

Lay Me Low

by TeddyRadiator

Severus' anger at Sirius Black's attempts to seduce Hermione raises questions about his own feelings towards her. The past and the present mesh together in a story of protection, betrayal and trust. Rating is for later chapters.

Prologue: And So It Ends...

Chapter 1 of 39

Severus' anger at Sirius Black's attempts to seduce Hermione raises questions about his own feelings towards her. The past and the present mesh together in a story of protection, betrayal and trust. Rating is for later chapters.

This fic was started almost three years ago, and I've been steadily working on it since. This fic literally helped me learn how to write, and I guess you could say it is my love letter to the SSHG pairing. There are a lot of things about the early parts of the fic that seem strange even to me, but I hope you will forgive me for them.

This is a parallel-canon fic, and where I could, I tried to show how canon could have gone. Anyhoo, I hope you enjoy my morality play.

Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.

For Sempra and Mimi

Lay me low, lay me low, lay me low,

Where no one can see me, where no one can find me, where no one can hurt me.

Show me the way, help me to say, all that I need to

All that I needed you gave me, all that I wanted you made me, when I stumbled you saved me.

Throw me a line, help me to find something to cling to,

When the loneliness haunts me, when the bitterness taunts me, when the emptiness eats me.

Lay me low, lay me low, lay me low,

Where no one can see me, where no one can find me, where no one can hurt me.

He sat, watching the girl sleep. He did that often now. It wasn't necessary, he told himself, and he wasn't needed, but he couldn't stop himself.

The fire smoldering in the fireplace was welcome down in the dungeons, even in summer, but the moisture in the castle walls of Hogwarts made the room as close and stuffy as a sauna. He smirked at the growing kinks in her already-untameable tresses, caused by the humid air. He was tempted to move her hair from her slightly shiny face, but he was afraid it would cause her to stir. She looked so peaceful, in spite of the wild mess fluffing around her face, he was loathe to disturb her slumber.

The girl sighed in her sleep, and kicked the duvet away from her body. There was a slight sheen of sweat on her forehead, and his sensitive nose detected the faintest sweet/metallic tang of approaching menses in her perspiration. She was restless because of the heat, and while every instinct told him to cover her, he resisted. She would only become more uncomfortable until she woke, and he wasn't there to wake her. He was there to watch over her.

Severus Snape sometimes questioned the precise moment he'd known how much he hated Sirius Black, but he didn't bother too much with the whys. He knew all too clearly why and the reasons were varied and bottomless.

Black's godson, Harry Potter, and his friends Granger and Weasley, probably wouldn't believe it to see him now, but Black had been one of the handsomest wizards of his age. He was tall, dark, aristocratic, cruel and secure in his looks and his pureblood status. He was as gaudily plumed and vain as Lucius Malfoy's peacocks. He was suave, sophisticated and learned; in other words, everything a poor, half-breed, badly raised, unattractive, touchy Northern boy like Severus Snape was not.

Black had been erudite and glib, and the young witches fluttered around him like geishas when he held court in the Gryffindor common room. He had only to crook his wand at one and she came running, thrilled to be Sirius Black's next conquest. It irritated Severus to see witches with brains, intellect and good looks, reduced to having the self-confidence and esteem of garden gnomes after Black had loved and left them, but they all seemed unable to resist the shallow, arrogant wizard.

Severus never would have believed that Lily Evans would be one of those witches, and for a long time she wasn't. In the end, she was too much a temptation for Sirius, and in true dog-in-the-manger style, his self-imposed hatred for Severus had been the impetus to saturate Lily with his charm, and barring that, the charm of his best friend, James Potter, the git. It had been Sirius and James Potter who'd taken Lily away from him.

Severus was forced to admit even to himself that they'd probably stolen her away long before he'd sealed his fate with her, losing his temper and calling her a Mudblood. They'd turned the only female, besides his mother that Severus had ever cared for, against him. The so-called Marauders had made life a misery for anyone in possession of a penis at Hogwarts during their reign. For that, he would never forgive them.

It still rankled every time he remembered Albus' cavalier attitude, when Potter and Granger had assisted Sirius in escaping two years before. Up to that time, everyone in the Wizarding world, Severus included, had thought Sirius Black had been Lily and James' Secret Keeper, and had betrayed them to the Dark Lord. It had landed him in Azkaban, where he belonged, and Severus had wanted to see Black kissed by the Dementors so badly, he could almost taste it. His fury at Potter and Granger was so manic, only the strongest Containment Charm cast by Albus had kept him from confronting James' son.

It no longer mattered when, last year, the Dark Lord returned, and once again Severus was unwillingly driven into his role of spy for the bloody Order. Peter Pettigrew, the little rodent, had finally been revealed as Lily's true Secret Keeper, and Black was exonerated by the Order, but where had Albus' sympathy been while they still thought Sirius had betrayed Severus' only love? Oh, Dumbledore had been the first to exploit Severus' guilt and remorse over it, but what of Severus' own grief and redemption? What had Severus done, since that night so long ago, but atone for his sins? When would forgiveness come? When would he be allowed to rest?

Sighing, Severus dropped the quill from his ink-stained fingers, and poured himself a glass of heavy, red wine. Why in Merlin's name was he thinking about this now? He knew the partial answer was that Lily was never far from his thoughts, and that his blame and self-abasement were inoculated in him as deeply as the Dark Mark that mutilated his arm.

He looked down at the Mark, disgusted. If he were a braver man, he would cut off his arm, move away, possibly to the States or Australia, and start over as a Muggle. *Where no one would find me* It was like the words to an old Muggle song his dad used to listen to...*Lay me low, where no one can see me, where no one can find me, where no one can hurt me...*

In a moment of self-pitying weakness, he passed a trembling hand over his eyes. Gods, he wished there was such a place on this earth, where there was no hurt, no fear, no dread... Just one place on earth where he could be safe and not be afraid... where the loneliness and fear wouldn't crush him... *Oh, Lily, I am so lonely...*

Surrounded by children and faculty every moment of almost every day, but Severus Snape felt more alone than if on a desert island. He was truly not a man who wished for, or expected much, but even his meager hopes were beyond him now. He had to face the fact that he, Severus Snape, was staring down a short, very dark tunnel, one that was growing shorter and more perilous with every passing day.

It's not that he wanted to die. He would never willingly take his own life. He only wished every night, when his few hours of sleep finally took him, that he would simply not wake up.

He straightened and took several deep, calming breaths. This was not the time to give in to his dark emotions. He had a job, and it was abhorrent, and he hated it and his life. But he'd sworn to it, and there was no turning back. He sighed harshly, and sniffed slightly. With a flick of his hand that was almost subconscious muscle memory, he drew his hair from his eyes and straightened his spine. He was not a coward. He told himself that every day. Perhaps, if he told himself often enough, he would one day believe it.

There was an Order meeting tonight, and he was expected to attend. Both sides expected it. The Dark Lord had insisted that Severus go and report back to him later in the evening. It would be a long night, punctuated by flights of fancy, boredom, ire and pain, should his report be met with disapproval.

He dreaded going to Grimmauld Place, squeezing into the narrow old house, surrounded by Order members who resented and distrusted him, and students who hated him and maligned him. Mostly, he hated knowing that bastard Black would be there, taunting him, doing every tiny thing in his power to cripple the already waning trust the rest of the Order placed in Severus.

Bastard. They had no idea-

The clock chimed, and he rose slowly and took another deep breath. He would hold his head high, and he would defend himself. He would show that shallow fuck Sirius Black what bravery was. He wouldn't let him get under his skin again. He wouldn't allow Black and Lupin to gang up on him, Lupin ineffectually trying to calm the mutt down...

And he wouldn't let them paw *her*.

He Apparated to the meeting purposefully early, before most of the rest of the members arrived. Ostensibly, it was to get a seat at the back, and not have to 'mingle' with the rest of them, but in reality he needed to be there before the so-called Golden Trio were allowed to arrive. It was the beginning of the Christmas hols, and they would be at the Burrow, but Arthur Weasley had already announced they would be coming with him and Molly to the meeting. Potter wanted to visit his godfather, and the other two would be stuck closely to him like the worst toadies.

Severus let himself in quietly so as not to disturb the harridan portrait of the late Mrs. Black, and he made his way soundlessly into the Library. He could already hear Black's unctuous voice, and Severus froze, listening intently, his anger rising with each breath he took.

The Granger girl was already there, and he could sense from her stance that she was uncomfortable and uncertain. Black was already touching her, pressing in close, already trying to put his arms underneath her Muggle jumper, saying things like "This could be our little fun secret, couldn't it? Nobody has to know, do they? You don't want to upset Harry and give him the wrong idea, do you?"

And the look on her face! Fear and disgust, and underlying it, a latent, innocent arousal, awakened, unbidden, unwanted, shocking and shaming the girl even as it was being summoned against her will.

Suddenly, Sirius pressed her against the bookcase, pushing his slim hips lewdly against hers. He pressed his hands against either side of her head, trapping her against the dusty shelf.

"I can't help it, dear. I think about you constantly. I've missed having you here. You're so beautiful. Hasn't anyone ever told you that, love?" He was already leaning in, leaving the girl little choice, when Severus quietly cleared his throat.

She looked up at Black uncertainly, and her fearful eyes flickered toward Severus. It was an invitation any man could read. Any man, it seemed, except Sirius Black.*Help me.*

Severus kept his voice steady and slightly bored. "Miss Granger, might I have a word? I think you missed part of your holiday assignment in your haste to escape the castle yesterday."

Both she and Sirius froze at the initial sound of Severus' imperious voice in the doorway, and Hermione threw him a glance that was at once frightened and grateful. She quickly ducked under Sirius' arms and strode toward her Potions professor, and Severus was mildly alarmed to see her shiver slightly.

"Thank you, sir. I'm sorry." She gulped and smiled weakly at him. "I was in rather a hurry yesterday."

"Indeed," he retorted, smoothly, his voice soft and silvery. Severus kept his eyes locked on Black's, daring him to interfere.

Hermione stood before Severus, waiting for him, and he stepped aside, sweeping his arm toward the door to usher her out of the Library. As the girl moved past him, she walked with her head down, her face scarlet. Severus glared at Sirius, who simply smiled and quirked a knowing eyebrow.

"Assignment, Snivellus? Don't you think you could come up with a little better excuse than that?"

Severus gave Black his second-best sneer. "I don't need an excuse to rescue the child from your clutches, Black." He stepped closer. "Leave. Her. Alone," he hissed, his black eyes flashing in anger.

Black merely laughed. "Jealous, Snape? Don't be. I'm sure there's plenty to go around. She is a lovely little peach, isn't she?"

For a moment, a red mist covered Severus' vision and he drew his wand. "Shut your filthy mouth or I'll shut it permanently, Black!"

"Oh really?" Sirius retorted, his playful stance hardening. "And what sort of message will that send, Snivellus? The great Severus Snape, dueling over a little girl!"

Black's once-handsome face grew pale and ugly. He spat, "You don't fool me, Snape! You've been sniffing around her little tail since her third year! Oh, Remus told me all about it! You're just jealous that she's turning to me for a little experience. How can I help it that she's curious to know what it's like to be with a real wizard? She certainly wouldn't learn it from you!" His gaze swept down Severus' form with contempt. "Do you honestly think a little treat like Hermione would ever be anything but disgusted by her greasy Potions teacher?"

Severus snarled in rage and raised his wand. A steadying hand grasped his wrist, and Remus Lupin murmured quietly in Severus' ear, "That would be very unwise, Severus. I don't know what's going on between you two this time, but the other Order members are arriving and I think you both should join us."

Almost spitting in fury, Severus lowered his wand and strode from the room, Black's laughter ringing behind him.

In the corridor, the Granger girl stood frozen, her eyes wide and troubled. He brushed by her without so much as acknowledging her presence, even when he heard her softly spoken, "Thank you, sir."

With the terrifying speed that made him such a deadly dueling opponent, he whipped round and faced the girl, still seething. "If you'd stop flaunting yourself in front of every wizard you see, you wouldn't be in need of rescuing, Miss Granger. Perhaps the next wizard to come upon you and Black may not find the thought of fucking you so..." He raked his eyes over her slim frame, a look of pure distain marring his features. "Unpalatable."

With those words, he quickly disappeared into the front room, leaving the bewildered girl standing in the hall. He did not see her dash up the stairs and ward her bedroom. He did not know that she wept in shame during the Order meeting, which was tedious and unfruitful, and cost him several moments under the Cruciatus Curse later that evening.

She did not know that the meeting was so tedious because Severus could not get her stricken expression out of his mind, and had paid little attention to the actual motions of the meeting. Nor did she know that, while he screamed and lost control of his bodily functions under the Cruciatus, he was thinking about how he would feel if he had to watch her suffer. She did not know that, in one brief, selfish, yearning moment of self-preservation, Severus Snape sealed her fate alongside his.

You can find Tobias Snape's favourite record The Albion Band, Rise Up Like The Sun, online. The song Lay Me Low can be found here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONDGv_PAog0

One: Not Enough Fingers To Count The Cost

Chapter 2 of 39

Severus' anger at Sirius Black's attempts to seduce Hermione raises questions about his own feelings towards her. The past and the present mesh together in a story of protection, betrayal and trust. Rating is for later chapters.

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For Sempra and Mimi

Show me the way, help me to say all that I need to

All that I needed you gave me, all that I wanted you made me, when I stumbled you saved me.

Severus managed to Apparate safely back to Grimmauld Place after the meeting, his head spinning and his guts churning. It was later than he realised, and he lurched through the door, covered in his own waste and almost sobbing with humiliation. He didn't really remember why he'd chosen to return here, except it was closer, and he doubted he'd make it back into the castle without splinching seven shades of shit out of himself. Navigating to Grimmauld had cost him every ounce of his remaining strength. He staggered into the library, just as his stomach emptied. He vomited on the carpet and himself, pitching forward, unable to right himself before he fell in the pool of his own sick.

Severus lay on the stinking carpet, whispering the prayers he prayed when still a lonely and sad first year at Hogwarts. *Please, he prayed, let me die. I don't want to live anymore. It hurts. I want to go home. I want my grandmother.* The thought of Black or Potter, or anyone for that matter, seeing him like this was enough to make him vomit again. *How the fucking mighty have fallen,* he thought, wiping snot from his face.

Surely, he'd endured everything a wizard should be forced to endure. Surely, by now, he had paid for his sins. His muscles were cramping painfully, his joints were filled with ground glass, his bowels were fluxed and bloody. Tears of pain and degradation streamed down his face, and when he looked up and saw the white, shocked face of Hermione Granger staring down at him, her face full of pity and horror, he grew angry and bellowed, "Get out of my sight, Granger!"

Only he didn't. He didn't have the strength to whisper, much less bellow, and anger used too much energy. The sound came out little more than a whimper and unmanned him so much he pounded his fist on the carpet in mortification. The action snapped the girl out of her shock, and she rushed to his side, heedless of the filth that covered him and the floor beneath him. She knelt beside him and placed a gentle, shaking hand on his cheek, which was bright red and burning with curse fever. She whispered, "It's alright, Professor. I'll help you. Just try to stay awake. I'll be right back."

