idea of things, did not occur to him.

Not that she had expected anything else, really. Hermione sipped her coffee, relishing the bitter taste.

Two cruelties lay before her: tell him now and hurt him, or wait to tell him and hurt him anyway.

No choice, really. Sighing, she picked up *Dueling and Defense: A Practical Guide*, by Rapiere LeFou and began to read about dueling etiquette. *The delicate and subtle art of dueling is not a fight, but a dance...*

"I do not wish to."

"Nonsense, Severus. You will."

"It's not a case of unrequited hate, Albus. Both sides are fully reciprocating."

Too late. Scruffy black hair replaced a white beard, and smiles containing iron-clad beneficence gave way to something bordering on a scowl.

"Potter."

"Professor."

Damn those eyes of his. Severus tried to focus on what he could see of the tomato vines in the background.

"How are Ron and Hermione? *Sir?*"

"Still alive at last sighting. I make no guarantees."

"Make sure nothing happens to them."

"That's the plan, Potter. They shall remain sequestered and wrapped in cotton wool until such time as Professor Dumbledore sees fit. This has been drilled into your skull before, or has the lovely Mediterranean air pulled it out of you?"

"I'm concerned about my *friends*, Professor. People I *care about*."

Severus's fingers itched to throttle the adolescent snideness out of him. "Touching, Potter."

Potter glared at him before vanishing from the mirror. Dumbledore reappeared to give Severus a weary look full of reproach.

"I should not have to remind *you*, Severus, of how it hurts to be terrified for the ones you love. Good day to you." With that, the mirror went blank.

But in a way you do have to remind me, Albus Severus thought, slashing the mirror to wisps of sliver. *It's a tug on the leash, ensuring that it is still connected to the collar at my throat. A collar of red hair and green eyes and pleading with someone I hated.*

Growling to himself, he reached for the glass of firewhisky sitting on the coffee-table and downed it in one swig. It burned away his resentment for the time, clearing his head to the task at hand.

Severus picked up a quill and a length of parchment and began to write a curriculum outline. After all, just because he was using dueling training to trick Granger didn't mean he was going to go about it badly. She was infinitely more useful if well-trained.

The coffee in her mug trembled as Ron's bedroom door slammed shut. Hermione stayed utterly still, staring resolutely at the bricks in the fireplace as she had all through Ron's ranting.

"...did you think it would be a fucking experiment or something? Are all the boys you've shagged variables to be plugged into some bloody Arithmancy equation?"

She had apologized only for any inadvertent misleading on her part, but getting him to see any side but his own was impossible. Eventually she had shut down, simply repeating "I'm sorry," when he stopped for breath. Screaming, she decided, was a show of weakness, a loss of control. She was tired of losing control.

And she didn't want to give him the idea that he had upset her. It might fool him into thinking that she regretted her actions, rather than their consequences. She would wait, calm and focused, until he had burnt out his anger and could see reason.

At least I'll have Snape to talk to, she thought, reaching for the coffee. It was warm and soothing, washing away the anger and hurt Ron had left her with. Sighing into the steam, she placed the mug back on the table and stood. She avoided the edge of the table as she stepped over to the nearest bookshelf; previous carelessness in that area was evident in a fading bruise on her shin.

This bookshelf yielded exactly what the other ones had: nothing more on dueling. She had quickly read and cast aside LeFou's book, as it reminded her strongly of *Defensive Magical Theory*. She would simply have to face Snape next week with her wits and what she remembered from the second-year Dueling Club and the DA.

There was a dearth of Dark Arts books as well, Defense Against or otherwise. Hermione set her hands on her hips, glaring at the spines. It was passing peculiar for Dumbledore to have ignored such books, especially during a time of war.

Ignored, she wondered, deigning *A Spell for Every Occasion* close enough for her needs and pulling it off the shelf. *ignored or withheld?*

Another question for Snape. She considered writing them all down, but demurred when she pictured Snape's face should she draw out a list of questions next week. Shaking her head in exasperation over the men she had to deal with, Hermione went to her reading.

She spent most of the following week reading and making notes of anything that seemed remotely useful. A list of all the spells she knew was created Saturday afternoon after drinking slightly more coffee than usual. She spent Sunday and Monday selecting and re-copying the ones that could conceivably be used in battle.

Only twice did she run into Ron, their mealtimes having mysteriously become out of sync and all other hours spent in separate rooms. The first time was as she stepped out of the bathroom after a shower. Ron saw her towel-clad form, went red as the Gryffindor banner, and ducked back into his room before she could venture more than a smile.

The second time was actually more embarrassing than the first, but for her rather than him.

By Monday, Hermione was in the habit of checking the broom shed to see if one of the Comet Two-Sixties was gone. This would, of course, signal that she had the house and garden to herself for the foreseeable future.

This morning, it was still there, but it had company.

Ron hadn't noticed her, of that she was sure, but the sight of him slumped against the wall with his fist pumping over his cock was not one that left her mind quickly. She couldn't help but wonder, as she fled down the flagstone path to the cottage, whom he was picturing as he groaned to the empty shed.

By the way he went red the next time they bumped into each other in the hall (fully clothed), she was sure it had not been Lavender Brown.

The memory still lingered on Thursday when she hiked into the woods to meet Snape. Hermione shuddered and tried to focus on birdsong and leaves. It would not do to duel with Snape while distracted by wanking Ron.

"At last."

Granger smiled cheerily at him despite his rude greeting, padding over the mossy ground to where he stood under the apple tree.

"Good morning, Professor," she said. A curl had escaped her ponytail and she brushed it out of her eyes, blinking up at him in a manner entirely too bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for his liking. It would be just his luck if she was a fucking morning person.

Growling inwardly, he resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose.

"By arriving you have agreed to undertake this task. You continue now at your risk," he said.

She blinked under his glare, but her voice was calm.

"I understand, Professor."

No, not really, Granger, but it will do.

Now he could begin. With care to making the movement unstudied, he began unbuttoning his frock coat, caressing the black buttons as he slid them through their holes. It was the subtle things, he knew, that lasted with women; a certain glance or movement or intonation in the voice. All it took was one detail to linger in her mind as she lay alone in bed and he had a foot in the door.

He undid three buttons before speaking.

"Miss Granger, where do you normally keep your wand?"

She frowned, and he saw her right arm twitch toward her back trouser pocket. It was all the answer he needed, but she clearly didn't recognize the telling movement.

"In my back pocket, sir, unless I'm sitting or lying down, in which case it usually goes on the couch or table next to me. I tried keeping it in the front pocket, but---"

"You should not keep it in your pockets at all." Button, this one at his navel. Her eyes flicked to the white tee-shirt he was wearing underneath as it peeked from beneath the black wool.

"In your pockets," he continued, "it may be lost, stolen, or broken. It is clearly visible and completely unsecure." Next button at the waist. With any luck, the silver on his belt buckle would catch her eye.

"Observe." With that, he undid the last button, which lay over his groin, and slid his coat off, presenting his left arm for her inspection.

"Oh. I see," she said, peering at the leather-and-elastic contrivance on his forearm. Two slim straps held a wider piece of leather against the back of his arm; it ran from elbow to wrist, ending just inside the joints. His wand was held by three loops of black elastic, its handle stopping just short of the back of his hand. She studied it, muttering her analysis aloud.

"Hm... well, I suppose it's hidden this way, since most wizards wear long sleeves, and it doesn't look as though it will fall out. But I've heard wizards who carry their wands up their sleeves place them on the inside of their arm, so why is yours on the outside, sir?"

"It's easier to wear and less obstructive."

"How so?"

She always wanted proof, this one. It wasn't a bad trait, exactly, but it was bloody annoying sometimes.

"You might enjoy having the inside of your elbow constantly poked, but most people do not." He bent and straightened his arm, demonstrating the freedom of movement. "Discomfort is distracting. Distraction is death."

Her mouth formed a neat "O".

"Your body matters in war, Granger." *In so many ways, you poor, pretty girl.* "Remember that."

From a pocket of his coat, he took a similar contraption and handed it to her. It was not dyed black, as his was, but was simple brown leather. "Spell it to fit and then we'll begin. Do not let me catch you putting your name or any foolish decoration upon it."

A snort of disbelief escaped her, though her concentration on her Shrinking Spell did not waver.

"I'm not stupid, Professor."

"We shall see. Ready?"

"Er, I did have some questions for you, sir," she stammered as he swept past her to take a position several meters away, "regarding Headmaster Dumbledore and Harry."

"Later! Now, a test run. Nothing harmful this round, though I doubt you know too many damaging spells. Begin!"

Predictably, she bowed.

Lockhart will get more people killed...

"*Expelliarmus!*"

Head over heels she went, into a shrub. Catching her wand as it fell, Severus sauntered to her struggling form.

"Rule number one: anything Lockhart says is stupid. Anyone who believes otherwise is also stupid. Get up, Granger. This is war, not second-year playtime."

With a groan, the girl got to her feet. Her hair was now bushy in both senses of the word. She grimaced as she extracted a twig and some leaves.

"I'm *sorry*," she muttered. "There weren't any books in the cottage except LeFou and he concurred with Lockhart on bowing before duels."

"Duels, yes," he snarled, thrusting her wand at her, "which are poncy, dancing-about, mine-is-bigger contests for ego-stroking. What I am teaching you is fighting, and it is not polite. There are no rules except to survive."

"You might have said so." Glaring at him, she snatched the wand from his hand, giving it a quick going-over, presumably to check for sabotage.

"Come. Again."

With a last mutinous look, she turned to move away.

"*Electrois!*"

A thin bolt of lightning streaked from his wand to singe away a chunk of her hair and send the rest of it crackling into a cloud.

"What the--?"

"Never turn your back on an enemy!"

"Why you...*Rictusempra!*"

He blocked her spell easily, but there was force behind it. Not surprising, if the brilliant flush of anger across her face was any indication. She didn't let up, either, sending a Stinging Hex immediately after it. He dodged instead of blocking to allow himself a retaliatory hex.

Three more attacks each and she was sent flying into the creek. She had held out fairly well, he thought as she emerged, spluttering, from the water. But then, he hadn't been throwing even half his abilities at her, a decision he'd made after much thought. When she inevitably got cocky, he would have something in reserve to show her how much she truly did not know.

"What was that spell you used two rounds ago?" she asked, wringing out her hair onto her soaked tee-shirt. "The one with the bright orange mist?"

"A Poison Air curse," he said, making a mental note to try to aim for the creek with all future force spells. Her wet clothes draped in a lovely manner.

"Oh! I read about that in fifth year. It was invented during World War One by wizards working undercover in the army, to replicate the appearance and effects of mustard gas," she rattled off, eyes shining like a Labrador that had brought in the morning paper. Her wet clothes seemed to be forgotten in favor of spouting drivel.

"It was invented by Brigadier Malat Mosphère---"

"You know," he said, blissfully silencing her for a moment, "I don't need to teach you dueling."

"Sir?"

"You can bore your opponents to death with useless information."

