

# I Want That One

*by TeddyRadiator*

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But also know this: at the heart of this story lies a mystery. All will be revealed if you dare to continue.

## 1/7: The Night Of Screams

*Chapter 1 of 7*

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*A/N: These characters are the property of JK Rowling and Warner Bros. I make no money from this story and claim no rights. Nothing you recognise belongs to me.*

*Awhile back, I destroyed my laptop, and while waiting for its replacement, this malignant little tumour of a story came to me, and I posted in on LiveJournal.*

*I would like to warn you again that this is a dark, intense story of violence, abuse, non-consensual and dubious-consensual sex. If the thought of this distresses you, I will more than understand if you hit the back button. This is a little off the norm for me, and very tough reading at times.*

*I will tell you that this is as much a mystery as it is a drama, but it is not pretty and will be at times uncomfortable reading. I do not want you to approach this story without understanding this in mind.*

*It is a strange little story, but has at its heart a mystery. Please keep that in mind. All of the characters in this story are over 18 years old.*

*Special thanks to my friends at LiveJournal, who understood what I was trying to do with this story. I ask you to look past the story into its deeper meanings, which will become clearer as the chapters wear on.*

*Great thanks to Voxangelus, who graciously stepped in as a fresh pair of eyes, and took a lot of pressure off, just because she liked the story.*

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"I want... *that* one," he drawled, a sneering grin twisting his already cruel features. The circle of black-clad Death Eaters followed the path leading from the pale, pointing finger to its target.

Lucius was the only one who didn't laugh. He thought it was the least plausible choice. With a decadent look of pure disdain, he challenged, "What on earth do you want with *that*, Brother?"

Snape shrugged. "It'll make a good house-elf."

Amidst the jeering laughter of the Death Eaters, their Lord and Master contemplated his most valued, most trusted spy. Severus Snape had pointed at the Mudblood, the Granger girl, thus claiming her as his granted prize for the victory Lord Voldemort and his followers had achieved. The Dark Lord smiled knowingly at his secret favourite, and nodded his acquiescence.

By rights, she really should be dead now. Most of them were. The defeat of the Order was bloody and all-encompassing, and the sheer fact that the girl was unceremoniously dumped on the Malfoys' doorstep moments before the final slaughter meant that the victorious Death Eaters could all but smell the fresh meat presented to them.

MacNair, the hero of the hour, who had triumphantly cast the still struggling Potter boy at the Dark Lord's feet, was given the happy task of being the first to take her; the first of many. Harry and Ron were forced to watch. At first threatening, then pleading, then sobbing, they witnessed their innocent, unbroken friend passed from man to man, broken time and time again, before their lives were ceremoniously ended at sunset. Then the true slaughter began. From that moment onward, it was to be known as the Night of Screams; the night the Light vanished, and the Dark emerged the victor.

She sat in a little cluster of women, mostly students around her age. Those who had initially tried to fight had been killed; those who hesitated had been killed; those who had pleaded, protested, postured and defied had been killed. The stench of death was a miasma in the air; to Snape's sensitive nose, it smelt like a slaughterhouse in summer which was precisely what it was.

Why was she still alive? Perversity, most likely; a whim of the gods. After the Death Eaters tired of her, she was thrown in with the other spoils to await her fate. Her fellow survivors had taken pity on her, and she was now kitted out in their castoffs: spare clothes those around her had given up to cover her dignity. The striped shirt was yards too large for her; the skirt much too short. Her bare feet were dirty, and her thighs bore smudges of reddish brown blood mixed with the leavings of her rapists.

At his words, "I want *that* one," the collective sound of the harem rose, mournful and pitying. Unconsciously, they all took a step back. No one wanted to be delivered up to the Judas, the Headmaster The Snape. After the slaughter of the night, the death of their dearly-held hopes and dreams, he was seen as being worse than the Dark Lord. He was the Henchman, the Pale Rider on the Pale Horse, and of all the Death Eaters, the most mistrusted and feared.

For he had approached them early in the night, comforting them with his honeyed tongue, quieting them with the mere familiarity of his pale, stern presence; touching them gently, offering them soothing potions and ointments to ease their suffering. He had held them, rocked them as they pleaded for their lives and their mothers; he had dried tears, all the while delivering up their secrets to his Dark Master. He had stroked them and had granted them succor. In the end, he had betrayed them all.

He was now looking down at Hermione with undisguised repugnance. "Get up," he snapped, grabbing her thin arm and marching her away from the others. He could hear the catcalls and laughter as his fellow Death Eaters closed the circle again, casting lots for the next slave.

Hermione looked back to the cluster of females where she had taken refuge for a few moments. Her space was gone; it was as if she had never been there.

She closed her eyes, feeling his strong fingers biting into her skin. Some of the girls had whispered that Snape might be the best choice of a new Master that is, those that weren't so traumatized that they were no longer capable of speech. Most were nearly catatonic with fear; Hermione was one of them.

Her former Potions professor dragged her along, and Hermione knew she'd better keep up. Within, her body sizzled and throbbled. She felt something loathsome trickling from between her thighs, and tears threatened. A sob escaped her lips, and Snape stopped and turned on her.

A fierce slap nearly knocked her off her feet and made her ears ring. "Shut up. And don't bother trying to gain my pity. I don't have any *φῶρος*." He pulled her forward again, out the door, his chilling calm and cold voice washing over her like a sluice of ice water.

Gasping, holding her burning cheek, Hermione willed her feet to move with his.

They arrived at his home and he warded the house with such logic-defying complexity it made Hermione's already befuddled head spin. She ventured a look around, shivering in the cool, musty air.

"Get upstairs, take off those rags and wash yourself. The loo's on the left at the stop of the landing." He didn't look at her, but removed his robes and sat down on an aging sofa. When she hesitated, he jumped to his feet and rushed at her so quickly she took several stumbling steps back, and fell on her sore backside with a cry. Such was her fear that she jumped up again quickly, afraid of more abuse.

She looked up into his eyes, which were black and unreadable, then looked down again. For a moment, there was only the sound of her harsh breathing, the ticking clock on the wall.

Finally, in a voice so deadly quiet she had to strain to hear, Snape said, "I can see I need to make you aware of a few home truths, Miss Granger. The Order is dead. Potter is dead. Your parents are dead. Everyone you loved or cared about is dead. The Dark has triumphed, and you are a spoil of war. The Dark Lord granted his chosen their pick of tokens, and I have chosen you. Don't make me regret it; there are many willing girls who will happily take your place."

His eyes were simply blazing. "I have literally waded in blood tonight, girl, and I could add yours to it so very easily. The victors are celebrating in the streets, parading around the dead bodies of your friends, and I could happily throw yours onto the pile. What happens next is entirely up to you."

Hermione stood as still as a stone. Then, silently mustering the last remnants of dignity, she turned and walked up the stairs, holding onto the railing with both hands, dragging her body upward and into the upstairs loo. She could feel his eyes following her journey upward.

She locked the door and removed her borrowed clothing, shivering even more. *Don't think about anything*, she told herself, as she ran the battered tub full of the hottest water she could stand. *Don't think, don't act, don't feel, don't wish, don't THINK*. She wouldn't think about the Death Eaters, or the rape, or the pain, or the boys -

The door flew open, and Hermione tried to snatch a towel to cover herself. Snape stood in the doorway, looking at her thin, almost childish body with contempt. "There will be no locked doors within this house, Miss Granger," he intoned, and she nodded. It earned her another swift slap. She had forgotten how quickly he could move. Tears threatened, and she looked down at the water, fascinated, as a drop of red liquid landed on the surface with a light *pop* and dissipated into lighter red ribbons in the water. She rubbed the blood trickling from her nose.

"When I address you, you will answer me. 'Yes, sir' will suffice for now."

Hermione swallowed. "Yes, sir," she said, her voice rusty, her throat raw from screaming.

She looked up into his severe face again. He had never liked her, she knew that for sure; but she had never seen the naked, raging hatred that now burned in his eyes. She had always hoped that her instincts about him had been real, that he was on the side of the light. She was starting to believe that everything Harry had ever suspected

about Snape was probably true.

As he read her thoughts, he smiled grimly. "I see we are starting to get the full picture now, Miss Granger. You are now my slave. As such, your job will be to obey me. Show me obedience, and you will be allowed to wear clothes. If not, you will serve me, and any guests I may have, as you are now."

He snatched the towel from her hands and looked down at her body. She was battered, all right. He could still see blood trickling down her thighs in thin, watery strips. She was so pitiful, so fragile. She had been so humiliated and battered. He had salves, potions to give her comfort... Then the anger returned so viscerously he wanted to slap her senseless again. "Clean yourself, girl. You're a disgusting mess."

"Yes, sir," she said, and with a wave of his hand, he cooled the water.

"No point in having you bleed to death before I get some use out of you. Show some common sense, Granger!" He looked down at her with such avid abhorrence she cringed. For some reason, that irritated him even more. "Broken already, are we? It didn't take much for you to turn into a whining child. You are a pathetic, useless, weakling!"

His hands curled into fists and for a moment Hermione thought he was going to strike her again. Instead, he whirled around and headed for the door. "Clean yourself up and then lie down on the bed across the hall. If you are still bleeding, lie on a towel, unless you fancy cleaning a mattress by hand."

The door closed behind him with a bang, making Hermione jump. With shaking, trembling limbs, she climbed into the high-walled tub, and bit back a cry of burning pain as her damaged nether regions made contact with the lukewarm water.

For several moments she lay in the tub, too exhausted to do anything but soak. A few more ribbons of blood unfurled from her thighs, then stopped. Hermione tried to wash herself, but stopped when she realised she was scrubbing herself raw. This kind of dirt, she knew, would never disappear. This was one kind of clean she would never feel again.

Suddenly afraid he would punish her for soaking too long, Hermione half-pulled, half-dragged herself from the water. She gasped at the weakness in her protesting legs, and held onto the tub until she was able to stand and dry herself. There were no clothes here, and, thinking about his parting words, Hermione crept out into the hall, across the landing, and into the bedroom, holding onto the towel.

The room was sparse, the faded wallpaper outdated and dull. The bed was narrow and rather short, and Hermione wondered if this had been his boyhood bed. Now, he would have to either sleep on his side with his legs drawn up, or dangle his long feet off the end. The image of this made her giggle for some reason, and she put her hands over her mouth in case the laughter turned to screams.

She lay on the bed, and pulled the threadbare covers up to her shoulders. The room was dark except for a dim, little bedside lamp, and she grew warm and sleepy. Even during their time on the run, she had never felt so tired. Her mind drifted, and she had almost dozed when the door opened, and his tall silhouette loomed in the doorway. Hermione forced herself to lie still. She knew that whatever she did, it would somehow be the wrong thing.

Sure enough, he crossed to the bed. "Too tired to wait up, eh? Slattern." Hermione turned away, only to feel his fingers dig into her cheeks and force her head back to face his. He looked at her with fury. Through crooked, clenched teeth, he hissed, "Never turn your head away from me, girl!"

"Yes, sir," she said, and felt her tears threatening again. She forced herself to look at him.

Satisfied she was watching him, he looked down at her imperiously, then yanked the covers from the bed, leaving her naked and exposed to his withering scrutiny. His eyes roved downward, following the contours of her body. He regarded her dispassionately, as if he were studying a rather unsavoury specimen.

He opened a jar of salve and applied it to the worst bruises, starting with the slap mark he'd made earlier. His hands were cool and surprisingly gentle; Hermione lay very still while he rubbed the ointment into her skin with almost tender care.

Once he'd finished with the other cuts and welts, he placed his large hands on her thighs. "Open," he said, in a voice that was soft and colourless. When she made a soft, pleading sound, he absently said, "Shush."

"Please, sir," She swallowed thickly. Her whispers sounded childish and whining to her ears. "Please don't. Not now. Please let me have time to heal "

"Silence," he said, as casually as before. "Open your legs, Miss Granger, or I'll Imperuse you. Is that what you want?" He looked at her impassively, waiting for her to decide.

Feeling as if her heart were dying in her chest, Hermione allowed him to part her shaking thighs, and he looked down at her sex with a strange, almost puzzled look on his face. She whimpered as he parted her labia, peeling it back with two fingers, examining her with chilling indifference.

"Shush," he said again, his voice almost bored. He dipped two fingers into the healing salve, and rubbed over her labia in a way that was almost sensual. Hermione took great, shuddering breaths, fighting tears of humiliation.

His hands were knowing and experienced, and Hermione was too traumatised at the time. Later, when she replayed the moment in her mind, it didn't make sense. When his fingers glided between her netherlips and circled her clitoris, she whimpered, thinking he was trying to prepare her for sex, and he smirked knowingly.

Without hesitation, he dipped a single finger into the healing salve, then inserted it, deep inside her passage, causing her to hiss. He withdrew it, looked at the smear of blood staining it, then pushed two long, slim fingers inside, pushing down on her pelvis with his other hand. Hermione heard her own harsh, panting breath, and forced herself to look up at his solemn face as he studied her damaged vulva. His fingers probed deeply, pressing inside her. His inspection was surprisingly gentle, and as his eyes slid off to the side, allowing his sensitive fingers to explore and examine her, Hermione sensed something; a shift of some kind.

It was not exactly gentle; he seemed... uncertain. It was almost impossible to define. Hermione made a soft sound, and he turned his head, startled from his musings. The loathing she saw earlier returned, darkening his features.

"Hmm." He withdrew his fingers and cleaned them carefully. "You're tight, I'll give you that. You may turn out to be of some use after all, Miss Granger." He produced a small vial and, holding her nose, unceremoniously tipped its contents down her throat. "Swallow..."

Hermione barely had time to force her parched throat to obey him when her world slipped sideways and set her adrift...

## 2/7: Liquid Lust

### Chapter 2 of 7

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*This chapter contains scenes of explicit sexual content of a dubious consensual nature. All of the characters in this story are over 18 years old.*

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The second day after the Night of Screams was a haze of orders, chores, commands, and punishments. Snape was irritable, impatient, demanding, and picky, and each infraction was rewarded with a barrage of haranguing language, mental abuse, and contempt.

If she truly displeased him, he either slapped her or threw her over his knees and literally spanked her, his large hand hard and merciless. He would then heal the hurt flesh, telling her to "Shush". His calm, almost apologetic manner when healing her was in such direct contrast to his apoplectic rage he seemed like a different person entirely. He never healed in anger.

Hermione was terrified of offending him. She was terrified of him, full stop. Alone at night, flooded with sadness and loss, she wept almost continuously. In his presence, she was too afraid to show any emotion whatsoever. Any sign of weakness was so inflammatory as to be criminal. He had always been swift and cruel; now he was manic in his ferocious desire to punish her for the most minor of infractions. Cowering seemed to be the most punishable offense.

As the only one of the trio who could boil water, Hermione had learned to cook during the long months on the run with Harry and Ron, so she tried to appease Snape with good food. Snape ate anything she put on the table and consumed it with relish, but never commented on her cooking. He never spoke to her at all, for that matter, except to issue orders or maltreatment. Hermione had to eat her meals standing over the sink.

In between the abuse, the cooking and the palpable fear that permeated the very air, was the work. Manual, hard, magic-less, often pointless labour. She was tasked with cleaning Snape's home from the moment she awoke to when she fell asleep on the old sofa in the front room in the evening. Hermione had indeed become a house-elf.

It was a monumental task that would probably take weeks. The house was dilapidated and grubby and possessed all the decrepit charm of a dying flopperworm.

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On the third day of his ownership, Hermione was on her knees, scrubbing a kitchen floor that had been aging when Chamberlain was Prime Minister; it was caked with years of embedded grime, and Hermione was already filthy from sloshing dirty water with the heavy brush he'd given her. Her knees, arms and even the tips of her breasts were black. He had still refused to give her clothes.

Out of the blue, apropos of nothing, Snape asked, "Are you still sore?"

Hermione looked up from the floor she was scrubbing. "Sir?"

He scowled, and rattled the newspaper he'd been reading. He spat, "Y-your - your cunt, stupid girl! Is it still sore?"

Withering beneath his coarse, cruel words, Hermione whispered, "Not as much, sir." When he did not reply, she returned uncertainly to her task.

She continued scrubbing, until she realised she was being watched. As she looked up, she met his basilisk gaze, and was unable to look away. After several seconds, he folded his newspaper with an impatient movement. Standing, he beckoned her. "Come. Come with me."

Hermione quickly jumped to her feet and followed him, rubbing her filthy hands on her bare flanks to dry them. He walked into the hall and stopped at the foot of the stairs. With an impatient gesture upward, he snapped, "Go on, up you get."

Hermione climbed the stairs, feeling the sick, cold realisation that Snape was several steps below her, watching her bare arse shift and move as she climbed. It gave her a feeling of helpless misery, wondering what he was thinking. He'd already called her body skinny, underdeveloped, boyish. He'd said those things with contempt in his voice. What must he be thinking now?

As if to answer, she received a sharp, painful slap on her backside. "Move, girl! Don't be so lazy!" Hermione scampered up the remaining stairs.

On the top landing he caught her arm and pulled her back into his bedroom. Hermione stood at the foot of his bed and thought, *He's going to rape me. It's his privilege* She had known this moment would come; she had tried to steel herself for it for the last two days. She could only hope that he would be quick. That was something she could live with; *just be quick*

"I will take all the time I require, Miss Granger," he said, smirking. He studied her surprised expression with his usual disdain. "You're so easy to read, girl. Like a child's book. How did *you* survive while the others did not?" He sighed irritably, as if to disagree with the fickle nature of fate.

"Sit." Once she had complied, he joined her on the side of the bed, and muttered a quick, rasping *Scourgify* to scrub the remnants of grime from her body.

Hermione kept silent as the cleansing spell rode over her like sandpaper. Even Snape's spells were tactile and abrasive. He leaned back, as if to inspect the results, then reached into the bedside cabinet and retrieved a small bottle. "Drink this."

Hermione took the bottle without hesitation. That was another hard-earned lesson. If she hesitated in drinking a potion, he grabbed the closest thing, usually her hair or her nose, and literally forced the liquid down her throat. The previous day she had choked so hard on her Pain Potion, spots had formed in front of her eyes. She stood, coughing and spluttering, while he berated her for her disobedience. "At this rate you'll be naked until you die," he'd snorted, his hands crossed in front of his chest, watching her struggle to breathe.

This potion was sky blue, and smelled of raspberries. She drank it down and immediately he chuckled. "I should think your tune is about to change, Miss Granger." He patted her thigh almost reassuringly.

Hermione looked at him, her expression puzzled. Suddenly her body felt as if it were electrically charged. She gasped as the bottle fell from her nerveless fingers. She felt a crippling sensation of need; it overwhelmed rational thought and consciousness. It was as intense as hunger, and as painful as menstrual cramps. She looked down at his hand, resting lightly on her leg, and felt that she would die if he moved it away. As if he heard her thoughts, he stroked her thigh softly, causing her to moan and shiver. Comprehension dawned immediately, and she looked up at him with shame-filled eyes that were drugged with desire.

"Lust... potion," she gasped, trying to rise, humiliation battling with an arousal so intense that she wavered toward him even as she tried to pull away.

"Yes, a rather powerful one, Miss Granger," he said smugly, and stroked her thigh again, causing her to writhe and whimper. "I've been experimenting with it. You're as good a guinea pig as any."

And then she was on him, her kisses and caresses clumsy and artless. She frantically tried to cover him with her body, tearing at buttons, making helpless, apologetic mewling noises in her throat that made him laugh again. He allowed her a few brief minutes in her fruitless attempt to remove his clothing before rising.

"Subtle as a hippogriff, you Gryffindors. No style," he sneered. "Is this what you want?" He purred, before magically removing his clothing.

Hermione had little time to contemplate his long, slender frame, his pale, scarred flesh, before she was covering him in kisses that were desperate and mortifying, and she felt tears slide from her eyes even as she sank to her knees, blindly questing down to the one part of his anatomy that set them apart; the one part that every Death Eater had demanded she pay tribute to before violating her. Every Death Eater had taken her that night, save the one before her now.