He heard her soft footsteps fading as she galloped into the kitchen, and slowly he dragged himself into a sitting position, his back arching painfully, as his muscles locked in a rictus of agony. His body bowed backward, as if pulled by a sadistic archer, causing him to gasp. He drew in great, agonizing, sobbing breaths, and wanted nothing more than to curl up into a ball and slip into oblivion. And the Granger girl was witness to it all. He would just have to Obliviate her, if he survived the night.

He could see her out of the corner of his eye as she ran back into the Library, closing the door behind her and warding it ferociously. She had a bowl of water and a pristine white cloth. What the silly fool thought she would do with that, he had no idea...

Hermione eased behind him, trying not to jostle him, and said in a quiet voice, "Lean back on me, sir. Please. I'm here to help."

Helpless to do anything but obey, Severus allowed her to pull him back against her chest, and he found his breathing eased a little in this position. His legs, which were sprawled out in front of him, ached and jerked spasmodically. Silently, Hermione reached around and unbuttoned his coat, and drew his sweat-soaked shirt aside, allowing the air to cool his feverish skin. He shivered, and she absently set the fireplace to a roaring blaze.

She then cast several charms in succession to ease his suffering. Cleansing charms, warming charms, healing charms. He felt the cleansing charms sliding over his body, ridding him of the issue from his stomach, bowels and kidneys. She cleaned his clothes. The warmth soothed his rigid muscles. Gradually, the cramps in his legs eased, and he fully collapsed back on her in exhaustion, his head lolling on her slim shoulder. His hair was sweat-soaked and greasy, and she whispered a charm that made his scalp tingle and his hair was clean and dry. She pressed a cool hand against his brow, and he gave a little, harsh sigh, the sound of a tired, ill-used child.

For a long, sweet moment, he wanted nothing more than to lie against this warm and tender pillow, where he felt safe and cared for. It was a false safety, but the compassion, he reasoned, was probably genuine. The Granger girl may be little more than a cub, but she was as loyal and powerful as her House's mascot when it came to defending the weak. While he hated thinking of himself as her 'cause of the hour', it really was comforting to sit here, the last of the Cruciatus tremors receding, feeling, if not exactly cherished, at least protected. He relaxed, and his body slumped against hers, but she held him fast.

"Granger," he croaked, fighting consciousness, "Tell the Headmaster." He choked suddenly, and she shifted gently behind him and placed the end of the towel, soaked in water, against his parched and rancid mouth. He sucked on it gratefully. When he could swallow without gagging, she gave him a glass of water, but only allowed him to take tiny sips. When he dribbled, she cleaned him. She soothed him.

"Please don't try to speak for a while, Professor," Hermione whispered, her voice shaking. She was shivering from fear. "Please just rest. I know you have important things to tell Professor Dumbledore, but they can wait."

He dozed for a moment, fighting sleep, fighting the warmth of her slender form against his back, the milky scent of her skin, the feel of her tiny but capable hands on his ribs, keeping him steady and upright. She pulled her mad hair out of the way so that it didn't irritate his face, and she remained blessedly quiet as he sat on the floor of the Grimmauld Place library, an undignified, boneless puppet with severed strings.

Once he was stabilized, she fished out several potions he'd secreted about his person, in the likely event tonight's outcome would be as predicted. She thumbed them open and helped him to down each one, crooning comfort to him as if he were a child. He knew he should tell her to shut up, to stop being nice to him. After what he'd done earlier, she would as likely spit in his face when she found out.

She rocked him slightly, as she would a child, and it irritated him. He wanted to tell her to stop, that he wasn't worthy of this gentle ministrations, but he couldn't because no one had ever rocked him before. It felt beautiful, almost pre-erotic. He shook his head. *This is Hermione Granger, for fuck's sake!*

He wanted to be angry at himself for this weakness, for allowing a young girl to baby him, but it took too much energy. The real truth, once he confessed his betrayal, would turn her away from him in disgust and loathing. It was what he deserved. He just didn't want to deserve it yet.

Oblivious to his thoughts, Hermione whispered softly as she rocked him, her breath sweet and ticklish against his cheek, "I won't tell a soul, Professor. I promise. I won't tell anyone." He could hear her crying, and her trembling vibrated into his body. Her tone grew darker. "I know how to keep secrets."

He stiffened, but kept his head forward. With effort, he drew breath. "He has no right." His voice sounded foreign to his own ears.

"I don't encourage him. I swear I don't." Her voice was so sad, like a desolate wind blowing through a ghost town. "I don't think of him that way. I'm a- I'm not one to... I don't encourage him."

"I know you don't, child." Severus tried to raise his hand, for some reason, but he could not remember why, and it flopped down onto his lap. Hermione pushed his hair from his face with trembling hands. She was gentle, and her touch was kind. No woman, save Poppy Pomfrey, had willingly touched him with such tenderness since Lily. But that was long before she turned against him. The Granger girl would, too, no doubt...

"This is wrong," he muttered to himself, and he felt her breathing behind him. His body relaxed, and gradually the warmth allowed life to seep back into his aching limbs. He would be almost too sore to move tomorrow, but he knew he had to get on his feet while he had some resolve left. "I asked for this. You did not." With the last of his remaining strength, he wheezed, "Help me to at least sit up in a chair, Miss Granger."

The move from sitting to standing took almost five minutes, and by the time they managed to get him on his feet, Severus was shaking and dizzy. Hermione helped him to a nearby chair, and he fell into it, gritting his teeth against the pain and the stabbing, icy feel of the Cruciatus backlash. Unsure what else to do, Hermione, standing behind the chair, gently rubbed his shoulders. It didn't really help, and truth be told, it made his muscles ache a little, but he couldn't bring himself to ask her to stop. It would mean the loss of her touch, and that was the only thing that made him feel remotely human. Right now, he felt more like a whipped dog, seeking comfort from any friendly hand, and he despised himself for it.

Hermione sensed that her ministrations weren't really helping, but instead of moving away, she threaded her fingers through his hair and began to massage his scalp and his temples in slow, gentle circles. "My father gets terrible tension headaches, and Mum does this for him," she offered, her touch sure and comforting. "He says it helps, but tell me if it doesn't, and I'll stop."

He had no intention of telling her. It felt wonderful, and his blinding headache eased. It was the Headache Potion, he told himself, but her gentle massage felt like heaven.

His shoulders eventually relaxed and he made a little sound of relief that brought tears to Hermione's eyes. She pressed her warm hands against his neck, and he felt his throat relax. He swallowed, and Hermione gave him some more water. He took the glass, and was relieved to find his hands steady again.

This had been a bad one. Frustrated that the Order meeting had gleaned no useful information beyond the antics of Delores Umbridge and the Ministry's interference with Hogwarts, the Dark Lord had been irritable and petulant. As punishment, Severus was presented to some of the junior Death Eater members to 'get in a little practice'. This meant clumsy, uneven attempts at executing the curse, all thrown at him at different intervals. The ringing laughter, the abject humiliation; it was all fuel to remind the Dark Lord's spy and punching bag to provide more useful information in future.

It had been a sickening display of entertainment; Severus made a very handy target for their gathering powers, and he found himself thrown from one to the other in some sort of obscene game of pass the parcel. Eventually the real sadists joined in, and he bit his lip until he tasted blood, as his trousers were unceremoniously yanked down around his ankles. Bugging was a favourite sport of both Mulciber and MacNair, and the Dark Lord was feeling especially generous tonight. Once they'd had their pleasure, the curses began again, the youngsters falling upon him without even giving him a chance to pull his trousers up over his bleeding rectum.

Severus had tried to be silent. He tried to think of Lily. He had screamed. He'd wept as he emptied his bowels and the others had laughed as if it were the funniest thing they'd ever seen. Some of his own Slytherins were amongst the witnesses; some were amongst those casting the Unforgivables.

In a delirium of misery, he thought back to the previous hours. He remembered how hurt the Granger girl had been when he turned on her, after extricating her from Sirius Black's clutches. *If I live through this*, his traitorous and rapidly deteriorating mind whispered, *I won't let her go through anything like this. I will protect her from this. From Black and Lupin. From Weasley and Potter and Dumbledore. From Black... permanently. I will lay her low... I will protect her... I can protect her... I will hide her away, where no one can see her...no one can hurt her... no one can find her... no one can hurt me...*

Just as he thought he would die from the torturing curses, he heard himself scream, "Please, My Lord!" He gathered the last reserve of strength he possessed. "I have news of a more...personal nature," he spewed weakly, gasping and praying for some sort of release. He was almost mad with the pain now, and the only thought he had was of... her. What was her name... Hermione. Granger. Granger. *If you'd stop flaunting yourself in front of every wizard you see, you wouldn't be in need of rescuing, Miss Granger. Perhaps the next wizard to come upon you and Black may not find the thought of fucking you so...unpalatable...*

"Indeed, Severus?" Voldemort's red eyes perked with mild interest. "And what personal news, pray tell, would be of any importance to the Order? Or, more importantly, to me?"

The Dark Lord raised his arm, and the curses ceased. Gasping, clutching his stomach, trying not to soil himself again, Severus had raised his head and met the slitted, amphibian eyes of Voldemort. Severus projected images for the Dark Lord, hating himself, but willing to do whatever it took to survive the night, to not die in this hell, surrounded by taunting, screaming demons enjoying his torment.

He projected images to the Dark Lord. Some were from his imagination, some exaggerations of actual events. Anything to make the pain go away... An image of Hermione Granger, laughing and talking with Harry Potter, both carefree third years. Severus, protecting her from the transforming werewolf Remus Lupin, feeling her little fingers clutching at his waist in terror, seeking his assurance... Severus watching her dance with Viktor Krum at the Yule Ball, projecting jealousy and animosity toward the unworthy Krum...

Seeing her at Grimmauld Place, during the later weeks of the summer months, watching her prance around the house in skimpy Muggle clothing, unaware that she was enticing him, tempting Black ... and tonight, Severus stepping up to Black, his unspoken threats... her gratitude toward him... he exaggerated her expression, made her seem more mature, more...enamored, more inclined to show her gratitude to Severus. Gods, how he hated himself...

With every fibre of his will, Severus pushed the feelings of desire and lust and corruption toward the Dark Lord. He pushed the longing to deflower, to ruin, to break the will and spirit of Harry Potter's smartest and most devoted acolyte, to weaken the boy's defenses, to make him less of a threat. And more importantly, to make Hermione Granger a weapon to defeat the Potter boy.

When he was done, and the Dark Lord broke away from Severus' mind, he smiled. "So, my Potions master has finally succumbed to the lure of his young charges? I'm surprised it hasn't happened sooner." Something in the vicarious tone of the Dark Lord's voice hinted at an undercurrent of lust, of that which had been all but shriveled from his body. "It seems the girl has developed a fondness for teacher. Do you share in this, obsession, my friend? Do you desire this, this Muggle, Severus?"

Drawing himself up to full height, Severus hid his relief well. The Snake had bought his story. "I tell you this because I believe she has... an infatuation for me. I have fostered it for a little while now, my Lord." He feigned an air of aversion. "I do not particularly care for children, especially this one. But if she can be..." he shrugged, and sneered, "corrupted, my Lord? If she is pruned from Potter's resources, he is seriously diminished. And, with all humble respect, my Lord."

Severus hesitated. He still wasn't thinking straight. He was about to potentially step into a very poisoned glen. He had to be very, very careful here.

"Yes, Severus? Continue." Voldemort watched his spy carefully. He was intrigued that Severus, of all his followers, would succumb to the lure of something so mundane as sex, and sex with a young Mudblood, no less. It pleased him. It was another weakness to exploit, especially if the chit was the first to actually warm the dark man's blood after all these years, since the Evans girl. He had given her the chance, and she'd chosen death over Severus. The Dark Lord could not be blamed for that.

Severus licked his lips. In for a Knut, in for a Galleon.... "I ask this boon as one who asks few favours, My Lord. If the Granger girl could be, shall we say, persuaded to the glorious cause, she would be a formidable ally."

Several of the Death Eaters within earshot hissed, Malfoy especially. "That little Mudblood girl? Really, Severus, having a dirty bit of trim on the side is one thing, but to actually suggest her worthy?"

"She's an incredibly valuable, intelligent little Mudblood girl, Sire," Severus expanded, his confidence growing. "She's clever enough that it would have to be a gradual change, and it would take time, but she is, in Dumbledore's opinion, one of the most powerful witches of her age."

"What does the opinion of that old fool matter to the Dark Lord, Severus?" Bella LeStrange hissed. Several of the younger Death Eaters close to her laughed with her, until the Dark Lord's words cut off the sound of their derision, like switching off the Wizarding Wireless.

"Dumbledore is a powerful wizard in his own right, Bella." The Dark Lord's voice was cold and every minion automatically lowered his head. "To underestimate an opponent is to strengthen him, my sweet."

"I'm sorry, M-My Lord," she stammered, a look of panic in her eyes. "I only meant that, next to your wisdom, your greatness-"

"I understand, I understand, my dear," Voldemort soothed, stroking her cheek until Bella preened with pleasure. "Your love and devotion sometimes blind you to the truth of unpleasant matters."

He turned and continued stroking the dark-haired woman's face. "But think of such a bright, young witch under your expert tutelage, my dear. You could mold and shape her into your beautiful image."

Bellatrix had dropped to her knees and purred to the Dark Lord her thanks, her eyes gleaming with lust, aroused as always at the thought of corrupting the innocent, and ripping away the soft underbelly of the uninitiated.

Voldemort then turned to Severus. "I will grant this boon, Severus. It is a worthy pursuit. But," he said, drawing his wand and aiming it at his spy, "one you should have mentioned in the beginning, and spared me all this time wasting. *Crucio!*"

Severus sat in the Grimmauld Place library, as Hermione brought him a cup of tea and a final potion to settle his stomach. He felt it turn and sour within as he stared into his cup. He caught a motion out of the corner of his eye and looked up. Hermione was holding something in her hand, silently returning it to him: his Death Eater mask. She looked grave, but underneath was a sympathy that held no judgement, no accusation. He took it from her and their fingers touched briefly before she released it.

He sighed. What had he done? What in the name of the seven gates of Hades was he thinking?

The girl stood opposite him, watching him carefully, as if she half expected him to keel over any second. Finally, she said, quietly, "Sir, is there anything else I can get you? Some food? Anything?"

Severus shook his head. He was still too exhausted and miserable to talk. Finally, he raised his dark eyes to her, and Hermione gave him such a look of compassion and pity he felt as if he would vomit again. "I don't need your pity, Miss Granger. Besides, you make a rubbish nurse."

She sat back for a moment, then a new light gleamed in her eye. "Well, sir, I'm afraid you're going to have to put up with me. Because tonight, I'm all you're going to get. Remus and Sirius are out feeding Buckbeak, Harry and the Weasleys are at The Burrow until tomorrow morning, and the only ones here at Grimmauld right now are you, me and Professor McGonagall, and even she's out visiting a sick friend and doesn't plan on returning until the morning." She gave him a rueful smile. "I'm the last biscuit in the tin, as it were."

She waited for him to answer with a scathing retort, until she realised he was completely, deeply asleep. His face had relaxed a little, but still held a careworn look, no doubt from the horrific ordeal he'd endured this evening. She lunged forward just in time to catch the falling teacup from his relaxing fingers.