"Useless, sir?" Her eyes narrowed, and she planted her hands on her hips, jerking her chin obstinately. "I was going to say that the spell can be easily evaded by use of a Bubble-head charm or, barring that, a handkerchief over the mouth and nose, which is useless information, I'm sure, if you're feeling suicidal that morning."

"Hmph."

Smiling a little, she commenced magically drying herself off, one article of clothing at a time.

"If we're at a pause, sir, I have some questions for you."

He lifted an eyebrow. There was an assumption behind her tone of being guaranteed to get answers.

"You're in no position to demand information, Miss Granger---"

"Actually, I feel I am." Finished with her drying spells (she had, for some reason, ignored her dripping hair), she crossed her arms and looked up at him, radiating self-righteous innocence from her wide brown eyes.

"To withhold information from me is to place me, and thus my duties, in jeopardy. I need to know everything possible about the current situation if I'm not to make mistakes out of ignorance. As a spy, sir, I'm sure you're aware of this precaution."

The problem with know-it-alls was that they were so bloody often right. Molars in Severus' mouth ached as he clenched his jaw.

"If you must."

She grinned, and he steeled himself for the interrogation of a lifetime.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 11

Everybody learns slightly more than they wanted to know, but not as much as they need.

AN: As always, thanks to astopperindeath for fixing the things my writer-brain missed. Also thanks to the ghost of John Milton for not haunting me in revenge.

Chapter 6

Each perturbation smoothed with outward calm,

Artificer of fraud; and was the first

That practised falsehood under saintly show

~Paradise Lost, Book IV

"So Harry's in Italy? Lucky." Hermione drummed her fingers against her thigh, trying to think of anything else to ask Severus.

She'd been right about Harry and Dumbledore. Apparently Italy was a very safe place at the moment. Voldemort had tried and failed to gain purchase there during the first war. While pure-blood prominence was a popular idea amongst the ancient blood of the Italians, doing anything to harm the legions of Muggle touristas was not.

"Are we quite done, Miss Granger? I have things to do, many of them unpleasant even in comparison to this."

"One more question, actually," she said, and smirked as he heaved a long-suffering groan.

"Why are there no books on the Dark Arts or dueling in the cottage here?"

"I...don't know," he said. He looked...startled, surprised, two emotions she had never seen on him.

"It makes our task a bit tricky, don't you think?"

"Yes. Well," he said, "should it come to it, I have a very large collection of such books at my home."

"You...you would grant me access to your library?"

He snorted, and the excitement that had flared up in her wilted.

"Indeed not, unless truly extraordinary circumstances gave me no choice. Any volumes I require you to read, I will bring here. Now," he continued, drawing his wand, "I really must be leaving."

He sketched out the portal and left without another word.

"Good day to you, too," she muttered. She turned on her heel and stalked back towards the cottage.

As she stepped through the front door, she heard Ron's voice in the sitting room. He stopped talking when the door, heavy and oaken, closed with a thud.

"Hermione?"

"Who else?" She looked into the living room, curious as to what would make Ron call out to her.

"Harry!"

Both of the boys winced at her squeal of greeting. Ron was sprawled on the hearthrug, taking up as much space as possible with his lanky limbs. Harry was peering through a mid-air widow exactly like the one Severus had used to call upon Dumbledore the week before. Behind him, she saw white stucco walls, bathed in sun. He was rather pink around the cheeks and nose, and the latter was peeling a bit.

"Oh, Harry, how are you? We were worried when you weren't here with us, but Dumbledore's letter explained that you were safe. Have you talked to anyone else? Do you know anything about what's going on?"

"Hermione," Harry said, laughing, "hold on a second."

"Sorry," she said. "But I have been worried."

"I'm fine, really. I'm over in Italy looking for Horcruxes."

"Looking for them?" Ron said, frowning. "Is there one over there?"

"No. I'm just piecing together the clues." His face clouded over. "Just doing the paperwork, and then it all gets relayed to S...someone and they do the actual hunting and destroying, while I stay here, nice and safe."

He spat the last words. Hermione was reminded of a lion at the London Zoo, pacing its enclosure and growling at passing birds.

"And at least you two have each other to talk to and whatnot,"...Hermione and Ron exchanged awkward glances..."I'm stuck here by myself, and I don't speak any bloody Italian. It must be really bloody nice to not be me and to be allowed to at least live without D...people breathing down your neck and keeping you wrapped in cotton wool--,"

"Harry, stop it, mate."

Ron's voice, firm but quiet, put a pause in Harry's rant.

"Let's not repeat fifth year, eh?" Ron continued. "It's not our fault, and at least you knew a bit more about what the bloody hell was going on."

"We don't like this any more than you do, Harry. You know that," Hermione said.

It was nice to be united with Ron again, even if it was uncomfortable and probably momentary.

Harry sighed. "Sorry. But I've really no one to talk to and everything I say gets something about 'it's all for the best'. It's just...I thought he trusted us to make our own decisions, after he..." Another storm cloud rolled over his features.

No one had to ask who "he" was.

"We'll figure something out, see if we can get out or help you somehow," Ron said. "Or Hermione will, anyway, and you and I will do as she says."

That got a weak laugh from all three of them.

Harry glanced to his left, and nodded to someone outside the mirror's view. "I've got to go," he said, and Hermione heard a mountain of resentment in his voice. "I'll try to talk to you guys soon, but we're right on the brink of discovering where some damn teacup is, so I can't say when I'll be free."

"Okay. We'll try to find a break somewhere between sitting around and doing nothing so we can pencil you in." Ron's infectious grin was back in force, and they all shared it.

"Goodbye, Harry. Please don't do anything heroic and stupid."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Hermione. Bye."

The sunny scene turned to a mirror and then winked out, leaving Hermione in the same room with Ron for the first time in a week.

He coughed. "Well, I...I think I'll go get some lunch." He got to his feet and paused to study the rug next to his trainer.

"I'll join you, I think," she said. She went to the door, and looked back to see if he was following.

"We're... okay, then?"

"Yes, Ron. We're okay."

We really have no choice. With the fate of the wizarding world resting on Harry and Dumbledore...a restive teenager and an idealistic schemer...it was no time to make enemies of one's friends. It was no time, in short, to be alone.

Severus stared at his sitting room, empty but for books and his cooling coffee.

Dumbledore had said he'd be in contact by Saturday afternoon, and here it was Sunday morning. The clunky church-bell tolled eleven, probably shaking bits of plaster onto the heads of those few who still attended. It wasn't a town to inspire much faith in fellow humans, much less anything you couldn't see.

Lily had attended, every Sunday when she wasn't at Hogwarts. He'd gone with her once, in the summer before fifth year. The shining happiness in her face as she sang the hymns and recited the psalms had made him ache for what he could never have. Always aspire to, in some corner of his mind, but never attain.

With a growl, he seized the coffee mug and downed its lukewarm contents in a gulp. A dark sludge of sugar and silt, oversweet and muddy, hit his tongue and he grimaced as he swallowed it.

And then his arm *burned*.

"*Accio mask!*" It was a routine he had long ago got used to: drop everything and go. Loyalty and punctuality were rewarded by the Dark Lord.

The air shimmered; a mirror appeared. "Severus? Are you--,"

"Not now, Albus!" he bellowed, snatching the silver mask from the air and placing it to his face. It shifted, molded, and attached itself to his brow, leaving his mouth uncovered.

He took a precious second to look Dumbledore full in the face, to see the silver mask reflected in his half-moon spectacles.

Dumbledore nodded solemnly. "When you can, then, my boy. Good luck."

Clutching his arm and feeling it tug him to the Dark Lord, Severus spun and let it pull him to his Master.

He reappeared in a circular room. Stone walls covered in empty portrait frames surrounded him, pierced by an occasional window that let in the summer sunlight.

Voldemort stood next to a huge oak desk, examining an intricate globe made of brass cogs, which clicked and spun to a rhythm all their own. To his right, Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestrange held Minerva McGonagall against the wall, their wands pressed to her throat.

"Ah, Severus," Voldemort said, "thank you for joining us. I do hope my summons did not interrupt your breakfast?"

His red eyes were focused on Severus' left hand. Severus followed his gaze to find his empty coffee mug.

"I apologize, my Lord," he said, dropping to one knee and placing the cup on the ground. "I was eager to obey your summons."

The mug exploded, snowing ceramic shards. Severus felt the heat of the spell on his face.

"Your zeal is commendable. Stand."

Severus obeyed, trying hard not to look at Minerva. She seemed unhurt, and he could have bounced Galleons off her rigid spine. Proud to the end. An end that he hoped he could delay.

"I believe you know our host, Severus. Deputy Headmistress and Head of Gryffindor House, Professor Minerva McGonagall."

He was always so polite. It was always so terrifying. "Well, my Lord."

"Obviously, she will no longer be useful Headmistress of Hogwarts. The question is, Severus, will she be of use at all?"

Severus stared back at that unblinking red gaze and tried to work out how to save her.

"My Lord, she is an excellent Transfiguration teacher."

Voldemort studied Minerva with his head cocked to one side, toying with his wand. The pose was so calculating, Severus half expected him to examine her teeth.

"But she has a history of being ferociously loyal to Albus, and, I would suspect, continues this in his memory. I will not endanger my plans by harboring possible traitors." His demonic gaze returned to Severus, not implacable, but in need of very good reasons.

You could cut the irony with a knife, Severus thought. Aloud, he said, "My Lord, she is very protective of her students, particularly the Gryffindors."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning she will not risk their well-being for personal vendettas. If she thinks...knows...that her obedience, and only that, will keep them safe, then she will bow to you. The other professors will follow her example."

Voldemort considered Minerva for an interminable moment. She stared straight back at him, though her face was white and drawn; Severus could see her hands shaking at her sides. Her bold front was a gamble. Either the Dark Lord would be impressed with her courage or offended at her defiance.

"A mind is a terrible thing to waste, I suppose," he said at last. Severus suppressed an exhalation of relief.

"Step aside," he said, gesturing the Lestranges out of the way. "Now, Professor McGonagall, to seal this bargain, I think you should fulfill Severus' promise: that you will bow before me."

She stood ramrod straight, eyes glittering hatred.

"Bow, I said." He was hissing now, the sibilant sound chilling in the absolute silence.

If possible, her chin went a little higher.

"Severus, if you would?" Voldemort stepped back, and extended his arm.

I'm sorry, Minerva. Damn her Gryffindor pride.

Severus leveled his wand at Minerva, and she turned to face him, lips thin and hard.

"*Imperio!*"

She twitched as the spell took hold, eyes now blank and empty, jaw slack. Severus swallowed his disgust at the sight, hating himself for doing this to her.

Bow, Minerva. Bow to your master. He bore down on her with his thoughts, battling his will against hers. She fought him bravely, but the spell did its work. Vertebrae by vertebrae, her back bent and bowed her before Voldemort.

"Who says an old dog can't learn new tricks?" Voldemort's high laugh, joined quickly by Bellatrix's mad cackle, pierced the air as Severus released her from the spell. She straightened, her back creaking.

"Crucio!"