Even flaccid, his uncut cock was large, and although Hermione had not so much *astouched* a penis more than three nights before, she had been well instructed by her rapists, and the potion now driving her body steered her soft hands and softer mouth unerringly toward her goal.

Severus initially watched her inexperienced attempts to pleasure him with detached amusement. Now, looking down at her, seeing her glazed eyes roaming hungrily over his body, he felt no longer completely in charge of his own emotions.

She held his cock between her palms reverently, as if it were the most longed-for treasure. Suddenly, he was as hard as if he, too, had taken the potion, and his erection leapt in her hands. He was dismayed at his own reaction. He was supposed to spurn her; deride her too-thin body and leave her alone to writhe in torment and rejection.

And then her pink mouth enveloped him.

It felt so wondrous it stunned him; his knees buckled, and he fell back against the bed, holding onto her hair so that she would follow him. It was not the knowing, practiced hands and tongue of a professional. It was the clumsy, awkward fumbling of innocence, and it took him back to his own youth, and the first time a girl willingly bent her knees for him. It was sweet and naïve, and it undid him. A soft moan escaped his lips. She heard it, and it drove a spike of lust so deep into her brain she could barely breathe.

Severus knew he should taunt her; call her names like "cheap whore" and "trollop" and "Gryffindor tart", but he could not. He felt her warm, moist mouth cradle him and suck him and it felt real, unsolicited. He knew it was the potion, and that she would never have even dreamed of willingly sucking off her Potions professor, but she was moaning deliriously, deep in her throat, and the sound was reverberating up through his balls into his cock in a way that was both innocent and erotically pagan. His eyes rolled in the back of his head, and he cursed himself for his weakness even as he pulled her closer between his thighs and crooned softly.

Hermione felt his hand on the back of her head, urging her to take him deeper, and the sweet sound he made almost made her orgasm. Whatever he was, she was obviously giving him what he wanted. He smelled so good; she buried her face into his pubic hair, sniffing appreciatively, her hand winding around his waist. She touched him everywhere, unafraid, and his hands relaxed and slid against her shoulders.

She moaned again, causing him to buck, and without thought her hand drifted down to her crotch, sliding between her labia; touching herself as she tried to pleasure him.

His eyes slid open to watch her, licking him like a lolly, one hand stroking his balls, the other feverishly rubbing her swollen sex in time with her flickering tongue. Her innocent self-gratification intoxicated him, and he wanted to sit and watch her. He wanted to see her come...

Inexplicably, he found his anger rising again. Fury seared into his heart, and he grabbed her hair painfully and yanked her head away. She cried out in protest as he pulled her away from his cock and heaved her onto her feet. "Selfish little bitch! I didn't give you the potion to gratify yourself!"

He spun her around and pushed her face down onto the bed. Thrusting his fingers harshly into her slick and ready cunt, he growled, "Your first priority ~~is~~ my pleasure, girl! I don't give a fuck if you enjoy it!"

He drove himself into her, balls deep. He pounded into her, roaring with lust at her tight, wet heat, knowing he wouldn't last long, and not caring. He fucked her without regard for her pleasure, safety, or sanity. Brutal, hard thrusts tore away tender, healing tissue, and found places the potion helped Hermione to newly identify. She knew she was being used and it was an abomination, but in spite of this she could feel her body readying to fly apart beneath him, and what was more, Snape could feel it, too. He smacked her backside with all the force in his arm, shocking her out of her potion-induced desire.

"You will not come!" he shouted, and began to push the cheeks of her bottom apart. He spit twice, his cold spittle hitting the target of her puckered hole, causing her to yelp. His long, middle finger pushed hard into her anus, up to the knuckle, and twisted painfully. She began to howl.

"No! This is not your pleasure!" he cried, and then he was coming unexpectedly, intensely *painfully* hard, with deep punishing strokes, as his orgasm turned his cock inside out and drained his balls dry, tearing cry after cry from his throat, against his will.

He slumped over her, breathless, head spinning, his cock still jerking and quivering. He could feel her body shudder as he withdrew his finger from her rectum. For a long moment they stayed locked together, until their breathing quieted. He slid from her tight, enticing passage, spent and useless.

He leaned forward and planted a kiss between her sweaty shoulder blades, making her shudder. "You're here as a convenient hole, Miss Granger," he crooned, his voice tender, sensual. "You are a means to relieve stress. Your pleasure is of no import to me, nor is your comfort. The next time it will be my cock in your arse, not my finger. I don't want you to enjoy it, witch. I want you to remember it, because you will never be anything but a tool, and an imperfect one, at that."

He rose from her prone body and muttered a cleansing charm over his body. He quickly dressed and headed downstairs, calling over his shoulder, "Clean yourself up and

get back to work. That floor isn't going to scrub itself."

Hermione heard the door close behind him, and she began to weep; great, braying sobs that threatened to make her physically sick. Shame and degradation washed over her; he had used her like the lowest Knockturn Alley whore and she had initially reveled in it. She knew it was the potion he'd forced her to take, but it felt real. It felt like how she'd always thought desire would feel; a bending, twisting emotion that drove everything from her mind but need and lust and want for her lover.

And it was as real as a glamour.

Gradually she rose, and wiping her eyes, walked into the loo. There was an old, spotted mirror on the front of the medicine cabinet, and Hermione looked at her woeful reflection. Her eyes were dead; her skin, flushed and splotchy, was also dead. The only part of her left alive was her cunt, still buzzing and throbbing, unrelieved from his unfulfilling consummation. For a mad moment she wished he'd beaten her; it would not have hurt as badly as this.

"You will not come," he had said. His word was law in this house, and although she was alone and knew it would take the briefest of time to bring herself off, Hermione knew Snape would know if she did. She did not want to know how he would punish her for that offense.

For a dark, hopeless moment, Hermione wanted to die. There was a drinking glass sitting on the chipped sink. Hermione studied it for a moment and thought, *could smash the glass and eat the pieces. By the time he realised what was happening, it would be over.*

Oddly enough, she did not blame Snape. She blamed herself. *If I had not been so stupid, she thought, I would be dead with Harry and Ron and the others*

No. She knew that wasn't true. She knew she wasn't stupid; merely unlucky. Snape certainly wasn't worth taking her own life. Hermione decided that when and if she was to die, it would be on her terms. But she'd have to be subtle about it. Snape set a great store on subtlety.

## 3/7: Experiments

### Chapter 3 of 7

On the night the light is defeated and the dark wins, Lord Voldemort grants a boon to his most valued and trusted spy.

This is a very, very dark and disturbing story of pain and punishment. If you find the idea of non-con and dub-con unsettling, please understand this will not be the story for you.

But also know this: at the heart of this story lies a mystery. All will be revealed if you dare to continue.

□

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*This chapter contains scenes of explicit sexual content of a dubious consensual nature. All of the characters in this story are over 18 years old.*

*Special thanks to my friends at LiveJournal, who understood what I was trying to do with this story. I ask you to look past the story into its deeper meanings, which will become clearer as the chapters wear on.*

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Over the next five nights, she and Snape fell into a perverse sort of routine. He would dose her with whatever lust potion he had on hand and use her body richly, teasing her up to a straining peak, then suddenly denying her any pleasure or completion. During the day, he ordered her about with an absent air, his tone almost civil. Then he would stop her in the middle of whatever she was doing, either cooking dinner, or cleaning, or washing clothes, and grab her arm, dispassionately dragging her up the stairs.

He always took her from behind; he never looked her in the eye. He would plunge into her body, his silken, menacingly sinister voice hinting at all manner of horror if she allowed herself to orgasm, while Hermione would try to block the sensations from her drugged mind. She would mentally recite old nursery rhymes, song lyrics, poems, potions ingredients; anything to deaden the irresistible urge to give into the potion. Anything to shut down this new, dangerous need he'd awoken.

It would have been much easier to deal with if he were raping her. What he did was much more complex, insidious. He tormented her with pleasure, and he did it with skill and knowledge. He learned her body, so that each touch, each thrust, each word was calculated to make her respond to him. His hands were often very gentle and skilled, then he would viciously change; he would pinch a nipple or petulantly yank her hair. Always taking her to the edge, always with careful expertise, making sure she was responding. Then he would react with a cutting remark, a sharp smack, and Hermione would come back to herself, to his name calling and taunts.

On the fourth day, after complimenting her on a particularly good lunch, he ordered her to clean the floor in the front room while he read a book. As she sat back on her haunches to catch her breath, she felt Snape slide the toe of his boot between her thighs, pushing upwards until it parted her labia. She gasped, and her treacherous body responded almost immediately. He nudged her clit with the very edge of his toe, and before she could stop herself, a soft exhalation of breath puffed from her lips, and she opened her legs wider to assist him.

"You like that, don't you?" His voice sounded shaky, almost as if he spoke against his will. "You don't want to, because it's so dirty, isn't it? But you do."

Her face flaming with humiliation, Hermione bit her lip. He angled his toe higher, sliding it back and forth, and she mewled helplessly.

"Tell me you like it. Say it." Hermione had never heard such raw, breathless emotion in his voice. He truly sounded like he was the one being pleased, not her.

She looked back over her shoulder at him, and was shocked at the lust blazing in his eyes. He was like a dark flame, seductive and incendiary, and in that moment,

Hermione felt the tiniest bit of power over him. It exhilarated and frightened her. She had never seen him like this, not really. In all of their encounters there had been a modicum of control, of surety of his dominance over her. Now, he was just a man; a man with flashing eyes looking down at her in a way she'd never been looked at before. A man who wanted her - Hermione Granger. She risked a smile.

"I like it, sir," she moaned, and pushed back against his foot. His eyes blazed, and his face slackened with pure desire. It was breathtaking and terrifying to see him like this. Again, she felt a frisson of power over him. He licked his thin lips, and as their eyes met, the raw desire in his face made Hermione's cunt clench. In that moment, she admitted to herself that she physically wanted him, almost as much as she emotionally feared him. She shivered and closed her eyes. "I like it very much, sir."

"Good girl," he whispered. His breathing grew quicker, as she pressed against his foot. For a sick moment, Hermione shamelessly rubbed against the leather, helpless to stop herself now that she had his permission. She licked her lips, and arched her back with a soft, unmistakable moan of arousal. She was so *close*...

Suddenly, he removed his boot and gave her a gentle push on her backside. "Is this the way you always shine a man's shoes, Cinderella?" His voice had changed and grown cold again. "You've missed a spot there, beside the table. Pay attention!" He jumped from the sofa and quickly left the room, and shortly Hermione heard his tread on the stairs, as he descended to his lab in the basement below.

Trembling, she meekly crawled over to the offending dirt on the floor. Her tears of humiliation, mixed liberally with frustration, helped to wash the floor clean.

On the fifth night, he gave her an overdose of the potion, and had to force a bezoar down her throat before she turned blue.

On the sixth night, she orgasmed without his permission. In order to avoid another overdose, he gave her a much smaller dose of the potion, but it took effect almost immediately. He placed a caressing hand on her back in readiness, and swiped down, from her shoulder blades to the cleft of her bottom, and she felt each calloused finger whisper down her body like the silken strands of a whip.

She was gasping, thinking of the vile water she'd slopped around, cleaning the floor. She thought of the smell of Thestral shit, and how it made her gag. The toe of his boot, teasing the underside of her clit...

Then his mouth, his tongue, followed the reverse path of his fingers, sliding from between her arse cheeks, up her spine; his lips sucking at her flesh, his tongue running circles in its wake with erotic languor. His hand reversed its journey and wrapped around a length of her hair and pulled gently. He traveled up her body, until his chest, hot and scratchy with sparse black hair, was pressed against her back. His large hands cupped her breasts, plucking her nipples, and his mouth was at her ear, licking against the shell, his breath hot and moist against her throat as he moved, commanding, "Don't."

Warning, "Don't." His breath was humid in her ear, panting in time with his thrusts.

Beseeching, "Don't." He was close, so close. She felt his grip tighten on her breasts, her hair; his movements were lightening fast.

Begging, "Don't. Please, oh, Hermione, don't!"

Her back arched of its own accord, and she pushed back toward him instinctively, even as he pleaded, "Please, don't. Please, don't." The words, hissed through his gritted teeth, coiled around her and mocked her shattered self-control. It was no longer a matter of 'Don't'. There was nothing, short of death, that could stop it.

A feeling of being sucked inward started clenching at her from her core, and as her orgasm blasted from her, Hermione felt as if she'd been flung into space. She couldn't prevent or hide it. A low cry tore from her lips and rose to a howling wail; her entire body flushed and she shuddered helplessly. The sensation was beyond anything she'd ever felt, and even as wave after wave of intense sensation crashed over her, she was sobbing, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry "

He roughly pushed her onto the bed, his own lust forgotten, and spanked her arse until his hand grew tired. Still fuming, he bound her to the bed and conjured a birch rod, stripping her bottom until the cane broke. He then produced a large, wooden-backed hairbrush, paddling her until she was voiceless from her screams and tears, and he was too tired to continue. By then, the skin of her backside was broken in a few places and he was panting as if he'd run a race. "I told you not to! I warned you! Could you not obey me just this once?"

With an impotent grunt of rage, he threw the hairbrush across the room, breaking it into pieces, then strode out the door, slamming it so hard the transom window above cracked. He left her for almost fifteen minutes before returning. Hermione sobbed uncontrollably, uncaring if he punished her for it; her arse was on fire and she was so sick with humiliation and pain, a part of her hoped he would come back and finish her. Dying was starting to sound easier than living with herself and her complete submission to his unpredictably seductive cruelty.

He finally returned. He walked back into the room, and hovered over her. Hermione didn't dare look at him. "You probably didn't deserve that," he said, cryptically. Broken, Hermione keened into the room, unable to stop crying, but he didn't remonstrate.

He sat down on the bed beside her. "Shush, Hermione," he said, quietly, absently. He placed a large jar on the bed beside her head, and uncapped it. He dipped his fingers into the jar, and tenderly rubbed the contents into her burning, stinging flesh. The salve not only healed the marks, but removed all traces of the pain. His hands were gentle as he rubbed the ointment into her skin, but Hermione felt them shake.

"Shush. Calm, Hermione," he said, although she had already quieted. "Shh, please stop," he said, over and over, as if she still cried and pleaded for mercy. He continued to move his hands over her skin long after the pain had subsided, his fingers finally ghosting over her shivering form. "Shh," he crooned into the silent room. "Shh."

Hermione began to fear that Snape was not sane. The incident was never mentioned again, although the dosage of the lust potion was still diminishing each day, and he continued to forbid her to climax with or without him.

By the end of the week, Hermione's nerve endings were on fire; she whimpered if touched. Her body was so needy and over-stimulated she finally got down on her knees and begged to be allowed to gain some relief. Snape looked down at her, his expression stony, uncertain. In the end, he refused her. "I can't," he said, mysteriously, walking away. "I won't."

On the sixth night she had a seizure. He calmly administered the antidote and held her while her body seized, explaining that repeated use of the potion often caused this sort of reaction. He made her clean his lab the next day, as a punishment for not being able to tolerate the dosage.

That night, he came to her late, and woke her, pulling her from the sofa up to his room. He silently handed her the potion, and as she drank it, Hermione realized with a jolt that the potion was so watered down as to almost qualify as a placebo. There was almost nothing in this potion but flavouring.

He waited several minutes, watching her silently, then reached for her. "You know what to do," he said, quietly, as if instructing her on how to cast a simple spell. Wordlessly, she nodded, and turned away from him, on her hands and knees.

He was gentle. He stimulated her, and found her wet enough and ready enough, and entered her slowly, as if this was a task he must accomplish. He took none of the wild pleasure that he'd taken on previous nights, but he was slow and gentle, until near the end, when his own passion took him. Then she felt his body tense, his grip on her waist tighten, his thrusts quicken. He came with a quiet little sob, as if he had either not wanted it to end, or had not wanted to come in the first place.

For several long minutes, after his own needs had been met, he stood behind her, his shuddering breaths the only sound in the room. Hermione heard him take a deep breath as his flaccid cock slid from her body, and he rolled her over onto her back and sat beside her on the bed.

Stroking her breasts, he said, "Are you still aroused?" He wore a distracted look that bordered on drugged; a faint smile played about his lips that had nothing to do with any post-coital relief. It was an expression of a man faintly stoned on power.

Hermione writhed, even as he warned, "Don't. Don't." His voice sounded perfectly reasonable, as if he were telling her not to go out into the rain without an umbrella. He

caressed her face, her throat, her limbs; he rolled her nipples between his long fingers, all the while crooning, "Don't. Don't."

Finally, he parted her thighs, smiling at her flushed, swollen vulva. She began to plead.

"Please sir, please don't touch me there! Please sir, please!" Her voice rose to a screech as his hand drifted languidly down her belly. He chuckled darkly as a single, gentle fingertip teased the seam of her labia. His touch was feather-light and felt like torture.

He watched her face, his fingers knowing and skilled. In a chastising voice, he sing-songed, "Don't. Don't. Don't."

He knew she would not be able to stop it. He knew it, even as his finger slipped between the lips of her pussy and touched a clitoris so engorged and stiff it felt like a little cock.

She grasped his arms in an effort to stop him, but she could not make herself push him away. He knew she was trying to obey him, but he so wanted to see her come. Why was he telling her not to? And still he smiled as he rubbed and teased her hard clit and whispered in her ear, "You're not going to come, are you? Surely you're not going to come?"

Her scream was a terrible thing. She cried out over and over, eyes open wide, unseeing, her mouth contorted with pleasure so intense it registered as pain. Rape had not felt this horrible. Sodomy had not been this brutal. This was a violation of her soul, her psyche, her pride and her discipline, and he watched, fascinated, as she shook and shuddered in dreadful ecstasy, her voice hoarse and exhausted. She was asleep almost before the last pulsing tremours of her body ceased, her tears of relief drying on her face.

She lay on the bed, drenched in sweat, twitching, even in sleep, her hands still clasping his arms. Relief and sadness marred her features.

Severus watched her, and thought, not for the first time since the Night of Screams, that he was going mad. No sane man would treat a young woman like this. He had chosen her, knowing she was marked for certain death, and even as he sought to protect her, the voice in his head would hiss that death was too good for her. He admitted to himself he desired her.

He would be standing in the kitchen, finishing lunch, and his heart would flood with an overwhelming, affectionate protectiveness for her. It would suddenly, inexplicably change to raging, gut-clenching lust, so demanding and uncontrollable he would seek her out and take her, even going so far as to give her a potion so that she would enjoy sex with him. And when she responded oh, gods, when she responded! A killing anger would sweep across him, and he would say and do the most vile and abusive things to her. He had always known how to make those he cared for suffer, whether by accident or by design.

For the better part of the week, she had tried to please him, to give him what he wanted. He rubbed his jaw, feeling the rasp of stubble. What did he want? Didn't he want her? Didn't she feel good? He thought he knew, but whatever it was always danced just beyond his ability to comprehend. Even the lust potion idea waned on him.

It had seemed so easy to sort out his feelings during the time the now-defunct 'Golden Trio' had been on the run. Severus wanted to blame the young girl lying helpless in his bed, his leavings trickling from between her thighs.

For the first time since the Night of Screams, Severus allowed himself to think of those last days. After almost six months on the run, she should have known better. They had a Wizarding Wireless, for Merlin's sake they knew the Death Eaters were one step behind them. Why had she allowed them to go to Canterbury in the first place?

Severus had known from the start that Granger would be the only reason the trio survived. Potter and Weasley wouldn't be able to find their wands with both hands except that she showed them. That was her weakness. That arrogant need to be the best, to show off her skills, overlaid with a sincere desire to help them. She'd written their essays, allowed them to copy her assignments, rely on her to get them through classes they'd rather snore through, and she let them.

Severus had been so tired. He had gotten to the point where he no longer believed Potter would win. Between the running of the school, keeping the Carrows from cursing every student except the Slytherins, the DA running vigilante raids, his faculty's near mutinous state, and the Dark Lord's increasing impatience and paranoia, Severus had been close to collapse, and felt it.