She transfigured the chair into a small bed, and quietly moved it nearer the fire, so that he would be warm when he awoke. She changed a towel into a large, fat quilt, and the chair cushion into a pillow. She debated on transfiguring his clothes into pajamas, but changing clothes while still on the wearer was ever a tricky spell, and she didn't want to disturb him any more than necessary. In the end, she satisfied herself with removing his dragon-hide boots, and sat them at the foot of the transfigured bed. She stood back and looked down at her Potions professor.

In the firelight, he looked as severe as ever, but warmth and comfort had softened his features, and to Hermione he looked... distinguished. Noble, in his own way.

Hermione sighed. Severus Snape was not a nice man. But she was convinced he was *agood* man. He knew what Sirius was attempting to do to her, and it troubled him. Unlike Sirius, Hermione trusted him. She had not wanted to come to Grimmauld Place, but could come up with no excuse to stay behind, and almost the moment she'd arrived, Sirius had tried to corner her at every possibility. She knew she ought to say something to Mr. Weasley or Harry, but Sirius had a way of knocking every argument into a cocked hat, and she found herself wondering if she was, in fact, sending him signals of attraction.

She had been flattered during the late summer hols when he'd found an opportunity to spend some time with her alone. He had told her how pretty she had become. "My, how you've blossomed, my dear," he'd said. When she told him that she was almost eighteen, his eyes had gleamed, and he'd moved in closer, whispering that she was almost a woman now, and that he'd like to show her the pleasures a wizard could bring to a witch grown. What had started as an innocent flirtation had turned into something that made Hermione distinctly uncomfortable, and when she'd confessed this to Sirius, he'd laughed it off.

"Oh, come now, Hermione, what's a little fun amongst friends? You're almost of age, you know. You're still a virgin, aren't you?" When she reluctantly nodded, his voice became softer, more seductive. "Are you sure that a boy is really what you want right now?" He'd given her a look of knowing sensuality, and she had found it repellent.

"I've got to get back upstairs. The boys-"

"The boys are outside." Black's eyes had raked up and down her body, and she felt undressed. He put his arms around her. "Why don't you and I go upstairs for awhile? It can be our fun little secret."

She'd felt almost sick with fear, not knowing what to do or say, when Remus Lupin appeared. She'd never been so happy to see anyone in her life. She couldn't get out of the house quickly enough. She could tell that Remus really didn't approve, but something kept him from rebuking his friend. Perhaps Remus surmised that Sirius had been through so much, he hadn't the heart to chastise him.

No, Sirius Black was *not* the wizard she wanted, and his increasingly insistent advances made every trip to Grimmauld Place almost as much an ordeal for Hermione as Death Eater meetings were for Severus.

She shook her head. No. She could not, would not cheapen her professor's life by trying to compare her petty little problems with his. She could never live the way Professor Snape had to live, enduring horrific beatings and cursings and playing both ends against the middle. She looked down at his sleeping form just as he rolled over and made a soft little sigh. Once again the sound went straight to her heart.

No, he wasn't handsome. No, he wasn't the nicest person to be around. But she'd rather spend time in his company than Sirius, or even Remus, for that matter. He had always pushed her to excel, had challenged her beyond what she thought herself capable of. He had forced her to find solutions beyond her book knowledge. She didn't always agree with his teaching methods, but she couldn't argue the results. He was the one professor whose praise she sought above all others. She had never received it, but she also had never felt its lack.

Professor Snape didn't bullshit them or bombard them with useless decrees. He didn't punish them for trying to learn how to defeat Voldemort. She had a sneaking suspicion he knew about Dumbledore's Army, but kept his own counsel about it. He didn't keep them in the dark or withhold knowledge from them because they were too young.

She trusted Professor Snape. No one would put themselves through this hell for a cause they didn't believe in.

She sat down in a nearby chair, in case the professor woke and needed anything. She was wide awake, her wand ready, in case Sirius returned alone and tried to interfere with the sleeping wizard. She'd show him! The fire was warm, and she shook her head to clear it... perhaps she should go and get some coffee... she would do just that, in a moment... she would just rest her eyes for five minutes...

She awoke to the sound of various Weasleys tumbling around the house, and Harry's voice calling, "Hermione, aren't you up yet? Breakfast is ready!" She looked around the library, the awful events of the previous evening flooding back into her memory. The fire had burned down to smouldering ashes, and the room was cold again.

The chair she'd transfigured into a bed for her professor was back to its original shape, and the bowl of water and towel sat empty and dry by the door. He was gone. It was as if he'd never been there.

The only remaining evidence of the night's activities was the thick comforter Hermione had changed from a towel; it was draped and tucked around her securely, keeping her warm in the drafty library.

Two: From The Waiting To Hear

Chapter 3 of 39

And the stories we tell ourselves and believe to be true are so much taller in Daddy's boots and in Mamma's shoes...

Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading Harry Potter bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.

For Sempra and Mimi

Shame in the smile, the look of lonely eyes can't count the cost of this compromise,

So we sing this song when we're forced to face fear,

It's a long, long way from the waiting to hear.

"Miss Granger, a word, please?"

Hermione stole a quick glance at Harry and Ron, as the rest of the Potions class slunk out of the dungeon classroom. Even the Slytherins looked as if their scales had been singed. There was none of the casual chatter that followed the chiming bell to end class for the weekend; everyone was too shell shocked into sullen silence.

Professor Snape had been particularly vitriolic today, his patience short, his temper shorter. Poor Neville had been ostracized for the afternoon, after a spectacularly unsuccessful attempt at a simple Pimple Reducing Potion. Professor Snape had been so angry; Hermione thought he would burst a blood vessel.

Sending the boy out of the room, he'd then blamed Hermione for not paying attention to Neville's rapidly deteriorating potion until it was too late, and hideous, vile yellow sludge was climbing out of the cauldron and dripping onto the worktable. Hermione's notes, along with her peace of mind, had completely disintegrated, and knowing Professor Snape, were quite ruined for the day.

As Harry and Ron filed out of class with the others, Hermione received sympathetic looks from her two friends, who made a point to glower at their Potions professor. Their resentful stares might have been invisible for all the acknowledgement they received, but it made Hermione feel a little better nonetheless. After all, Professor Snape had been so flipping nasty to her!

"Yes, sir?" she began, remembering to keep her eyes slightly downcast. It was ostensibly to show respect, but after Harry's disastrous attempt at Occlumency, Hermione was taking no chances by risking a glance into those dark, flashing eyes.

For a moment, the professor studied her carefully, then, with a deft wave of his hand, Summoned a chair. His voice was diffident, almost casual. "Please sit down, Miss Granger." Hermione sat carefully, feeling even more trepidation. First he bit her head off, now he was almost...courteous?

It had been a week since classes had resumed after winter holidays, and Hermione had not seen her professor since that horrible night she'd found him befouled and broken in the Grimmauld Place library. She was even more dismayed, after eavesdropping on a conversation between Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey, to discover that Professor Snape had spent the first two weeks of the Christmas holidays in the infirmary under Madam Pomfrey's care. Hermione's ministrations, it seemed, had only been adequate to get him mobile enough to make it back to Hogwarts.

The events of that night had lingered in her memory since, even manifesting itself in her nighttime dreaming. At first, they were common-or-garden nightmares, in which Professor Snape was lying there bleeding, while Hermione was frozen to the spot and too afraid to move, or help. Inadequacy dreams, pure and simple.

In the last few days, since she'd returned to Hogwarts, the dreams had taken on a different... complexion. She would be massaging his temples and he would suddenly grasp her hand and hold it to his cheek. She would bend down to take the teacup from his hand, only to find him grasping her face and pulling her toward him.

The latest dream was the most unsettling. Two nights ago, it had started like the others, with her finding Professor Snape on the floor. Then the dream changed. Instead of finding him huddled in pain and degradation, he'd suddenly reached for her and pulled her down, pinning her underneath him, looking around quickly, as if to make sure they were alone.

His body was warm and the weight of him on her abdomen gave her a feeling that she could only describe as... pleasant pressure. He was hard and unyielding, and her limited experience with the opposite sex told her that what she felt pressing against her pubic bone was his erection. She looked into his eyes and they were large and dark, liquid and hypnotic. Framed by long, black lashes and lids that slowly closed and opened, they filled her vision to nothing more than their dark, beckoning gaze. She lost all will to move, content to lie beneath his comforting, crushing weight, lost in his eyes forever.

He'd caressed her cheek with the back of his hand, and in a voice woven of silk and velvet, he purred *Lie down with me, Hermione. Here, no one can see us... no one can find us... no one can hurt us...* His hair hung down like a curtain that encompassed them both, and she could feel his breath, warm and sweet, against her face.

His voice was soft and tender, and the smile on his face was so unlike his usual scowl, that, when he leaned down, and hesitated, she rose from the floor and pressed her lips to his, as if to seal his words with a kiss. It wasn't like kissing Ron, or even Viktor... The professor's lips moved over hers so softly, and he smelled of patchouli and freshly mown grass...

She'd awoken with a start, gasping, sweaty, and definitely stirred, her heart pounding. It was bizarre in the extreme. She was almost unable to look up at the Head Table during breakfast that morning. She could barely make it through her Potions lesson that afternoon. As the evening wore on, she felt increasingly foolish about her reaction. She was a young woman, after all, with desires and biological needs. She told herself it was just a manifestation of the need to protect, and to be protected. Sealing with a kiss, for Merlin's sake! It was, after all, only just a dream.

Professor Snape, for the most part, had treated her no differently than he had before that night at Grimmauld Place. If anything, he was a little more impatient with her, and Hermione supposed she understood it. She, Hermione Granger, Gryffindor swot and Harry Potter's best mate, had seen him at his most vulnerable and helpless. It had to cut deeply for a private wizard like Professor Snape to be seen any other way than in complete, iron-clad control.

As she sat in front of him, Hermione thought of all of this, and wondered if he was about to make her take some sort of wand oath not to reveal what happened that night. As she considered even suggesting it herself, he stood quietly and began to pace. "Miss Granger, I am a private man-

"I know sir, and I meant every word I said! I won't tell a soul! In fact, I'll even take a wand -"

"I'm also a very impatient man who doesn't like being interrupted!" He had whirled to face her, his movements sharp as lightning, and he winced to see her visibly shrink from him. He sighed, and suddenly scrubbed his face with his hands. It was a very un-Snape-like thing to do, Hermione thought. It made him more human. It was oddly appealing. It also made her think of him pulling her down on the floor with him in her dream. She shifted in her seat a little, and blushed, to his confusion.

"Miss Granger, if we could manage to sit still and listen for more than five seconds without waving our hands in the air or interrupting, it would be most appreciated."

"Sorry, sir." She slumped tiredly. She was never going to understand or please this man. She certainly was never going to end up lying on the floor with him. She blushed again, causing her professor even more confusion.

With a slight huff, he straightened again. "As I was saying, I'm a very private man, and I wanted to to thank you for assisting me. I was at a distinct disadvantage, and quite... vulnerable at the time." He looked over her shoulder, unwilling to meet her eyes. "I appreciate your efforts to help me maintain a modicum of dignity."

Hermione watched him carefully, and her heart told her to hear the apology, the humiliation. *Gods, what this man must go through* she thought, and her soft, tender heart went out to him.

When he hesitated, she ventured, almost timidly, "And, are you well now, sir? No lasting injuries?"

His voice was surprisingly mild. "I am quite well, Miss Granger, thanks, in great part, to your quick thinking and assistance. I am not a man who seeks out help unless absolutely necessary, but I am... grateful that you were available. I am also aware of your discretion."

He sat down in his chair and glanced at her troubled face. Again, his eyes slid away from hers, unwilling to meet her gaze. "I am not used to being ... treated with sincere compassion, Miss Granger. I found it... most comforting."

Hermione felt tears prick her eyes, and looked away. The more she tried to stem the rising tears, the more they pooled in her eyes until one single tear spilled down her cheek, and she dashed it away, embarrassed. Her lips trembled, and she felt foolish, childish. Taking a deep breath, her voice shook. "You you shouldn't have to endure that, Professor."

She sniffed as another tear fell and rolled her eyes, waiting for the derisive comment. When none came, she said, "I can hardly stand the thought that you have to face that monster and and allow allow him " She openly wiped the tears from her eyes and brushed the back of her hand against her running nose.

A hand cupped the back of her head, almost gently, and when she opened her eyes, he was standing beside her, holding a white handkerchief to her face. She looked up uncertainly, and he placed the handkerchief over her nose.

With an unreadable expression, he softly commanded, "Blow."

Obediently, she complied, and for some reason, it made her laugh in spite of her embarrassment, to be sitting here, having Professor Snape, of all people, blowing her nose like a first year. Apparently, it was the reaction he wanted, for he released both her head and the handkerchief at once, and resumed his seat.

Hermione blew her nose again and wiped her eyes, feeling absurdly better. There had been something singularly reassuring about the feel of his hand on the back of her head, and it made her realize that he was, after all, a man. Before everything, before professor, before wizard even, he was just a man. A man who was willing to sacrifice too much of himself.

She felt a little calmer. "I'll clean this and return it to you, sir," she said, indicating the snowy white fabric. He made a careless gesture, waving his long, elegant fingers dismissively.

"No matter. Now, Miss Granger, there is another reason I wished to speak to you." This time, his eyes did not break from hers, and she felt caught in his gaze. His eyes were large and dark. *Where no one can find us...* She glanced away, feeling both invaded and somehow guilty. For a terrible moment she was afraid he had Legilimised into her mind and seen her dream of him. She gulped.

"Yes, sir?"

Again, he hesitated, and frowned. She could see his Adam's apple move as he swallowed. She could see the faint line of the beginnings of a five o'clock shadow, a smudge of ink on the tip of a long, tapered finger. It was as if she were absorbing every speck of minutiae in him, and it made him uneasy.

Finally, he took a deep breath. "I wish to ask you about your relationship with Sirius Black."

Hermione swallowed, and felt her nervousness increase two-fold. "S-Sirius?" She dropped her eyes. "I I don't know- I didn't."

"Miss Granger, please don't misunderstand me," Professor Snape intoned, his voice soft but intense. "From the first time I saw him... interacting with you at Grimmauld Place last summer, to the night when you and I... I was under the impression that his... advances were, shall we say, less than welcome. If I am mistaken, I would like to be enlightened."

Hermione looked up, puzzled. "Begging your pardon, sir, but why?"

His scowl deepened. "I will caution you again not to misunderstand me, Miss Granger. I merely point out that I saw-"

"No, sir. Forgive me for interrupting," she added, quickly, flushing. "I meant-" She hesitated, her posture crumpling with embarrassment.

"Well? Merlin's sake, girl, spit it out!"

His impatient tone stiffened her spine, as he knew it would, and she was able to draw herself up slightly. "I only meant that, well sir, you made it quite clear that night you don't have a very high opinion of my character, and I wondered why someone like yourself would even care about the real truth of the matter." She slumped again, the effort of speaking her mind almost too much to bear. "No one else does," she muttered, almost to herself.

The professor was silent for a few moments. He was beginning to look uncomfortable. Perhaps he was now wishing he'd not brought up the subject. Hermione was forced to agree. He pressed his lips together as if pained to continue. "To be perfectly honest, Miss Granger, as you no doubt know by now from Mr. Potter's hopeless attempt at Occlumency, the history between myself and Sirius Black is rather strained."