The only warning had been the cessation of his laugh, and now Minerva writhed against the wall at the point of Voldemort's wand. Severus stared at the oak desk, trying to block out her cries of agony.

"You will bow when I command it," Voldemort hissed. "You will live when I allow it. And you will die when I wish it."

She collapsed into a tartan heap when he released her, gasping for breath.

"Come," he said, as calmly as if he not just tortured an elderly witch. "There are other things to deal with. To the Manor."

Severus did not allow himself to stay.

They appeared outside Malfoy Manor, upon a long, manicured path lined with tall hedges.

"You dealt with the old bitch perfectly, my Lord." That was Bellatrix, looking at Voldemort with hot eyes and parted lips. Rodolphus stared stoically at the path ahead of them, ignoring his wife's blatant lust. Severus suspected that no love was lost between the couple; if snake-babies started popping out of her, it was likely that Rodolphus would not blink. She moved closer to Voldemort, heaving deep breaths that forced her breasts tightly against their scanty enclosures.

"Calm yourself, Bella," Voldemort murmured. "You are making a scene."

She flushed an ugly mauve and looked away.

"I shall fly to the Manor. Join me in the skies, Severus." With that, Voldemort lifted from the ground like a bat out of hell, black robes swirling in the wind as he rose fifty feet.

Severus drew his wand and muttered, "*Corpus avis*." He jumped and the spell caught him midair, lifting him until he was level with the Dark Lord.

"Nothing dampens her cunt like torture," Voldemort remarked, gazing down at the witch on the ground, who had turned her predatory attention to her husband.

Severus declined to comment on the state of Bellatrix's cunt. Instead, he asked, "Was there a private matter you wished to discuss with me, my Lord?"

"I require a Headmaster for Hogwarts, Severus."

Fuck.

Hours later, Severus Apparated into his sitting room. The couch coughed up a puff of dust as he collapsed onto it, head in his hands.

"*Accio whiskey.*"

He snatched the bottle from the air and ripped out the glass stopper, flinging it across the room. Gulping the liquor down was like drinking turpentine.

"Severus?"

He had forgot the mirror that hung in the air. As he glared up at it, Albus's face came into view, concern etched in every line.

"I have news, *Headmaster*," Severus spat. "Oh, sorry, would you care for a drink first?" He waved the bottle in Albus's face. "You might need it."

"Severus, what is going on?" His soft voice was unusually sharp.

"More for me, then." Severus took another swig. "Well, Albus," he said, rasping slightly from the burning alcohol, "what is going on is the Dark Lord needs a new Headmaster for Hogwarts. Minerva's job interview didn't go so well, so he wants a lovely Death Eater to churn out little minions with each diploma."

Albus might be old, but he was still quick. "You?"

"Possibly. I am, and I quote, 'a top contender.'"

"Who are the others?"

"The Dark Lord did not bless me with that information." Severus stared at the amber whiskey, sloshing it back and forth in its bottle. "But whoever they are, I suggest you hurry up and find the remaining Horcruxes."

"Why?"

"Because I refuse to be Headmaster of bloody Hogwarts."

"Severus, it would be for the cause, for the best..."

"I do not want to be drawn further into your plots and plans, Albus!" Severus snarled. "I do not wish to be another lapdog in that school, to be the blame and locus of hatred for every parent and every student. I'm having a hard enough time staying alive as it is without worrying the house-elves will stab me in my sleep with the steak knives!"

"Severus!" Albus's voice was cold, now, cold as it had been seventeen years ago when he had looked down at a young man begging for a woman's life.

"You will do it, if he asks you. I know you will."

Such faith, Albus. Touching "We shall see. Perhaps he won't pick me. I will endeavor to make myself useful to him in other ways."

"Indeed. Now, I do have some good news." Back to the sunny, smiling man with twinkling eyes.

"Do tell." Severus considered the whiskey, and then he placed it to the side. It was warming his veins well already.

"We have found the location of the locket."

"Let me guess...I get to pick it up? Cash on delivery?"

Albus sighed. "Mundungus Fletcher has it, we think. Use your contacts to meet with him, and yes, Severus, you will have to pay for it. And before you bemoan your financial situation," he added, seeing Severus's scowl, "I will Floo you the money once you have secured a meeting."

"Very well. What do I to destroy it? Drop it down the loo?"

"The Sword of Gryffindor, which hangs in my office--,"

Tacky fucking cleaver, Severus thought, suppressing a tipsy snigger.

"...will destroy it with a blow. Or, you can cast Fiendfyre, though I would do so from a distance and with plenty of water on hand."

"Very well," Severus said, standing up and nodding emphatically. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to piss. Good day, Albus."

One last sigh of resignation and then the mirror scattered. Severus considered the empty air where it had been, then reached for the bottle again. A hot bath to mull things over sounded nice. Pity there wasn't enough whiskey to bathe in, but so it went.

With the exaggerated care of the inebriated, Severus headed for the toilet.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 11

Dueling, and the first stirs of temptation.

AN: Hope you all had lovely holidays! Here's chapter seven, all shiny and nice. Continued thanks to astopperindeath.

Chapter 7

O sacred, wise, and wisdom-giving plant,

Mother of science, now I feel thy power

Within me clear

~Paradise Lost, Book IX

The world conspired to distract Hermione this day.

To her right, stacked on a dry log, the stack of books that Snape had brought whispered to her. They were bound in black and red, the leather looking as though a dragon had a go at them several centuries earlier. A dark halo indicated the protective spells Snape had placed upon them.

To her left, Snape. He was taking off his coat. His long fingers lingered over each button, just as they had lingered over her nipples the night before; he had twisted and tugged with his hand as his mouth licked and nipped...

In her mind, at least. With her fingers pumping in and out of her cunt as she alternated between pinching her nipples and rubbing her clit, biting back the moans that the fantasy of Snape above her, touching her, fucking her incited...

...and now she smelt singed hair as she hurled herself to the ground. It had only been a flash of lightning at the corner of her sight, but it had been enough to set off her reflexes.

"To quote Alastor Moody: Constant vigilance. Get up." Cool and calm, as always, his voice still communicated fathoms of disdain. He hung his coat over a branch as she warily got to her feet.

"You cannot afford distraction when working with Dark spells, Miss Granger," he added. "Lose concentration again, even for a moment, and I remove those books immediately."

"I'm sorry, sir." *Stop purring your words, please, sir.*

He gave a curt nod and then snapped, "Duel!"

It was all the warning she ever got. The past two lessons of pure dueling had taught her that.

Hermione sent a Quagmire Jinx at his feet and used the few seconds his subsequent floundering bought her to dive behind a thick oak tree.

"Reducto!"

Half the tree vanished in a cloud of sawdust and scorched wood.

Oh, well. New hiding place, then...

She shot out from behind the tree in an awkward, crouching run. *"Missile enchant!"* she cried repeatedly and, in the corner of her eye, saw Snape duck and block the balls of white light. Cover fire might do little harm, but it kept him from retaliating for vital seconds as she found a boulder and threw herself to the ground.

"Stay alive until you can think properly," he'd told her last week.

A few seconds. Nothing.

She peeked over the top of the boulder.

Snape had vanished.

It was bloody annoying when he did that.

Hermione edged around the boulder, knees bent and head low. The rough rock snagged at her shirt, and a few stings told her she was leaving hairs behind, but keeping her back to it was imperative.

A sound. Not hers.

She froze.

Where is he? She saw nothing in the woods, no sign of him anywhere. The birds resumed their tweeting as she crouched next to the boulder. It could have been any picturesque forest that did not contain a very dangerous opponent. She, however, knew better than to relax. He'd scolded her roundly the week before for letting her guard down after he'd fled into the trees, seemingly in retreat.

A long, dark shadow slid over her head, and she knew it was over.

The wand that pressed into the soft flesh at the base of her ear was a formality.

"Yield."

Her spine tingled from the silk in his voice even as she dropped her wand and raised her hands. "I yield."

The wand relented.

"You can do better, Granger, and I expect better next week."

He was sprawled over the top of the boulder like an indolent panther. She glared at him before retrieving her wand from the moss. Another duel, another loss.

A few minutes later, she and Snape were seated on the log. She stared at his wand hand as he inscribed burning red lines in the air over the books. His supple wrist glided through the complex motions as though oiled, drawing whorls of red magic that turned into a tangled knot. He flicked his wand, and the line disconnected like an errant hair flicked from a finger, leaving a nebula of red hanging in the air.

The dark halo surrounding the books shimmered and dissolved, floating up to the knot like rain reversed. Once it had absorbed all of the magic, the knot imploded.

Severus delicately picked up the top book and opened it. He paged through for a minute, frowning in search, before settling on a page and proffering the open book to her.

It tingled in her hands, though whether it was an effect of the book or her nervousness at holding something so obviously Dark, she didn't know. It was different than the books of Dark theory and potions that she had read at Hogwarts. This book had power and malicious intent woven into its binding. She wanted to fling it away and *Scourgify* her hands of the blood that the red binding surely left on the palms of good people.

"Now, before performing any Dark spells, you must ensure..."

"*Performing?*" Birds took flight at the shrillness of her voice. She stared at Snape, flabbergasted.

Snape's lip curled. "They are of little use otherwise."

"But," she said, mentally flailing as she tried to formulate a cohesive sentence, "I thought you would merely teach me the theory of Dark spells, or advanced defense methods, or something like that. I can't actually cast these spells, they're dreadful..."

"Silence!"

"No!"

It was out of her mouth before she could stop it, and her point-blank refusal stunned Snape for a second. She seized the opportunity to restate her case.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I want to know why. I've read about the effects of Dark magic on the caster, and they reminded me quite a bit of a Muggle drug called heroin...pleasant for the moment, but very addictive and with numerous repercussions. Give me good reasons, Professor, because using these spells, even in practice, frankly scares the shit out of me." She took a deep breath and met his eyes steadily. *No more outbursts*, she promised herself. *No matter how much this scares you, no more outbursts.*

"That was better," he said at length.

The world also wanted to confuse the hell out of her.

He smirked at her and continued, "Granger, had you expressed enthusiasm for these spells, I would have seriously questioned your morals and, by extension, your suitability as Potter's bodyguard. Yes, these are dangerous spells to cast, but as I was going to say, you must prepare yourself against their siren call."

"As for why you need them," he added, standing up from the log and drawing his wand, "well, no Death Eater will expect a friend of Harry Potter to throw Dark spells back at them."

He meant her to use these spells in battle. These spells which killed and maimed and tormented.

But dead is dead, isn't it? a very Snape-like voice in her head purred. *Better them than you.*

And she could not deny that under misgivings and fears, curiosity burned.

"All right," she whispered, more to herself than him. "But only one for now, please."

A slow nod was his response. She stood up and, balancing the open book in her left hand, drew her wand.

"The first spell on page two hundred and seventy-three. Read the incantation aloud, slowly."