He had slept less than two hours a night. He looked like a wraith, deathly pale, shadow-thin, his obsidian eyes and large nose prominent on his thin face. He had gotten to the point where caring about the future took almost too much effort. Severus found he no longer thought about Lily, or Dumbledore and his machinations, or anything more than just keeping all the untidy messes of the school slopping together and moving onto their appointed course. He had almost reached the end of his string. Then Lucius had appeared and told him the Snatchers had spotted the Granger girl in Canterbury.

Hermione twitched in her sleep; Snape stroked her calf, gentling her, remembering those days before the Night of Screams.

*He had been stunned when Headmaster Black had informed them that the Granger girl had taken his portrait with them, ostensibly to spy on Severus! His could not help but be impressed by the girl. Black was being transported around in a small handbag the girl had charmed to be infinitely extendable; it held everything from reference books to tents and food. She had her own traveling apothecary in there as well. Black, for all his pureblood drivel about her being inferior to either boy because of their blood status, was secretly impressed with her steely resolve and cunning.*

*So was Severus. He had known the girl to be keenly intelligent. Seeing her emerge from the chrysalis of the little hand-waving, book-spouting irritant, to a butterfly of sharp, quick-witted resourcefulness was secretly gratifying. He took a small pride that his constant disdain of her insistence on quoting every book she'd read had forced her to learn to think for herself, and from the age of fourteen, she'd outstripped every witch and wizard at Hogwarts, not only in knowledge, but also in intellect.*

*Severus became almost obsessed with Black's updates. He moved Headmaster Black's portrait to his private chambers, and daily he queried the portrait about what the Trio was doing. The two Headmasters, living and dead, spent the evenings talking about what they'd learned from Black's spying.*

*The only solace in Severus' hellish life was the snippets of the day-to-day adventures of the Golden Trio. Amidst the hell that his life had become, the only thing that soothed him was Black's confirmation at the end of each day that the trio had survived; that the morning heralded another uneventful night.*

*He shuddered when Black regaled him with the trip to the Ministry, their near miss, and the capture of Slytherin's locket. He cringed at the thought of how close they came to being caught; the sheer, foolhardy recklessness of it. The Weasley boy had splinched himself and they'd almost been caught so many times Severus added his fear for them to his growing list of things to lose sleep over.*

*Headmaster Black was less impressed with the boys. "I tell you, Headmaster, they wouldn't be able to find their arses in a snowstorm without that little Mudblood chit-"*

*"Do NOT use that word, Phineas!" Severus hissed, his dark brows knitting together in a frown. "Give the girl some respect."*

*"Why?" Black said, slyly. He looked at Hogwarts' latest Headmaster keenly. "Why are you so quick to rush to her defense?" He made a little snorting noise. "Don't tell me you've fallen for this one! You and your silly Gryffindor girls. What's wrong with a good, pure Slytherin wench? You're a damn fool sometimes, Headmaster."*

*Severus wanted to tell him to fuck off, but he was afraid he would, and he couldn't bear the idea of Black withholding information from him. He could not keep going, not knowing how they were doing, and more importantly, how Hermione was coping with two young, hormonal wizards.*

*And each night, Headmaster Black would come to him, chuckling, telling an overheard remark, a silly joke, a finely crafted idea, a new Horcrux discovered or another near capture and clever escape, and Severus would realise that he envied them. He actually envied Potter and his friends. They were on the run, hiding out for their very lives, and Severus wished he were with them.*



*Every day, the Granger girl would dazzle him, with her leaps of intellect, her ingenuity, her audacity, and her caring, fond protectiveness of the other two. And every day, his respect and admiration would grudgingly ramp up another notch, until he found himself looking forward to talking with Black's portrait more than any other activity in his day. It was the only thing that gave him pleasure anymore.*

*By late October, Severus realised that learning about her from her life on the run had an unexpected and altogether unwelcomed side effect. It had created an infatuation with Hermione Granger. He had always been a covetous sinner, but he'd never thought he'd wish to be on the run for his life, just to be with her.*

He didn't still want her, did he? He didn't like, or need, or have any real use for her, now that Potter had gotten himself killed, did he? She was a grim reminder of all he'd lost. He had stopped loving her the day she destroyed the Light.

Perhaps she could help him regain it. He smiled to himself. Perhaps he was going about this completely backwards.

The next night, he was afraid to give her any Lust Potion again. As he watched her making dinner, a desire to fuck her overcame him and he could barely cross the floor to her.

"Come with me," he commanded, and she meekly followed him. She looked like she would cry when she saw the vial of potion, and the anger rose again. Warring against the anger was his genuine fear that she would have another seizure. He didn't want to see that again. She looked at him, as he had taught her to do, and in her imploring eyes, Snape saw his own reflected fear.

But he wanted her. He wanted her to be wet and ready for him, and the Potion was the only answer. He tipped a few drops of the potion on his finger and intoned, "Open."

Obediently, Hermione opened her mouth, and to her surprise, Snape rubbed the Potion onto her gums. She watched him, her expression mildly confused, as he removed his finger, then watched her carefully.

*The eyes, he had once written in a long-forgotten essay on Veritaserum, cannot deceive a Potioneer who is confident of his abilities and his results. With the right potion he proselytized, the eyes will tell you a thousand secrets. They can make a thousand promises, and break a thousand hearts. Sometimes, with the right potion, they can do all those things at once.*

Snape's Potions professor, Master Highbutton, wrote in the margins that Snape should stop waxing poetic; that his declarations were, in Highbutton's immortal words, a load of Skrewt shit.

But Highbutton had never looked into Hermione Granger's eyes. She was trying to fight it, and the more she fought, the more her amber eyes blazed with heat and want. She was grasping the side of the bed, her only means of preventing herself from flying at him. Gods, he wanted her. Merlin save him, he wanted her to touch him.

"On your knees," he demanded, his tone unsteady and desperate. He was frantically trying to free his aching cock from his trousers, and she obeyed him like a slave. She was already reaching, already licking her lips as he pulled her to him, so needy and frantic he felt as if he had been the one to take the potion. "Suck me," he said, and his voice sounded foreign to his own ears. There was nothing of the cool, menacing Headmaster about him anymore. He was not commanding her. He was begging her.

He cried out as her mouth enclosed on him, and she watched his body arching up to her mouth as she sucked him, her hands moving in rhythm with his thrusts. It felt like heaven to him.

"This is wrong," he moaned, pulling her closer, his hips moving faster, his climax imminent. "You are my student; you shouldn't be doing this," he whimpered.

Her reply was to swirl her tongue around the head of his cock, her eyes locked with his. "Don't make me want this," he gasped, feeling the delicious, forbidden tingling that told him he was coming.

"Don't make me want you!" He roared as he climaxed into her mouth. His seed spurted hot and bitter down her throat, and he felt dirty and angry even as she licked him clean. "I wouldn't expect you have any shame, after what you've done," he moaned. She looked up at him uncomprehendingly, her mouth swollen and lush from sucking his dick.

He managed to stumble onto his feet, buttoning his trousers. He walked unsteadily toward the stairs, and said, "I want some ice cream. Bring me a bowl."

He flung himself into his chair, fighting tears. He was furious and afraid and so upset he felt as if he were about to jump out of his skin. He ran a shaking hand through his greasy hair. He had to stop this.

He had to do something to *make* her stop him.

On the following night, he took her up the stairs with a different potion. "I think you are ready for something new, Miss Granger," he said, taking her into the loo.

From a secret cupboard, he withdrew a small iron box and opened it with his wand. From the lovely little box he took a long, stoppered glass tube. Uncorking it, he slowly withdrew a single, reddish-brown hair, the tube's only contents. He meticulously returned the glass to the box, and the box to its cupboard.

He took his potion and dropped the hair into the vial, and the potion within turned a light tan colour. He thrust the vial under Hermione's nose. "Drink this, then wait until the change." He strode from the room. "I'll be waiting for you."

Hermione sighed. She had no choice but to take the potion, and so drank it. The sickening taste and feel of the Polyjuice Potion coated her insides, making them morph and shift. She shuddered, and struggled to keep the contents of her stomach down, forcing herself to calm. Whoever she was now, she was the woman Snape wanted.

Hermione looked up into the mirror. She was now a few inches taller, with gorgeous straight, auburn hair and sparkling green eyes. "Oh, gods," she whispered. The woman looking back at her was too familiar not to recognise. She was Harry's mother, Lily Potter.

## 4/7: Revelations

### Chapter 4 of 7

On the night the light is defeated and the dark wins, Lord Voldemort grants a boon to his most valued and trusted spy.

This is a very, very dark and disturbing story of pain and punishment. If you find the idea of non-con and dub-con unsettling, please understand this will not be the story for you.

But also know this: at the heart of this story lies a mystery. All will be revealed if you dare to continue.

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*This chapter contains scenes of explicit sexual content of a dubious consensual nature. All of the characters in this story are over 18 years old.*

*Special thanks to my friends at LiveJournal, who understood what I was trying to do with this story. I ask you to look past the story into its deeper meanings, which will become clearer as the chapters wear on.*

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Hermione stared at her reflection, and something like hysteria threatened to take over her sanity. If Snape's master plan had been to destroy any sense of self-worth or esteem, he had finally succeeded. This was the humiliation from which Hermione was fairly sure she would never recover. *Bravo, Professor, she thought. You've done it this time. You've only managed to kill me and keep me alive at the same time. Your Master would be so proud.*

Like a sleepwalker, Hermione walked from the bathroom into Snape's bedroom, feeling clumsy and off-balance in this too thin, too tall frame. She approached him as he sat on the bed, staring at her like a starving man surveying a banquet.

Slowly, he stood and approached her. He too was naked, and even as she crossed the room to meet him, he stopped in his tracks, gaping in wonder. His eyes glowed with pleasure, his face relaxed, and he looked pleased and content. Hermione was struck with the thought that, when he smiled and released the tension in his face, Severus Snape was a handsome man.

His voice was light and boyish. "Oh, gods, you're perfect." He rewarded her with a glorious smile that seemed foreign on his stern face and all the more alluring for it. Hermione's heart cramped with a yearning for him that made her feel like the worst, self-deluded masochist on the planet. It was almost as powerful as the humiliation that closely followed it.

Snape took her in his arms and pulled her close, looking down at her with shining eyes. "You're so beautiful." He reverently sank to his knees, wrapping his arms around her. He hugged her tightly, pressing his face against her abdomen. Hermione stroked his raven hair, her unfamiliar hands moving of their own accord. "Oh, Lily," he moaned, ecstatically, leaning into her touch. "My beautiful, sweet Lily."

He rose and lifted her into his arms as if she were a delicate ribbon of light. He laid her gently down on the bed, murmuring soft words in a voice that poured over Hermione like molten silver. He looked deeply into her eyes, smiling, covering her face with gentle kisses, his fingertips trailing over her cheek. It was not an unpleasant sensation, only a frustrating one; Hermione could feel the pressure of his lips, but not a real touch; it was like wearing a thin suit of latex over her entire body.

Snape did not notice her confusion; he was no longer the sadistic, cruel master of her new unlfe. He was tender, considerate, and when he parted her lips with his tongue, his kiss felt perfect and rare, even in this dead woman's mouth. Hermione had never been kissed like this before. *You still haven't* she told herself, and felt a keen, swift jealousy that he could be so loving with her, as long as she wore the skin of another woman. She put her arms around him and drew him closer, trying anything to *feel* him. He moaned deep in his throat, and kissed her until she was breathless.

He was caressing her, trying to arouse her, to give her pleasure, so that she would respond. Hermione watched him, almost at a distance, hidden behind this foreign body, remembering the capriciousness and instability of Polyjuice. Any other potion used in conjunction with it would negate it. Snape's lust potion could not be used; it would tamper with the results of the change.

Hermione was cast into new, treacherous waters. Snape was making love to her, without benefit of potion-manufactured desire, and her traitorous body couldn't tell the difference. It was devastating to realise that she wanted him as much as he wanted Lily.

Hermione wanted to respond to his kind caresses; he was skilled, practiced. His hands were sure and experienced and generous, and she wanted to enjoy the feel of his lips on her nipples, the knowledge that he *could* be a giving, talented lover. She wanted to revel in his rare smile, his soft mouth that bestowed pleasure with each touch. She wanted to enjoy his hypnotic, beautiful voice, which called her beautiful, precious and beloved and *Lily*.

And when he entered her, so slow, deep and sweet, and their dance began, it felt like love. It was not for her, though, and even though she wanted to ignore the lie and pretend he was making love to her, inside this shell she could not feel him properly. The friction between them increased with each long, slow, sensuous plunge. This was the vilest, unkindest cut of all. Hermione felt tears slide from her eyes into hair that didn't belong to her, receiving this long, slow beautiful lovemaking that didn't belong to her, and being denied pleasure, trapped as she was in a body that didn't belong to her.

As his passion took him over, Snape quickened his pace, his body labouring to please her. Hermione opened her eyes and saw his strained face as he loomed over her, trying to fulfill his fantasy, trying to make love to this ghost, and Hermione tried to enable him, knowing that soon she would be Hermione again. Hermione, the despised. Hermione, the scapegoat.

Snape soon grew frustrated. "Come," he urged, moving faster, trying to find his own pleasure. "You must come for me. Come on my cock," he moaned, and drove harder into her borrowed body. She could sense his dissatisfaction, his puzzlement. Pleadingly, he said, "You have my permission. Come for me, now." He continued to thrust harder, but he, too, could not be lubricated by this unbody. His own arousal began to wane.

When he realised he couldn't orgasm either, he became perplexed, then angry. "Why are you doing this, Granger? After a week of leaving a slime trail all over my house, is it too much to ask?" When she did not reply, he raged, "Is that the only way you can allow yourself to fuck me? A Potion?"

Stunned, she felt as if he'd thrown a bucket of her dirty mop water over her. Then a hot, lava-heavy rage flooded Hermione, shocking her from her grief-numbed subservience. Her mind finally cleared of its fog of trauma, sadness, and unrelieved lust. Gone was the groveling, sniveling slave.

Grabbing his arms, she snapped back, "And is this the only way you can to allow yourself to be kind ~~to~~me, Severus Snape? A Potion?"

Furious, with a rage that matched hers, Snape grabbed the vial on the bedside table and tried to force its contents down her throat. "Take it then! Take it if that's what you need to give me what I want!"

She fought him, knocking the potion out of his hands, adrenaline and arousal speeding up the effects of the Polyjuice, ruining its stability, making her change back too early.

Snape froze as her face transformed. Gone were the sleek tresses; Hermione's wild hair shone auburn as she partially morphed, and green eyes stared out of her own

face. As Severus looked down at Hermione, he felt her body change, and his cock was now sheathed in a passage that was slick and hot and familiar, and he looked at her face. Hermione's face!

She looked up at him with eyes that were snapping with fury and challenge. Then with an aggressive strength he honestly didn't know she possessed, she pushed him off her body with a roar worthy of her House's mascot.

She rolled him over, until she sat astride him, his cock still buried in her tight heat. She pinned his arms to the mattress and bore down on him, fearful and fearless.

For what seemed like an eternity they glared at each other, their breathing in unison, panting at one another. Fire and lust reignited between them, and Hermione was suddenly, amazingly aware that she was astride a fully grown wizard, with a very large cock between her legs and enough anger for both of them. She grinned down at him mirthlessly, and his eyes widened, first in shock, then in submission. That alone filled her with power, and she leaned close to his face.

"No one else in this bed, Snape," she hissed. "No potion, no other woman, nothing else - just you and me, now. And you'll give me what I want."

And then she was fucking him, riding him with every bit of the same fury as he had ridden her, with a body that was real, with skin that lay against her own nerve endings. A body that needed no potion, no Polyjuice, no need to pretend. She used him, devoured him like a rich confection so long denied that manners and propriety and decency no longer held any place in consuming him.

Snape felt an overwhelming, exquisite, forbidden pleasure roll over him with every movement, and his balls tightened in anticipation. He was helpless, pinned beneath her, the fight in him spent and tamed. He felt his orgasm lifting him off the bed, and moaned loudly. Hermione felt it, too, and snarled down at him.

"Don't you dare come," she growled, pistoning on him furiously. "Don't you fucking dare come until I do!" He gasped as her eyes faded from green to amber, and she rode him as true desire took her over, and before his mind could accept what his heart already knew, his hands were on her waist, and he was helping her, thrusting up to meet her driving, pumping hips, moaning with each breath something that sounded like her name something that felt like surrender.

Their eyes were locked on one another's, each completely enthralled. Her firm breasts moved in rhythm to her thrusts, and when he blindly reached for them, they fit into his hands perfectly, and her nipples dug into his palms like nails from the cross.

Her eyes grew glassy and unfocused, and her climax slammed into her, as sure as an *Avada* and as cruel as a *Crucio*. She threw back her head and screamed, her nails digging into his chest. He felt her orgasm reverberate down the back of his own spine as she keened her pleasure in the room and her muscles contracted and clamped down, milking his cock. He had never had a woman climax like this; he had pushed her away the first time, before he could truly feel her body. If he had known, he would have never denied her this he would have never denied *himself* this.

Now, she was taking everything from him, pulling her lust and pain and need from him and it finished him completely. He was coming harder than he could ever remember, crying out what certainly was her name, over and over; driving his cock up hard into her shuddering body in complete submission.

His lust and passion-drugged mind slowly cleared, and he felt warm and cloistered in her wet, trembling flesh. She was a real living, passionate woman with a real body; a real woman that he could have for the rest of his life, that he could accept if he allowed himself, could cherish if he chose, and could revere if he could ever forgive her.  
*Hermione, Hermione...*

"Oh gods!" he cried, realizing what had happened, what had shifted, and how he was lost. Lost to the darkness and to the Dark Lord, lost to himself and his own self-hatred; lost to the girl he wanted to punish every single day of her life for the unpardonable sin of living when everyone else had died. He had once cared for her, but when he had to watch her used by his brother Death Eaters, something had broken in him, and he had sat in numbed silence as Potter and the rest of the Light was snuffed out, leaving her behind.

Then, he had been given his choice of slaves. Just like that, he'd looked out over the harem of girls and she had stood out, as calm as a martyr, as sad as a siren. So, he had claimed her, fucked her, punished her and done unspeakable things. She deserved it, but he couldn't remember why. Why had she deserved to be ruined so?

From the day his world ended, the only proof that Severus Snape had embraced what was good and pure was her. His release, his knowledge, gave him no pleasure; it merely served as a bitter reminder that he was trying his best to destroy the one small beam of light left in his life. What he could not explain was, *why?* Why had she deserved it?

For one exhausted moment, he fell back, his arms flung outward on the bed. Since the Night of Screams, he had taken her daily. Now, she had fucked *him*, and he felt as if he'd never truly understood anything until this moment. Not sex, nor life, nor death, nor himself certainly not her. He heard a small helpless sound, and knew it was coming from his own lips.

Hermione collapsed against his chest, panting, her sweaty body sliding against his own damp skin. It would have been so easy, so unforgivable, to put his arms around her and hold her to his heaving chest.

Instead, he quietly, almost respectfully, removed her from his body and rose from the bed. In three strides, he was out of the room, and Hermione could hear his swift footsteps down the stairs. She curled up in a ball, waiting for him to return, to inflict something truly heinous on her. She had lost her temper. She had defied him. She had shouted at him. She would pay for it. She'd suffered greatly for a lot less.

On the next day, Snape treated her as if nothing untoward had happened the night before. He instructed her to clean his bookshelves, and left her to her work. He spoke very little, but she felt his eyes following her everywhere she went, but he kept his silence and his distance.

Lucius Malfoy came to visit that afternoon. The wards shimmered, and Snape looked up at her, cleaning the tallest shelves. He looked alarmed. "It's Lucius. Get upstairs. Quickly!" he hissed.

Hermione, still naked, leapt down from the ladder and took the stairs two at a time, her heart pounding so hard she could barely breathe. Dashing into his bedroom, she slammed the door to let Snape know she was hidden.

"Well, I must say, Brother, your little house-elf has been working *very* hard," Lucius was saying, his voice jovial. "Where is your little Mudblood, Severus? All shagged out? I must say, you look as if you've been receiving a little spit and polish as well."