Hermione's bewilderment ramped up another notch. She shook her head slowly. "Umm, I'm not sure I understand, sir. Harry never discussed your lessons. He only said they weren't working and that you'd ended them."

It was almost worth this entire, awkward conversation to witness the bafflement on Professor Snape's face. He was utterly nonplussed at her comment, although he quickly hid it behind his usual look of disdain, and she could tell by the slight frown between his eyes that he wasn't sure he completely believed her. Uncertain how to proceed, Hermione sat still, the only outward sign of her insecurity was the twisting handkerchief between her busy fingers.

In the silence Hermione became sure the professor was going to challenge her, but something made him change his mind. "Well, that puts a different spin on things, then,"

he said, softly, almost silkily. "Miss Granger, are Sirius Black's advances welcome?" Each word was spoken carefully, pushed at her like smoke rings; each word carefully placed like chess pieces on a board. "I would appreciate total honesty. I am aware this may be difficult, but I assure you my motives are honourable."

It was her turn to look surprised. With pure, unadulterated, Gryffindor integrity shining from every pore, Hermione replied, "I can think of no reason they would be anything less than honourable, sir. However you feel about me personally, you've never behaved... inappropriately toward me or any student - in that way." She gave him a look full of trusting, blind conviction. "It simply isn't in you, is it?"

Oh, gods, that hurt. Hurt right down to his magical core. It hurt worse than any Crucio he'd ever received, more than any insult, any rape, any curse. It hurt as much as Lily, as much as... Severus found himself hoping he'd be summoned tonight, to be punished. He deserved it, after what the girl had just said. After what he'd done.

Rather sourly, he shook his head. "No, Miss Granger. That is not something I would ever entertain. I'm not known for my kindness, but I should hope I'm not seen as that type of predator." He managed a half-hearted smirk. "I am glad you understand this, at least."

"Yes, sir." Hermione dropped her eyes, and after a heartbeat, she glanced up, and saw his bland expression, patiently waiting for the answer to his question. She closed her eyes, feeling the flush of shame rise from her neck to her face. "At first, I was flattered."

She gave him a sad little smile. "I'm not blind about my looks, Professor. I know what people say." She stole a quick glance at him. "You've said it yourself. Bushy-haired, know-it-all, pushy, bossy, buck-toothed, skinny, insufferable." She cut herself off as Snape's hand, which had been propped under his chin, hit the table with a thump. She could see the disapproval in his eyes. Professor Snape hated her tendency to over detail things.

"Sorry. It's just that, he and Remus were so nice, at first." She favoured him with that little apologetic smile again. "Sirius told me I was growing into a lovely young witch. Who doesn't want to be told they're attractive, especially bushy-haired swots like me?" she ventured, and when he did not reply, she gave a little shrug. "I thought he was being kind."

Hermione's expression darkened. "Then he started - " she swallowed, "touching me. When I passed him in the hall, or sitting beside me at the table."

She cringed, as she looked up and saw her professor listening and watching intently. "I thought at first it was accidental. Then he started," she looked away, mortified that she was confessing these things to Professor Snape, of all people. "He started.. he touched me..."

"I can't tell Harry. He loves Sirius so much, and I don't really know how he would react. I don't want to be the cause of a disagreement or bad feelings between them, or worse, I don't want Harry thinking I'm somehow leading Sirius on." She made an impatient gesture. "I can't tell Ron, because he'd tell Harry, and, well, we're right back to square one. Sirius is Harry's only family now, besides the Dursleys and they hardly count."

Severus made an unconscious gesture of agreement. Petunia, gods. That sour-faced, dried up crone, old at the age of ten, with her superior airs and graces, treating him like the Spinner's End trash he was...

"So you see, nobody wants to hurt Harry, especially me. I can't go to Grimmauld with everyone. I've tried that and it got so awkward I just gave up and took my chances. Until that night when you saw..."

She looked at him, her uncertainty and childishness gone. With a surprisingly strong voice, she said, "I'm not a prude, Professor, and I'm not ignorant about what goes where between a witch and a wizard. I may not have much experience, but I do know when someone is trying to seduce me. If I had wanted Sirius Black, we wouldn't be having this conversation." Her eyes met his. They were a woman's eyes. "And if I had welcomed his advances, I would have had ample opportunity to act on it, and neither you nor anyone else certainly would have heard about it from me."

Professor Snape was silent for several more heartbeats. Hermione could not be sure, but for a moment she thought she saw a satisfaction, a triumph, in his dark eyes. He took a deep breath, let it go, and pursed his lips.

Finally he rose from his chair. "Miss Granger, I think you and I better go to the Headmaster."

-oOo-

Hermione looked from Professor Snape to the Headmaster, then back to Professor Snape. For a moment, she wasn't sure if she should laugh or hex her Potions professor. Both options were sounding very good right now. Both men stood still, waiting for her to respond; the Headmaster with a serene, almost amused expression, Professor Snape with barely concealed impatience and resentment.

Finally, the silence stretched, until Hermione felt it would snap if she remained quiet. "Let me make sure I understand this clearly," she said, slowly, taking a few deep breaths. "You told Vol-

Professor Snape hissed, and Hermione recoiled. "-The Dark Lord, that I was in love with you. That I was, what word did you use? Infatuated with you." She stole a look to her Potions professor, but he stared stonily at the ground. "I'm sorry, sir, but I don't really understand. Why would you do that?"

Hermione was reeling from the confession Professor Snape had just made. Apparently, the Headmaster already knew about it. Hermione had never been so flummoxed in her short life. Professor Snape had told Voldemort that he could use her obsession with him to corrupt her and use her against Harry.

"I guess I do understand the ruse, of making him believe that isolating Harry would weaken him," she said, slowly. She looked at her professor with doubt-filled eyes. "What I don't understand is why you told him I was in love with you?" She looked from one man to the other. "I'm not usually thick about things, but this is really beyond me, sir. Why on earth would you want me, of all people, to be in love with you? Pretend to be, I mean."

"Try to look at it this way, Miss Granger," Professor Dumbledore interjected, and Hermione saw Professor Snape's eyes flicker toward the older man. There was resentment clearly in her professor's eyes, and something less definable. It was not, she was certain, aimed at her. It was that indefinable depth in Severus Snape's eyes that would come back and haunt Hermione two years later.

"Professor Snape is very concerned with things that are happening since Tom Riddle has returned. He's also expressed your reluctance to speak with anyone about the perceived treatment you received from Sirius."

Hermione's head rose slowly and she looked at the Headmaster. She then looked at Professor Snape. The word 'perceive' suddenly enraged her. Her eyes narrowed. "Now, look, Headmaster! I don't see where -"

"Ahem." The trio turned to see Dolores Umbridge mincing in the door. "Headmaster, am I early for our meeting?" She looked at her wrist watch. It meowed. "Four o'clock, wasn't it?"

Both Hermione and Severus glowered at the little pink toad, while the Headmaster, ever the gentleman, stepped forward. "Not at all, Dolores! You're perfectly on time, as always. Professor Snape and Miss Granger were just leaving." He looked at the two of them patiently. "We can continue our chat at a later time, I think, Professor Snape. Good day, Miss Granger."

Professor Snape made a small formal bow and ushered Hermione from the Headmaster's office. By the time they reached the hall outside the stone steps, Hermione was seething.

"Perceive? Perceive? He's acting like we're making it up! He's talking like I'm trying to-"

Professor Snape was striding down the hall as Hermione walked with him, struggling to keep up. He too, was furious. "Acting as if this was all a joke?" he growled to

himself, and Hermione looked up at him in alarm. "What does he think I'm doing out there? I'm not doing this because I want to-"

" - Letting that pink nightmare run the school with her stupid bloody decrees! She's hurting people and he does nothing!" Hermione kept up with Professor Snape's long strides, almost running beside him.

" It's not like I like being his sodding sacrificial lamb... Greater good, fucking Potter..."

"Wait!" Hermione grabbed Snape's arm with such force it spun him around. He looked down where her hand gripped his arm, then at her, hostility radiating from him.

"Unhand me, Miss Granger! I'm not to be pawed at!"

Hermione huffed in disbelief. "What is the matter with you? Are you insane?"

Shock stilled his tongue for a moment, then he shook her hand from his arm and continued striding down the hall. Hermione had no choice but to follow him. "Oh, no, you don't. You have to talk to me about this."

"I am under no obligation to do anything according to your whims, Miss Granger, and I will remind you that you are in danger of losing a rather large amount of house points. Not to mention garnering a month of detentions." He kept his eyes ahead as he raced down the stairs towards the dungeons, knowing full well she was right behind and would not be deterred.

Hermione was livid. "Don't be childish! Be that as it may, Professor, you obligated yourself to me the moment you told Voldemort-"

"Do NOT say his name!" he hissed, turning around and grasping her arms painfully. "Childish? Really? I know very well what I've done."

Hermione implored, "Then explain it to me! Please, Professor! Explain what you've done." Her voice softened, "Explain it so I can help you. So I can help prevent another night like the one in Grimmauld."

The punishing grip on her arms loosened, and he looked into her large amber eyes. She was as open and soft as a newborn, full of concern and confusion. He had caused all this. He closed his eyes in defeat.

He sighed, and Hermione suddenly wished she was anywhere but here in this place with this wizard. "Very well. Come with me, Miss Granger. I fear our conversation will not be suitable for this open a forum."

-oOo-

By the time they reached Severus' study, he had calmed down somewhat and was able to think a little more clearly. Blast Dumbledore! He felt like hexing the old fool.

Severus never should have gone to him and confessed what had happened that night. He thought the man would help him find a way out of the hole he'd dug for himself. Instead, Dumbledore had been angry, and his insinuations and suggestions made Severus realise that Dumbledore misinterpreted his motivation the same way Black had done. Albus believed Severus secretly wanted her for himself as a spoil of war, and would play both ends to get her.

"Don't be ridiculous, Albus! Why in Merlin's name would I want that child-"

"She is not a child, Severus. She is going to be eighteen in a matter of months, as you well know. And your reasons can be easily explained, as one who knows your history."

"She's a student, and as far as I'm concerned, that makes her a child!" he spat, furious that Dumbledore would intimate that Severus' motives had been anything other than self-preservation. "I was being tortured, Albus! I had just come from Grimmauld Place, where I was witness to that mangy cur molesting the girl in the library!" His tone had changed, without his realizing it. "She was vulnerable and scared and I pictured her in my mind. The Dark Lord saw her, and I had to think of something. Forgive me for being human!" He despised himself for the lie, but it was a small lie to cover a bigger one.

"I know, I know, dear boy," Albus soothed, and placed a fatherly hand on Severus' shoulder. "I cannot imagine what you were going through. It is regrettable, but I know you did what you thought was the best thing."

"It was the only thing, Albus!"

Dumbledore sighed. He walked over to the window and looked out onto the Quidditch pitch, where the Hufflepuff team was going through their paces. "Your first and only allegiance is to Lily's son, Severus. You know that. I want... assurances that your motives are, shall we say, pure of heart? That Miss Granger knows this is only a ruse." Albus turned and gave his Potions master a hard stare. "I want to be sure that *you* know it is only a ruse."

He turned back to the window. "Have a word with her, Severus. Find out if she would be willing to go along with the deception. Anything that will divert Tom's attention from Harry can only be to our advantage while he grows and achieves the level of skill needed to accomplish his destiny."

Severus leapt to his feet. "And her destiny, Albus? Or mine? You don't actually expect me to go through this farce, do you? The girl is repulsed by me!"

Albus turned to his Potions professor. "Then, dear boy, you must find hidden depths with which to change that, won't you? Allow her to get to know you. She may surprise you. She has hidden depths of her own. Even a wizard as shallow as Sirius has known that for quite some time now." He turned his back to the room and gazed out the window, a sure sign of dismissal.

As Severus reached the door, Dumbledore called after him. "I will think on it, Severus. In the meantime, perhaps you should ascertain whether or not Sirius' actions are as unwelcome as you believe. And," he added, "that your actions are motivated by nothing more than the need to protect a student."

-oOo-

Severus now sat, facing this student, who looked at him with an agonizing mix of bewilderment, trust and anger. He met her glare and held it until she dropped her gaze.

That's right, Severus. Be offended. Let your self-righteous indignation cover up the real truth, because your guilt and your self-loathing will mangle and chop up your blackened, dark heart if you don't. You've seen the girl. Albus was right. You've admired the fire and the spirit and the intellect you see behind those cat's eyes. She's wasted with Potter and Weasley. You've dreamt of her. You want to protect her, hide her away. You want her for your own. And you know she'll never come to you willingly. You dirty, sick, twisted pervert, he thought, his self-loathing rising like bile, leaving a horrible taste of guilt in his mouth.*It isn't in you, is it, Professor? Isn't it, little one?*

She chanced another look at him, and licked her dry lips. "Dumbledore...doesn't believe me, does he?"

"No." He said it without inflection or emotion, as if it was of no import. "He didn't believe me, either."

"About why you told Vol-The Dark Lord I was in love with you." Her voice was almost as bland as his. He looked at her carefully.

He was a spy. He was a petty, bitter, lonely spy who had nothing to live for except to see that Potter fulfilled a bloody prophesy issued before the boy was even born. His only love had turned on him and died because of his foolish decisions. His one true friend had died a horrific death because he had persuaded him down the wrong path. Severus realised he himself was facing a very short, very bitter path ahead, alone. It was the loneliness that would kill him in the end. It would make him reckless, and

eventually he would seek out death to crush the loneliness.

Why not seduce this innocent, trusting young woman? Why not enslave her with the prison of his own design, weaving such a spell of dark seduction and promise that she would never wish to leave, as long as his silken lash caressed and pleased her? Why not corrupt her, mold her into what he needed? He had done it before to terrifying success. He had made mistakes that time. He had learned from them and would not make them again.

And in the meantime, she would grow of age, to warm his bed and stimulate his mind, and whether or not Potter or the Dark Lord won would be no matter. He could shut away the guilt and the remorse and the betrayal of everything and everyone, even her, and they could go. He could just disappear, steal her away, where no one could find them...

"How old are you, Miss Granger?"

Hermione looked puzzled, and answered warily, "Seventeen, sir."

Seventeen. He had taken his Dark Mark around that age. He thought of the power he'd craved, the revenge he'd sought, the woman he cherished. All would be his under the command of the Dark Lord. Hadn't Lord Voldemort promised him these things? Hadn't the words been spoken from his own lips? Ashes. All that was left of his burning, covetous ambition was ashes. Ashes were the dreams of Severus Snape, and every day he relived them, only to see them burn into nothing.

The dark seduction was indeed pleasurable, but voracious. It could never be satisfied, for it could never be allowed to grow in the light. He had tried to feed it in his early days as a Death Eater, after Lily abandoned him to the darkness. It had exhausted him, jaded him to the point of seriously considering celibacy. He had driven his desires like a wild horse, but in the end, it was not pleasure he had ever really craved, ever really, truly wanted. That had died on the day he hissed a foul name into the air, destroying a friendship that had meant more than physical pleasure...

Hermione. Oh, he could seduce her, even keep her. But would she ever truly be happy? And why, gods damn it, did he care for the happiness of a seventeen-year-old girl and why did it seem so integral to his own?