She bent her head to the book, repressing a hysterical smile at the heavy, Gothic lettering. Dark wizards were so melodramatic. The font made the spell, which seemed to be in either Italian or Arabic, nearly impossible to read and pronounce. Snape critiqued her as she went, mentioning that the "ah" was to be said "asch" and any "e" with an accent mark over it was long, not short. Over and over they went until she had it burned into her memory and it slid honey-smooth off her tongue.

"Now, free your hands and stand over there." He pointed to a patch of bare rock next to the stream bank. Hermione placed the book on the log with great care before moving.

"Aim at the water. When speaking the incantation, think of heat. Intense, burning, consuming heat."

"Sir?"

"Yes?"

She swallowed. "What will it feel like?"

He cocked his head and pursed his lips. "I cannot describe it, exactly. But it will feel very, very, good, Granger."

Talk about consuming heat. Pushing thoughts of her newly-throbbing groin from her mind, Hermione stared at the water and began.

Fire and a kettle. Lava, pouring out of a volcano. The blaze of lust pulsing through her as she touched herself. Hermione focused, enunciating the words as images flew through her mind. Ron's hot temper, flaring up over the least little thing; the heat of the hob she'd touched as a child, searing her finger and making her cry out...

And pleasure shot through her, emanating from her wand hand like a misplaced orgasm. She gasped at the sensation, the incantation turning into an ecstatic chant of pure pleasure. The pulsing of her cunt was fueled by it, distracting her; her body begged to be touched and rubbed and satisfied. It was nothing like the fleeting pleasure of her activities the night before. She craved *more*. It refused her need and faded away, leaving her breathless and hugely, ridiculously, turned on.

"Look at the water, Granger."

She hadn't been aware of closing her eyes, but she opened them and looked.

The water seethed in the stream. It bubbled and roiled. Steam rose in great puffs, clouding the air and making her hair grow damp.

"It's a boiling spell?" She could not keep the incredulity from her voice. All this effort and drama to boil water?

"Essentially." Snape stood beside her, watching the boiling water slowly simmer down. "However, unlike most boiling spells, this one is not limited to water."

She stared at him. "So, if this were cast on a person... their blood...?"

He nodded.

Maybe two weeks ago she would have been sick at the thought. But now she just said, "Oh." Her pulsing loins seemed a distant matter, and her body a traitor to her cause.

"It is a remarkable sensation, is it not?"

"What...oh, yes. It's...yes."

"Like sex."

"No," she murmured, with a slow shake of her head.

"You're right." She looked over at him. "Like sex should be, I think."

She nodded. "I've read about this. The feeling comes from the power of the spell. It isn't controlled the way power in Light spells is; it's very raw and primal. The earliest spells were, by our current definitions, Dark, but wizards learned to control the power, to tame it..."

"Though not to resist it," he said after she trailed off into silence. "Humans, magical or no, are always drawn to that which feels good, whether magic, drugs, or other people. And very often," he continued, hating himself for the quote that was lining up on his tongue, "as Dumbledore has said, it is those things we most want which do us the most harm."

She gave a rueful smile, still staring at the stilled water. The spell must have deeply affected her for her to miss his sex comparison. Maybe he'd misinterpreted the hungry looks she'd given him earlier.

But it had been hard not to think of the seduction, and sex, when he'd seen the sinful bliss on her face as the spell went through her. The lovely oval of her parted lips, breasts heaving, eyes drifting shut as twisted light shot from her wand. He knew the sensation well, and watching her evoked in his mind the first time he'd cast a Dark spell. There had been come inside his pants afterward.

Watching her and remembering that had made him hard as hell. Time for a distraction for both of them.

"Granger?"

"Yes?"

"Duel!"

Maybe it was the lingering traces of the new Dark power, but she did not run for cover as he aimed and fired a Stunner at her. No, she blocked it easily (silently, too), and shot a jinx right back at him.

He ducked and overbalanced. Catching himself of a nearby rock, he saved himself in time to deflect another spell...but only just. She had the upper hand, and she knew it. Spell after spell flew at him, and he caught sight of a grin on her face more suited to a raiding corsair.

He did so hate it when his students got cocky. Blocking her spells, and getting off one or two of his own, Severus edged towards the stream bank, looking for a sandy beach that would be soft on a fall.

"*Expelliarmus!*"

He stepped into the beam of red light that streamed from her wand. It was like being kicked by a centaur. The air was thrown from his lungs as he slammed into the sand, and he knew his wand probably now soared through the air to land in her hand. He did the best he could to ensure his wand hand hit the sand near his face, palm down.

All right, Granger, let's see how you deal with a disarmed enemy. The grit of the bank crusted his face and slid into his hair, but he lay still, waiting for her.

Cautious footsteps. A shadow over him. But nothing touched him.

"Yield."

I think not. Grasping a handful of sand in his right hand, he twisted and flung it at her face. She cried out and stumbled back, shaking her head and rubbing her eyes.

He leapt up and tackled her to the ground, wrestling the wands from her. She fought instinctively, wriggling and kicking, but he was stronger, and she was blinded. It took but a minute for the wands to be in his hands and at her throat.

"Yield, Granger."

She struggled, writhing underneath him. Tackling her, he reflected as his trousers tightened, might not have been wise. He could not help but be aware of how soft she was. Various situations in which she was writhing under him of her own free will arose in his mind...

"Yield, dammit!"

"All right! I yield." Her kicks and bucks stopped, somewhat to his disappointment, and she lay still aside from her heaving breaths. "Now get off, please. You're heavy."

His balls were vociferous in their threats to turn blue for the remainder of the day, but Severus rolled off her and got to his feet. He took care to face away from her and immediately strode back to the log where his blessedly long coat was laid.

As he started doing up the buttons, she appeared beside him, flushed, panting, disheveled, which did nothing to assuage the burn in his groin.

"So, Professor," she said, freeing her hair from its braid to smooth the flyaways back into submission, "what lesson shall I take from that round?"

Don't tackle an attractive young woman unless you plan to do something with her in so doing Composing himself, he looked down at her and saw a smirk not unlike his own adorning her lips. He bit back a surge of panic at the thought that she might have noticed his physical reaction. He could not afford to appear uncontrolled, even in this; the seduction had to be deliberate, the power always in his hands.

He scowled to cover his consternation. "Anything is a weapon, Granger. Do not assume that an opponent without a wand is harmless, especially if dealing with a Death Eater." Bellatrix's little daggers, one on each wrist, came to mind, along with a vivid memory of them flying through the air toward a helpless Muggle woman...

"Anything is a weapon," she said. "Duly noted, sir. And for next week, is there anything I should do?" To the Dark books her eyes flicked. As subtle as a jackhammer, all cleverness aside.

Severus drew his wand and cast a few more spells over the books, rendering them mostly harmless. "Read those for next week. Memorize ten spells, but do not actually cast them. And if you drool on the books, I will hex you all around this blasted fairy-tale forest, is that clear?"

A manic grin spread over her face, and she bounced on her toes slightly. He had no doubt that had he been Professor McGonagall, he would have received a throttling hug.

"Yes, sir! Thank you so much, sir!"

"Hmph. Next week, then, Granger."

She scooped up the books and clutched them to her chest. "Next week, sir. And, sir?"

"What?" His wand paused in midair, about to start the incantation for the portal.

"Be careful."

"Thanks ever so for the reminder, Granger. Would you like to write it on my hand to ensure I don't forget?"

She chuckled, and then she turned to go. She must be getting used to his jibes; a month ago she would have cringed and looked away.

The dank air of his town slapped him in the face when he stepped through the portal. Here, Granger's body was more distant, her laugh less charming, and his plan still solid. It was easy to be cold here. But in that paradise Albus had made...

He told himself it was an effect of that enchanted cocoon and not in any way of Granger's tits or arse or smile that his cock still strained against his trousers. The place warmed him, lulled him, just as it was meant to lull the two young people living in it. He was the seducer, and he would have the girl soon, on his terms, and as part of his plan.

But his unsaid, "*Thank you*," still lingered in his mind.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 11

Another conversation with Harry. Also, Horcruxes are such a pain, aren't they?

AN: The usual thanks to astopperindeath, J.K. Rowling, and John Milton.

And on, methought, alone I passed through ways

That brought me on a sudden to the Tree

Of interdicted Knowledge: fair it seemed

~Paradise Lost, Book V

Severus fought his way through the patrons of the Leaky Cauldron, ignoring the indignant squeaks from those who received a boot heel to the instep or an elbow to the ribs in his efforts. Anonymity had its price, he supposed, tugging his hood farther over his head, but the Dark Lord's hold in the Ministry was not yet secure enough for a Death Eater to openly move about.

It took a few minutes to worm his way to the back corner of the little pub, but he was rewarded (in a manner of speaking; the sight was no aesthetic treat) with Mundungus Fletcher, huddled behind the table, as promised. He looked like nothing so much as a weasel with boils, shifting and twitching as he tried to surreptitiously scan the room. A scared man, then; a man with something to lose.

Sidestepping a pair of goblins, who shoved their long hands inside their coats and glared at him suspiciously, Severus pulled out the other chair at the small table and slid into it. Fletcher snapped to attention, nervous eyes focused on him.

"Mr. Fletcher," Severus rasped, grating the words in his throat to disguise his voice. "I see Mr. Borgin relayed my message. You were wise to heed him. *Clink* went the small bag as it dropped to the table, and it pulled Fletcher's greedy gaze for a moment. "My master rewards wisdom."

"D-does he, now? Good man, good man..." The money was no replacement for personal safety, though. Fletcher's quivering was obvious even in the light of the guttering candle. Severus guessed that he had been trembling ever since ghoulish Mr. Borgin told him of the request from an ominous, and anonymous, customer. The black market had got quite a bit blacker recently.

"He rewards compliance even more. Do you have it?"

"Ye-es," Fletcher said, sliding one hand inside his coat, "but..."

"But?" Severus tapped one fingernail against the table in an executioner's drumbeat.

Fletcher gulped. Sweat shone from his brow, highlighting the white cap of each boil. "I don't want no mention of me after now, see? Your master may have piles o'rewards for th'obedient, but I'm happy with what you're givin' me now. Really, I am."

"Mr. Fletcher, my master only wants the locket. You are something he steps in and scrapes off his boot. Vanish back into the rat warren of your life, and you shall vanish from his mind. Of course," Severus added, seeing relief pass over his face, "if you so much as mention this transaction to your headlice, your name will undoubtedly reappear..."

"Right, right, yes, o'course." Fletcher hurriedly placed a small package, wrapped in brown paper and twine, on the table. It lay there, innocuous as anything that did not contain a piece of Voldemort's soul. He took it and heard a starting gurgle of protest die quickly.

"Can't blame a man for checking the goods, can you?" Severus said. "Neither of us, I'm sure, wants to deliver bad goods." The twine fell apart with a quiet *sectumsempra*, and he unwrapped the brown paper as quietly as possible. No sense drawing attention, especially with the pair of goblins standing close by, pointy ears pricked.

The locket was dull and heavy in his hand. Like any locket would be. Some tiny, romantic remnant in his mind had expected an heirloom of Slytherin and a Horcrux to feel... different. More than metal. He held it in the light, turning it to inspect the engraved letters. It matched Dumbledore's description, and that was all Severus could test it for, at the moment.