With the slightest of hesitations, Snape replied, "I imagine she's still on her knees, scrubbing the loo. With her tongue," he added, his tone louche and diffident.

Lucius chuckled. "My, how the mighty have fallen," he said with mock sadness. "I'm sure she's pining for the loss of her old status from the Gryffindor princess to the spy's whore."

Suddenly, their voices became muffled, and Hermione recognised a *Desilenciato* spell, one that enabled the caster to speak with another, while reducing their voices to an unrecognizable mumble. Malfoy's voice sounded jolly next to Snape's deeper, mellifluous tone, and although Hermione could not decipher their words, Malfoy seemed to be enjoying the subject of their conversation. Snape, less so; his voice was more sombre, less animated.

As the minutes ticked by, Hermione strained to hear what was actually being said, but it was impossible until the spell was cancelled.

Suddenly Malfoy's voice was clear again. "I'll inform the Dark Lord that you'll be ready in a week's time."

"Yes. Tell our Lord I am most humbled and grateful for his confidence in my abilities. I will not disappoint him." Snape sounded less than pleased at this pronouncement,

and then Malfoy said something that made Hermione's heart stutter.

"Yes. Well, I suppose you *could* say that thanks are in order, Severus. After all, if not for me, we would still be stumbling around, trying to locate Potter and his ilk, instead of celebrating our victory." He sounded positively ebullient, but there was an undertone to his statement that troubled Hermione.

Snape simply stared at Malfoy, his expression more unreadable than ever. Lucius regarded the dark man for a moment.

Malfoy's jovial, smug demeanor changed, and his voice darkened. "Yes, a great debt of thanks, Brother. The question of your loyalty to the Dark Lord has ever been a hotly debated one in the inner circle, Severus. Isn't it lucky for you that I have been able to vouchsafe for your integrity?"

He leaned in to Severus' ear, and he growled, "One might say you owe me, Brother." It made Hermione shiver that Malfoy could make the sentence sound so intimate and ominous at once.

Hermione heard the sharp crack of Disapparation, and quickly descended the staircase. Snape was in the front room, staring ahead, as still and pale as a marble statue. He hadn't moved.

Hermione swallowed once, twice, trying to get up the courage to speak. "Sir?"

Snape whirled around and stared at her, his eyes wide, almost fearful, as if he'd forgotten she was there.

He cleared his throat, his adam's apple bobbing nervously. "Get get back to work," he whispered. His voice was hoarse and strained, and carried none of its usual commanding bark.

Hermione crossed to him to climb the ladder. Her curiosity won over her trepidation, and she turned back to him. "Sir, would you like a drink or something?"

Snape looked back at the spot where Malfoy had Disapparated. He looked stunned, and on his face was an expression of puzzled unease. "I don't know." He looked up at her again. "Well, go on. Get back to work." He whirled and left her, standing on a ladder, her polishing rag in her hand. She heard his tread on the stairs, descending into the basement laboratory. She had learned that he sequestered himself there often, usually when troubled or needing to be alone.

Hours later, it occurred to both of them that Snape had protected her from the very thing with which he'd originally threatened forcing Hermione to receive his guests without being allowed to wear clothing. It also occurred to both of them to question why Malfoy was acting as the Dark Lord's message boy, instead of summoning Severus outright.

## 5/7: The Pendulum of Memory

### Chapter 5 of 7

On the night the light is defeated and the dark wins, Lord Voldemort grants a boon to his most valued and trusted spy.

This is a very, very dark and disturbing story of pain and punishment. If you find the idea of non-con and dub-con unsettling, please understand this will not be the story for you.

But also know this: at the heart of this story lies a mystery. All will be revealed if you dare to continue.

□

*A/N: These characters are the property of JK Rowling and Warner Bros. I make no money from this story and claim no rights. Nothing you recognise belongs to me.*

*I would like to warn you again that this is a dark, intense story of violence, abuse, non-consensual and dubious-consensual sex. If the thought of this distresses you, I urge you to hit the back button on your computer.*

*I will tell you that this is as much a mystery as it is a drama, but it is not pretty and will be at times uncomfortable reading. I do not want you to approach this story without understanding this in mind. Please remember before you get out your flame thrower you were warned.*

*This chapter contains scenes of explicit sexual content. All of the characters in this story are over 18 years old.*

*Special thanks to my friends at LiveJournal, who understood what I was trying to do with this story. I ask you to look past the story into its deeper meanings, which will become clearer as the chapters wear on.*

*Great thanks to Voxangelus, who graciously stepped in as a fresh pair of eyes, and took a lot of pressure off, just because she liked the story.*

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That night, Snape did not give her a potion of any kind. Instead, he watched her cook dinner, her small hands nimble and strong as she prepared their meal. He felt a measure of calm steal over his restless mind as she added eggs and oil to a mound of flour in the middle of the counter, and swirled the wet ingredients into the dry.

She worked with a dignified satisfaction, knowing she'd measured precisely and the dough was perfect. Perhaps it was merely the placid serenity of simple, creative labour, enabling her to forget for awhile the less pleasant aspects of her present reality.

He watched her intense concentration, the way she used her hands like the sides of a bowl, to keep the flour mixture together. He enjoyed her capability and the ease in which she did so many things well. He recalled Headmaster Black's observations of her during their time on the run, baking bread for 'the boys', as she had called them.

As Black regaled him with the story, Snape remembered closing his eyes and imagining the aroma of the warm bread as she turned it out onto the table for the three of them to eat. He remembered the pitiful, embarrassing longing to join them, to be a part of something that ... even so perilous ... was full of genuine love and hope. She was such a lovely creature, so giving and compassionate...

He felt a sudden, sure validation that he had done the right thing, claiming her and keeping her from the others...

He shook his head and frowned. He had been following a train of thought and then it just went... Damn! It was gone. The confusion was quickly replaced by a greasy sort of

arousal. It grew as dark as his heart, and a dirty, irresistible tang of lust slid into his veins like the poison of a spider.

Even as her hands slid smoothly over the dough as she worked and kneaded it, he imagined her hands on him, sliding along his chest, around his cock... He was powerless to stop his thoughts from pooling into the crotch of his trousers.

She glanced up and met his eyes; her hands faltered in their task for a moment. He thought she might suspect him of performing Legilimency on her. In the last week, it had actually never occurred to him to attempt it. He thought for a moment that the odds were pretty good he would not like what he found. Hermione only saw desire, heated and feral, smoldering in his eyes, and it both excited and shamed her. She lowered her eyes and resumed her baking.

It was very good pizza, made with fresh ingredients. She was a decent enough cook. They had finished eating and she had just dried the last plate, when he rose and took her hand.

Silently, he led her into his room, and instructed her to lie down on the bed. He regarded her for a moment, then sat on the bed beside her, and looked down at her, pensively. "Don't be afraid," he said, his voice softly seductive. "I won't hurt you."

He raised his hand and Hermione flinched automatically. He pursed his lips disapprovingly, then ran his long, slender fingers over her cheek, his touch languid, sensuous. His hand trailed down her throat, merely ghosting over her skin, his eyes following the path of his fingers. He stroked her face again, his hands slow and gentle, and Hermione's eyelids fluttered closed, unable to resist the soft, soothing touch of his fingertips and his intense, all-encompassing concentration on her. She slowly exhaled the breath she had not realized she'd been holding.

His hands slid down, over her collarbones and down the sides of her torso. Hermione held herself very still, trembling. He was so maddeningly gentle, so unlike his usual cold indifference. His hands felt warm, familiar, smooth. Gentle fingers circled each taut, aching nipple, and she jumped and made a small "Oh!" sound that drew a dark chuckle from his lips.

"It's alright, girl. Relax." His voice was the very definition of suave menace. Down his hands traveled, before slowly returning to her face. Hermione tensed again. Hadn't he teased her before, only to punish her for giving in, for trusting him? Hadn't that been the object of this game since the first day they'd played it? Why couldn't she stop him? After the previous day, why *didn't* she stop him? She hated him for being so ruthlessly seductive; she hated herself for wanting to enjoy it so much.

His fingers skimmed lightly over her belly, making her skin jump and quiver, and then he was teasing her legs open, pushing gently, questing like the tenderest of lovers, and Hermione's thighs parted like water against his soft insistence.

He made love to her with his fingers, fluttering them over her skin, and when she reached for him, he magically removed his clothing, and allowed her fingers to brush against his white torso, his slender flanks.

He teased her soft folds, his finger easing up, but never quite touching where she needed so badly to be touched. "You like that, don't you, Hermione?" At her feverish nod, he smiled, and his voice was sweet and slightly breathless. "Oh, yes, your skin is lovely. Like silk to the touch."

His voice was nothing more than aspirated consonants, whispered sibilants, slow and measured, like drops of wax. She made a soft sound of entreaty, and he answered, "Shh. It's alright. I'm not going to hurt you."

He hummed softly. "Oh, yes, you're enjoying this, aren't you?" His voice, like his fingers, gentled and coaxed. He caressed her clit, and she mewled helplessly. He smiled knowingly. "That feels good, doesn't it?" he purred, sounding slightly out of control, and Hermione looked up into black eyes that were enormous and luminously intense with arousal.

Almost outside herself, Hermione nodded, her body taut, half-expecting him to turn on her, but as he touched her, he held her spellbound with his knowing, pleasuring fingers. As he gently pushed her thighs further apart, she moaned softly. He shifted down the bed, and lowered his dark head to the apex of her thighs. He parted her slick labia with his thumbs, with the joy and wonder of opening an enchanted door to a room of unspeakable delights. He hissed with satisfaction as she keened softly, helpless to his irresistible touch.

Smiling down at her, he licked his lips, intoxicated by her clean scent. With a soft sound of yearning, he teased and fondled her expertly, and Hermione cried out into the room as his skillful, talented mouth warmed and nibbled her humid flesh.

He raised his head, and regarded her thoughtfully. "Has no one ever done this to you before, Hermione?"

Tears pooled in her eyes. Damn him. "No, sir," she whispered, trembling, aching for his mouth to return to his task, yet afraid that he would do just that. "I wasn't I had never before " She looked up at the ceiling, embarrassed at her own weakness.

He stroked her thighs reassuringly, and moaned appreciatively. "Mine for the taking, then. You taste divine, girl." A long, slow finger slid into her, and she arched her hips to assist him.

"Oh, gods, you *feel* divine," she mouthed, hoping he hadn't heard her. He laughed, a soft puff of breath against her painfully sensitive clitoris, and as he set himself to his task, laving her almost roughly, she cried out, writhing against him.

She looked down at him, and his dark, fiery eyes met hers. He replaced his lips and tongue with his knowing fingers, and she whimpered a sound that was both a plea and a command. He smiled.

His voice slid over her with sinister, silken menace. "You like that, don't you, Hermione? It makes you ache, doesn't it? It makes you want things you can't even name."

Afraid to speak, she nodded, and his hands moved inside her, then played over her folds, brushing against her swollen clit, causing her to buck and clutch the bedclothes. "Do you want more?"

"Yessss," she hissed, her hips moving of their own accord, pushing against his hands. He chuckled again.

"Ahhh, you're so wet, aren't you, girl? That's all you, isn't it? We have no need for potions, you and I, do we, witch?" he purred, his deep, silken voice mockingly chastising. Wickedly, he removed his fingers, slick with her moisture, and licked his fingers provocatively. "Like nectar. Do you want me to continue? I will."

When she nodded, he rubbed against her distended little bud until she was moaning helplessly. "Answer me, Hermione."

"Yes!" she cried, giving in to him, moving her hips unashamedly against his talented fingers. "Please don't stop!"

"I won't," he soothed. "I want you to come this time. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Yes!" She moaned with unrestrained lust, so caught up in his dark desire she no longer cared. Tomorrow, she would have to live with herself for what she allowed him to do. Tonight, she wasn't sure if she would survive if he stopped.

Hermione felt herself trembling, on the edge, so close she could feel it, afraid to let go. So afraid. "Oh, gods, I'm so close! Please let me "

"Come for me now, Hermione!" His voice was ragged, and sounded nothing like the seducer that had led her up the stairs a few moments before. He was just a man, on fire for his witch, wanting, needing her to want him, to crave his touch and his passion.

Hermione felt herself ride high, higher, up on a wave of pleasure that would surely break her, and when she came, her scream of pleasure was answered by his cries of

"Yes! Yes, girl, that's it... that's it... oh yes..." Hermione's entire body pulsed and pounded; her heart was beating wildly, and her cries were glorious and she shuddered and moaned as each pulse drove through her like electricity, and she collapsed on the bed, spent and dazed.

His fingers ceased their enticing ministrations, and he rose above her, looking down at her, and in that wild, uninhibited moment, she leaned up and kissed his throat in pure gratitude. He inhaled sharply, and the sound excited Hermione unbearably.

"Please!" she whispered, shivering with the anticipation of his cock in her body, praying he wouldn't betray her, praying he would keep his word.

"Do you want this, Hermione? Tell me." He stared down at her, his eyes burning with something she couldn't define.

Rising to press against his pale, slender hips, she sobbed, "I want you, sir. Please, please do it!" Her eyes blazed into his. "I want you to fuck me so much!"

"I want you as well, witch," he purred, and together they cried out as he slid into her molten cunt. His eyes rolled back and he growled, "Oh, yess, I want you." He hissed as she clenched around him, his face open and abandoned in pleasure. He lowered his head and pressed his lips to her neck. His warm tongue darted out, sliding along the line of her jaw.

His lips tickled her ear as he whimpered feverishly, "Since last night, I've thought of nothing else but you. When I finally slept, I dreamt of you. My senses are filled with your scent, your taste. I can think of nothing but wanting you, wanting to make you come for me. I want to hear you scream my name, I want..." He howled as he wrapped his arms around her waist and withdrew his cock from her, only to slam back into her again. They cried out together.

"Oh gods," he moaned, and shook his head. His voice was plaintive with longing. "It's so good, Hermione! Do you want this?" He began to move in her, his body shuddering as he pulled away from her. His expression became pained.

"Yes!" she cried, pulling him close, covering herself with him. "Please don't stop, sir; don't stop!" He delved deeply into her, shivering at the sensation of her body; the tight heat of her made his head spin.

"Shall I make you come again?" His voice was like chocolate; dark and so sweet Hermione felt herself grow wetter with each word. His breath felt ragged and frantic against her skin. He was moving against her now, deep, quickening strokes that painted her cunt with crippling, addictive pleasure. He sounded so needy and helpless. "Tell me, Hermione. Do you want me to make you come?"

"Yes, please!" She was completely on fire; she would wither and die if he stopped. "I'll do anything you ask, just don't stop, please!"

He froze, and the hot, helpless yearning bled from his face. He looked down on her as if he had just noticed who she was. His lips pressed together.

Finally, after a small eternity, he whispered, "Anything?"

Hermione saw the light drain from his eyes and knew the pleasure was over. She began to cry. "Please," she sobbed, knowing it was the wrong answer, but helpless to say or do otherwise.

Instead of pushing himself away, he began to move in her again. He quickly found his rhythm, slower and harder. Together they moved against one another, but the sensation had changed. Gone was the lover, urging her to her pleasure. This was a different Snape, using his body as a different sort of instrument entirely.

As he plunged in and out of her methodically, desperately, he began to moan in time with his movements. His thrusts grew more insistent, harder. Something like a sob tore from his throat, and Hermione felt moisture on her cheek.

She looked up at Snape; he was crying, his eyes closed, his expression stricken.

He sobbed, "Merlin, forgive me, but I want this, witch! I don't want to want you this much. You have bewitched me!"

"Sir, I "

He babbled as he plowed into her. "You've stolen everything from me, and now you have my soul! I can't think, I can't eat, I can't do anything but desire you!" He shook his head, and cried harder. "Why won't you leave me be?"

Hermione felt her desire die as he hovered over her, and he opened his streaming eyes and sobbed, "You were our brightest and our best and bravest! You are so fine and beautiful, and the only one we trusted to keep Potter safe " He stopped crying and growled, "and you turned coward and ransomed him!"

Hermione froze, then tried to stop, but he was plunging into her with increasingly harder thrusts. "No!" she whispered, in a quaking, helpless voice. "I never - "

He lowered his chin against her shoulder, pinning her down, and drove into her madly, panting. "Why did you leave them? Why did you trade your life for theirs?" His angry voice rose in volume, increasing with his thrusts. He was hurting her now, hurting her more than any Death Eater. He was driving into her; she felt his hips breaking her in half with each punishing, relentless plunge.

She began to struggle against him, her desire for him replaced with fear. He held her tighter, holding her down as he fucked her. The more his passion became charged with anger, the more terrified Hermione became.

And still he cried, "You were so close so close!" He turned his head, gritting his teeth. "Ah, gods, I'm so close!" He mastered his passion, and Hermione could literally feel him growing limp within her. He shook his head, helplessly. "I was so close."

He stopped moving, and looked down on her, his pale face sweaty and mottled with rage. His teeth were clenched in anger as he snarled, "Why didn't you just stay out of sight? Why did you betray him? Why didn't you protect him until he could kill that monster and set me free?"

"Professor, I didn't! It was "

He closed his large hands around her throat and roared, "Malfoy told me what you did! You bartered their lives for your own precious hide!"

Stunned, Hermione shook her head, "No..." She was struggling with him, but he was too upset, too far gone. True panic set in as his grip tightened on her throat. "No, please! Listen to me- "

His spit flew on her face as he ground out, "All Malfoy had to do was promise you a hot meal and you were ready to serve up Potter's head on a platter!"

"No! It was you!" She managed to cry, her voice choked and wheezing. With fear slicking her strangled windpipe, she grabbed his thumbs and forced them backward, against his wrists. He released her with a shout of pain.

She took a deep breath, and spluttered, "You told me I was safe!" She was clawing the bed, trying to crawl away out from under him, coughing and screaming, "You revealed my hiding place! You delivered me to Malfoy! You ransomed *me* for Harry and Ron!"

He froze, suspended over her. The killing, burning anger that overwhelmed him every time he'd fucked her burst within his chest like a furnace, and she visibly cowed beneath him.

"LIAR!" He bellowed, and slapped her hard. As her head snapped to the side, she watched with sick fascination as blood from her nose sprayed across the duvet.

He looked down at her with an accusatory mixture of pain and anger, his body bathed in sweat, his chest heaving, his cock already sliding from her. "I would NEVER have betrayed you!" he hissed, wiping a fleck of foam from his mouth.

She sobbed, "You did, Professor! It was you who grabbed me!"

His voice was as deadly quiet. "I was trying to buy time, to keep you alive! I was always there to protect you! You separated from Potter and Weasley. They would have escaped the Death Eaters if they hadn't tried to rescue you! YOU caused their deaths!"

Already his voice was weakening, and tinged with uncertainty and confusion. His hand touched her bleeding nose almost tenderly. "Gods, I want to hate you! And every time I think I understand how I feel, I end up wanting to fuck you into the mattress!" He sobbed, "And then I end up hurting you " He broke down and cried openly. "And it almost k-kills me!"

He collapsed against her, crushing her with his weight. His voice was muffled against her shoulder, but Hermione could hear his anguish in every word. "I'd cut off my own c-cock if I thought I could stop wanting you but it wouldn't help! It wouldn't change anything! Ah, you fucking siren - you succubus!"

Hermione stared at him in shock, her own rage boiling in her heart. Fury gave her strength, and she pushed him off, crying, "You fucking bastard!" She slapped him with as much force as her tired arm would allow, and he looked at her uncomprehendingly, dazedly, as if coming out of a trance. He stared down at her in shock and confusion.

With a voice as cold as the grave, Hermione said, "If you're so sure, then look into my mind, and find the truth where it lies."

He swallowed, and straddled her, taking most of his weight off her hips. When she met his gaze, he looked deeply into her eyes and whispered, "Legilimens."

As if a curtain parted between the real world and the one inside her head, Hermione helplessly felt Snape enter her mind and walk with her to their fate.