Severus sat, regarding her so intently he could feel her growing discomfort. He hadn't been so different, really, at that age. If he were honest with himself, they were very much alike, painful thought it was to admit. Thin, awkward, ostracized, proud and arrogant in their knowledge, eager to show off their skills. Self-conscious, hypersensitive to criticism, but cunning and resourceful when necessary.

He continued to contemplate her, his admiration reluctantly rising another notch. Clever little witch. Age had given her the poise she so sorely lacked as a youngster, showing off her knowledge, always having to be the first, the best, the correct answer. *Oh yes, Miss Granger. I've not forgotten the stolen Boomslang Skin, the enchanted galleons used to gather your little vigilante playgroup. Those boys couldn't find their bollocks with both hands. You've been the instigator all along, haven't you, little one? Potter doesn't have the brains. And without you, he doesn't really have a chance.*

He sneered at himself. *And where has your superior intellect and cunning landed you, Severus?* It had turned him into a bitter, lonely hermit, and he'd had encouragement from his professors, if not from peers.

Well, he had been admired once. The loss of that friendship hurt almost as much as losing Lily, and was twice as hard to reminisce over. He pushed the thought away, knowing that, if he contemplated it for long, it would come back and torment him until he could never make it go away. It raised the darkness in him, and for a moment, he allowed it to touch him, to slide over his soul like a wanton caress.

What, then, would Hermione be in ten years' time, bowed under by his overbearing hostility? Severus Snape knew all too well his shortcomings. He also knew how to use his assets to great advantage. He could corrupt her. He was sure of it. She was untouched, he knew it. She could fall so easily for the right combination of innocence and knowledge. Knowledge was her lust. Praise was her aphrodisiac. She was as ripe as Eve had been in the garden, and like Eve, she would fall to his silken, Slytherin tongue.

A soft, sensual word of praise, spoken in a tone of voice pitched with intimacy and experience. An intense heat found in the eyes that could hint of both threat and promise. A practiced, knowing touch at a vulnerable moment of his choosing, and his making.

He looked into her eyes, as clear and clean of reproach as a unicorn's. They were starting to show tension under the weight of his contemplation. Pinned by those liquid, dark eyes, Hermione jumped slightly, as if prodded by an unseen hand. Severus realised he'd been staring so long, she thought he was using Legilimency.

Severus mentally crossed his fingers and decided to do the only thing he hadn't tried he would tell her the truth.

"You ask me why I want to know, Miss Granger. I'll tell you. No Slytherin tricks, no guile. The honest truth.

"I hate the way he looks at you. I hate the way he gropes you. I hate the way he throws his conquest in my face!" Now the emotion was there, crackling around the edges of his formidable self-control, and it filled Hermione with consternation. She watched him carefully, a little warily.

"There has been no conquest."

"There will be."

She huffed. "I think I have a little say in it, Professor. I am not attracted to Sirius Black, nor do I have any plans in future to be."

Severus was shaking his head, and a grim, almost cruel smile slashed across his face. He rose from his chair in his alarmingly sudden way. He walked toward her, bearing down, seduction by intimidation.

"It doesn't matter what you want, little girl. Sirius Black is Harry Potter's godfather." Each word was spoken with tongue-tipped contempt. "And we all know that Mr. Potter's happiness and welfare are the most important considerations to the hopes of winning this war. Harry Potter's godfather has him wrapped around his undersized little tool, Miss Granger. What Harry Potter's godfather wants, he gets, because giving his godfather what he wants makes Harry Potter happy!"

"Harry's not like that!"

"The hell he isn't! Nothing's too good for Sirius Black!" he spat, giving full vent to his resentment. "Ever since I've known him he's been the same. He can't stand the thought of another wizard having something or someone first! How many times did he seduce a girl just because he could, just because another man wanted her?"

"He's always been able to get his way! Look what he's done to every young witch to cross his path! Right now, today, all he'd have to do is to tell James he wanted you and you'd be on his doorstep in stockings and suspenders with a big bow tied around your arse before you could say Nimue's Bristols!" Severus wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, removing the flecks of foam. He was panting as if he'd been running. The darkness was riding him, the pale rider on the pale horse, galloping through his mind unchecked, unheeded.

"Harry."

"What?" Severus turned to the young woman, his anger rushing hot and uncontrolled through him. For a moment, Severus thought she had called *him* Harry. She was shaking her head, and there was a fearful look in her eyes.

"All he'd have to do is to tell *Harry* he wanted me'. You just called Harry, 'James', Professor."

Severus stared at the young woman, stunned at what he'd said. And just as it possessed him, the darkness left him, cracked, blasted apart and opened by the little ray of light sitting across from him. Rage and humiliation drained from him, leaving him shaking and almost in tears. For a moment, he was a skinny seventeen-year old-again, telling Lily Evans those same words, trying to convince her that James' and Sirius' motives were far from honourable.

Here he was, twenty years later, trying to convince Hermione of the same thing about Sirius and Remus. It was as if history was doomed to repeat itself over and over in his mind. *Oh gods.* He ran a shaking hand through his hair, and his breath came in great sobbing gulps, although his eyes were dry and burning.

Hermione stood slowly and walked toward Severus. She approached him very carefully, as if afraid of incurring bodily harm. She put a gentle hand on his shoulder, as if to calm him. "I think you'd better sit down. Please."

Obediently, Professor Snape sat down in his chair. He no longer looked angry or confused, just exhausted. "Miss Granger," he began, then sighed. It was a pitiful sound of a defeated man, a man who knows the war is lost but must keep fighting anyway. "Once again, I am forced to rely upon your discretion." He looked down at his desk, and sighed again. "I-I'm not behaving in a manner that befits either your teacher or a gentlemen."

"I'm not offended, truly. Please don't distress yourself further, sir." Hermione looked up at her professor, and decided to push. "This is some some vendetta between you and Sirius, isn't it? This isn't really about me, is it?"

"It is for him. He's decided you're- you're - "

His hesitation and uncertainty emboldened her. "You promised me the truth. No Slytherin tricks. No guile. All of this wasn't just to save yourself. You could have done that any number of ways." She threw caution to the winds. "Why did you tell the Dark Lord I'm in love with you? So you can get revenge on Sirius Black for something that happened when you were my age?"

"No!" He shook his head, furious, confused. He looked at her, still gazing at him with no hint of recrimination in her eyes. "Yes. It is partially. I will admit that. Can't you understand? Sirius will seduce a witch just because another wizard is in the picture."

"And you think that's what he's doing with me?" Hermione shook her head. "Are you the what did you call it? The wizard in the picture?"

Severus looked at her, his black eyes growing dark. She could not break his gaze. He stilled to the point where she could no longer hear even his breathing. He raised his chin, and his lips relaxed and parted slightly. His expression changed into one that Hermione could only think of as 'hungry'.

What do you think, girl? I want you for myself. Sirius may be an imbecile, but he's smart enough to know why I desire you he thought, just as agonizing pain seared up his forearm. His Dark Mark roared and pulsed as if it had a life of its own. Severus gasped and hissed, his arm convulsing with the pain, his fingers curling and bending unnaturally as the muscles spasmed and contracted beneath the seething, writhing flesh.

"Not now," he all but moaned to himself, and pressed his arm to his side until the painful summoning subsided. He swore under his breath, then rose and found himself face to face with Hermione. In the few seconds the Mark had drilled its pain into his nerve endings, he'd quite forgotten she was there.

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The words are from my songwriter friend, Christopher Branch. This is another example of how inspiration can come in many forms.

## Three: If I Am To Be Condemned For My Sins, Let Me Commit Them First

Chapter 4 of 39

Severus and Hermione have a conversation fit for a voyeur, but the lines blur a little too much for comfort.

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

*For Sempra and Mimi*

*A/N: This chapter depicts an encounter between Severus and Hermione when she is, according to canon, seventeen years old (due to the Time Turner), and therefore, of age in the Wizarding world. While this not a physical encounter, it is sexual in nature and reads thus.*

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*Walking too fast, thinking too hard, too many thieves now, to let down your guard.*

*Strange as it is, stranger it seems; who told this life it could fall apart at the dreams?*

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Severus and Hermione looked at one another, over the space of a few heartbeats. *Oh, please, please, don't make me go to him again* Severus silently begged, but the deaf, blind gods stayed silent and indifferent. He closed his eyes to master his fear, hating that Granger, of all people, was witness to it. He felt like a helpless child again, looking up into the eyes of his drunken father, cowering, anticipating the swaying stance, the sound of the belt sliding from his trousers. He had pleaded silently for protection then as well, knowing none would come... *Lay me low...*

He gasped, and drew himself to full height. *Remember your purpose*, he told himself. He could almost hear Albus saying it. *Whatever punishment the Dark Lord metes, you deserve it. You dirty, little scrote of a man...*

"Miss Granger, please leave now. I have to " He hissed as the Mark burned again. The Dark Lord was impatient now. Severus panted, angry that the girl was still there, staring at him. Through clenched teeth, he urged, "Merlin's sake, girl! Go!"

She was shaking her head. "It's him, isn't it? He's summoning you, isn't he?" Severus could only nod, grasping his aching arm to ease the pain. "What will he do to you?"

He rasped, "I cannot say, but it will not do to keep him waiting." He calmed, and made his voice gentler. "Miss Granger, if you wish to help, please go and tell the Headmaster I was summoned. I'll return when I can."

She stepped closer. "But he'll want to know about us! You've told him about me, and he'll expect some sort of update!" She dropped her head, casting about for any idea. "Can you can you make up something? Can you show him I don't know me thanking you or, or something, anything?"

Hermione looked into his eyes with absolute trust, and as the pain subsided, his Slytherin heart whispered *Make her. Make her pretend. Make her give you some little scrap of her comfort in this godsforsaken mess you call your life. Make her touch you*

And the darkness that was never far from him, that he fought every day, settled into his belly like a heat, a latent, sensual power. It was a power of knowing that she was ripe and sweet for plucking. A few honeyed words, a soft, innocently placed touch, and soon she wouldn't need to pretend...

As if she'd read his thoughts, she looked up at him, her eyes bright and fearful. She grabbed his wrists in her hands, and when he looked down at her small hands, encircling his wrists, she rung them to get his attention. "Look at me, Professor!"

As he stood still, Hermione stepped back, looking down at his feet. She smiled, as if recalling a pleasant memory. She lifted her gaze to him, and the glow in her eyes almost made him stagger. It was a knowing, warm glow, and it made her look older, more worldly, more knowing. For a fleeting, thankfully transient moment, the visage of seventeen-year-old Bellatrix Black came to mind. Mercifully, it was gone just as quickly.

Hermione moved closer, and Severus almost took an involuntary step back. She still held onto his wrists, pinning him in place. She laughed softly, modestly, and he wasn't sure if the sound frightened him or aroused him. His mind was telling him one thing, but his traitorous body, quite another...

"Professor," she said, her voice sweet, her expression fond, "I wanted to thank you again." She lowered her head modestly. "I'm afraid to be in the house alone with him. He " She shook her head. "He thinks I owe him. He said that I should feel grateful for his attention. He thinks he should be the one I give my "

She stopped again, and blushed. Blushed, for Merlin's sake! She looked at him with admiration shining in her eyes. "I know I've never been one of your favourite students, but at least you don't force me to do something against my will."

"Nor will I," he said, his voice soft and light, easing into his role like the practiced actor he was. "You are quite safe here with me, Miss Granger." Of its own accord, his hand reached to cup her cheek. She closed her eyes, and nestled against it. Severus' eyes grew wide, as he felt his cock roar into life. *Oh, Merlin, what is the girl doing? What might she do, if I allow it?*

In spite of his rapidly spiraling thoughts, he smiled at her outright audacity. He raised a delicate, expressive eyebrow. "You're a good girl," he crooned. His soft words were rewarded with her brilliant smile, her eyes lighting at the praise. There - oh yes, there it was. The heat of Hermione Granger: praise. Her treasured, truest lust. Just as he had done before his summoning, his lips relaxed and parted into a smile worthy of a lover.

His eyes slid slowly over her, starting at her mouth, and traveling, first down her body, then returning to her face. He felt powerful, basking in her open and enthralled admiration. She was watching him intently, her body still. Her mouth was also parted, and Severus could see her rapid breathing, her pulse flashing at her throat.

"Yes, such a good girl, Hermione," he repeated, slightly breathless, caressing her name with a voice that was soft and silky, that promised so much. It was a voice he'd used a hundred times to get what he wanted. It had enticed quite a few females, willing and unwilling, into loosening their thighs and sharing his bed or his coin. It was a voice he'd used to assure victims when there were no assurances to be given. It was used to placate and seduce when the rebels called for the innocent to suffer, and he could offer nothing more than a soft command to close their eyes, and dream. He used his one true beauty, and it soothed even him.

He could see the flush on her skin, and knew his beauty had produced it. He returned her predatory, knowing smile. As his hand slid from her cheek, she turned her head slightly, and his fingers brushed against her lips. They were soft and heart-shaped, and they pursed slightly against his fingertips. He dragged his middle finger across her bottom lip, his movement so subtle, it could almost be construed as accidental. He could feel the soft puff of her breath against his finger. For a sweet, dirty moment, Severus imagined what she would do if he slid his longest finger between her lips and into her warm mouth. He could almost feel her tongue cradle it, swirl around it as she suckled it. He could imagine her, eyes closed, lost in the longing, not fully understanding, but welcoming it nonetheless...

He sneered down at the girl, the powerful darkness feeding these stolen, forbidden seconds. He could hear her breathing increase, and he felt an electricity pulse between the two of them, and he knew she felt it as well. They were both breathing heavier, and their chests rose and fell in unison.

*It would be so easy,* the dark voice told him. *She's so willing to do whatever I ask. I could say almost anything at this moment, do almost anything, and she would respond...*

Caught up in the fantasy, Hermione looked modestly down at his hands. Her voice was almost a whisper, and her eyes were lidded. She touched the tip of her tongue to her top lip, and Severus' raging hard-on tightened his trousers painfully.

She murmured, "I'm so glad you're there. You're the only one who believes me." She brought the full battery of her tawny eyes to meet his, and he felt a shiver run up his spine. Her lips trembled, and she looked up at him beseechingly. "I don't want to go back there with Ron and Harry. He doesn't understand. No one does, even Dumbledore. He doesn't believe me, either. Harry's so blind where Sirius is concerned."

Severus touched her cheek again, and Hermione rubbed against his hand like a kitten. He stroked her soft skin with his thumb, and lightly crooned, "Shh. It's alright, child. You don't have to go if you don't wish it. I'll ensure you never have to." He felt her shiver, and he knew at that moment, she would be his. And underlying it all, under the darkness, under the lust, was that pulsing, tiny light that wanted him to do the right thing, to keep his promise to her. *Where no one can find us...*

"But the holidays "

"Can be spent here. I require assistance on a Potions project. I'll arrange it with the Headmaster. It will give you a reason to stay away from Grimmauld, and no one would be the wiser." His voice was as far removed from his teaching voice as possible. It was creamy and rich, and the girl responded so beautifully to it. Watching her, Severus could almost forget they were playing a desperate game of charades. More than that, he could feel the needy urge to forget it was only a game...

She was looking at him with dawning hope in her eyes. "Would you would you really want this? Would you allow me to assist you, Professor?"