"Very well. Here." Severus dropped another bag of gold to the table. Fletcher snatched up both, and they vanished into the depths of his rank trenchcoat. "Now disappear, Mr. Fletcher, for a while."

He did not need further encouragement, and with a "pop," he Disapparated. Severus stayed a minute longer, staring at the locket. He held a piece of Voldemort's soul in his hand, and he couldn't decide whether to feel triumphant or nauseated. Frowning, he rewrapped it and shoved it into an inside pocket, then left as quickly as he could.

It sat in his house like a bad smell: always there, even when he thought he'd grown accustomed to it, and impossible to get rid of. He took to rushing past the secret drawer in his chimney bricking where it sat, berating himself for being stupid as he did, and he no longer sat in the sitting room to read late into the night.

Dumbledore's head appeared over the kitchen sink a few days later, causing a coffee cup to tumble from Severus's hands to a quick death on the linoleum.

"Oh, dear," he said, peering anxiously over his half-moon spectacles. "I am quite sorry to have startled you, Severus. I keep forgetting Italy is an hour ahead of England."

Severus drew his wand and resurrected the mug with a jerk. The damned locket was making him bloody jumpy. "I've got the Horcrux, Albus, if that's why you're bothering me."

"You should have taught Divination," he replied, chortling at Severus' glare.

"But then Sybill would have had a coronary from reading Potter's death in the sludge at the bottom of a cauldron, and what a tragedy that would have been for us all. Do you want the locket?"

"Hmm." He twirled a strand of beard around his finger. "No, I think you'd better keep it. If you can get to Hogwarts, the sword of Gryffindor should destroy it, as would Fiendfyre..."

"My house works best when it isn't a pile of smoldering coals. Just a thought."

"Indeed." Dumbledore was occasionally afflicted by a remarkable deafness for sarcasm. "Well, keep it safe, in any case. We have located Helga Hufflepuff's cup, and before you ask, Severus," he added with a quiet smile, "you will not have to retrieve it."

"Where is it?"

"Bellatrix Lestrange has it in her Gringott's vault. I would, however, be indebted to you could you acquire a strand of her hair and make a Polyjuice from it."

Doable, on all counts. There was to be a major meeting next week at the Manor, and apparently Bellatrix was imposing on her sister's hospitality for a time. A hairbrush full of coarse black strands should be no problem to acquire.

"Will next Wednesday suit you?" Severus said. "The Dark Lord has summoned us on Monday night." Polyjuice stock was a staple of his small potions laboratory, as making it fresh every time took too damn long, and the Order often had need of it.

"Very well. Has Voldemort...for goodness' sake, Severus, don't wince...chosen a new Headmaster?"

"Not as of yet. I suspect next Monday will bring us an answer." Severus stared at the sink. Every likely candidate he considered brought endless problems for his plans.

Dumbledore sighed. "Patience, then, is our only option. Before I go...try not to look so pleased at the idea, there's a good man...how are Hermione and Ron getting on? Harry is quite concerned. I may let them speak later. Poor boy."

"Still alive and squabbling," he said. *Hermione is a more competent duelist than I had predicted and is remarkably skilled with Dark Arts, which I pray gives you a heart attack when she boils Dolohov's blood in his veins. As for Weasley... well, who cares, really?*

Dumbledore nodded. "Such is love at that age. Ah, to be young..."

Severus could not help but add, "and stupid," which earned him a stern look.

"Treasure their innocence, Severus, for all too soon it will be taken from them. Good day to you." And the communication circle silvered over, as definite as a *click* on the other end of a Muggle telephone line, if not quite as dramatic.

The resurrected cup met its second death against the opposite wall, leaving a dent to mark its martyrdom.

"I do not recall *my* innocence ever being treasured, Albus," Severus snarled at the shards. "Particularly by you."

Hot water, topped with a froth of mango-scented bubbles, enveloped Hermione to the neck. Piling her curls behind her head to form a makeshift cushion, she relaxed into the spine-soothing ergonomics of the stone tub. Despite the litany of complaints she wished to register with Dumbledore when this ordeal was over, he had provided them a heavenly bathtub.

She took her wand from its perch on the rim of the tub and cast a Levitation spell on a black-bound book sitting next to the sink; one of Snape's, it promised to be a gruesome read. It flew to her, coming to a halt at the perfect level for reading. A quick *Impervio* ensured that the steam would not harm it.

She had only got through two spells...one was a very nasty way of poisoning someone's food from the next room...before the door resounded with knocks.

"Ron, I'm in the bath!"

"That's nice, Herm, but Harry's shown up in the sitting room. D'you want to talk to him?"

"Harry's here?"

"I could send him in to see you, if you like, but Ginny might object..."

"Yes, yes, I'm coming. Wait a moment." In a trice, she had Disillusioned the book and sent it into the cupboard under the sink. She slid out of the bath and seized one of the cloud-like towels from the rack, wrapping it firmly around herself and securing it with a spell.

Ron was still outside the door when she opened it. He blinked at her state of dress.

"If it were anyone other than Harry, I'd call you the biggest flirt in England," he said, his smile slightly too tight for his light banter.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, Ron..." She smacked his arm and strode past him to the sitting room.

"You're dripping!" he called after her.

"Do shut up, Ron...hello, Harry," she said. The communication spell hung in front of the fireplace, its shining light framing Harry's (very tan) head. She Summoned a chair and sat, taking care with the arrangement of legs and towel.

"Hi, Hermione. Lovely outfit you've got on."

She glared at him, causing him to grin. "I was in the bath," she sniffed.

"Without Ron?"

She blinked, and stared at him. "Of course without Ron. Why on earth would I be in the bath with Ron?"

The grin fell, and he flushed. "Oh... sorry, it's just... Du...I thought you two were, you know..."

"No."

"Oh."

"It just didn't work out, mate."

Hermione jumped. She hadn't noticed Ron come into the room, but now he dropped to the floor beside her chair, blowing hair out of his eyes.

"So, how's your little paradise, Harry?" he continued, as blithe as anything. It was, she thought, one of his more tactful moments.

"Sunny. Beachy. Bloody boring." Harry sighed and fidgeted, running a hand through his hair, which did nothing to convince it of gravity. "We've got a hold of another Horcrux...Slytherin's locket...and we know where the cup of Hufflepuff is."

"Just three more, then," she said, trying to sound reassuring.

"Yeah, just three more." There was the hint of a sullen pout around his lips, and a crease darkened his eyebrows. She knew the expression well, having spent most of fifth year dealing with it.

"And then what, Hermione?" he asked. "We find all the Horcruxes and destroy them, someone kills Voldemort, and us three get to hear about it afterward when they're unwrapping the bubble wrap."

"What are we supposed to do, then?" Ron said. "We can't get out of this stupid place, and I'll bet there's something keeping you over there."

"Besides, aren't you the one who must kill Voldemort? To fulfill the prophecy and everything. I'm sure that's been factored in to Dumbledore's plans, Harry." Hermione tugged at her hair, staring at Harry's stormy mien. Not that she blamed him in the least. It was very tempting to try to follow Severus back into the real world when he left her on Thursday. This place, paradisiacal as it was, abraded her nerves. Prudence and safety were all very well, but she fretted under the ignorance that had been forced upon them.

"Right. Good thinking, Herms. As usual." She hoped it was a smile tugging at his lips.

He glanced over his shoulder, face darkening again. "I have to go. Apparently someone wants to talk over me again." The frustration was back in his voice, and when he returned to her and Ron, it was back in his face.

"All right," Ron said, smiling a little. "We'll get through this."

"I know. Thanks, guys." With that, the mirror turned off and vanished.

Ron rubbed his hand over his eyes and turned a worried expression on Hermione. "He's going to blow his top soon."

"Don't I know it," she replied, catching her bottom lip in her teeth and tugging.

"You're going to have no lips by the time this war is over," he said, a joking reproach in his crooked smile. Always the jester, there to lighten the mood, if only so they didn't go insane from the tension.

Shaking her head at his levity, she ruffled his hair before heading back to the bathroom. Mulling in hot water helped her think.

But a thought stopped her in the doorway to the hall.

"Ron," she said, picking her words as though they were apples at a market, "I think I can get us both out of here for the battle, anyway."

"What?"

She didn't turn back to him, fixing her gaze on the stone wall.

"I think I can, but you have to trust me. You might not be inclined to follow me, but you have to if you want to get out to fight."

"Hermione, what are you talking about?"

"I can't tell you now because I'm not sure. But if it works, you have to believe me." It was Snape, after all. Surely he would bend the rules, or at least be persuaded somehow...

"I guess. Yes. I mean, I trust you, Herms. Your plans don't usually get us in trouble."

She smiled. "Thanks, Ron."

The bath was a retreat now, and she sank into it and the book with her mind on nothing more than her lesson with Snape, two days hence. Dark spells swirled in her eyes, but she pinned them down.

Thursday morning came with the weather sickeningly perfect, as usual. Birds twittered their harmonious cheeps in the trees as she walked to the creek, making her consider pitching her apple core at them. She settled for tossing it into a ditch for the deer to eat (if they ate.)

The clearing was empty when she arrived. Or, she corrected herself, drawing her wand and pressing her back to a tree, it appeared empty.

Two minutes. Nothing but her breathing and the birds tickled her ears, and only a butterfly passed her.

Carefully, she slid her rucksack, heavy with Snape's books, to the ground and sat down beside it to wait. She glanced at her watch, confirming that Severus was five minutes late.

He arrived three minutes later. His customary scowl looked etched into his face with acid. It deepened when he saw her.

"Good morning, sir," she said.

"Hmph." He crossed his arms and looked at her, cocking an eyebrow.

She tried something else. "I've brought your books, Professor." She patted the rucksack. "I read *Murder Mowst Foule* and the French one, *Le Morte Varie*, though it took three different translation spells to really get all the nuances, and I still can't pronounce some of the Middle French very well."

He tapped a long finger against his bicep, eyes narrowing. Hermione decided to shut up.

"Choose a spell and cast it. Use common sense in your selection."

"Because there is such a dearth of common sense in my mind," she quipped, rolling to her knees to open the rucksack. Thinking for a moment, she pulled out *Le Morte Varie*.

"What the fuck have you done to my book, Granger?" His voice was sharp, dangerous, and she fought the urge to quail under it.

"Put sticky notes in it, sir." She found the marker she wanted and opened to it, reviewing the heavy Gothic text of the spell. "They help with later reference, and before you ask, they're entirely removable." Glancing up at him, she raised her eyebrow at his scowl. "Since when do I damage books?"

He growled and looked away. Smiling to herself, Hermione stood and drew her wand.

There. That boulder would do nicely.

She stared at it, trying to look past the hard granite to the molecules which composed it. It was not a solid mass, but a paused fluid. The French words of the spell slid from her tongue, r's rolling perfectly from practice, and she felt the incantation take shape in her wand. It hummed, it throbbed, it grew warm in her hand as the power built within her.