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*They were in Canterbury, in the old part of the town, looking for supplies. It was a Saturday, and there had been a street market, heaving with people, and they had felt relatively anonymous.*

*The illusion of normalcy had gone to Harry's head a bit, and he and Ron had spied a joke shop on the square and couldn't resist having a look. "We'll just be a minute, Hermione," Harry had pleaded, and something in his careworn face had softened her resolve that they all stay together each and every moment.*

*For so long, they had been running on high octane fear. They never smiled or laughed anymore. They had pressed grimly on for so long that pressing grimly on had become their way of life, and Hermione couldn't bring herself to deny her friend this tiny respite from reality. Tomorrow, she would renew her constant vigilance; today, for a few, brief moments, they could be just three normal teenagers, enjoying a warm Saturday afternoon in one of England's prettiest old towns.*

*She had been casually perusing a fruit and veg stall just outside the shop when she felt a shimmer of magic pass over her head, like the shiver that precedes someone walking over a grave. She quickly looked around the crowded street for a place to hide, and, panicking, ducked into the alley a few doors down from the joke shop.*

*The two Death Eaters appeared with their backs to her, literally feet away. She had already disillusioned herself before they arrived, but the sight of them was so terrifying she felt warm urine trickle down her legs. It was already too late to Disapparate; they would hear her, and besides, she couldn't leave Harry and Ron.*

*"They are here, Brother," one of them said, his voice slightly muffled behind the mask, and Hermione recognised the clipped, cultured tones of Lucius Malfoy. Hermione was backing away quietly, toward the mouth of the alley, when the other Death Eater spoke, stopping her in her tracks. She'd heard that deep, rich voice for the last seven years, even in her dreams, and she wouldn't have missed his reply for the world.*

*"This is absurd, Lucius! Why would the three of them traipse around Canterbury, for Merlin's sake! Obviously your source is incorrect."*

*"He's never incorrect." Lucius removed the mask, after placing a Notice-Me-Not spell on the alleyway, unwittingly encompassing Hermione in the bubble of invisibility. He looked at her former teacher with blazing, hungry eyes. "I say they are here, Severus. This could be the night we end this foolishness!"*

*Severus Snape had also removed his Death Eater mask, and flicked his hair from his eyes with an impatient gesture. "I fail to see why dragging me out of Hogwarts was necessary, Lucius. If your source is so infallible, why do you need me?"*

*Lucius smiled at his friend, and his demeanor relaxed, became slyer, more conspiratorial. "Because you are the second greatest Legilimens in the world, Brother. You can sense them. You know their magical signature." He stepped back, regarding Snape smugly. "You are the Dark Lord's bloodhound."*

*"I thought that was Greyback's job," Snape replied sourly, clearly disliking the comparison.*

*"When a heavier hand is needed, quite," Lucius acquiesced. "But when a more subtle, elegant touch is required, your skills are second only to the Dark Lord's."*

*"I'm not here to be flattered, Lucius," Snape retorted, but he was already looking around, his nostrils quivering, as if he could actually scent her on the wind. Hermione held her breath, praying her Dissolutionment held long enough for her to back out of the alley, find the boys and disappear somewhere, anywhere but Canterbury.*

*As she watched the two wizards, Snape looked directly into her eyes, and she felt the secret, slippery feel of him. He entered her mind with the delicate touch of a lover unbuttoning a silken blouse. Seeing and feeling this inside Hermione's memory filled Snape with eerie, disoriented shame, as if he had actually attempted to undress her in the alleyway.*

*The Snape in her memory looked directly at Hermione for the briefest second, and his presence disappeared from her consciousness. His eyes then slid away from her indifferently; no one would have ever detected from Snape's reaction that he'd seen or done anything.*

*He turned back to Malfoy, looking bored and irritated. "I sense nothing here that remotely resembles their "*

*Lucius suddenly leaned forward and whispered urgently in Snape's ear. For several moments, the only sounds were the murmured voice of the blond man, and Hermione's thundering heartbeat. Snape listened to his fellow Death Eater intently, his face inscrutable as ever. Finally, Snape nodded silently, then turned and faced her, looking directly into her eyes.*

*Malfoy stepped back, a smirk playing about his lips. He murmured complacently, "You can thank me later, Brother. I may well have just saved your life." Snape didn't appear to have heard him.*

*Snape watched himself turn and face Hermione again.*

*He muttered, "Finite Incantatum," and Hermione cried out as her Dissolutionment failed. In his silvery, seductive tone, Snape said, "It's alright, Miss Granger. We're here to take you to a safe house." He gestured to her with one hand. "It's time to come in from the cold."*

*Hermione's voice shook as she stammered, "Professor, how " She looked past him to Malfoy, then back to her former teacher. "How do I know I can trust you?"*

Snape smirked approvingly. "You know how." His tone suggested that, if she did indeed know, she had better do it. Again, she looked past Snape to Malfoy, who was glancing around the alley tensely. "Severus, we are not the only ones in Canterbury at the moment. Whatever you need to do, you'd better do it. I can only protect you so long."

Snape turned back to Hermione. "Well, Miss Granger?" He scowled slightly, his mouth settling into an impatient line. "If I were the enemy, wouldn't I just take you and go?"

Hermione, feeling the chill air touching the wet patch between her legs, looked down and flushed with humiliation. She looked up at Snape beseechingly. He had followed her eyes, and sighed. "It's alright," he said quietly. "I know how frightened you are. You've been very brave, Miss Granger. Let the Order take over now."

Snape watched as her pink tongue nervously darted between her lips. His gaze then rose to meet hers. A muscle in his jaw twitched. "Well?"

She swallowed. "W-what writer did I quote on my fourth year Potions exam?"

He grimaced. "Morley, for debunking the theory of Mugwort versus St. Johns Wort. What grade did you receive on your fourth year Potions exam?"

Tentatively, she replied, "Exceeds Expectations, but you gave me extra credit for my work on the St. Johns Wort philter on the condition I never told Harry or Ron."

Snape nodded, and walked toward her. "Well, we have established our identities, not to mention relived some happy memories, and thus wasted valuable time. Messrs. Potter and Weasley are no doubt waiting at the Apparation point for you even as we speak, Miss Granger. Come with us, and let us get you to safety."

When he was close enough to touch her, he ricked a hand on her shoulder. His touch was surprisingly warm. She had always thought him to be cool as marble. He quietly intoned, "Come. You don't have to run anymore."

Hermione looked deeply into his eyes, searching for something to trust. She saw, no more or less, the man who'd taught her for the past six years; the man who had, time and time again, put Harry's welfare first and foremost, before killing Dumbledore. He had always managed to keep them from harm, even as he sneered and berated them. His flat, indifferent stare was comforting in its very familiarity, and she decided she could trust him. She wanted so desperately to trust someone, and she wanted to be right about Snape.

Finally she nodded, relief and faith showing in her eyes. "I'm so tired, Professor," she said, and when he put his arm around her shoulder, she slumped against him and began to cry. "I'm so tired of being scared..."

"I know, Miss Granger "

"What the hell? Snape! Take your filthy hands off her!" Hermione and Snape looked over her shoulder to see Harry and Ron standing in the alleyway, their wands raised, ready to fight. In that second, Hermione knew everything had changed; enough, perhaps, to mark her for death. She felt faint with fear.

She looked up at her Professor, and hideous understanding dawned. She had backed the wrong horse. His arm tightened around her waist, and he plucked her wand from her hand with unconcerned resignation.

Malfoy smirked. "Well, as much fun as this has been, I think, Mr. Potter, if you wish to find us, I'm afraid you'll have to catch us!" There was a loud "POP!" and he, Snape and Hermione Disappeared...

And then Snape was scrabbling out of her mind, physically pushing away from her, leaping from the bed as if branded by her touch. Hermione sprawled gracelessly across the bed, then scrambled over to the opposite side, onto her feet. She turned to face him, wiping her bloody nose.

Hermione dared to look up at her Professor, and the sickened anguish on his face caused her insides to cramp so badly she thought she might soil herself. Her voice shook as she whispered, "Professor, I trusted you. You were the one to Disillusion me, and you were the one who took my wand. You betrayed us. You betrayed me."

His face went blank, and she closed her eyes, waiting for the killing blow, the snap of her neck.

He was shaking his head, his eyes wide. Doubt was already quelling the rage. "I I didn't." He fell on his knees. "Why would I do such a thing?" He looked up at her with bleak, startled eyes. "Why would I betray you? How could I betray you?"

Hermione knelt and put her elbows on the bed, clasping her hands together like a child saying her nighttime prayers. "Malfoy." She shuddered, and tears sprang to her eyes again. "Malfoy must have Imperused you."

She wept, her tears mingling with the drying blood on her face. "I was just so tired and scared and hungry, and I wanted to believe you so badly! I wanted to believe we weren't out there alone anymore! I wanted you to save us again." She lowered her head and sobbed, reliving that awful day, the day of the Night of Screams.

She looked into his eyes beseechingly, and the dawning horror and self-loathing on his face made her stomach churn again. "I have to go to the loo," she said, fretfully, afraid her bowels would let go onto the floor.

He was shaking like a man with palsy. "I remember nothing," he said, and pulled himself from the floor into a nearby chair. He was deathly white. "I remember none of this."

He looked at her with abject misery. "I thought Malfoy told me he caught you in the alley and you promised to give up Potter and Weasley in exchange for letting you live."

Snape's eyes blazed with anger, and for a moment Hermione thought it was aimed at her again. Instead he railed. "Why did I believe fucking Malfoy, of all people?" He looked at her intently. "I've known you since you were eleven! I've been following your progress daily since last fall! Why would I believe you would allow your friends to be killed just to save yourself?"

He buried his face in his hands. "I should have known you would have died rather than betray them. I was measuring your Gryffindor courage against my Slytherin self-preservation."

He raised his head; he looked like a dying man. "Oh gods, I killed him. All along, it was my weakness that killed Potter." He, too, looked as he was about to be sick.

"No!" she said, trying to rise. Her stomach gurgled threateningly. "Malfoy tricked you somehow!" Snape shook his head over and over, his face blank and stunned. Hermione cried, "He cursed you!"

Snape rose from his chair. "How could he? I can throw off an Imperius Curse easily. I don't know any spell that would have made me do this!" He looked to the ceiling, as if entreating the heavens for answers, then, with a sigh, he scrubbed his face with his hands. "I don't remember. I don't remember."

Hermione now felt something new, something she never thought she would feel. Pity. Understanding. Sympathy. And something close to forgiveness, but she wasn't ready for that, just yet.

"You must have been tricked, sir. You didn't know what you were doing. He must have Imperused you. He must have! And... and then he must have Obliviated you as well." Looking into his eyes, suffused with suffering and sorrow, Hermione realised he was devastated. Shame and remorse radiated from him in palpable waves.



She repeated slowly, "You didn't know what you were doing."

For several minutes, Snape looked at her, blinking. Finally, he said quietly, "I believe that's what Christ said, Miss Granger. 'Forgive them, for they know not what they do.'

"As I recollect the story, he was killed, anyway." He swallowed the bile that threatened to rise from his gullet. "And I knew what I was doing here. I remember every foul thing I've done to you in this house." He gagged suddenly, as if he were about to be sick. He mastered his nausea, but his face was a horrible, greenish colour.

He looked at her. "I wanted you to pay." His voice was sick with realisation of what had transpired. "I wanted you to suffer for being a coward and a traitor. But I admired you so much. I still do." He turned away from her, gasping. "Oh Merlin, what have I done to you?" His eyes were wild with fear and shame. "What have I done? Miss Granger I " He wailed, a sound of torment and grief. He lowered his head and began to sob uncontrollably, and Hermione knew she would be ill if she didn't go to the loo soon.

She rose unsteadily and walked around the bed to him, placing a shaking arm around his shoulder. "Please, sir "

"Don't call me that!" He raised his hands as if to ward off a physical blow. His old anger returned and he shrugged her hand off his arm. "Don't give me permission to debase you further!" He stared up at her, his eyes like wet coal. "Don't look at me with those sweet eyes, as if you deserve any of this! Don't comfort me with your precious, tender -" he gasped, in awful comprehension of what he'd done, "body - oh, gods, what have I done to you?"

Snape leapt from the chair so quickly it tipped backward and fell with a crash, making her jump. He fled the room, leaving the door ajar.

Helplessly, Hermione ran to the door and called after him, "I believed! I believed in you, Professor! I never really stopped believing you were on our side! You have to believe me!"

Watching his retreating back moving down the stairs, Hermione felt the last vestiges of her old life walking away, never to return. She watched his naked form descend, the darkness engulfing his retreating back... his retreating back...

Hermione barely made it to the loo before her bowels let go, and she sat on the toilet, holding her painfully cramping abdomen, as her body emptied for what seemed like hours. Every potion, every loss, every hurt, every remark, every humiliation she had suffered since the Night of Screams seemed to purge itself from her body, and she was as weak as a kitten when she stumbled back to the bedroom and fell into bed.

As she lay in the darkness, she pulled the duvet over her head, and waited for him to return. Perhaps tonight was the last straw, and the last remnants of his sanity and light crushed. And since she was the last loose end...

Perhaps Malfoy would soon realise what had happened, and he would try to kill them. They would be seen as a liability now. If that was the case, she would fight him. Shamed of placing her trust in the wrong man, Hermione had gone meekly with him on that first dark night. She vowed to herself she and Snape would not go gently into this one.

The moments ticked by, and as her thoughts drifted, she first dozed, then gradually sank into the first true, deep sleep she had experienced since the Night of Screams. As she slept, she dreamt of Harry and Ron, and Snape's retreating back...

## 6/7: The Guilt of Atonement

### Chapter 6 of 7

On the night the light is defeated and the dark wins, Lord Voldemort grants a boon to his most valued and trusted spy.

This is a very, very dark and disturbing story of pain and punishment. If you find the idea of non-con and dub-con unsettling, please understand this will not be the story for you.

But also know this: at the heart of this story lies a mystery. All will be revealed if you dare to continue.

□

*A/N: These characters are the property of JK Rowling and Warner Bros. I make no money from this story and claim no rights. Nothing you recognise belongs to me.*

*Special thanks to my friends at LiveJournal, who understood what I was trying to do with this story.*

*Great thanks to Voxangelus, who graciously stepped in as a fresh pair of eyes, and took a lot of pressure off, just because she liked the story.*

---

She awoke with a start. The sun was shining through the grubby windows; she could hear birdsong outside. A comforting hand was stroking her cheek, her hair; gently, almost lovingly. Sensitive, familiar fingers were gliding over her eyebrows, her jawline. For a moment, she leaned into them; such tenderness and kindness felt so welcome after the last week...

Hermione threw the duvet from her body and started to rise, then froze. Snape was sitting on the bed, watching her, his expression agonizingly miserable. He was fully dressed.

She could taste fear, slick and rancid in her mouth, and finally Hermione found the courage to sit up and face him.

Snape held out his hand to stop her. "Stay where you are," he said, his deep voice tired and flat. Hermione looked at him carefully. He looked dreadfully ill. His skin looked like old parchment. His black, black eyes, enormous and bleak, looked like burned out lava, staring out from a face that was waxy and greenish in the light. The circles under his eyes were almost as dark as bruises. Hermione was alarmed at his appearance.

"Sir, are you alright?" she said, shivering, her body suddenly covered in goosebumps. Snape regarded her thoughtfully, then grasped the duvet, and Hermione braced herself for whatever was to come. At this point, she envisioned a beating, a command to cook breakfast; sex...

Instead of any of a dozen things Hermione had anticipated, Snape merely wrapped the duvet around her more securely, and said in a voice she had never heard, "Lie back, Miss Granger, if you wish. You are cold and no doubt, weak. You've been asleep for almost two days." He turned away. "I promise upon my wand you will come to no more harm at my hand."

He handed her a pint glass of luminous, orange liquid, and she looked at him warily. He coloured, shame clearly written on his face. "It's only Lucozade, a Muggle drink. Your system has been unbalanced by all of the the potions I've forced upon you. I thought this might help restore some salts and electrolytes to your body." He grimaced. "I thought, in light of recent events, giving you any restorative potions was... inadvisable, not to mention poor taste."

Cautiously, Hermione sipped the contents of the glass. It was marvelously cold, and although Lucozade had never been her Muggle drink of choice, it tasted wonderful in her parched mouth. She gulped it noisily, and Snape watched her carefully, guilt and remorse clouding his features. Something else fleeted fitfully across his face, like clouds scudding across a dark sky; affection, protectiveness, fondness; something like all of those things, but at the same time, nothing like any of those things.

When Hermione had emptied the glass, Snape took it from her and sat it back on the bedside table. Hermione licked her lips and relaxed somewhat; she did feel better.

As she settled down, Snape regarded her carefully. He touched her shoulder, as if trying to comfort her, and thereby comforting himself. Hermione stole a glance at his face. He looked so fragile Hermione felt pity well in her breast. She tried to squelch it, but he was like a condemned man, innocent and guilty at once. She considered all she knew about him, and herself, and she could not quite bring herself to hate him. At this precise moment, he was hating himself enough for the both of them.

Shivering even harder from consuming the cold beverage, Hermione burrowed back under the duvet. She lay on her side, looking up at him. He looked truly awful; he was drawn and hunched, as if bleeding from an internal wound. It frightened her.

"Sir, are you sure I can't " Hermione hesitated, trying to gauge his reaction. "Can I get you something, sir? Anything? A cup of tea?"

To her surprise, he laughed, a harsh, desolate sound. He looked away. "Why are you being kind to me?"

Hermione hesitated again. He had once used questions like this to test her, and every answer was the wrong one. "I you you look like you need something, sir."

For the first time since the night Harry and Ron died, Snape looked at her, really looked at her, and into her. What's more, he allowed her to look into him. He sighed. "You cannot help me, Miss Granger. I am lost. Only a lost man would do what I've done to you." He looked away for a moment. "I made a brave, frightened, innocent girl pay for sins I committed. I damaged you in ways that are more criminal than anything the Dark Lord has ever done."

"But sir, Malfoy "

"Malfoy did not set you to hard, manual labor while refusing to let you wear clothing. Malfoy did not beat you, or verbally abuse and debase you. Malfoy was not here to force potions down your throat. Malfoy did not force me to sexually assault you, over and over. I knew what I was doing, Miss Granger, and it is no excuse to say I was coerced or compelled to do them. The fact is that I took pleasure in those things."

He made himself look her in the eye as punishment. "I cared for you so much. I listened every day to Headmaster Black, regaling me with tales of your cleverness and bravery. I found myself longing to join the three of you just to be near you. And how do I repay you? By making you do heinous things with me." He looked away. "It doesn't matter that my feelings for you were twisted and perverted by circumstances beyond my control. I can never forgive myself for allowing them to happen. You were innocent, and I am lost."

Hermione sat up, the covers still wrapped around her body. For several seconds the room was quiet except for their breathing. "We're both lost, sir." She smiled wearily. "I accepted these things because I thought I deserved them."

He made a wry face. "That makes no fucking sense whatsoever, Granger. Stop spouting bullshit. It doesn't become you. I know. I had to put up with it for six years."

Hermione felt a laugh bubble up into her mouth. "Well, at least I know Professor Snape is still in there."

He scowled at her. "It's not amusing, Miss Granger. It's tragic. We are a tragedy of epic proportions that I have created and cannot repair."

Hermione was thoughtful for a moment. Slowly, as if her words were being chosen very carefully, she replied, "I cannot allow myself to think we are beyond repair, sir. If I start to think that way, I may start crying, and who knows if I'll ever stop."

She sighed; it was a sound that made a chill run down his spine. Finally, she said, "For so long, we had been on the run. I was so sick of trying to keep everything together! We were so afraid all the time and then Ron would whine, and Harry would try to keep the peace, and I was just tired of playing den mother. I wanted to stop, and just be me again. I wanted to take a proper bath, and sleep in a comfortable bed, and eat food I hadn't made myself and had to listen to Ron complain that it wasn't as good as his mum's."

Severus felt a swift protectiveness for her. "I don't know. I think you are an acceptable cook."

Her reaction to his diffident praise was astonishing. She beamed at him. "Thank you." She looked down, and worried a loose thread on the duvet cover with her fingers. "But this is the problem, you see. My need for praise, my need to be the best at everything. I felt I was failing. I couldn't figure out the location of the Horcruxes quickly enough. I was trying to keep us all safe and sane and not at one another's throats." She looked into his eyes. "I wanted to be a normal person with a normal life. I wanted to just toss the reins to someone else and let them take over."