He favoured her with another sneer, and made an appreciative humming noise. This time, he dialed in a touch of soft menace to his sinful, silken baritone beauty. It was seduction itself, more than even his words. "Oh, yes, I want this as well. I very much want you here, Hermione." His pronunciation grew more clipped with each word; each consonant savoured and presented, each vowel tasted in his mouth like ripened fruit.

"Yes. Very, very much." He could see her blush again, and her lips flushed a luscious shade of pink. He found himself aching to discover if her little nipples were the same, dusky hue as her pouting lips; oh, those sweet, little pink nipples, begging to be nibbled, like the heart-shaped lips, that were parting...

"Thank you, Professor. You always make me feel safe."

And it was over. Safe. The word instantly dashed ice-cold water over his libido, and deflated it like a nail driven into the tyre on a Muggle automobile. Severus felt a sickening urge to send her screaming from the room. How dare she tease and flirt with him? How dare she make him want her, then plunge a dagger in his desire with one tiny word? Who the fuck started this?

The Mark sizzled under his skin again, and he grunted in pain. The last of his dispirited lust was tamped down to nothing, as he tried to deal with the pain.

Hermione saw his sudden discomfort, and looked up at him expectantly. "Do you think it was enough?" She smiled weakly. "I was afraid I was laying it on a bit thick. Perhaps you can, oh, I don't know, tweak it in your mind or something?"

Severus was stunned. He knew the whole little sordid exchange was as substantial as a glamour, but he had sensed her responding. He frowned, and she made a little gesture, a modest shrug. "I used to do Stage School during summer hols." She sobered. "I never thought I would be using it to save someone's life, but I'm really glad, Professor."

He stared at her, openly surprised. He took a deep breath to soothe his ruffled ego, which had deflated somewhat, along with his cock. Smirking in his usual manner, he replied, rather formally, "I must say, it is the theatre's loss that your calling lies elsewhere, Miss Granger."

It was her turn to look confused. *Was he paying her a compliment, or had he been caught up in what had just happened, as well? And why did he sound so disappointed in her? Gods, the world may as well stop turning, for all she knew of what had just happened.*

For several more heartbeats, they regarded one another. Then Hermione said, "Sir, perhaps you'd better go. I don't want to be the cause of his displeasure."

Severus nodded, then turned to go. His mind was racing, and he needed to master himself quickly. The girl had, truth be known, rattled him more than he was willing to accept.

As he turned, he said, "Tell the Headmaster I was summoned "

"I know. I will." For several seconds, Hermione watched him prepare to leave. As he reached the door, she impulsively called out, "Professor!"

He turned, impatient, fearful, "What, Miss Granger? I have to leave now!"

She rushed to his side, and, reaching up on tiptoe, placed her hands on his shoulders. After the slightest of hesitations, she gently kissed his cheek.

He stared down at her, his expression unreadable. "Miss Granger? And which play are we enacting now?" He sneered. "The Passion of Christ?"

This time, he was sure her blush was genuine, as was the hurt in her eyes. "No! I mean, I'm not! Just be careful. I can't bear the thought you might be hurt again. Especially not because of me."

He gave her another stiff little nod, and whipped around. Almost before she could register it, he was gone, striding out of the room.

Hermione sat down shakily, her bravado gone. She had told Professor Snape it was all an act, yet, she was trembling. She touched her face; she could still feel the warmth of his palm against her cheek, the whisper of his fingertips brushing over her lips. She could feel every small callous on the pads of his long fingers, could smell the crushed rosemary as they lingered over her mouth. She could still hear his voice saying her name, gently, almost affectionately. She could see the heat in his dark, obsidian gaze. It was the singularly most erotic thing that had ever happened to her in her short life. Her body had all but hummed when he stroked her cheek, and she'd felt cold and hot at once. She was almost sure her knickers were wet.

And when she'd kissed him, and asked him to be careful, she had prayed for one brief moment that he would return her embrace. In those few short minutes with her professor, she dimly understood why Sirius Black had not so much as stirred any latent emotion, other than revulsion. She understood desire now. It had a name and shape and form, and Hermione was deathly afraid her body had decided that form was her Potions professor.

*He started this, she thought, somewhat petulantly. Him, with his talk of hating Sirius Black, of convincing that madman Voldemort that she was infatuated with him, that she could be seduced into betraying Harry. And Professor Snape had made her knickers wet, and made her tremble merely by cupping her cheek and calling her his good girl. And what play are we enacting this time? Why did he sound so offended by it? These are his rules, aren't they?*

Hermione touched her lips again, trying to remember the feel of his fingertips, the sound of his voice. *Oh, gods, Hermione thought, closing her eyes. What if this isn't just a game?*

Suddenly, she felt very ashamed of herself, but she couldn't quite pinpoint why. She waited a few minutes, until her mind emptied of the inexplicable feeling of guilt, and rose to find the Headmaster.

He was waiting down the hall from Professor Snape's office. She walked quickly towards him, but Professor Dumbledore seemed in no hurry to move away. She waited until she was close enough to be able to whisper to him.

"Sir, Professor Snape wanted me to give you a message. He's been "

"I know, Miss Granger. I encountered him as he was leaving. He asked me to come down and make sure you were alright." Dumbledore gave her a fond, fatherly smile. "He seemed to think you might be a bit... agitated."

"Well, sir..." She glanced quickly around, but they were quite alone in the corridor. It was a narrow hall, free even from portraits. "Aren't you worried for him? After all, the last time he was summoned..." Hermione stuttered to a halt, unwilling to mention that night, that one, strange night, which had made so many changes in the status quo.

"Miss Granger, Professor Snape is a very capable wizard. He is the one man I trust with my life. I have every confidence that he will return to Hogwarts soon, and without grievous harm. You must trust in his ability to take care of himself."

Hermione stared at the Headmaster. She was still smarting from his remarks about her and Sirius. Now, to blithely dismiss Professor Snape's potential peril seemed callous in the extreme. A sense of grave injustice flared within her, but she quickly remembered that she was now a player in this dangerous game. Immediately, Hermione tried to rearrange her expression into a calmer one.

"Yes, sir. Thank you. Well, I'm going to be late for dinner."

"Indeed. Enjoy your meal, Miss Granger."

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"Greasy git. Why does he constantly have to pick on you or Harry?" Ron asked. At least, that's what Hermione hoped Ron had said. With the contents of an entire plate of food in his mouth, it was hard to tell, exactly. "Where is the old Dungeon Bat, anyway?"

"Don't say things like that about Professor Snape," she said, her tone automatic, absent-minded. Hermione stole a glance at the Head Table. Professor Snape's place was empty. Hermione was tempted to tell the boys that their professor was out possibly risking his life for the Order. It probably would have effectively shut them up, but the words stuck in her throat. She desperately wanted to talk to Harry about Sirius as well, but every time she opened her mouth, the opening gambit sounded either too forced or too accusatory. Harry sensed she wanted to speak to him, and had given her several opportunities, but like her, didn't seem to be able to break the seal.

She wondered if she should go and wait for Professor Snape by his office. As a prefect, she had any number of plausible reasons to be there, but she was still loath to take her chances down in the dungeons, near the Slytherin house quarters.

As the last of the food disappeared, Ron and Harry rose. "Are we still on for tonight?"

"What?" she said, looking up at her dark-haired friend. Harry smiled down and gave her a playful little shake.

"Hello? Earth to Hermione? We were going to have a planning session for the next " He quickly glanced around. "You know, special meeting?"

Ah, the D.A. strategy meeting. She'd completely forgotten about it. She smiled and stood. "Of course. I'm going to change. I'll see you later, yeah?"

As the boys left, Hermione risked a final glance up at the Head Table. Only the Headmaster and Professor McGonagall were left, chatting away like old friends. Disappointed, Hermione finished the last of her pumpkin juice, and was about to leave, when a drawing voice behind her said, "Looking for Lover Boy? I told Father I can't understand what he possibly sees in you, but, then again, Snape's no oil painting, either, is he?"

Hermione whirled to see the smirking, pointed face of Draco Malfoy, sneering down at her. Of course! Lucius Malfoy would have been at the Death Eater meeting, when Professor Snape was hurt. Draco could have been there as well, for all she knew. Choosing to ignore Draco, Hermione silently rose and started to walk away. From behind, Draco softly called out, "Hey, Granger, what do you get when you cross a Mudblood with a Potions master?"

Hermione turned and gave him a cool look. "Oh, I don't know, Draco. A Malfoy?"

His pale face flushed with anger. "Shut your grubby mouth, Granger! You're going to have to learn some manners around your betters, girl. There are some who believe that a wizard who can't keep his witch under control deserves a little beating himself. I wouldn't be so smug if I were you!"

Hermione stood still for a moment, then walked back to the Slytherin table. She hissed, "Shut up, Malfoy." She looked him up and down, carefully. "Here's a riddle for you, Draco. Do you know how easy it is to castrate a ferret? No?" She gave him a look of pure disdain that would have made even Professor Snape proud. Glancing down at his crotch, she sneered, "Keep annoying me and you'll find out firsthand!"

She walked out of the Great Hall, but not before Draco called back. "Enjoy it while it lasts, Mudblood. When he gets tired of you, he's already promised the rest of us can play with you."

Hermione's blood was boiling, but she smiled mirthlessly, as she walked toward the Gryffindor common room. She may not be in possession of Slytherin guile, but she was strong enough to learn how to control her emotions around Draco Malfoy. If Professor Snape had a hidden agenda, she would be clever enough to find it. As she made the long walk to Gryffindor Tower, her initial exhilaration faded, just as Draco had planned. His parting shot had put just enough doubt in her mind, as to exactly the conditions Severus Snape had bartered, when he made his pact with his Dark Lord.

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"You're rather late, Severus," the Dark Lord hissed, as Severus knelt down, and kissed the hem of his robe. "Dallying with your new toy, no doubt."

"Forgive me, My Lord," Severus said, lifting his dark, liquid eyes to Voldemort. "I confess she has provided more distraction than I am used to indulging."

Severus forced his body to remain relaxed, as he allowed the Dark Lord to invade his mind. It was always a sickening sensation; there was a corpulent feel to the Dark Lord's invasion of Severus' mind, a subtle sliding against his consciousness. It felt oily and rancid, as if something rotten stroked the corridors of his soul.

And there she was... *You always make me feel safe, Professor... you don't have to go back there, child... stay with me... I will protect you from Black... I don't want to be with Harry...* Hermione, looking up at him with that soft, trusting glow... The dormant, innocent arousal, the more knowing pull of desire, when he called her *higood girl*... He pushed all his want, his need to possess the girl, his erection, the feel of the physical pulse in his groin as she touched her soft lips to his fingertips.

Finally, the Dark Lord sat back on his throne. "You've done well, Severus. Already, the girl is pulling away from the Potter boy."

"Really, My Lord?" came the drawling voice of Lucius Malfoy. Severus turned and faced the blond aristocrat. With an expression of mild puzzlement, Lucius flicked his gaze to Severus. "My Draco tells me that the Granger girl and Potter are as close as ever. Apparently, they're working together with several other students in some sort of clandestine Defense club, where the girl is one of the leaders."

He gave Severus a smug smile. "It hardly sounds like a young girl forsaking her best friend, Severus."

Severus gave Malfoy a withering, patronizing stare. "It does, if you do not wish to draw any undue attention to yourself, Lucius. I've told the girl that she must carry on as always. She understands that she must not show any outward signs of rebellion, or our association ends." He tutted slightly at Malfoy. "I think you've grown soft, Lucius. You used to be much more... Slytherin." Malfoy's face darkened, his pale, grey eyes growing glacial.

"Children, please," Voldemort interrupted, and both Severus and Lucius lowered their heads. "You know it pains me to see my loyal lieutenants squabbling. Of course, the girl must act as if nothing is amiss. Severus will teach her the ways of his house, Lucius, and when her loyalties are revealed at my triumphant moment, the Potter boy's anguish will make my victory sweeter," he hissed, smiling his unholy glee into the room.

"Rome was not built in a day, my dear Lucius, and neither is vengeance. Let my Potions master brew his young lover in her time, and she will be all the more flavourful and potent for his patience. I seem to recall, Severus," Voldemort smiled, stroking the dark man's hair fondly, "That you ever enjoyed the taste of willing flesh more than that which is taken by force."

Severus willed his body not to shudder in revulsion at the Dark Lord's fondling, possessive touch. "Indeed, My Lord." He allowed his eyes to slide toward Malfoy again. "I find the idea of rape to be a huge waste of energy that can be better spent in more... pleasurable pursuits." Some of the Death Eaters laughed, knowing it was a barb against those who had took him by force, whose selfish cruelty was only too well known.

Severus had never enjoyed the tang of rape, which was why he privately thought the Dark Lord frequently used it as a punishment for him. Severus would always take celibacy over forced molestation, and this pleased the Dark Lord. He was only too happy to appease his loyal Death Eaters' darker appetites now, to keep them sated, dependently under his thumb. However, when the war was over, he would need acolytes like Severus, whose minds were not slaves to their basest desires.

Severus was saying, "She is an intelligent young witch, who craves knowledge over everything. Once she has tasted the forbidden fruit, she will only crave more. Already she asks questions. It will be only a matter of time until she is ready for her answers."

Voldemort decided the Mudblood girl was a pleasant diversion for the Potions master. Already forced to live the life of a monk in the soft nest of Hogwarts, Severus eschewed all but the occasional dark revel, and only then when under the most imperious command of his Master. He occasionally frequented the Knockturn Alley whores, who gratefully accepted his coin, but turned their faces away, as if being forced to copulate with a golden idol or animal.

If the young girl could give Snape her loyalty, and willingly warm his bed, she could give Voldemort another string to his bow against Harry Potter; against Severus, even. If properly motivated, she would provide wise counsel to the Potions master. She would certainly keep him on his toes, until she was no longer of use.

The Dark Lord stroked Severus' face in a fond caress. "Rise, my friend. Now, when is the next Order meeting?"

"Next week, My Lord. I plan on antagonizing the blood traitor, Black, into a confrontation. If I can convince Potter that Black is molesting his friend, it will be one more distraction to demoralize the boy."

Voldemort nodded, pleased. "Well played, my friend. The game is afoot, then. Isolate the boy, until he stands alone, and he will fall. I am pleased with your report, Severus. Return to your school, to your little plaything." His smile was a hideous thing. "Kiss her goodnight for me."

Severus stood, and kissed the hand that had stroked his hair. He stood and faced the Dark Lord, resisting the urge to wipe his mouth. "You are too kind to me, My Lord. And to her, as well." He looked up at the Dark Lord with fevered adulation. "I will mold her into a fitting jewel for your throne."

"I have every belief you will, my friend."

Severus bowed again, and turned to leave the room.

"And Severus? When you go to the Order meeting, take her with you."

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Song lyrics are from 'Waiting To Hear' by Christopher Branch, one of my Songwriter friends, from his album 'If All These Things Are True'. Used with permission

## Four: There Are Wounds That Stir Up The Force of Gravity

Chapter 5 of 39

Severus is relieved to return to Hogwarts unscathed, but that would be almost too much to hope for...