This wasn't a pleasure like the other one. This was pulses more than an explosion. Each time she moved her wand and the rock twisted like bread dough, another gentle ecstasy moved over her, making her groin ache. She found herself wrenching the rock into complex knots, trying to heighten the effect, but each wave only faded to leave her wanting more.

"Enough," she heard, and a spell cut through her own, ending the pleasure like a cold shower. Only the knowledge that Snape was there kept her from thrusting her hand into her knickers on the spot and rubbing an orgasm from her needy clitoris. Every twist in the former boulder was a reminder of her frustration, and the multitude of loops in the knot that tied it around a nearby tree recalled the very close and very male presence of Snape.

It occurred to her, as she turned to him, that hers were not the only hands that could, hypothetically speaking, of course, end up in her knickers.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 11

The ultimate temptation is presented. And who are we mortals to pass up temptation?

AN: Sorry for the delays in posting and replying to reviews. It's the last weeks of term, and I'm swamped with essay-writing, research, and job hunting. Thanks to astopperindeath for her divine patience with me.

Here grows the cure of all, this fruit divine,

Fair to the eye, inviting to the taste,

Of virtue to make wise: what hinders then

To reach, and feed both at once body and mind?

~Paradise Lost, Book IX

Pink cheeks and sweat decorated her pretty face, giving her the appearance of a hardworking milkmaid. No bucolic milkmaid, though, ever had such desperate lust in her eyes, or lips parted in a perfect, cock-ready moue.

All hunters know when the prey is most vulnerable, when to start the quiet movement through the long grass to the weak, wobble-legged youngster.

He could have her right now, if he wanted, but he longed to draw it out, to heighten every aspect of her frustration before providing her release. It would cement her fixation on him, he told himself.

"Granger?"

"Yes?" She licked her lips and gazed hungrily at his face.

"Duel."

He said it quietly, in sync with a sweep of his wand that sent blue lightning at her heart. As he'd taught Lockhart, opponents often fire on "two."

The air flared red as his bolts connected with her shields. He barely dodged in time when they shot back at him, reflected perfectly.

Counter, fire. Dodge, block, attack. It was a dance to the music of hexes, lit by fire and magic, with their breathing keeping time. He liked to imagine he led even as she pushed him back toward the creek.

Two Haymaker Spells later, both of them were soaked to the skin and trying to get a footing on the slippery rocks in the stream. Her trainers were an advantage here, giving her grip where his boots slipped. He fell when ducking a spell of hers and righted himself just in time to fend off her intended coup de grace.

He scrambled to the bank as she swatted away the horde of locusts he'd summoned, but he knew she would be right behind him. He managed to throw up a barricade of stone and mud, buying time to rebalance.

The wall fired like clay in a kiln, then crumbled to the ground. Behind the rubble, she stood on the bank, dripping wet and looking like wrathful Gabriel, with glowing wand in place of fiery sword. Seducing her, never a chore, was now a positive gift.

Water flew from her hair as she twisted away from each barrage of his spells. She only sent a few back at him, but those he barely blocked. The ruthlessness that he'd been teaching her, the resourcefulness and creativity added to her intellect was proving to be dangerous. He would have been pleased with himself had he not just barely escaped her Slicing Spell.

She slipped when she ducked from his Fireball. It was all the opening he needed.

"Expelliarmus!"

Her wand flew to his hand like a bird to seed, its owner landing on her pert arse in the moss.

He slumped against an apple tree, exhausted, and rewarded himself for being alive by watching her pick herself up.

"Not bad, Granger," he said to her inquisitive, needing-to-please look.

"What? No scathing remark?" She smiled. "I must be amazing, then."

He snorted. "Hardly. You're unexpected, or you will be, on the field of battle. And there are tricks yet to learn, Granger, and those Dark books won't read themselves."

"Mmm." It did not appear that she heeded his words; she extended her hand and stepped toward him, still smiling just a little. "And I look forward to it. Wand, please."

He ignored her, and she moved closer, body swaying under her soaked clothes.

He gave her his best smirk.

"Come and get it."

Kimonos had less silk than his voice, modulated and pitched perfectly, a tone that had got him laid once or twice without any other currency. He let the words hang in the air and watched her face tint itself pink.

In a rush of movement, there were soft lips pressed upon his mouth, and she was flush against him, every curve apparent to his grasping hands. She absorbed him into her mouth, tongue against tongue, and it took only a minute to discover the sucking motion that made her whimper. Tracing his finger along the back of her thigh, he held it and drew it up to his hip, grinding his erection against her...

...and she pressed her wand into his neck.

She let the kiss continue for a moment...her libido gave her little choice...but she pulled away from his wonderful mouth when he stilled.

It had been so easy. So easy to kiss him, and let him kiss her, as she slid her hand up his arm to retrieve her wand from his careless grip.

"Anything... is a weapon." It escaped her lips like a bird from a cage, flying to his surprised face. She stared up at him, watching his pulse beat against the tip of her wand.

This was her first duel won, and she wished it wasn't. It was not how she wanted to win.

But she had triumphed according to his rules and with his tutelage. His hard eyes reflected that, and she blinked into them.

His eyebrows rose when she withdrew her wand.

She shook her head and walked away, stopping short of the creek to stare at the water. Water that had seethed and bubbled under her curse. It had borne her first attempt to duel Snape, and now it soaked her clothes again. Trial by water, she supposed. To this end.

Snape's arm wrapped around her shoulders, pulling her tightly against him as he pressed his wand into her temple.

His voice was warm in her ear. "Never turn your back on an opponent."

Her breath shuddered in her tense body

Should I fight him?

Do I want to fight him?

"Do you yield?" he murmured, digging his wand in a little harder.

That was quite a question at this juncture. Hermione bit her lip, thinking it over, weighing the possibilities, as only she could.

"Do you *yield*, Granger?"

She dropped her wand to the ground.

"Yes," she said, keeping her voice as even as she could with the blood pounding in her thighs.

His wand vanished from her temple a moment before his teeth nipped at her neck. She sighed in his tight grip as he suckled at the sensitive skin along her vein. This was what Ron had failed at, this slow seduction of her most erotic areas, and now she was melting under Snape's expertise.

With long fingers, he flicked open the first few buttons of her blouse, exposing the lace edge of her bra.

"Lovely undergarments, Granger," he said, tracing the skin along the border of her bra, tingling her nerves in the most pleasant way. She leaned back into his chest and felt his erection digging into her lower back. His hands traveled lower, touching, revealing, until the shirt lay on the ground in a damp white heap. Slowly, he began to slide the

straps of her bra down her shoulders, nipping and sucking at each patch of skin they passed. Hermione shivered at the near pain, at the knowledge that maybe he would leave a mark on her skin; marks she could hide under clothes, but never from herself.

Some part of her, the part that he would call "Gryffindor idiocy," rebelled against her passivity.

She squirmed in his grip, turning around to stare up at him. She wasn't sure what action she should take, but she could hazard a guess.

He groaned when she slid her palm over the bulge in his trousers, thrusting his hips into her hand.

"You've been reading some extra-curricular books, I think," he said, lids lowered in pleasure as she massaged him.

"Mmm." Squeezing gently, she made him sigh, but he pushed her away when she started fumbling at the button on his trousers.

"My move," he murmured into her questioning gaze, smirking.

He deftly unbuttoned her jeans, opening them only enough for a sliver of her black knickers to show through. With a hand on her shoulders, he spun her back around.

"It will be better this way, Granger. Trust me."

How much he asked for with those last two words. And she, at this point, was prepared to give it.

This, she realized moments later, was a man who knew what he was doing. His hand cupped her pussy perfectly, exactly as hers did when she touched herself, allowing access to everything. No fumbling, just a brief search until he could tweak her clit with short, upward strokes and make her knees tremble.

His free hand must have been busy, for warm air suddenly brushed her nipples. She would have touched them herself but for an onslaught of circular caresses that erased her brain and made her arch away from him, grinding her hips into his cock in helpless retribution.

Snappe pressed his fingers to her mouth, and she sucked blindly, groping for any additional sensation to increase the pleasure. She was rewarded when wet fingers and cool breath pulled her nipples into peaks.

"You make such lovely sounds," he said into her ear, sliding his fingers past her clit to tease her entrance, "and with so little stimulation. Want to know more, Granger?"

"A-ahh!-always." She spread her legs. Shift as she might, his infuriating fingers evaded her cunt, continuing to trace the sensitive edge. Frustrated, Hermione reached behind to roughly rub his erection, pressing the cloth into the hard warmth. He inhaled sharply and nipped her neck.

"Then," he said, making her whimper with a last little flick as he slid his hand from her knickers, "I think we'll need to lie down. Before one or more of us falls down." With that, he stepped away from her and brandished his wand.

A bare mattress appeared on the ground. With a mock bow, he extended his arm towards it.

And she froze.

Damn.

He was ragingly hard and had been so ever since she emerged from the stream with water pouring from her shirt. Keeping himself in check had been difficult. Every moan of hers, every movement as he touched her had sent a surge to his cock.

Now she stood, like a half-naked deer, frozen to the spot and staring wide-eyed at the mattress.

Back to the coaxing, then.

"Steady, Granger," he said quietly, stepping back to her and brushing a finger along the side of her neck. He kept the stroking up, trying to relax her as he thought frantically with what little blood remained in his head.

Yes, he could stop now. Send her back with her clothes spelled into neatness, knowing that she would probably finish herself off the second she reached her bed. His hand was not a pussy, but it could serve once she left.

Damn it, though, he *wanted* her. Not a wank to a memory of red hair. Not a ginger whore. *Her*, Granger, in her soft flesh and wanton curls.

"Come, Granger," he said, watching as she slowly relaxed under his touch. "It's not forbidden, and it won't get you in trouble." Even now, like this, he could lie.

"But... I mean, I didn't bring any condoms, or anything, and I don't know any spells..." She was babbling, though with the classic Granger sensibility.

Good thing, too. He cursed himself for a lust-addled fool and pressed his wand to her abdomen, murmuring the spell.

She gasped and pressed a hand to her stomach. He had heard the spell felt odd, but that was a sign that it was working.

"There. No further protection necessary. Condoms indeed." She was breathing easier now, as evidenced by her full breasts rising... and falling... and rising...

His cock protested his trousers.

Thank all the gods, she stepped forward and knelt on the mattress, looking up at him.

She attempted an impish smile. "W-well, what are you waiting for?"

With a wave of his wand, all their clothing but her knickers appeared in a heap on the ground. Unrestrained, his cock jutted at her, encouraged by her smooth curves and parted lips. Merlin, if she was any other woman he would stand in front of her and wrap his hand in her curls while those lips worked over his cock...

He gently pushed her back on the mattress, brushing her hair from her breasts and shoulders to allow his mouth full access to her nipples. She gasped as he sucked at them and whimpered when he bit ever so gently. She was new, sensitive, and so beautifully responsive that seducing her was almost too easy, like giving candy to a child.