Tears filled her eyes. "That day in Canterbury, when you showed up with Malfoy, I knew I should be more cautious, but all I could think of was, 'thank the gods, someone's come to take over and I don't have to do this anymore.'" She was crying openly. "I was supposed to be there for Harry, but the first familiar face I saw, I gave in to, because I was so sick and tired of being on the run!"

"You are little more than a child, Miss "

"No, I'm not!" she said, angry and remorseful, and her vitriol surprised him. "I was old enough to go on the run to try to keep him alive, I was old enough to know danger, I was old enough to take care of them."

"Fighting one's fear and exhaustion is not a question of maturity, Miss Granger. You were living and breathing constant fear and pressure. I admire you that you lasted as long as you did."

"Well, don't. I didn't last long enough." She sniffed, and Snape silently handed her a snowy handkerchief. She took it with a little gesture of thanks. She blew her nose, and Severus could see the fight was waning in her. "When I realized you had deceived me, I knew the boys were dead. I thought we all were. So, when you chose me on the Night of Screams, I told myself that, whatever you would do to me, I deserved it and more for being so weak. My selfishness cost Harry and Ron their lives. I thought I deserved everything you did. But then something happened."

Severus waited, afraid of what she would say. She started haltingly. "When you touched me, that first night, I was too traumatized by the... well, what had happened. Then you gave me the lust potions." He stiffened, and his shoulders automatically hunched as if anticipating a physical blow.

"I know it was the potions, but it felt real. And the things you did felt real, and pleasurable, and I wanted them. Even when the potions wore off, I wanted you to touch me, to make me feel that pleasure again. It became an addiction; I told myself it was just the potions, but you stopped giving me potions days ago, didn't you?"

He nodded. "The last time I gave you a lust potion was the day you had a seizure."

"I thought so. I know how lust potions work, Professor. They don't linger in the system; they don't have any residual or lasting effects after they dissipate. I was aroused by what you did."

Hermione forced herself to look at him. "Last night, when you said we needed no potions to arouse one another, you were right. You only had to look at me and I became

wet. I'm practically Pavlovian, the way I respond to you." She made a wry face. "We would have made a great sociological study, you and I."

"Granger, please!" he said, guilt twisting his guts into ropes.

She continued as if she hadn't heard him. "So I would try so hard to please you because I didn't want you to stop." She looked down at her hands, resting in her lap. "I still don't. If you touched me right now, I would give myself to you because I want it. I desire you, even now, even though I know you don't really want me the same way as I want you."

Severus felt his stomach lurch. That hurt, right down into his shriveled kernel of a soul. He forced himself to say, "You only think you desire me, Granger."

She scoffed. "To quote a phrase, sir: I see no difference." Somewhere in the back of his mind, Severus heard himself saying those words, and he associated them with her, but for the life of him, he could not remember why or in what context. That thought depressed him. He had come to treasure all of his thoughts about her until the Night of Screams.

He could not talk to her about this now. It would force him to admit that he, too, desired her, wanted more than anything to pull back the covers and make love to her. He was no longer interested in games or power. He wanted to bury himself in her warm sweet body and cherish her, pleasure her and feel cleansed by her. He couldn't talk about it now.

Snape finally looked at her. For a moment, he thought he might cry himself. He squared his shoulders, as if steeling himself for an unpleasant task, and cleared his throat. "I have a secret, Hermione. You are the only one I can tell."

Hermione waited, her fear ramping up a notch.

He began. "The Dark Lord is pruning the Ministry, so that he can begin his new Wizarding world here in England. I've been told to go to Belgium to the Wizarding European Union to act as an envoy. That was what Lucius came here to tell me. It is a great honour to represent the Dark Lord." He took a deep breath.

"The truth is it is also a way to get me out of the picture, out of the constellation of power. No one trusts me. I am obsolete, now that that Potter is dead, and my influence over the Dark Lord is neither wanted nor considered necessary. Consequently, it is an assignment I cannot refuse, or I will be seen as disobeying the Dark Lord, and I will be killed."

Hermione felt her heart slam into her chest. He was leaving her.

He looked off into the distance. "The further I am from the Dark Lord physically, the less his power can affect me. If I can escape to Australia, I believe I can disappear." He waved his elegant hand in her general direction. "I can get away; I can escape from all this, Miss Granger."

She nodded, dying in her own skin. He was running away and leaving her.

He looked into her eyes. "I'm leaving this afternoon. I'm never returning to Wizarding Britain. I'm running away like the coward I accused you of being; like the coward I have always been."

He looked away and closed his eyes. "Since the day Potter was born, I made a vow to Dumbledore to protect Lily's son, and in one unguarded moment, I set off the chain of events that led to Potter's death by betraying you. Perhaps, one day I can learn to live with what I have done. I don't know."

Leaving me, she thought. He's going to let me take the fall.

He looked at her. "Of course, you are coming with me. I will not leave you behind. I have to find some means of atonement for what I've done to you. Even if it's just to take you somewhere safe from harm, where you'll have the chance to lead that normal life you so longed for."

She tried to not let her relief show, but she knew immediately he had seen it. He laughed again; it sounded like the harsh bark of a wolf. "And here you were thinking I was leaving you to be the Dark Lord's whipping boy for me, perhaps to deliver you into the tender bosom of Lucius Malfoy and his whelp?"

He glanced away. "Well, why not? What have I done to make you think otherwise?"

Hermione felt her heart stutter in her chest. "If we go to Australia, sir, would we really be safe? My parents were there, and now they're dead."

He looked at her with surprise, then shame. "They're not dead."

Hermione gasped, and the smile she gave him was like the sun breaking from the clouds. "They're alive? Oh, thank Merlin!" The look of relief and joy on her face made him turn away, guilt making his chest ache.

He lowered his head. "I told you that to hurt you. No one honestly had a clue where they were." He added hastily, "Come to think on it, why are your parents living in Australia?"

She swallowed. "I modified their memories last summer, and planted a memory that they'd always dreamed of selling their practice and moving there. I thought it might be a way to protect them, in case the worst should happen." She smiled sadly. "They won't remember me. I thought that would be the best thing, in case I didn't survive."

He looked at her thoughtfully, respectfully. "That was exceedingly courageous of you, Miss Granger, not to mention damn clever. It also may very well have saved their lives. They were rather high on the list of targeted Muggles." He nodded, and a ghost of a smile played across his lips. "Quite clever, indeed. Then again, over the years I have come to expect nothing less of you. I know you don't believe me, but I have always admired your resourcefulness. You are a fine witch, and a brave and beautiful young woman." He looked down, but not before Hermione saw the bitter self-loathing in his eyes. "For a time, I was not allowed to remember that."

At his rare, though cryptic words of praise, Hermione beamed at him, and he felt he might have just taken his first baby steps toward some sort of redemption.

Hermione felt her heart swell, and reluctantly considered forgiveness again. To quell her impulsive thoughts, she added. "Perhaps the two of us could find them and restore their memories. I have their aliases; we could start from there and look for them."

He considered. "We would have to live as Muggles for a time. Perhaps the rest of our lives."

Hermione ventured a smile. "I grew up as a Muggle, sir "

Snape made a noise in his throat. "My name is Severus," he ground out. "Don't ever call me 'sir' again." He looked at her, then coloured. "Please."

Hermione nodded, hearing the apology in his tone. "I grew up as a Muggle, *Severus*. I wouldn't have any trouble reverting back."

He regarded her with a look of respect. "Then, perhaps we can devise a real plan."

"Perhaps, Severus." Hermione sat up a little straighter. "I will go with you on one condition."

His black eyes slid between luxurious long lashes, to rest on her face. Again, an unfathomable expression brushed across his face. It was a certain rueful admiration; perhaps even a touch of resigned affection.

"Five minutes in charge, and you're already forming a plan. And taking over." Even as he spoke, his haughty attitude faded, as if it required more energy to maintain than

he was able to produce. "Then again, I am hardly inclined to refuse you any request."

His acquiescence emboldened her, and she pressed on. "I happen to think I'm entitled to make this one, Severus. I will go with you on one condition."

He looked at her, his unreadable expression carefully slotted back in place. "And that condition being?"

She felt tears prick the back of her eyes. She took a deep breath. "No more potions. No lust potions, no Polyjuice, no more pretending - whatever it is you were pretending." She took a deep breath. "No more blame. We've both been damaged we both have reason to blame ourselves." Severus lowered his gaze, and Hermione continued, softly, "We have to try to forgive one another. Perhaps we try to forgive ourselves."

He shifted uncomfortably. "You've done nothing to be forgiven, Miss Granger. I have been the unforgivable one. I understand a little more my actions and motivations, but they do not change the fact that I did unspeakable things to you."

Hermione nodded. "I accepted them because I wanted to let someone else take over the task I had been given. No one made me do that, either. I can't say how I would have treated you if the shoe was on the other foot, Severus. I'd like to think I would've done things differently. But I haven't spent the last three years dancing with the Devil, like you." She shrugged. "Who knows? It doesn't matter. I'll go with you as your companion. We will learn each other from the outside in."

She had always been one for lost causes, and there were none more lost now than herself and Severus Snape. "And down the road, if we become real I-lovers, it will be because we both want it, not because of any potion or punishment."

For the first time in her life, Hermione thought she might have rendered him speechless. He looked at her with bleak incredulity. "Why on earth would you entertain the thoughts of becoming my lover, Miss Granger? I have taken you against your will, using mood altering drugs; I have repeatedly hurt and beat and humiliated you over a fucking lie!"

This time, Hermione recognised the sudden, swift anger as self-directed. Yes, she was definitely thinking again. "You have, Severus. And at the time you enjoyed doing it." Hermione shrugged. "I enjoyed it at times, I won't lie to you. We both did things that led to the death of innocent people. Harry and Ron were my friends, and no matter how you say it, I let my guard drop because I wanted to drop it. At least you have the excuse that Malfoy somehow confounded you."

"I'm no psychologist; I'll leave that research for another time." She tapped her temple with her index finger. "For a person known for my intellectual prowess, I've done precious little thinking with *this* over the last week. It feels good to think again, to plan again."

She blushed suddenly, as if she realised the other parts of her body which had been driving her actions, and Severus found it rather touching that, after all that had happened to her, she still was innocent and sweet enough to blush.

His sex games had originally been a means to control and subjugate her; but the deepest part of his heart was invested more than he was prepared to admit. What had started as a way to protect her from the Death Eaters morphed into a game of desire and dominance and emotions he could not understand; emotions that drove him to humiliate and hurt her. It had become a complicated mess inside his head; a minefield of infatuation and tenderness warring with an irrational, heretofore unfathomable hatred and vengeance.

When she spoke of them becoming real lovers, his traitorous heart had bloomed with a painful, sticky hope. It was too much to ask for, but he knew he would nevertheless ask for it. He had no pride left to bruise.

She sobered, and pressed on. "But this is my condition: if you actually think there will come a day when you feel enough remorse to ask for forgiveness, then I will come with you, and I might entertain the thought of forgiving you. And making a relationship with you. As equals. We're all we've got now. I'd rather go with you than go our separate ways. Two heads, and all that."

She felt tears falling again, and for the first time since the Night of Screams they felt good, like another poison being purged from her system. "You are all that's left of what I knew, all that was once good and light to me - Hogwarts. You are part and parcel of everything about innocence and magic and light. You were an unpleasant part of it most of the time, but an important part nevertheless."

"I don't know what Malfoy did to make you betray your own soul, but if we can figure it out together, I can learn to forgive you, and you can forgive yourself." She nodded, her chin lifting in defiance. "Who knows? One day, we may even figure a way to win."

He opened his mouth to speak, and she rushed in, before he could interrupt her. "And my name is Hermione. I want you to call me Hermione."

Snape's mouth twitched. "I believe that is more than one condition, Hermione. But in light of recent events, I am inclined to show generosity of spirit."

Hermione blinked, and her eyes narrowed slightly. Snape was making a joke. And it meant nothing more than an attempt at humour.

He nodded. "So now we move on. I do have many things to tell you, but they will take longer than we need right now." Again, that almost-smile. "I know a great deal more now about what happened on the Night of Screams. Perhaps once you've heard the entire story, you can find it in your heart to forgive me. You might even find a way to show me how to forgive myself."

"Then tell me over breakfast." She smiled at him again, and it was all he could do not to fall at her feet and kiss them. Instead, Snape sat in his chair, looking at the long red streak on the faded duvet cover, as if memorizing it. Under the bloodstain, he could see the soft glistening of starch sliding over the fabric; Hermione's task on day five. He stood, and straightened his coat. He looked down at Hermione, his expression unreadable.

And then he pressed something into her hand. It was her wand. He stepped back, his expression placid, accepting, and laid his own wand on the bed beside her. "If you wish to use it on me, I will not hinder you. I deserve nothing less than your retaliation."

Hermione sighed, looking down at the wand. "Severus, that may just well be the start of me forgiving you." She stood up. "And the start of forgiving myself for allowing it to happen." It was her turn to look shamed.

"I developed feelings for you. Attraction and desire, obviously, but they were always tainted with fear and mistrust. I had always admired you, and wanted to please you, even thought it was obvious you couldn't stand me; all of those emotions became jumbled up in this bed." The look of shame on his face was almost unbearable.

Her voice trembled slightly. "Some of it was manufactured by the potions and your own manipulations, but it all felt real to me. A lot of it still does. I have to figure out what's real, and what I can attribute to outside influences. And what I can purge from my system, and what I want to keep."

Hermione saw a dozen emotions flit across his features. Shame was among them. Gratitude made an appearance, as did hope and respect. He held out his hand, and to his profound relief, she took it. He was so grateful he brought it to his lips, and his heart cramped, looking at her broken, chipped nails, the pads of her fingertips, roughened from the long week of hard, back-breaking work.

"I never 'couldn't stand you', Hermione. You must believe me. If you take away nothing else from this bed, know that."

She regarded him carefully. "Thank you, Severus. That helps." She smiled, and that seemed to comfort him somewhat.

"Then we will leave this place after lunch, Hermione." He drew the duvet aside, and looked down at her with quiet, tired dignity. "I have taken the liberty of packing your clothes, but I have prepared something for you to wear on the journey." With a quick wave of his wand, Hermione felt her body gently cleansed. Magic washed her softly, soothingly. It was a spell used to clean babies, and it felt as comforting as a mother's touch.

Then, for the first time in over a week, her body was encased in clothes. They were comfortable, warm, clean-smelling and rode against her skin perfectly. Even the colour pleased her.

She grinned at him, feeling giddy and foolish that the simple act of wearing clothing could please her so much. His expression indicated that he seemed to understand. As she turned toward the door, he stopped her, and to her surprise, he gently cupped her face in his large hands.

She looked up at him, and the trust he saw in her eyes made his chest ache. "If I begged your forgiveness, would you truly grant it, Hermione? Truly?"

She could barely make herself think the words, much less say them. "Are you begging, Severus?"

He was breathing hard; Hermione realised he was weeping again. "Yes." His lower lip trembled like a child's, and she knew he was as overwhelmed as she. To her surprise, he leaned forward, and kissed her forehead, and that kiss told her many things about him she had never known until that moment.

He kissed her nose, and gently touched his lips to hers; it was their first real kiss, and it was as innocent as they had ever been or would ever be again. He pressed his forehead to hers. "I'm so sorry," he said, his voice harsh and desperate. "I'm so, so sorry, Hermione."

He was holding her close, his face buried in her hair, and Hermione put her arms around him, unable to harden her resolve against his helplessness. "I know," she crooned, rubbing his back, which made him cry harder. "It will be alright, Severus. We will find our way." She felt her own eyes filling again, and prayed to the gods that she was right.

"Please forgive me." He slid down until he was on his knees, rolling his forehead against her stomach, his arms like a vice around her waist. "Please."

"I do." To her dismay, he dropped to her feet and kissed them. She could feel his tears dropping onto her bare feet. "Don't do this, Severus!" She pulled the once-proud man onto his feet. "It's not fitting." Hermione's tears joined with his, and as they held one another again, they gave rein to their grief.

Severus' voice shook with his sobs. "I'm so ashamed! I will never hurt you again!"

"I know," she soothed. "We'll be alright, Severus. Shhh. It's alright. Shh."

"Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you." For a long time, man and woman, wizard and witch, jailer and prisoner, Death Eater and Light bearer, stood together, trying to give comfort and peace to one another. Gradually, their tears ceased, their emotions dulled and calmed, and they now faced one another, equals, partners, comrades, crusaders.

When they were able, Hermione took Severus' hand, and together they walked downstairs to breakfast.

An hour before Hermione had awakened to find Severus stroking her cheek, Lucius Malfoy felt his wards shimmer, and recognised Severus' magical signature.

"Good morning, old friend!" Malfoy smiled, trying not to reveal his surprise and trepidation. "Always a pleasure, even at this early hour. Out and about, readying your affairs for Europe?"

Snape brushed an imaginary speck of lint from his immaculate robes. He drawled, "Indeed, Brother. I'm merely running errands and wished to say my goodbyes to you and your family while I had the chance."

Lucius relaxed somewhat. "I shall be more than happy to convey your wishes to Narcissa; she and Draco are visiting her sister. I expect them back tomorrow."

Inwardly, Snape smirked; Lucius' dislike for his unstable sister-in-law was well known. "Ah, then, I shall not keep you. Farewell, Brother." Snape held out his hand, and Lucius shook it once.

"Farewell " Using his grip, Severus yanked Malfoy forward, until his wand was pointing between the blond man's eyes.

"*Legilimens!*" Snape roared, battering through Malfoy's mind, ripping away at the aristocrat's consciousness until he found what he sought: The two of them, standing in an alley in Canterbury.

*Snape, turning to him, saying, "I sense nothing here that remotely resembles their - "*

*Malfoy leaned toward Snape and whispered, "Mensimperio Maximus!" It was a curse given to Malfoy by the Dark Lord himself, newly created within the dark place where his soul had resided before he Horcruxed it away. It was a 'singular curse'; any witch or wizard could only cast it once. When cancelled, it removed all memory of the spell and its repercussions from the recipient's mind. It was unbreakable to any except the caster and the Dark Lord himself. As he intoned it, Malfoy was so frightened of ruining his only chance to cast it, his voice shook.*

*Thankfully, Snape never knew what hit him.*

*After assuring himself that Severus was unable to fight the curse, Malfoy told him everything to say, every code, every argument, every bit of Malfoy persuasion to convince the girl that they were on her side. He could not sense her presence, but he knew that Snape would be able to find her, and they could use her, as long as Malfoy could control Hogwarts' hated Headmaster. They merely had to wait until Potter and the blood traitor Weasley stumbled upon them, then they could leave, knowing the two of them would blindly walk into any trap to try to save their friend. It had been too easy, really.*

*Once Snape had served his purpose and the three of them had Disappeared from Canterbury, Malfoy Stupified the girl, put her in a full body bind, Portkeyed her to Malfoy Manor and cancelled the curse. While Severus was still weak and reeling from the backlash of the cursework, Malfoy temporarily modified his memory, planting the suggestion of Hermione as a two-faced, ambitious, spineless weakling, grasping in her drive to show off, stopping at nothing to be noticed, to be seen as better than her pureblood peers.*

*Lucius portrayed her as a jumped-up Mudblood willing to sell her mother's soul for recognition; a little coward so petty and sniveling she made Peter Pettigrew look like Godric Gryffindor by comparison. Severus' self-proclaimed dislike for the girl was well-known; to plant the suggestion that Snape had always hated her seemed an easy way to cement his actions.*

*It had never occurred to Lucius' Slytherin way of thinking that Severus secretly admired the girl or cared for her in any way. Malfoy would have been bemused to realise that planting this suggestion caused such conflicting emotions within his dark friend that Severus' mental stability had been compromised almost to the point of permanent damage and insanity.*

*Indeed, Severus had behaved exactly as Lucius had anticipated. What he had not planned on was Severus choosing the girl as his spoil of war. It had complicated things a bit, but Malfoy had not had time to worry about it. He was trying to secure his Lord's victory, and therefore his own place in the history of it...*

Severus watched, sickened, as the events unfolded in Lucius' memory:

*When he informed Severus that Hermione Granger had betrayed her friends in exchange for her own life, Severus had been contemptuous but unsurprised, to Malfoy's relief. By the time the memory modification started to fade, Lucius had set the wheels in motion to get Snape into Europe and out of the way; it was too late for Severus to*

do or say anything that would threaten his position in the hierarchy of power. Lucius had, in his mind, managed the cleverest leg-pull of the war.