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

*For Sempra and Mimi*

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*I could not say no to the light of my desire; I'm not asking so much.*

*But you roll-call the passion:*

*His lips ? No. His back ? No. His face? No, no, no - I'm not asking so much!*

---

Severus Apparated to the same point he always used, just outside the wards of the school. He stood still for a moment, looking down at his feet, letting his stomach catch up with the rest of him. He could see little whorls in the dust, showing the patch of dirt he used over and over, Apparating and Disapparating from Hogwarts. How many times in the last six months had he been summoned before the Dark Lord, and thankfully returned to this same spot, with his body and his sanity intact? How many times had he returned with neither?

He looked up at the castle, his home for so many years. He hardly thought of his house in Manchester as home. It was merely the place he had existed, until he came here. Hogwarts had ever been refuge and haven, workhouse and prison. He loved it almost as much as he hated it. He had never wanted to teach, but his foolish, bitter choices had narrowed his options down to nothing, until Dumbledore picked him up that horrible, hideous night, and gave him a choice of life over death. Severus was no longer sure he'd made the right decision.

Hogwarts would forever stand as a symbol to him, of what he'd had and lost. At one time, he thought he could eventually atone for his sins. Lately, especially on nights like this, he knew that to be no longer true.

As he walked past Hagrid's hut, Severus saw the half-giant standing on his top step, peering out into the night. A lantern was in his raised hand, bathing the ground around his door with soft light.

Silently, Severus nodded to the large man, and Rubeus returned the nod with a gentle smile, stepped back inside, and closed the door. Dumbledore would often notify Hagrid that Professor Snape might be returning from a meeting the worse for wear; more than once, since the Dark Lord's return, Hagrid had carried the injured wizard up to the infirmary, in the late hours of the night.

Severus found it rather comforting, that Hagrid would often wait up, just in case. It was always a relief to both of them for Severus to be able to return to the castle under his own power, rather than taken there, cradled like a battered child, in the arms of the soft-hearted Hagrid. Severus, to be honest, also appreciated the fact that Hagrid never judged him.

Only now could Severus allow himself to think of Hermione. Would she be waiting, worrying about him? Why did the thought that she might, seem so sweet to him? How could the silly ramblings of a child give him such pleasure, such a feeling of hope that, after all, they might be able to find safety? Perhaps together?

The meeting with the Dark Lord had ended several hours ago, but Severus had made an unscheduled stop, before returning to the castle. As he left the presence of the Dark Lord, he had been almost overwhelmed with relief, and a brittle, uncertain joy. He felt shaky, and feverish, and, truth be told, randy as hell.

He remembered the little play with Hermione with incredible clarity, as if reviewing it in his mind like a Muggle film. It had been intense, and arousing, and had left him wanting more. It had been a long time since he'd given in to his desires, other than to relieve himself with his hand. That would not do tonight. He needed to celebrate.

He Apparated into Knockturn Alley, bristling with the exhilaration of surviving another night without torture. He was thrumming with life, and relief that he was not dead, or, at the very least, physically abused again. His heart was beating wildly, and shortly, he found the right witch, paid her price and cast the cleansing charms on her, the protective charms on himself, and the notice-me-not charm on them both. He had just enough self-restraint to push her face against the wall, in one of the Alley's many alcoves, release his eager cock from his trousers, bend her forward and plunge into her, with a growl of satisfaction.

He was finished in a matter of minutes, enjoying the anonymous heat of the nameless, almost faceless woman, hearing her grunts mingling with his, as he pounded into her, wanting only the life-affirming release of fucking a willing cunt. His pleasure mingled with the sweet knowledge that he'd survived one more encounter with death.

He did not stop to analyse why he'd chosen the whore with honey-coloured, bushy hair, or how much he enjoyed wrapping his hands in it as he engaged her body.

Behind his tightly closed eyes, he didn't have to analyse who he pretended to fuck. As his climax roared from him, he didn't question why he'd silently formed the word, *Hermione!* over and over on his lips, as his issue shot hard and hot into the hired vessel. It did not please him on some level, but completed him on another.

Once he'd finished, and cleaned himself, he walked away, feeling dissatisfied, as he always did with prostitutes. It was true, the witch was just a whore, but he hated the feeling of this indifferent, meaningless screw. It never occurred to him that he was not a sex-deprived pervert.

He was a loved-starved man.



It would have humiliated Severus to realise he did not know there was a difference. He only knew the feeling that he had done something pointless. He merely considered it a dark necessity, one that would never truly satisfy him, because the darkness was never satisfied. Merlin, his brother Death Eaters would laugh themselves apoplectic if they knew his weak, childish thoughts.

He walked slowly, deliberately, up the school steps, counting them, as he always did. It calmed him, prepared him for his briefing with the Headmaster. He knew he was merely whistling in the dark. No amount of counting was going to calm him tonight. He had no idea what to tell Dumbledore. Severus felt restless and tired, all at once. His skin both tingled and crawled, from his encounter in the Alley.

On the surface, it had all started so simply. He wanted to show Black that Miss Granger could not be used to place another notch on his bedpost. Because he'd been unable to do so with Lily, he wanted to protect the girl from Black and the blind trust of her friends. He wanted to be safe himself. He enjoyed Hermione, as someone who enjoyed intellect and cleverness. The young Gryffindor had been the most irritating of students, until he realised she was as hungry, as lonely, and as needy as he. He could no longer tell himself he wasn't intrigued on a more physical level as well.

He'd started this mess, out of desperation and torture, and now he had to keep all the balls in the air. He'd done it before, but he had been a much younger man, with more reserves to draw upon. He was older now; the years had blunted his razor edge, making him a clumsier, albeit more destructive weapon. He had no right to the girl. His first mission was to ensure Potter lived to defeat the Dark Lord.

But what then? Would he be free? Would he even be alive to enjoy that freedom? If he lived, he wanted to start afresh. Could the little, curly-haired swot be the key to a new life? Would she even want to be? Could he place his love and regret for Lily behind him, permanently? Did he even have the capacity to love someone else?

He had felt her respond to him. His large, sensitive nose smelled the unbearably sweet scent of arousal. She had pretended to pretend, he was sure of it. Where did that leave him? Where did he want this to go?

Mainly, he just wanted it all to be over, one way or another. For Potter to win, or for himself to die. But it would be so sweet to run away, to grab Hermione's hand and run. *Oh, Lily, what have I done?*

As he entered the back side of the castle, through the tunnel entrance to the dungeons, he thought about what he would tell Miss Granger. How would he explain that he had a job to do, that she was part of it, and he needed her to play the game as well?

There was time to think on it. First, he needed to shower, and wipe the stench of his own lust from his body. Then, he would sit down with a glass of wine, and give this serious consideration.

He walked toward his private quarters, off from his office, and saw a figure walking the halls in front of him. He sighed. He had faced one of his fears tonight; it was now time to face another. Then he smiled. Hermione Granger had come to him. She had come to HIM, Severus Snape.

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Hermione sat in her room for almost an hour after the DA strategy meeting, arguing with herself about going to see Professor Snape. If she went to his private quarters, what on earth would she say to him?

*Well, Professor, I just wanted to see how you were doing after your meeting with Lord Voldemort. And since, just by speaking to me, you made my knickers so wet that I had to change them, I thought I'd stop by, to see what you planned to do for an encore... Of course. Then, she'd just slide out of the room, on a slime trail of his scorn.*

On the other hand, what if he were injured, and needed her again? *That's stupid, Hermione. The man has been doing this for months now, and he was just fine before you blundered in on him at Grimmauld.*

But he had already told Voldemort about her, before she'd found him there. He was already upset with her, when he left Grimmauld Place that night, which was why Voldemort saw her in the professor's mind in the first place. She had caused his punishment.

It had been that guilt that had made her start the strange little charade, the one that began with her pretending to be infatuated with her professor, and ended up with her - well, being infatuated with her professor. She thought of his voice, how sweet and seductive it had sounded, like the softest silk sliding over her nerve endings, awakening her to feelings she'd never experienced before.

She paced her small room, chewing on her bottom lip thoughtfully. *We're in this together. I should at least make sure he's alright.* Hermione grimaced. She was doing a pitiful job, fooling even herself. He had stirred something within her, something dark and forbidden and oh, so, tempting. She lay on the bed, very still, trying to remember the feelings he'd evoked, when he touched her cheek. His fingers were so sensitive...

*Stop it, stop it, stop it!* She raged at herself, embarrassed. If her professor knew what she was doing, what she was thinking, he'd probably be mortified. They were acting out a scene for him to replay for Voldemort. That was all it was. *What play are we enacting this time? The Passion of Christ?*

Gods, she'd made a fool of herself. And now, she didn't know what to think, or believe. Professor Snape had promised that she didn't have to go back to Grimmauld again. *But was that just another part of the game? Maybe I could ask him.*

*No, you'll go to bed, and ask him at a more appropriate time* she told herself. She was still telling herself this as she threw on her cloak and headed out the door.

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Severus would have known it was her from a mile away. Her absolutely unreasonable hair, fluffing out in every direction, her slightly toes-out walk (which he remembered reading somewhere was a tell-tale sign of ballet training), and her tense posture, all told him even from this distance, that Miss Granger had come to his quarters. His soft boots carried him down the hall behind her, and he made an impulsive, but potentially disastrous decision. She was still walking away from his door, and any minute now, she would turn and...

"Miss Granger?" Hermione jumped, with a little squeak, and as she spun around, her eyes widened in shock. Before Severus could react, she turned and ran so quickly, he barely had time to register her terror-paled face. "Miss Granger!" he hissed, but fear had given her wings. She flew down the hall as if the hounds of hell were after her.

Severus felt something shift from the top of his head, and he cursed silently to himself, as the heavy cowl fell from his hair. He was still in his Death Eater robes. The girl was racing down the corridor, and it would only be a few feet before she was in view of the staircase. From there, she would run straight toward the Ravenclaw Common Room, screaming that there were Death Eaters in the castle...

As she ran, she suddenly whipped out her wand, and cried, *'Expecto Pat'*

"*Impedimental!*" he shouted, and the girl was stopped so suddenly, it looked like an invisible arm had yanked her around the waist, and held her aloft. *Muffliato!* Severus called, and Hermione's cries for help were silenced, her Patronus left unsummoned.

He ran from behind, removing the heavy robes as he ran, saying, "Miss Granger, please don't panic. It's me, Professor Snape."

Suspended in midair, the young woman looked as if she was floating underwater. Her hair, which had been streaming behind her, was twisting and turning in the magic current of the spell, tangling hopelessly. As he grew near, Severus put an arm against her back, and another around her waist. He whispered, "*Finite Incantatum,*" and caught her neatly as the canceled spell dropped her to the floor. He steadied the frightened girl on her feet, and she turned huge, tear-filled eyes to him. He stepped back,

feeling foolish and, no doubt, looking the part as well.

"I'm sorry, Miss Granger," Severus began, and made a half-hearted gesture at his robes. "I had forgotten about these."

The girl was shaking, and she turned her face away from him for a moment. She gasped, "I thought for a moment... I thought..."

Severus put a steadying hand on her shoulder. "Calm yourself, Miss Granger," he said, sternly. Experience had taught him that a nearly hysterical student could be placated more with a firm voice than a soothing one. "I apologise for jinxing you, but I had to stop you, before you mistakenly alerted the entire school that we were being invaded."

Hermione looked at him, shaking her head, then she sagged with relief. "I'm the one who should be apologizing, sir. I saw the robes, and I just panicked." She made a little gesture of frustration. "I feel so foolish! I came down to see if you were alright, and the moment I saw you, I started running like a first-year!" She gave him a beseeching look. "How am I supposed to help Harry if I run like a fool every time I get scared?"

Severus felt a momentary stab of fierce, hot, irrational jealousy. He'd just risked his life in front of a madman for the chit, and all she could talk about was helping bloody Potter! Severus could feel the sting of betrayal, the same betrayal he'd felt when Lily chose James. It was happening again, and he had risked his neck for her! Again! Anger severed any latent feeling of tenderness or remorse. His brows lowered, and his voice sounded hard, flat and final.

"I suggest in future, Miss Granger, that you refrain from sticking your bushy head where it doesn't belong, and perhaps you won't find yourself running from imaginary peril. Lion, indeed!" He sneered down at her, enjoying the shocked hurt in her eyes. "You certainly won't win points for the famous Gryffindor courage."

He turned on his heel, not wanting to see the reaction of his words. It had hurt like fuck when he'd walked away from Lily, and felt the distance growing between them, along with her silence. He didn't want to stick around to hear that silence again...

"Now wait just one damn minute!" Severus froze in his tracks, and slowly turned to see Hermione Granger, striding after him, her amber eyes thunderous, her wild hair almost crackling in anger. "Don't you dare walk away from me after saying something like that!"

Stunned that a student would challenge him so vehemently, Severus whirled around and stalked back to her. "I would advise you to lower your voice and change your tone, Miss Granger. Thirty points from Gryffindor for your insolence."

That stopped her. She never lost points for her House. For a moment, he thought he had cowed her enough, but she merely changed tack, and continued walking toward him.

"Fine. I probably deserved that." She came close enough for him to see the sweat on her forehead, the corkscrew curls of her hair, where the Impedimenta Jinx had twisted and knotted it. She was still breathing heavily, and he waited for her to speak.

She drew herself up to full height. "You frightened the devil out of me. I came down here to see if you were alright, or if you were hurt, or needed help. And you scared me, you jinxed me, you insulted me, then you took house points away from me!"

She had worked herself up into a state, and now stood, breathing hard, staring at her professor, who was looking at her as if she were from another planet. Frustrated, Hermione raised her hand to wipe the perspiration from her forehead, only to be met with the complete tangled mess that was her hair.

She huffed. "AND you've tangled my hair into knots! How am I supposed to fix this?" She looked into his stony face. After a moment's silence, she sighed. "But you're alright, aren't you?"

Severus opened his mouth to speak, and closed it again. He was completely overwhelmed by the little witch's impudence. He was still smarting from her remark about Harry, angry at her self-righteous outburst, and flummoxed that she'd had the cheek to stand up to him. He was the one who walked away, head held high. He was not followed. How dare she -

Amidst all the conflicting emotions, was the sudden realisation that, before he'd frightened her into her sudden dash, she'd been here because she was worried about him. After all the anger, her first words were, "But you are alright, aren't you?".

He sighed. "Come with me, Miss Granger." He stared at her hopeless hair with growing dismay. "Perhaps I can help you, and we can discuss this little... outburst with calmer heads." He gave her hair another glance, and shook his head, bemused.

For a moment, he thought she was going to refuse to come with him. She merely looked at him, waiting. Severus smirked, realisation dawning. "I am quite unharmed, Miss Granger. Thank you for your concern. Right now, our most pressing matter is, shall we say, a little less perilous."

---

Once they had returned to his study, Severus excused himself, and took the opportunity to change back into his regular school robes. It would not do to be seen here with Miss Granger in anything other than a professional setting, no matter how much he would prefer it otherwise.

"Now," he said, drawing his wand. "Let's see if we can address this." He pointed his wand at her crazed hair, made a figure-eight motion with his wand, a downward slashing movement, and intoned, "*Teresdec Orocuros!*"

Hermione felt his magic slide around her hair, untangling the unmanageable mess, as if being brushed by unseen hands. Her hair began to smooth and curl of its own accord, into long, luxurious ribbons. The curls slid around themselves. One slinked around her arm. Severus smirked as one daring little curl reached out and attempted to slip around his wrist, like the tendrils of an octopus.