Almost. If his plans could go through with minimum effort and maximum enjoyment on both sides, he was not going to fight it. With that thought, he tweaked her exposed nipple, carefully twisting until her whimper became a sound of protest, then soothing it with caresses.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw her knees part. Glancing up, her face was open with the pleasure from his sins, tilted back to expose her creamy neck. Little moans escaped her with every movement of his fingers.

"Want something, Granger?" he said after trading mouth for fingers.

"Uhhmmhmm," she moaned, opening her eyes to look down at him, all frustrated indolence.

Abandoning her nipples, he backed down the mattress until her covered cunt lay in front of him. He slid her knickers down her legs, smirking at the damp crotch of the crotch, and tossed them on top the heap of clothes.

She moaned when he blew on her cunt, and he caught her hand as she reached down to touch herself.

"No, Granger. Much as I would love to watch you finger yourself for me, it will have to wait." But it was a very lovely idea and would no doubt fuel his wanking for a month.

"Then... bloody... *do something!*" She thrust her hips at him, legs spread wide to reveal her lovely self.

In answer, he plunged two of his fingers deep inside her.

"Ahh!"

She fucked his fingers even as he moved them inside her, and he quickly abandoned any idea of finding her g-spot. For, as he pumped his hand back and forth in counterpoint to her hips, she tightened around him, and her breath came in pants.

It took only a few small licks and a moment of sucking on her hard clit to make her come undone around his fingers.

It was the like the spells and it wasn't like the spells; no, it was better than the spells, his fingers inside her, thrusting, seducing her until his warm soft tongue descended and tipped her over into the moaning mess around his fingers that she was. Hermione pushed herself onto his fingers, trying to find more sensation, anything to prolong the orgasm, and she shuddered anew when he brushed her clit.

His fingers slid out of her, and she whimpered, both in pleasure and disappointment. She felt limp, perfectly content to stay where she was until her senses returned.

Hands gripped her hips, tugging, and she followed them lazily, flipping over to her stomach. He pushed on her hips, lifting her to her knees and spreading her legs.

She sighed when he slid into her, soft and filling as his fingers had not quite been, and she leaned into his slow descent.

Then he grabbed her hips and fucked her so hard she had to struggle to keep her face out of the mattress.

Each thrust almost hurt. He was big inside her, and she was not used to this level of sensation, this depth of penetration. Hermione leaned away from him a little, easing his pounding inside her. His bollocks slapped against her cunt once or twice, on particularly hard thrusts, and it sent small tingles of remembered pleasure through her.

He grunted with each stroke, moving his hands over her back, her arse. He spread her arse cheeks apart and groaned anew and made her gasp at the taboo view he must be enjoying.

"No..." she ground out, afraid.

He released with a squeeze of each cheek, resuming a harder grip on her hips.

"Ah, fuck, girl... I'm go... going to... unnh!"

He shoved deep into her, forcing her body forward, as his cock grew inside her and pulsed. His hips jerked for a time, with each throb, but he eventually stopped, breathing hard.

Hermione slid forward and collapsed to the mattress; he whimpered as she came off of his softening cock. There she lay, feeling his come start to trickle down out of her cunt and onto her thighs.

And all she had now, as the orgasm cleared from her mind, were questions.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 11

The second aftermath

AN: Thanks to astopperindeath for much support and betaing.

Chapter 10

The sweat cooled on his skin, making him shiver even in the warmth of the forest. He was content to remain there for a while, eternity, a minute or two, while his mind started to function again.

The mattress shifted; Hermione was sitting up, trying to tame her thoroughly tousled hair. He watched her, seeing her plump curves undulate as she stood and went to retrieve her clothes. She picked up her wand along the way, muttering cleansing spells over her body.

She dressed quietly and with focus, adjusting and plucking at her hems, as if orderly clothing would stabilize her shaken world. She did not meet his eyes until she was fully covered, fully armored.

"Did I seduce you?" she said.

He snorted. "Don't flatter yourself. I am not easily lured to bed."

"Did you seduce me, then?"

He sat up. "Granger, let us say that sex seduced us and leave it at that."

She smiled with no humor and looked at the stream, twining and bending patterns with her fingers.

"Those spells have a very interesting affect. Pleasure from darkness, and always never enough..."

Stretching a kink out of his neck before reaching for his wand, Severus said, "There's no satisfaction to be found in them, or in anything so insubstantial. The sins of the flesh—," he smirked at her blush—"are named for a reason." And she was flesh, solid and real under his hands and against his cock and in his mind.

"Of course. Never satisfying, so you always cast more and more... but you, you and I, we ended. Satisfied, I think." Her voice was slow, pondering.

He eyed her. This was not the wisdom of the seduced and won over.

Then he realized he should have known better than to think this woman could be offered an apple without analyzing its taste afterward, however sweet it might be.

And he wasn't sure if he was as disappointed as he should be about her mind defying his plans.

He dressed quickly and prepared to leave, sketching the silver in the air.

"Professor?" Her voice was quiet, but firm, predetermined.

"What?" he snapped, placing the edge back in his voice and hoping it would put strength back in his wavering decisions from months ago.

"When the Horcruxes are found and you take me to defend Harry in whatever final conflict arises, I would appreciate it if Ron could come with us. He'll go mad if the war ends without him there." She watched him, waiting.

"I care little for Weasley's peace of mind."

She smiled at his callousness. "I thought as much. But he's another person to fight alongside, and you should know what Weasleys are like when their blood is up."

"If he causes any trouble for me, then it's your responsibility to quell him," he answered. "With whatever force necessary."

"He trusts me," was all she said. He eyed her, trying to see something behind her blithe brown eyes, and it crossed his mind that perhaps he'd done too thorough a job in imparting his techniques. That was the sort of answer he had offered Dumbledore at times.

The idea of being in Dumbledore's position, even for a fleeting moment of coincidence, sent him through the portal without another word.

Hermione stood for a moment after Severus had left, listening to the snickering stream and the shrill birds. Her clothes were still damp, so she dried them absent-mindedly, turning the denim of her jeans crisp and abrasive.

Well. That was... yes. That was.

She grabbed her rucksack and turned to walk back through the woods, feet keeping time with her ponderings.

Right. So. I have fucked Severus Snape. I wanted to. He wanted to. We both certainly enjoyed it, and I really hope Ron wasn't flying overhead.

She grabbed a leaf off a tree and shredded it, flesh from vein from stem, until only a skeleton remained. What she'd done with Ron... it was like having an overdone pub steak: edible, but bland, and you were glad when it was over. Severus was seared and tender and flavorful.

Steak sounded quite appetizing, as she hadn't eaten in a while. Shaking her head at her meat-metaphor, she put her stomach from her mind.

He had almost smiled at her. "Come and get it." A complete lack of reticence at touching and fucking a girl who had recently been his student, but then again, it wasn't as though she had stopped to think very hard about him being a teacher. Stopped to think about condoms, yes, but there were levels of practicality that no amount of fingering would disband. Rules were far more ethereal when his skilled fingers were tweaking her clit.

Put it down to sex. And rules... were there rules here, in this Eden where she cast Dark spells and dug herself out of Ron's heart and fucked Severus Snape? Were there rules when no one was watching?

Snape is watching.

But Snape, she decided, didn't count as rules anymore, not here away from house points and detentions. There was no Filch or Umbridge to put up decrees and dole out punishments. Here there were flowing, evolving limits, defined only by her own judgment.

I am watching.

And, as she stepped into the clearing and dropped the leaf's remainder to the grass, Ron flew across the cabin's roof with a cheery greeting. To protect that smile, she thought as she answered it, previous limits would have to be redefined. Casting Dark spells here was one thing, but she would find her boundaries on the battlefield. Fucking Snape... could be useful. And enjoyable. And possibly something to keep in mind after the war, if they were both there for the after.

For now, lunch and a nice, long reading session were in order. Perhaps a bath afterward.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 11

How far can Severus go before he takes action?

Where neither joy nor love, but fierce desire,

Among other torments not the least

~Paradise Lost, Book IV

He avoided the firewhisky bottle. The last thing he needed was more heat in his veins.

Ice water helped, but only a little, and he slammed the glass back to the table so hard a cube flew out onto the wood.

A whore previously, maybe that would have helped. Several days of lots of wanking, juvenile though it would seem. But it was certain to him that sticking his cock into a warm, wet, willing cunt after a very long period of unintentional abstinence had not been a bright move. It was difficult, now, not to associate her swotty, frizzy head with heated kissing, pressed up against a tree. Or to separate her firing spells and twisting around attacks from her bucking against his hands as she came.

Severus eyed the ice cube, sitting in a slowly growing puddle on the table, and considered dropping it down his trousers.

Even the thought cooled him slightly. Leaving the ice to melt on the table, Severus strode into the sitting room, scanning the crammed bookshelves until he saw something that might help further alleviate his situation. He sank into an armchair with *Newt Scamander's Book of the Hundred Most Hideous Harpies* and steeled himself for a very unpleasant and thoroughly unarousing bout of reading.

The next morning, after a rather restless night, a magnificent eagle owl dropped a letter on top of Severus's toast. He offered it one of the burnt corners in return. It clacked its beak and vanished back through the window.

"And to you too, Archimedes." Severus broke the seal, sighing at the familiar loopy handwriting on the parchment.

Severus,

I didn't wish to wake you, my boy. You will no doubt need your sleep for the meeting on Monday. But I thought it important to tell you that the fourth Horcrux has been obtained and destroyed. A shame to lose one of Helga Hufflepuff's lovely teacups, but it had to be done. Miss Tonks is recovering nicely from the burns that Mrs. Lestranger's security spells induced.

Only one Horcrux remains to be discovered, and I believe that Harry and I are very close to getting a solid hint as to where and what it is.

And please, tell me as soon as Voldemort announces the next Headmaster of Hogwarts.

You are doing splendidly, Severus. She would have approved.

Sincerely,

Albus P. W. B. Dumbledore

One more down, one in his chimney, one slithering around the Dark Lord's neck, and two more to be discovered. Severus hoped that the scar on Potter's head would prove to be the last of them, and that it would have to be removed from his head prior to destruction. Possibly with a blunt knife.

He did not hope as hard as he might once have. Being away from Potter lessened the effect of seeing *that* face and *those* eyes, coupled with his abrasive personality. Hating him was more habit than anything.

His whole life had been habit for several years now, he thought, staring into his coffee. Get up, terrorize students, report to Dumbledore, hate Dumbledore, hate Potter, try not to die... miss Lily...

"She would have approved."

That was habit, too. And as a memory of warm, full breasts and come-hither eyes surfaced in his mind, he could not but wonder how much of it was just that.

He spent the weekend with cold water and unscintillating reading. Monday evening found him staring at a plate of lightly buttered and salted tagliatelle, trying to convince himself that eating before a Death Eater meeting was a good idea. It involved weighing the likelihood of passing out from hunger against the possibility of vomiting from the activities.

Half the plate was empty before he took up his best robes and gave the hated silver mask a final polish with his sleeve. It was cold on his face, shocking him into complete focus on getting through the night alive.