Later, when their fellow Death Eaters congratulated Severus, he smiled at them modestly, but Malfoy could sense his confusion. He let Severus stew, knowing that Snape could not afford to reveal his uncertainty to the Dark Lord. It would all be over in a couple of weeks, give or take the time for the memory modification to fade.

Snape pulled from Malfoy's mind with a great, ripping fury. The two wizards faced each other, panting; one from the rape of his mind, the other from his chilling anger. Snape snatched Malfoy's cane and removed the wand from its core.

He pointed it calmly at the blond man, fully intending to kill him with his own wand, but something in the older man's face stopped him. Snape hissed, "Why, Lucius?"

Malfoy, his eyes blank with fear, shook his head. "Why?" His glacial eyes grew even colder. "You were on the knife edge of being killed by the Dark Lord! He didn't trust you, even after you killed Dumbledore! I had to do something to restore his faith in you. If the girl was ever questioned, which she was, she could say truthfully that you had played your part in betraying Potter." He huffed, "I thought it was a jolly clever idea on my part; you could show a little gratitude for all my hard work."

Snape stared at Malfoy for several minutes. His head reeled with what had transpired. "Why would you bother to save my worthless skin, Lucius? You were ever jealous of my position with the Dark Lord why would you go to such extreme measures to secure it?"

Malfoy looked at him incredulously. A bit of the strain around Lucius' eyes softened. "Draco. I did it for Draco. You saved him." His voice shook with emotion. "You killed Dumbledore to save my only son -"

Snape bit back the retort that sat behind his teeth. It was bitter as gall, and he knew revealing the truth would undo everything Lucius had done. Merlin, all the wrong things had been done for the right reasons.

The two men looked at one another, and Lucius slumped weakly in his chair. In spite of the early hour, Malfoy splashed brandy from a decanter into a glass and took a large gulp. He choked, "You saved Draco from the Dark Lord. So I saved *you* from the Dark Lord." He made an impatient gesture. "And you finally got your hands on the little Mudblood chit there's never been any love lost between you; everyone knew that."

Severus felt his lips go numb. Now he and Hermione would both be remembered as traitors to the light *Hermione, Hermione...* Through gritted teeth, he replied, "When you look at it that way, Lucius..."

"Exactly! And now we're even."

Malfoy took another drink of brandy, and held up his long, thin hand. "Don't worry; I've told no one; not even Cissy has any inkling you aren't exactly the hero I made you out to be." His smile was positively beatific. "It'll be *our* little secret, Brother. No *real* need for anyone else to know, is there?"

Snape looked down at one of the few people he could ever remember calling a friend, and shook his head.

*You've damned my soul, Lucius. You told me I hated a young woman I secretly admired and cared for, so I brutalized her even as the deepest part of my soul fought me and almost destroyed my sanity and her life. And you used me to murder the one hope we had of putting this madness behind us. Now, no matter what happens, in the eyes of the Wizarding world I will forever be known as the man who orchestrated the death of Harry Potter, and Hermione will be forever branded as the lynchpin to his capture.*

Severus felt sick with remorse. He said tightly, "You should have let the game play until its logical conclusion, Lucius. We have innocent blood on our hands."

Malfoy shook his head and shrugged indifferently. "All blood is innocent, Severus. Only the heart that pumps it has a conscious will to serve either the Dark or the Light. Besides, history will write you as a hero to the Glorious Revolution."

"If the Dark Lord reigns supreme."

Malfoy crossed his legs, brushing a long blond hair from the leg of his trousers. "Merely thinking that way could get you killed, no matter where you are, Severus. Besides, I couldn't take that risk. Our survival is paramount; we are, after all, dedicated in the service of the Dark Lord."

He took another drink; a slow sip this time, savouring the fiery liquid. "Let it go, my friend. What's done is done. No need to thank me." He lifted his glass in tribute. "We Malfoys look after their own."

Severus looked down at his friend. Finally, he nodded. "Yes, you do. I suppose I really do owe you, don't I?" he added, grimly.

Lucius waved his hand idly. "Let us speak no more of debts, old friend. We've no time for finger-pointing, in any case. There is much work to be done for the Dark Lord. Let us play our roles, and keep our hearts secret to all but ourselves."

Snape gave a little bow. "Of course, Lucius. Look after your own. And I will look after mine."

He smiled as he raised his wand. "*Mens imperio Maximus!*"

The next afternoon, long after Severus Snape had disappeared unexpectedly, taking his slave with him to parts unknown, Narcissa Malfoy returned with her son to her husband's home. Not finding him in the drawing room, she knocked on his study door, and receiving no answer, walked in to find him staring into the fire, a bemused expression on his face, toying idly with his cane, studying the silver serpent's head. With the firelight flickering over his features, his profile looked different, strange.

Narcissa smiled uneasily. "Luc?" He made no move.

She approached him, and looked down in horror to see blood on his long, thin hands. A magical dagger sat on the table; a hand mirror lay beside it. Both were also smeared with blood.

Narcissa looked at her husband's handsome face and recoiled in revulsion, crying, "Lucius! Sweet Nimue, what has happened to you?" The man sitting in the chair calmly looked up at his wife, as if he had no idea what she meant. A rather vacant smile played about his lips.

Two words had been carved into his forehead with the dagger. *Debt Cancelled.*

"Lucius?" He smiled, his eyes guileless and innocent. "Is that *my* name?"

# 7/7: Three and a Half Years Later...

## Chapter 7 of 7

On the night the light is defeated and the dark wins, Lord Voldemort grants a boon to his most valued and trusted spy.

This is a very, very dark and disturbing story of pain and punishment. If you find the idea of non-con and dub-con unsettling, please understand this will not be the story for you.

But also know this: at the heart of this story lies a mystery. All will be revealed if you dare to continue.

□

*A/N: These characters are the property of JK Rowling and Warner Bros. I make no money from this story and claim no rights. Nothing you recognise belongs to me.*

*Special thanks to my friends at LiveJournal, who understood what I was trying to do with this story. Great thanks to Voxangelus, who graciously stepped in as a fresh pair of eyes, and took a lot of pressure off, just because she liked the story. Thank you for your help and love.*

*And thank YOU, dear reader, for hanging in there with this story, which I know was not pleasant reading at times. I appreciate your hesitation, and I thank all of you who gave it a go regardless!*

*This Epilogue is really quite unnecessary to the story, but I felt compelled by the Muse to write it, so if you are happy with the way that Chapter 6 ended, you may want to stop there. If you'd like to see what happened next, by all means, read on, MacDuff:*

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The news of Voldemort's defeat at the hands of Neville Longbottom had been the only topic on Canberra's Wizarding wireless for the past thirty-six hours, and the celebrations in Wizarding Australia had been going on at least that long. Merlin only knew what they were doing in Britain. Here in Australia, not only did they not know, but they cared even less.

They had already spoken to Neville separately and together to congratulate him; it was the last time they would need to offer him their counsel and advice; already the new Order of the Phoenix had rounded up the last remaining Death Eaters and galvanised the Ministry into behaving like a governing body again.

Their official pardons and nominations for their Order of Merlin medals had arrived via Portkey that morning. Not that medals mattered; being exonerated had ever been their goal, and now that it had happened, they were content for the politicians to take over so they could return to their lives.

---

It had started almost the moment they sneaked out of Wizarding Britain. Freed from the pall of Spinner's End, armed with the information of what had actually happened (via Legilimency and a hefty dose of Veritaserum), Hermione and Severus at last pieced together the horrors that had befallen them.

It was easier to accept Severus' irrational behavior as they came to realise that his feelings for her had been twisted so obscenely by Malfoy's suggestions. Once they'd retraced the steps, it made better sense: Severus had developed feelings of affection for Hermione, and the strong emotional hatred impulse Lucius planted battled so fiercely in Severus' mind that the only way he could reconcile them was to turn the hatred into lust. It was the only way he could justify the intense feelings; anger, lust, sex.

It was only during the act of sex itself that Severus' guard lowered enough, and the planted suggestion could take over. This, they realized, was the reason he turned so abusive during the act itself; his own abandonment at making love to a woman he truly esteemed compromised his inner discipline enough to allow the implanted hatred to take over his subconscious again.

It was also the key to his daytime behaviour forcing her to clean his house his unconscious mind's unspoken, hidden plea for her to help him 'clean up' his own mind. Neither were experts in the functions of the subconscious mind, but it made sense to them, and comforted them both.

Severus could not hate Hermione; therefore, rage, dominance and sexual abuse took its place. It fulfilled Lucius' remit, and allowed Severus to keep his sanity. It was only when the modifications began to fade that the sexual games became more confusing. Severus unconsciously knew he was going against his own dearly held principles, but could not break free from the compulsion. This, coupled with the misinformation about Hermione's role in Potter's capture, conflicted Severus to the very brink of madness. Hermione thought it was a testament to his strength that he hadn't driven himself completely insane trying to fight the implanted suggestion and harmed them both.

As the truth gradually seeped into their bones, they found it easier to accept and forgive themselves, and set about the cautious task of getting to know one another. It never occurred to them to go their separate ways. They had been together through too much, and found a strange sort of comfort in each other's presence. As far as they knew, the Order was dead. For that matter, so was Hogwarts, and that bothered Severus more than anything; to be remembered as the Headmaster in charge of the destruction of Hogwarts was a constant ache in his heart that no amount of forgiveness on Hermione's part could comfort.

It was only after they left Spinner's End that Hermione and Severus both started suffering from horrible nightmares. They took to sleeping in the same bed, just to be able for one to rouse the other when the twitching and cries began. They did not engage in sex; neither was ready, and they found comfort in this as well.

It took them the better part of a month to track down her parents. Hermione had given them false names, passports, the lot, but had not tried to send them to a specific location she concluded that, if she did not know where they were, no one could torture the information out of her. Finally, when she and Severus knocked on the door in Canberra and she saw the sweet face of her dad in the doorway, she was so overcome with relief and emotion that Severus had to step in and get the job done.

With more charm than Hermione had ever heard issue from his lips, Severus announced, "Mr. Wilkins? Hello, I'm Stephen Robbin and this is my colleague, Rachel Wingate. We are from the Neighbourhood Watch." He flashed something in her father's face which, presumably, he saw as an identification card. Severus smiled. "May we come in?"

After that, it took another two days to fully restore her parents' memories, and a further week to gain their forgiveness. They were furious with her, and finally, after several hours of haranguing, Severus showed his true colours.

"Excuse me, Mr. and Mrs. Granger, but I grow exceedingly weary of this listless diatribe. Your daughter is a bright, caring, intelligent, and brave woman, who whisked you out of harm's way in one of the cleverest ruses I have ever seen. Your lack of gratitude is only surpassed by your appalling lack of manners." Everyone assaulted him at once.

Hermione blanched. "Severus, please "

"How dare you?" her mother snapped.

"Now listen here, you " Mr. Granger started, rising from his chair.

"Quiet, all of you!" Severus' voice rang cold and imperious into the room, and the three Grangers were cowed into silence. Severus looked over at Hermione, who was staring at him with eyes filled with the fear he had promised she would never again feel in his presence. Something in his heart cracked, and he slumped dejectedly.

Heedless of the two older people in the room, Severus crossed to her and knelt at her feet. He put a gentle hand on her knee. In a quiet voice, he said, "I'm sorry, Hermione. By the gods, I swore I would never again raise my voice to you, and I have. Forgive me for my thoughtlessness." He turned to her parents with a scathing glare, and they both felt guilty for no reason whatsoever.

A look passed between Hermione's parents, and they saw at the dark man with new eyes. They watched their daughter, gazing down at him with a mixture of rebuke, forgiveness and fondness, and in that moment, the very air seemed to change. Her professor, this Snape fellow, was stupidly in love with their daughter, and unless she was mistaken, Jean Granger was fairly certain her daughter felt the same about him.

The four of them settled into life together in Canberra. The Grangers kept their false name, and Hermione became Rachel Wilkins, their daughter just home from Uni in London, and Severus became Stephen Robbin, a lodger from England. They found jobs in the Wizarding districts of the Capital city, but under assumed names and always under a very powerful glamour. They were well known; they could not risk exposure even here.

They slept in separate rooms, and although the way they felt about one another was written on their faces for all to see, their companionship did not extend to sharing a bed. At night, they would watch telly together, Hermione nestled in the crook of Severus' arm, and they would discuss things in hushed tones, their attitude with one another affectionate, intimate, but nevertheless restrained. It was quite puzzling to her parents, but they said nothing.

Almost two months to the day after they'd arrived in Australia, Severus' Dark Mark burned. And burned. They could smell it, acrid and revolting. The pain ran under his skin like acid, causing his fingers to claw inward and his body to burn with fever. He wept in misery the entire night.

The agony was so blinding he became delirious, and at one point he asked Hermione to literally remove part of his arm. She responded by doping him up on Pain Potions and healing charms. Between the Fever Reducing Elixir to ease the chills and Hermione's own tender ministrations, Severus eventually renounced his grisly proposal.

Hermione simply held him while he cried, rocking him helplessly until he passed out, either from the distress or the potions. She apologized over and over for forcing the potions on him, and he forgave her over and over; which also puzzled her parents, but again they kept their counsel. Their daughter had changed in the year since they'd left England, and to try to order her about now seemed not only pointless but also tactless. Whatever there was between their daughter and her older, brooding companion was none of their business, as far as they could see.

For two additional months the Mark would flare periodically, each time a little less intensely. Finally, the pain stopped altogether. The four of them celebrated Hermione's and Severus' six month anniversary as Australians trying to strategise how to find out what was happening in Wizarding Britain.

Nine months turned into a year; they celebrated Christmas together. Severus and Hermione gradually grew closer, their company easy and comfortable. They would often sit entwined on the sofa; more than once, Hermione felt his lips against her hair, his fingers stroking her arm, and it stirred and troubled her that he seemed content to go no further.

Hermione wanted to approach him with the idea of becoming lovers, but each time she made overtures to the subject, he would either have to check on a potion in the basement or he would goad her into an argument to change the subject. It never lasted long, and was never an out and out brawl, but it troubled Hermione to the point where she decided to confront him one night, fourteen months after the Night of Screams.

"Severus?"

His reply was a rather disinterested grunt. He was reading a Potions journal, his dark glasses perched on his nose. He was sipping a cup of tea. Hermione loved him like this; calm, at ease, reading about something he obviously enjoyed, even if just to argue and mutter to himself that this theory was crap or that proposal would never fly. It didn't matter that the Journal was two years out of date; it served to remind him that he was, or rather, had been, a leader in his field. It seemed a shame, Hermione thought, to yank him away from something he loved so much to answer her question.

She took a deep breath. "Severus, is there someone else?"

"Someone else where?" he said, still absorbed in his journal. He tilted his head and murmured, "How Ringeisen thinks you can strain dragon's blood to release only the antibodies is beyond me "

"Severus!"

He looked up at her strained tone, alarmed. "Is something wrong?"

She could feel her anger rising. "I don't know you tell me!"

He regarded her quietly for a moment, then something like understanding flashed in his face. "Is it the seventeenth already?"

"No, and I resent you implying that my PMT has anything to do with anything!" she countered, her amber eyes starting to smolder.

"Then what on earth are you babbling about, Granger?" His tone was so calmly impatient she wanted to hex him.

"I'm bab " She counted to five, then started again, her voice marginally calmer. "I'm asking you, Severus Snape, if you are seeing another woman."

She might as well have asked him if he were shagging Lord Voldemort for the reaction she received. He stared at her for a moment as if niffers were floating out of her ears. In a tone of voice that revealed just how flummoxed he was, he replied, "Hermione, why on earth would I be seeing another woman? *When* on earth would I? We live together, we work in the same building. Why would I even entertain the thoughts of someone else?"

Hermione watched his eyes carefully. Something in her troubled gaze asked the invitation, and he silently complied. She Legilimised into his mind. She saw his day to day life, working in the large Apothecary in Canberra, his relief to come home each evening like any other normal wizard.

She watched herself as his eyes followed her around a room as she chatted to her parents, or to colleagues. She felt his sweet satisfaction in the evenings when she brought him a cup of his favourite tea and snuggled against his chest as they watched Muggle television. She could feel his sadness at parting each morning as they went their separate ways to work, and his impatience to return home to her again.

And there it was, in a nutshell: the quiet, firm pleasure of hearing the sound of her Apparation, signaling her arrival home. His cautious, hopeful joy when she walked into the room, placing a careless kiss on his head, asking him about his day. Severus Snape wasn't looking at anyone else; he was too busy looking at her.

Hermione pulled away gently, as if loath to intrude on such a tender moment. Tears were in her eyes. "Then why don't you want me? Why haven't you come to me? Do you not feel desire for me?"

Severus regarded her for several seconds, as if marshaling his thoughts, then rose from his chair and laid his journal and glasses aside. Crossing to her, he took her right hand, and gently placed it against his groin. Hermione breathed in as she felt him, hard and hot and wanting. She looked up at him in confusion. "Then why "

"I'm like this almost constantly around you, Hermione." He lowered his gaze, to where her hand gently rubbed against the tented placket of his trousers. His voice was husky. "I want you. Merlin, I want you! But I'm not going to force you to do anything out of obligation or pity or compassion."

Hermione looked at him in surprise. All this time, she had felt like the clumsy, inexperienced girl he no longer desired. It seemed once again, they were at cross purposes, and she told him so.

"Severus, there are nights I am awake until four in the morning, trying to get up the nerve to come to you. It's not about pity or obligation. Merlin, what nonsense! I want you



because you are my best friend and an incredible lover, and I want us to be a proper couple."

His dark eyes sought hers. "Be sure, Hermione. I'm no good at casual relationships." He scoffed at himself. "I'm no buggering good at relationships, full stop. I only know this."

He took her in his arms and for a heart-stopping moment Hermione was sure he was going to kiss her. "Hermione, if I take you, it will be forever. I think we both learned one thing about me during your time at Spinner's End. If I want something, I'll do anything to keep it. I won't let you go."

He lowered his head to kiss her, and at that moment, an owl crashed into the Wilkins' patio door, breaking the glass and injuring the bird. Hermione vanished the broken glass while Severus repaired the door and mended the owl's wing.

Once the drama was over, Hermione unfolded the parchment that had been attached to the owl's leg. Her hand was shaking so much she could hardly unroll the paper. She and Severus, their heads touching, saw the words on the parchment, and for the moment, kisses and sex were forgotten.

The note read: *Hello, is this the Wilkins Family that used to live in 938 Violet Close, Sutton Surrey in England? If so, I have a message for someone you may know: Hermione Granger.*

The letter was from Charlie Weasley, who, it seemed, had received a letter from Ron during the year Ron, Harry and Hermione had been on the run. He wrote the letter after just leaving her and Harry, and escaping from the Snatchers. "Ron wrote Charlie a letter?" Hermione mused, and at the sound of her voice, another parchment magically separated from the first. It was a copy of Ron's letter to his older brother.

She started to read it aloud, but tears made her vision swim and her voice quaver to the point that Severus took the parchment from her trembling hands, and read it to her, his voice dignified and heavy with respect for the dead.

*Dragon man,*

*I hope this gets to you and finds you well. As you know, things aren't going so great, and, to tell the truth, I don't know if we'll win or not. I have hope, but it's so difficult, you know, to trust anyone. We try every day to find the things that will kill the snake, but the pressure's getting to me pretty badly. I pulled a strop and left, and now I can't seem to find my friends. It was a stupid thing to do, and it's all my fault. I mean, the three of us are all we've got, really, and I sometimes think if You-Know-Who doesn't get me, a certain know-it-all will if I ever catch up to them!*

*I have an owl waiting, and this is the only parchment I've got, so I'll say goodbye for now. I just wanted you to know I'm alive. If anything happens to the three of us, you may want to look up some people in Australia by the name of Wilkins. And tell Mum and Dad and the family I love them. They're the reason I'm still trying to fight. That's all I can say about it. Take care, and good luck. Youngest brother*

Hermione wept against Severus' shoulder. Bless Ron; for some reason, he had mentioned Hermione's parents' names in the letter to Charlie, who had put two and two together and started searching. It couldn't have been an easy task; Wilkins was a common name.

It was a bittersweet moment for Hermione; reading the letter; Ron's clumsy attempt to hide his identity; seeing his fear that he would not survive, and how sorrowful he felt for abandoning them. In that one letter, Hermione relived those dark days on the run. It was like hearing his voice again, and even though she smiled through her tears, that night Severus heard her crying in her room. He stood outside, staring at her door for almost five minutes, squared his shoulders, and walked in.

In the light of the moon, he saw her lying in her bed. When she spied his tall figure silhouetted in the doorway, she held her arms out to him like a child, and he sat on the bed and held her until her grief spent itself into emptiness.

And so it was that Ronald Weasley, who had never truly been given a proper, befitting eulogy, was finally laid to rest that night, by a former Death Eater and his former slave, in a modest ranch house next to a golf course in Canberra.

The two of them rose the next morning ready to fight again.

Several months before, they had heard whispers that Neville Longbottom and some of the other original members of the DA were still alive and living in Spain. Living in Australia had made it easy to not think of Europe and the rumours of the new Order of the Phoenix rising from the ashes. Charlie's letter seemed to validate that report, and he'd been charged to find out if Hermione's parents knew anything of her whereabouts.

Within a week, the wheels were set in motion. Hermione sent a return owl to Charlie via a third-party postal service he'd suggested. Both sides were still unsure if they could trust the other; Hermione and Severus were still considered accessories to murder, but Severus' defection from the Upper Echelon of the Death Eaters was now a well-known fact, and served only to cloud the waters.

A very cautious network of meetings were arranged through, of all people, Pansy Parkinson, whose family had defected six months after the Night of Screams, and emigrated to America.

Finally, Severus and Hermione met Neville in Romania, under the watchful eye of his bodyguard, none other than Charlie Weasley.

They met in the JW Marriott Grand, a Muggle hotel in Bucharest. It was the most neutral territory; Hermione was terrified that Charlie might use this as a cover to ambush them with a vendetta over Ron. Even after the letter, she was still frightened of the long arm of the Weasleys.

When Severus answered the knock on the door, Charlie immediately rushed past him and flung his arms around Hermione, crying, "Oh, little Granger! Thank Merlin you're alive! We'd heard " He looked from the young woman in his arms to Severus' glowering face, and decided to censor his answer. "All sorts of nasty rumours."

Hermione, so happy to see friends again, spent the next hour catching up, often turning to Severus to include him. Charlie watched their body language carefully, as he'd been asked to do. They were a couple, that was for sure; it was written all over them; it showed in Hermione's constant attempt to draw Snape into the conversation, and Snape's own disintegrating effort to keep a distance.

He eyed Charlie warily, as if afraid the handsome dragon handler would try to seduce Hermione out from under him. He was as sullen and watchful as Charlie remembered from his own school days, but underneath was a fierce protectiveness for the young woman in his charge.

Finally, after some unseen signal, there came a knock on the door, and Neville Longbottom and Pansy Parkinson strode in. Severus was shocked to see the changes in Longbottom. Gone was the gawky, awkward near-Squib that had melted more cauldrons in his first three years at Hogwarts than the remaining student population had in Severus' entire career.

This solemn young man carried himself like a soldier, his eyes bright and calm. He hugged Hermione solemnly, and said to her quietly, "It's alright, Hermione. I know you did everything you could to keep them alive."

Hermione wept openly, and to the surprise of everyone in the room, Severus included, she turned to him and buried her head against his shoulder. "See, Severus? I told you Neville would understand! They still believe in me!"

He tried to comfort her. "Of course they would, Hermione. You are innocent." He glared at Neville as if to rebuke him for making Hermione cry, and Neville blinked. Severus felt absurdly pleased, knowing he could still intimidate with the best of them.

Finally, as Hermione quieted, Neville cleared his throat and said, "Well, I guess we all know why we're here. We need to know the truth. Not what people say happened, but

what really happened, from the horses' mouths, so to speak." He withdrew two vials. Unapologetically, he looked at the two fugitives.

"I know you're on the run from You-Know-Who. But I have to know I can trust people, and sometimes I have to do it in ways that I don't like but are necessary. This," he said, indicating the two vials, "is some of the most potent Veritaserum on the market today. Absolutely fail-proof, completely effective. No one has been able to fight it." Neville looked at Hermione levelly. "Whenever you are ready."

"I'll take this on one condition, Neville." Hermione stole a glance at Severus, who looked on impassively, with an underlying resentment in his eyes.

Neville looked at Charlie, then at Pansy, who shrugged. She tried to smile at her former Head of House, but he was looking at Hermione.

Neville sighed, "Hermione, it's this way or nothing. I have to know who to trust "

"I understand that, Neville, and I will answer any question about the Night of Screams, but I don't want to be asked anything about the week that followed it." She looked from Severus back to Neville. "That is very personal between Severus and me and has no bearing on the events that came before."

Neville took a deep breath, then nodded, Gryffindor to the core. "Agreed." He turned to his former Headmaster. "Professor, do you agree to this? With the same conditions?"

For a moment, Severus was tempted to confess exactly what had taken place between the two of them. He would be jailed for it, but perhaps that was his penance. He had put her through so much; even now he had difficulty forgiving himself.

"He has the same conditions, or we walk." Severus shot a glance at Hermione, who was looking at him sternly. "That's none of their business, Severus, and it serves no useful purpose."

"Agreed." Neville nodded, only wanting to get on with this part of things. He hated not being able to take a person at face value, and this was the ugly manifestation of the forced mistrust he had to live with. It would, Hermione knew, never sit well with him, and that alone would make him the best champion.

Ten minutes later, Severus and Hermione walked the other three people through the last two days of Ron's and Harry's lives. They left out nothing, having drilled one another to remember everything that had been done to them. At one point, Charlie produced a Pensieve, and the five of them stepped into the alley in Canterbury together.

Severus and Hermione held hands as they saw the entire scene play out, from the arrival of the two Death Eaters to Malfoy's incantation to the capture and execution of Hermione's two best friends—the last hope of Wizarding Britain against the Dark Lord. It was hellish to revisit it, and by the end all save one person in the room was in tears. Only Pansy Parkinson remained dry-eyed.

Finally, another silent signal passed between Neville and the others, and they stood. "Thank you. As you can no doubt understand, we have to be on the move. Can't afford to stay in one place. I suggest you two get back to sunny Oz and wait. I promise you I'll be in touch. In the meantime, stay in Australia; this is our fight now, and we don't need you two risking your lives unnecessarily. Right now, we're winning; when it's over, I'll see that you two are restored to your proper place on the chessboard. When we win, your testimony will be more important than ever."

Hermione beamed. "You know what, Neville? It feels damn good hearing you say 'when we win', not 'if we win'."

Neville gave her another hug. "Harry and Ron won't have died in vain, Hermione. I promise you."

Charlie interjected, "We'll have to corroborate your testimony with Lucius Malfoy's, of course, but I don't think it'll be a problem." He grinned. "He's still wearing some pretty heavy glamour, you know, Professor."

He winked at Severus, who allowed himself a smirk. His encounter with Lucius shortly before he and Hermione left England was his only deviation from their agreement of not discussing events after the Night of Screams. Apparently, Malfoy had eventually recovered his memory, but the words carved in his forehead with the charmed dagger were permanent, and had to be magically concealed.

As Neville and Charlie prepared to leave, Pansy approached Severus with a smile. "It's good to see you again, Professor."

Severus nodded. "It is good to see you working for the side of the Light, Miss Parkinson. However, I am no one's professor anymore. Please call me Severus."

"Then I insist you call me Pansy, Severus." Pansy eyed him coolly. Her smile was not at all to Hermione's liking, but she kept her thoughts to herself. The attractive Slytherin hadn't noticed; she was too busy trying to flirt with Severus.

She preened. "We all travel separately to avoid detection and I'm going to be the last to leave tonight. Perhaps we could meet for dinner; say, seven o'clock?"

Severus looked uncomfortable. "I appreciate your offer, but Hermione is quite tired. I think it's best "

"I wasn't suggesting that she join us, Severus," Pansy said, looking into his eyes. "I thought you and I could spend a little time catching up." She gave him a frank look of invitation. "Now that we are longer professor and student, perhaps you and I could get better acquainted." She flicked her eyes dismissively toward Hermione. "Alone."

Hermione felt a swift, stabbing jealousy that made her want to hex Pansy into next week. Instead, she looked at Severus, who returned her look with the same bland coolness he reserved for most of the world. Rather than make a fool of herself in front of this Pureblood bitch, Hermione turned away. She was not his keeper. He was free to do as he pleased

"I'm afraid I cannot do that, Miss Parkinson. I do not wish to go anywhere with you alone. I am in love with Miss Granger, and as soon as I return to Australia, I plan on asking her father for her hand in marriage."

Hermione felt as if her stomach had just dropped onto the floor. "You do? You're in love with me?"

As if embarrassed to be making these intimate declarations in public, he said through clenched teeth, "I am. I want us to be married when we return to Canberra."

Hermione and Severus finally bade the trio from England goodbye, much to Pansy's seething resentment, and Neville and Charlie's delight. They promised another meeting in a week's time to discuss strategy and planning, and wished the couple a safe trip back to Australia and their heartfelt congratulations on their impending engagement.

When the door to the hotel room finally closed on Hermione and Severus, she locked and warded it within an inch of their lives. Severus had remained silent since his astonishing declaration.

Finally, Hermione turned to him. Swallowing, she said in a voice husky with emotion, "Did you mean all of that, or were you just trying to get rid of her? Because if you don't mean it, that was really cruel "

Severus grasped her arms, albeit gently, and gave her a little frustrated shake. "Granger, need I remind you I've just taken the most potent Veritaserum in existence? Do you think I would have spouted our private affairs to those Gryffindor boys and Pansy Bloody Parkinson if I was able to control my ability to keep my mouth shut?"

Hermione felt a shiver pass through her body, and it made her tingle. A lovely smile brightened her face, making Severus' heart swell. Impulsively he confessed, "I do love you, Hermione. Do you return my feelings?"

Hermione laughed. "You know I do! Still Slytherin to the core; using the Veritaserum /took to wrinkle out answers from me!"

For a moment, they gazed into one another's eyes, then Severus lowered his mouth to hers. They kept their eyes open, searching, finding the truth of their first kiss as true lovers. It was a soft, warm kiss, and their lips fit against each other's as if they'd been made to fit together. Hermione's eyes fluttered closed, and Severus broke the kiss reluctantly.

"Are you sure, Hermione?"

She nodded, stroking his face. "Do you want this, Severus?"

To her surprise, he laughed. "Merlin, yes! I'm afraid I'll die if I can't touch you."

She smiled. "Then you're going to live forever, Severus Snape."

Looking down into her amber eyes, he saw everything he'd ever hoped to see in a woman's eyes; hope, love, desire, acceptance, all riding on an undercurrent of raw arousal. It excited him like nothing ever had, and he pulled her into his arms and plundered her gorgeous mouth, moaning loudly in his throat as her small hands clasped the back of his neck and brought him hard against her.

Each kiss was new and intoxicating; each was a token of trust, a gesture of care, a benediction for the past eighteen months of careful candor and dedication to one another. Severus' tongue slid between her lips, and she suckled it until he pulled away, his eyes glazed with desire.

This time, when Hermione rolled into his arms like quicksilver, he accepted her hungrily, his mouth fused against hers, pulling their Muggle clothing from their bodies and laying her down on the hotel bed.

He looked down at the young witch he'd used so callously all those months ago, and for a moment, he felt that shame of the things he'd done. Hermione saw it immediately and shook her head. Feverishly, she pulled him down to cover her with his body. "No, don't think of that. Never think of that again. I want this, Severus. I *need* this." Her eyes were bright, and her lips very wet. "Severus, I want you inside of me. I'm aching for you. It's worse than any lust potion."

He saw the love and desire in her eyes, and he pressed against her, crooning, "That's because it's real. My sweet girl, I'll give you whatever you want. Anything, as long as you love me." He was already parting her thighs, feeling the hot, slick juices preparing the way for him, and between the feel of her warm, anxious body and the delicious scent of her, he could no longer wait. As he pushed into her that first, exquisite time, he whimpered her name, and it turned into a growl of pleasure so feral it almost made Hermione come during that first deep, solid thrust.

There was no need for slow seduction, although Severus was careful. They made love slowly at first, and their bodies remembered each other in ways that delighted them both. Hermione was his banquet, and Severus feasted on her as he first devoured, then consumed her. Hermione was scorched by his level, burning gaze, and when he gave into the pleasure of her body, finally letting go of the control he'd held in check since their last day at Spinner's End, the sheer beauty of it overwhelmed Hermione.

This was not the man who left England, hiding her and helping her escape. This was the man who had helped her restore her parents to her, who snuggled with her at night, who comforted her when she had nightmares, who was so happy to see her at the end of the day. This was the man she loved, and how ever she had come to love him was no longer important to Hermione Granger. The only thing important was here now, hearing him say he loved her, and that he wanted her.

She keened her pleasure into the room, and Severus closed his eyes. He had forgotten how intensely vocal she was when truly aroused, and it excited him more than he thought possible. He knew he wouldn't last long. Her cunt was so hot and tight, and it pulsed around him like a mouth, sucking him, making him shiver and gasp with the intense pleasure of it.

Suddenly, she moaned into his ear, "Severus, please, faster.... oh, fuck, harder, please, Severus, gods, now!" With a triumphant roar, he hooked his hands around her shoulders and drove her hard into the mattress, crying out his love to her with each deep thrust.

He could feel her warm sheath quivering, preparing, as he gave her body what she asked of him, but he could feel his control going, and it would soon be too late to stop it. "Come for me, Hermione..." he whispered in her ear, his voice light and silvery sweet. "Come for me, oh, gods, I can't stop it... I'm coming in you..."

His strokes became lightning fast, hard, slapping pounding thrusts, and Hermione reveled in each torturous, driving snap of his hips. Her orgasm burst from her, sending pleasure through her like jagged flashes of electricity, and as she pulsed around him, Severus came with a howl of pleasure that made Hermione answer him with a searing cry of her own.

It didn't seem possible to come this hard for this long, and Severus shuddered as he tried to keep from crushing Hermione into the soft bedding. They were both panting like wild animals, bathed in sweat and trembling from their union. Severus searched Hermione's face for any sign of pain or discomfort, but all he saw was a lovely young woman, her wild hair tangled and spread over the pillow, her face flushed with a sheen of sweat. Her mouth was open as she gasped for breath, and her eyes were positively glowing with satisfaction. She was the most beautiful sight.

And most importantly, she'd chosen him.

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They were sitting on a screened porch, watching lovely little iridescent frogs clinging to the mesh, listening to the myriad sounds of an Australian summer night. Magical fireworks were blooming in the sky, lighting up the night in swathes of colour and music. The world was celebrating the death of Voldemort, and the hero Neville. They watched, for the first time, as spectators, and it felt wonderful..

Hermione lay on a chaise lounge, propped up by several pillows and a Cushioning Charm. Her husband, kneeling on the porch beside her, ran his large, gentle hands sensuously over her enormous belly, stopping occasionally to place a slow, warm kiss on the mound that nourished and protected his child.

The screen door opened; his mother-in-law walked onto the porch, carrying a tray with a pitcher of lemonade; she smiled at their total absorption in one another, poured the pale liquid into two tall, frosty glasses, and left them without a word. The screen door slammed behind her with a faint creak and a soft clap. They ignored it.

Severus handed his wife one of the chilled glasses, and Hermione drank it thirstily, as he placed both hands on her huge belly and caressed it, covering it with more kisses, completely enthralled by his tender ministrations. She was ripe and glowing, and her pregnancy had been joyous for both of them. Hermione had shocked Severus; she'd been the randiest little minx he'd ever seen. Who knew a pregnant woman could be so incredibly sexy?

Hermione sighed; what he was doing felt lovely, but it also stirred her, and reminded her that she was too far along for fun and games at this point. *Don't, don't...* In truth, she adored his worship of her body; her mother had confided that her father had been almost the same way when she was carrying Hermione. It went a ways toward making up for morning sickness and swollen ankles.

"You're going to miss that when it's gone," Hermione grumbled good-naturedly, nodding at the massive protrusion being fondled by her husband. "Merlin, I never thought I'd ever be jealous of my own stomach."

Instead of answering, Severus drew slow, sensuous circles over her rounded belly, and whispered, "Less than nine months old and your mummy's already trying to get rid of you, little one. I suppose you're just going to have to gird your loins and come out and see us." He looked at his wife, cautious hope in his eyes. "No one can harm you now."

Hermione touched his arm, where only the faintest shadow remained of the Dark Mark that had once caused him to weep with pain during their early days in Australia. Two days before, they had both watched in sick fascination as it faded away to a smudge; they had known the happy news of Voldemort's defeat before the rest of the world

found out, hours afterward.

Pressing his ear close to her, so that only Hermione's body lay between his face and that of his unborn child's, Severus murmured, "New life. That foul, loathsome creature is gone. New life the chance to create a new world for us."

As Severus caressed his beloved wife, he said, "I love you, so much, girl." He leaned forward, pressing his lips to hers.

Hermione enjoyed his slow, sweet kiss, pulling away reluctantly. "And I love you, Baby Daddy." He grimaced at the nickname, but he did not rebuke her. He'd brought it on himself.

*Making love to a pregnant Hermione was the most delicious sex Severus had ever experienced. Something about her rounded belly, her glowing face, and her raging hormones kept him in a perpetual state of arousal around her. They had both been randy and insatiable right up until the day the mediwitch midwife had marked the large red "X" on the calendar as their cutoff date for sex.*

*On that last night, they made love as if they had a quota to fill. Severus, lying on his side behind his wife, rocked slowly and sensuously into her, his large hand cupping her lovely, ripe belly, his senses reeling with his love for her, and this proof of her love for him.*

*He had been so close to climax, moving against her, driving into harder than perhaps prudent, but unable to prevent himself from plunging into the impossibly hot vice that was her cunt. She was moaning, panting like an animal, and telling him to do the dirtiest things; things he loved to do to make her come. He could feel her rippling, pulsing around his cock; she was so close, her orgasm standing on tiptoe, waiting to be released.*

*Outside of himself with desire and lust, he had purred in lascivious baby-talk, "My sweet baby, come for Daddy..."*

*Hermione wailed brokenly, and called out his name. He was so far gone he had no idea he was babbling, "Such a good girl... oh, baby, are you going to come on Daddy's cock?"*

*In all his life, Severus Snape had never been so grateful for Silencing Charms. He'd never heard her scream so loudly, or made her come so intensely, or been so embarrassed at something he'd said in the throes of passion. She had never let him live it down.*

Tucking a stray black hair behind his ear, Hermione said, "Now, help this upturned turtle get on its feet." She struggled to sit up, and Severus obligingly pulled her onto her feet.

Hermione smiled up at her husband's homely, yet handsome countenance. "Now, I think you need to call the midwife. You've nagged the poor baby enough, and he's planning his jailbreak."

Severus stared at her for a moment. Then blinked. "Hermione "

She grinned and chuckled at the dawning understanding on his face. "The contractions started this morning, but now they mean business." She leaned forward and kissed him again. "Let's go get this new world started."

Severus closed his eyes. He was going to be a father soon. It was the greatest accomplishment of his life, and he was grateful for it, as grateful as he was for his wife, his son, his family, his freedom - his life. He walked into the house to tell his mother-in-law the news, his heart as light as his beloved Hermione; as clean as his unborn child's.

He had got everything he wanted.