The burning began, racing through the black lines on his arm to make him clench his teeth and hiss from the pain. He used it, though, used it to focus and strengthen his resolution to eliminate the Dark Lord and Dumbledore, the men who enabled this pain, by any means necessary.

He pushed her face out of his mind and spun on the spot.

The Dark Mark burned in the sky over Malfoy Manor, visible even from the path to the gates. Severus paused for a moment to steady himself against the double nausea of Apparation and dread. His lungs filled with sticky summer air, congealed with the scent of Malfoy's entire rose garden.

No one else was on the path, and he prayed he was not late. He restrained himself from running to the gates, but only just. He nearly knocked over the cowering house-elf who opened the door with freshly bandaged fingers.

The instant the doors to the grand dining hall opened, Severus dropped to his knees, not even daring to look to see who was already there.

"Ssseverus. How nice of you to join us. Do ssit down."

"My Lord," he said, straightening to face a cadre of Death Eaters seated at the table. Bellatrix was at Voldemort's left hand, and she was smirking like a dragon with a fatted calf. With long, pale, fingers, Voldemort indicated the seat at his right.

Late, yes, but not punished. Yet. Not one to question a lack of immediate torture, Severus nodded and moved to sit.

It wasn't until he took in the rest of the room that he noticed the large, dark cocoon hanging in place of the chandelier in the high ceiling. It was breathing, though shallowly.

"Sseverus, thank you for coming so promptly. I was merely discussing some minor topics with your compatriots, things you did not need to be bothered with."

Severus broke his gaze from the shape and turned to look at one of his masters. Red eyes met him, above a beneficent smile that not even the dumbest newborn kitten would trust for an instant.

Severus said, "I come when you call, my Lord, and do not question."

Voldemort nodded and turned his attention to the entire table.

"As part of the new academic structure of Hogwarts, certain changes have been made to the curriculum, and I fear a professor or two may be... what is the Muggle term... 'sacked.'"

Severus joined in the dark chuckle that arose at the table. The Carrows were a pair of grinning piranhas, staring at the cocoon with glittering eyes. Lucius, Narcissa, and

Draco were paler than usual.

"Severus," Voldemort continued, blithe as if it were a tea party, "I believe you know our guest..."

He pointed his bonelike wand at the cocoon and said, "*Ennervate*."

It shifted, suddenly, and then began to writhe violently.

Voldemort tilted his wand, and the shape lowered into the pools of light just above the table. Slowly, it rotated around to face him.

You fucking bastard.

"Charity Burbage, for those of you don't know, until quite recently taught the Muggle Studies class at Hogwarts. Draco, are you familiar with her?"

Severus glanced over, seeing Draco's eyes wide and staring in the face of direct interrogation. "No, my Lord. I did not take her class."

Voldemort nodded. "As any proper pureblood would do. Severus, I hope you were not close?"

Her hazel eyes were huge and pleading. Muffled sounds came from behind her gag, made of the same ropes that bound her.

"We were not close, my Lord."

"Really?" Voldemort kept his red eyes on Severus as he flicked his wand again. The gag disappeared.

"Oh, God, Severus, what's happening?" Her voice rasped, no doubt worn away from screaming uselessly. "Please, Severus, help me, stop them, stop him, Severus, *please!*"

"Why does she ask your assistance, Severus?"

A game, then. Another fucking game of testing his "loyalty," of pushing him further and further to ensure that he was true to the Dark Lord and his intended regime of cruelty. And Severus had no choice but to play along. He had to make the expected move in return or else all was lost and then he would be dead without ever being free.

"I really don't know, my Lord. I had better things to do while teaching than associate with Mudbloods and Muggle-lovers." He wanted to boil his tongue for saying it, as her eyes filled with despair and Voldemort raised his wand.

"But..." Her voice was a whisper, drained of all she thought she knew. "We're friends..."

"Avada Kedavra."

The plump body shook the table.

"Nagini will take care of this, I think," Voldemort continued. He hissed, and Severus recognized, through a haze of rage, Parseltongue.

He shuddered when the massive form of the snake slithered over his feet, scales cold against his ankles. She swarmed up her master's chair and onto the table; blessedly, she dragged the corpse away instead of consuming it on the table.

"Now," Voldemort said, sitting back in his chair and steeping his fingers, "to other, but related business. How go our attempts at the Ministry?"

Severus tuned out the toadying reports of small victories to try to get himself under control. His fists were clenching so hard his knuckles cracked. He would drink to Charity when he got home, drink until he forgot her many kindnesses to him as a young professor, the assistance with administrative issues, the smiles...

A word from Voldemort caught him.

"Hogwarts."

He rapidly brought his attention back, focusing the anger until he was razor sharp with it.

"...it is my pleasure," the scaly bastard was saying, "to introduce the new Headmistress of Hogwarts."

The dramatic pause was only enough time for Severus to recognize the gender specificity and comprehend the significance of the seating arrangements.

"Bellatrix Lestrange."

The muscles in his face could still be molded into a grin, he found. He slapped his palms together in syncopation with the applause of the rest of the table. Bellatrix preened under all the attention, casting her adoring gaze upon the Dark Lord between victorious smirks at Severus.

Voldemort raised his hand, cutting off the clapping and sending Bellatrix back into her seat.

"There is work still to be done. Go, and do it."

The Malfoys stood up quickly enough to warrant raised eyebrows from Alecko Carrow, slowly rising across the table from them. Their pale faces were carved of stone as they bowed and backed from the room, a meek blonde huddle.

Severus had only just turned to bow when Voldemort murmured to him.

"Have you anything to say regarding my selected Head of Hogwarts, Severus?"

His back creaked objection to his carpet-kissing bow.

"My Lord, Bellatrix has many fine qualities, as do all of your most loyal servants," he said, carving smooth words from his roiling mind. "I had no presuppositions as to your choice for this important position."

A sibilant laugh. "If I did not know you to be intelligent, I would think you a fool for not picturing yourself sitting in that opulent tower, running the best school of witchcraft and wizardry in Europe."

"I seek only the power you allow me, my Lord."

"As I said: intelligent. You may go, Severus."

Severus backed out of the room, never taking his eyes from the twisting patterns of the Persian rug. Once the doors shut, he straightened from his obeisance and fled for the exit as fast as was seemly, seizing the handle of the front door from a quivering house-elf to fling it open. The garden was a labyrinth of twisting shapes, the muggy air pressing against him until the claustrophobia from heat and anger and evil was more than he could bear. He yanked off his robes and rent the front of his jacket, sending

buttons flying into the roses until only a light, white shirt remained. Thus attired, he gathered his abused clothes and all but ran to the gates.

A too-dark shadow in a corner stopped him for a moment. He only ran harder once he made out the swollen form of Nagini, monstrous in her gluttony and abetting of her master's evils.

It was all coming down around his ears, just like the last time, control and solid ground giving way to sucking quicksand. A death sentence, yet again, and power wrenched from his hands, leaving him to beg for mercy from the other side.

Only this time both sides were the "other side." And this time the only Mudblood who mattered was on his side and safe. Safe until the war was over, except he was planning to put her on the front lines, wasn't he, and he wondered at how much of history is doomed to repeat itself.

There was too much burning in his mind.

Severus stumbled to the Apparition point and threw himself home.

And home, as always, waiting for him like a loyal dog, was a bottle of liquor. He didn't know when he started drinking, and he only stopped when his eyelids refused his commands to stay awake, betraying him to the comfort of the worn sofa. But even there, Voldemort's laughter echoed, a soundtrack to visions of the wrong hair and the right body pressed against him and a rock twisting around a tree.

He woke and, for the first time in years, didn't want to be alone with his rage.

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Hermione blinked awake, warm from a dream of long fingers and a silky voice in her ear. Sighing, she nestled back into the pillow, resetting the light quilt above her.

The silky voice continued. His voice, she realized, and it was outside her window.

Hermione sat up and stared at the unnaturally silver light falling through the glass panes onto the rug. This was not the product of the fingernail moon. She pushed back the covers and slipped out of bed, grabbing her wand from the dresser as she padded across the room.

Not the product of the moon, indeed. On the grass outside stood a quicksilver doe. Hermione levered up the brass latch and pushed the window open. What had been a murmur of silk in her dreams coalesced into Snape's clear tones.

"Get out to the stream before I kick the window in!" He? She? Stamped a slender leg, looking as irritated as a graceful Patronus could.

"Snape?" she hissed, casting a wary glance towards the connecting wall between her room and Ron's. Bless the boy for being able to sleep through a hurricane. "What are you doing here in the middle of the night? Is this some kind of test, because if it is, I would really prefer to get back to sleep."

The doe didn't answer, simply continued to look perturbed.

Knowing Snape, he would have his Patronus smash the window, and then there would be a number of additional problems to the ones she already carried. Shooting him a glare, she said, "All right. Wait a minute and I'll be out."

For some reason, she turned her back as she dressed, shimmying out of her light nightdress to quickly don bra, shirt, and jeans. A thick elastic to tame her hair, odd socks and worn trainers, and she was fit to slip out the broad window onto the grass.

The doe pawed the ground, ears flicking. Hermione spelled the window shut.

"After you," she said, waving her hand towards the forest with sarcastic gaiety.

She had to jog to keep up with the Patronus, who slipped through the woods with ethereal grace and no sound. The wood at night was silent, save for her feet on the path and her breath. Dumbledore must have programmed the birds to stop singing and the deer to vanish into their thickets.

Snape was by the stream, seated with his knees up and his back against the apple tree. One long arm was propped at the elbow on his right knee, the hand delicately clenched some inches from his face. Something dangled at the end of a chain he held in that hand, catching the light of the Patronus with each pendulum swing. He watched the pendant like a hypnotists' guinea pig, absorbed as it swung away and towards his forearm. The Patronus went to him and touched her nose to his hand, before vanishing.

"Snape, what is going on?" she said, by way of greeting. It was the middle of the night; niceties could wait.

"Do you know the spell for Fiendfyre, Hermione?" His eyes didn't leave the bauble. There was something unusually controlled in his voice, a care to the enunciation of each word, as though speaking were difficult. And since when was she "Hermione" in this clearing?

Edging closer to him, she replied, "I think I came across it in *Murders Mowst Fowle*. It was in Middle Arabic, I think, since it's based on the summoning of fire djinns."

It was a locket at the end of the chain, a necklace in all. Snape, upon closer inspection, looked like he'd been dragged backwards through every circle of hell. Were his eyes just the slightest bit red and puffy?

"I happen to know the spell," he said. Back and forth went the locket. Hermione tried not to think of being strapped down underneath its arc.

"Why is it important that I...we know the spell?" she said, trying to worry out whatever was going on. He was not acting normally, and something about that locket was screaming at her memory to recognize its significance.

"Because we will use it tonight." Now he looked at her, eyes blacker in the thin moonlight than she had ever seen them. She backed up a step as he set his free hand on the tree trunk and pushed himself to his feet. He swayed just slightly.

Oh, dear lord, he's drunk...