"Cheeky," he murmured, watching the curl insinuate a tentative grip on his wand. Hermione watched in fascination, as her hair reached to slink around her professor's hand almost possessively. Before it could wind its way around him completely, he dropped his arm, and stepped back, studying his work.

"That's a little better, I think, Miss Granger," he said, a self-satisfied smirk crooking the edges of his lips.

"That's that's wonderful!" Hermione laughed, watching her hair smoothing and curling, as if alive. "You'll definitely have to teach me that one, Professor."

"Indeed, although you may have to take a few running starts at it. Usually, if you make a downward motion of your wand, your hair will straighten. Yours, however, apparently desires to do otherwise."

Hermione laughed, her cheeks turning pink. She pulled the searching curl back, and let it twirl around her finger. "It usually does. My mum always said my hair had a mind of its own, but I've never seen it manifested so literally, until now." Her hair finally settled around her head in soft, curling waves. She smiled her thanks at her professor, and he nodded his acknowledgment.

Now that the initial terror of the evening had passed, Hermione felt drained, and completely idiotic. She'd taken one look at the menacing figure striding down the hall, and instead of assessing the situation, she'd turned tail, and ran like a first-year. *He must think I truly am a dunderhead* she thought.

It was only as she was about to reach the main body of the castle, did it occur to her to conjure her Patronus, to warn the DA. She shuddered now, at the thought that she might have actually sent it. Oh Gods, what a hideous mess she'd come so close to making! She felt a bit shaken at the thought of how much damage she could have wrought.

"Miss Granger?" Hermione looked up at her professor, who had obviously asked her a question. She'd been too immersed in her own embarrassment to notice. Feeling even worse, she gulped. "Yes, sir? I'm sorry. I was "

"Indeed," was the rather dry reply. He looked only slightly patient. "I merely asked, would you care for tea?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, thank you, sir. I really should to return to Gryffindor Tower. I'm going to have to avoid Mr. Filch, as it is."

"Yes. In future, Miss Granger, perhaps you could refrain from taking unnecessary risks, however well intended. While I am flattered you were concerned for my welfare, I wish to remind you that I am a fully grown wizard, and capable of taking care of myself."

His tone sounded testy and crabbed, and Hermione felt as if she'd completely ruined the golden glow of their earlier time together. She nodded, suddenly unable to meet his eyes. "Yes, sir. I'm sorry." She rose to leave. "Goodnight, sir. I apologise for my poor manners earlier."

"Miss Granger, wait." Hermione looked up into his pale face, and could have sworn she saw something... it was gone before she could categorise it, but it certainly wasn't anger, or disappointment. It was...

Professor Snape tilted his head slightly, and, had it been anyone else, flirtatiously. Smoothly, he drawled, "Correct me if I'm wrong, Miss Granger, but you did attempt to conjure a Patronus earlier. Is that correct?"

Her face froze in uncertainty. The conflict in her face, of caution warring with the desire to show off her skills, made Severus want to laugh. He could almost see the wheels turning as she stammered, "Well, sir. Actually, I did, but " She turned frightened eyes up to his, and he felt a little, hard knot form in his belly. It was sweet and welcomed, but he didn't truly understand, or trust it.

"Would you please conjure it now?" His voice could have given silk lessons. "For me?"

Again, Severus suppressed a laugh, at how her reticence disappeared, replaced by delight at the chance to show off her abilities. Immediately, she raised her wand, and after giving him an indefinable look, cried out, "*Expecto Patronum!*"

A bright light flashed, and from her wand sprang an otter, playful and saucy. It swam in the invisible waters of magic around Severus, watching him intently, its expression flirtatious, and inviting. With another muttered spell from Hermione, it quickly swam away into nothingness, leaving the room darker, and, to Severus' mind, a bit bereft.

He turned to the young witch, and gave her a short nod, a look of grudging respect in his customary scowl. "Quite impressive. Very few witches your age are capable of such a fully-formed Patronus, Hermione."

Hermione felt her stomach flutter at the sound of her name, sliding from his lips. She blushed, and ducked her head. "Thank you, sir." Pride won over self-consciousness, and her pleasure at his praise seemed to be its own Patronus. She rewarded him with a smile, the likes of which were seldom reserved for Severus Snape. "Thank you!" she repeated, feeling absurdly pleased at his compliment.

For a moment, Severus dropped his eyes, thankful he had taken his passions to a more experienced witch tonight. The pull of this young woman was like that of a succubus to him, and he hated himself for feeling its lure. What's more, he hated her for pulling him in, albeit innocently. He loved Lily, didn't he?

It was time, he deduced, to put her back in place, both in her mind and his own. He continued his suave enquiry. "And, will you tell me..." He hesitated, and locked his gaze with hers. "How you learned to conjure it?"

Hermione, locked in his stare, knew she had been trapped. If she lied, he would know. If she told him the truth, her suspicions of his knowledge of the D.A. would become fact. *Oh, gods*, she thought. *I've destroyed us.*

"Hermione?" his voice was like chocolate, dark and intoxicating, and she shook her head, knowing what would happen next. He tilted his head, in that almost-flirtatious manner, and a smirk played about his lips. "Hermione, is there something you don't wish to tell me?" He stepped toward her, and Hermione knew she should try to block him out. His eyes were filling her vision, large, liquid, black - mesmerizing, and draining her will...

"Come here, Hermione."

*Come. Here. Hermione.* The three most seductive words in the English language, when issued from that stunning, velvet-lined throat. Hermione shook her head, even as she walked toward him. Was he casting an Imperio? Her feet moved toward him of their own accord, and she could no more stop herself, than stop breathing.

When she got close enough to touch, he gave her a sneer that was almost sensual. "Look at me," he whispered, and she felt him enter her mind, and he moved effortlessly through her consciousness, gently probing, opening her, peeling back the walls of her resistance, like the most delicate pages of a book. He was a scent, and a flavour, and a hypnotic voice, moving within her mind...

*Her fear. Death Eater!... running down the hall, feeling his spell yanking her off her feet and suspending her in the air... talking with Harry and Ron, "We should work more on shielding this week, there are still a lot of weak spots"... Draco... "Snape's already promised we can have you when he's through with you"...*

She could feel his anger at this, and he changed within her mind, grew harder, colder, then changed again to something else, something warmer, desirable... *You're a good girl, Hermione... oh, yes, such a good girl... touching me, Professor Snape is touching me... I like it...it feels good, forbidden, wanted...*

And suddenly, she was alone again. He was gone, and she felt chilled. There was a slick taste in her mouth that had nothing to do with him in her mind, but something that had been in *his* mind, earlier... She was falling, her mind sizzling with the implication of what he'd seen, and now what he knew.

Strong hands gripped her arms. She heard a sob escape her throat, a sound of humiliation and fear, and suddenly, she was sitting in a huge chair, and her professor was kneeling down in front of her, apologizing.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," he said, his eyes bleak. He was holding her hands in a painful grip. "I shouldn't have! I just wanted to "

He jumped up and strode away from her, running a hand through his sweat-slicked hair. "I had no right," he rasped, the silkiness gone from his voice. He sounded upset and angry, but not, Hermione realised, at her. This anger was self-guided. He turned to her. "Sometimes, I think I may be going mad."

Hermione watched him carefully. "I'm frightening you, Miss Granger. I'm sorry." He shook his head. "I can't seem to get a grip on my emotions." He looked almost in tears. "I practically raped your mind, like one of the Marauders. I'm not like this," he pleaded.

His eyes grew darker, angrier. "I think of Black pawing you, touching you. He knows I..." Pain snaked around him. Suddenly, a dark, liquid fire settled in his belly, and he felt his body flush with hunger. Looking at the girl, he felt a crippling desire for her. He could take her now, no one would know... He could Obliviate her afterward. He could take her over and over, feel her warm maiden's blood splashing over his rigid cock...

"Ahh!" he cried, suddenly understanding. The soft, slimy touch of the Dark Lord... the forced kiss of his hand. The Dark Lord had given him the *Votumtactus* - the Dark Caress. What a fool he'd been! Hadn't he seen Death Eaters use the spell to incite one another's bloodlust, to enable them to prolong their stamina for a raid?

Panicking, Severus backed away from the girl. He held out his hand, as if to hold her at bay. "Miss Granger. Please listen to me. If you care anything about me, you'll leave now. I am not well. I must go see the Headmaster." He was almost visibly cowering. "Please, please do this for me. I promise I'll explain, if you'll just go now!"

Hermione looked at him, her concern warring with her fear. "Sir, should I call the Headmaster?"

"No! You can't be seen with me now! Please!" Shaking, Severus forced himself to calm. "Miss Granger Hermione, I have been cursed, and I don't wish to hurt you, but I will if you stay."

Hermione could see the anguish and fear in his dark eyes. Seeking to soothe him, she said, reassuringly, "I'm not afraid "

"You should be! I will hurt you, witch!" His fear changed into anger, and his eyes blazed at her. "The Dark Lord knows I desire you, girl, and if you stay, I'll take you against your will!" He drew his arms around himself, as if holding his own body in check. An almost helpless look of longing passed over his face, and his voice became intense and silvery. He took a deep breath through his large nose, and closed his eyes, ecstatically. "I can smell you, I can almost feel you if you let me touch you, I'll take you on the floor like a "

Severus' eyes flew open, and he raged, "Please leave! Can't you see I have no control over myself?" He swallowed, panting. "I promise it will pass. Just, for the love of Merlin, girl, leave, while I still have the strength to let you go!"

Hermione nodded, and turned to leave. "I'll be back tomorrow."

"I will let you know. Don't come back until I allow it GO!" he thundered, and almost wept with relief, when she fled from his study. Gods, he wanted her, wanted to pull her down on the floor and punch another hole in her. It would feel so good, and her cries would sound like sweet music. His thoughts began to race, and run wild and voracious in his mind, feeding on the uncontrollable lust the Dark Caress produced.

He grinned savagely. *Black will never have her. I'll howl my pleasure so loudly, he'll hear it, slinking in his coward's den in Grimmauld Place... She belongs to me. She is mine... I'll take her over and over and I'll smell her maiden's blood and it will inflame me more and I will fuck and fuck her I'll fuck her in front of Black and laugh as she comes on my cock I can call her back -*

He actually opened his mouth to call her name, knowing she would return to him, out of sense of concern, the latent desire he'd raised. She trusted him. She believed he would protect her. He made her feel *safe*...

A tiny pearl of light broke through the madness, and it was small, and pure, and shaped and scented like her. He knew with certainty he'd go mad, rather than allow anyone to hurt her. He had dragged her into this. He would hide her, even from himself, if necessary.

He staggered to the fireplace, snatched a handful of Floo powder, and announced, "Headmaster's Quarters!"

Hermione made her way quickly to Gryffindor Tower, as alarmed and frightened for her professor as she'd been at Grimmauld Place. And through her worry, and anxiety, were his words, playing over and over in her mind: *The Dark Lord knows I desire you, girl...*

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Title and opening lyrics are from the song Gravity, by Rickie Lee Jones

The Hair Spell is dedicated to the great Sempraseverus, whose drawings of Hermione's hair inspired Severus to create it, just for Hermione.

## Five: Take Me In, Tender Woman, Sighed The Snake

Chapter 6 of 39

Who is the hunter, and who is the hunted?

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

*For Sempra and Mimi*

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*...Now she stroked his pretty skin and then she kissed and held him tight*

*But instead of saying thanks, that snake gave her a vicious bite.*

*"I saved you," cried that woman, "And you've bit me even, why? You know your bite is poisonous, and now I'm going to die!"*

*"Oh shut up, silly woman," said the reptile with a grin, "You knew damn well I was a snake before you took me in!"*

*"Take me in, oh tender woman, take me in, for heaven's sake, Take me in, oh tender woman," sighed the snake...*

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"Circe's bird, Headmaster! What happened to the poor man?" Madam Pomfrey's face was strained, as she looked down at the twitching, sweat-soaked Severus, held in place with magical restraints. As he writhed on the infirmary bed, he groaned and muttered, his eyes wild, his skin paper-white and waxy.

Dumbledore looked grave. "He has been the victim of a dark curse, Poppy. The poor boy wasn't even aware of it. It only manifested itself upon his return to the castle."

Madam Pomfrey looked down at the Potions Master. He was so pale, he seemed to glow in the moonlight streaming into the infirmary windows. "Which curse is it? Is it something you know how to counter?"

"Only time will counter it, Poppy. He'll need to remain restrained like this for several days, possibly a week, until it works its way out of his system."

Poppy nodded at the Headmaster. She noticed that he had not deigned to answer her question. She licked her lips, and delicately asked, "Is there a potion that I can give him to relieve his suffering?" When Dumbledore did not reply, Poppy pressed, "Albus? If you won't tell me the curse, will you at least tell me what I can do to help him?"

Albus looked over at his Potions master, and thought for a moment more. "Votum Nexus should relieve some of the symptoms."

Poppy looked at him in shock. "Why? Votum Nexus is a potion to induce impotency!" She made a sound of puzzled incredulity. "Besides, Albus, that takes two days to brew. It's not exactly something I keep on hand here." They looked together at the twitching, moaning man on the bed. Poppy shook her head. "He'll go mad during that time." She huffed, frustrated. "What exactly is wrong with him, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore merely looked down at Severus. Madam Pomfrey shook her head, completely nonplussed. "Albus, why are you being so reticent? How am I to help the boy, if you won't tell me what has cursed him?"

"The curse itself is unimportant. His reaction to it is my chief concern. I may have to place him in an enchanted sleep, Poppy." The Headmaster turned and walked toward the door. He turned back, his eyes sad and thoughtful. "Keep him as comfortable as possible, my dear. I'll return momentarily. Professor Umbridge requires my attention."

Severus heard the muffled sounds of the Headmaster and Poppy Pomfrey, but it was little more than a buzzing inside his head. All he could feel was heat, and a desire so voracious, it threatened to drive him mad. He thought of her... The desire to take her was so overpowering, it was painful. When he stumbled into the Headmaster's study, he was ready to tear the school apart to get to her.

He had no doubt in his mind that he would have hunted her down and taken her where he found her, were it not for the powerful restraints that bound him to his bed. His body ached for her, his Muse, his charge, his lover. It twisted his allegiance to Lily; it diluted his pure love and devotion to his friend. He fought against it, but every time he tried to picture Lily, her image would disperse in a puff of smoke, to be replaced by -

He could see *her*... she would kneel at his feet, and her mouth would take him to heaven, sliding over his turgid, straining cock as he tangled his hands in her wild hair... she would rub against him wantonly, allowing him to fuck her in a thousand ways... if she wanted to conjure a cock of her own and bugger him, he would let her. He would let her make him her slave... he could hear her, smell her, feel her... she was his goddess, his mistress, his succubus, his lover. She would hide him away, where no one could see them...

No, she was not his lover! He didn't love her. You don't love what you want to crush and demean and fuck and rape and hurt... He whimpered *She's a bloody student! I do not desire students!*

*Please don't let me hurt her!* he thought, praying to those cold, indifferent gods again. He honestly did not know why he bothered to beseech *them*. She was his goddess now. She was the only one who could give him what he needed to remain sane.

He could see her face, sharp with intelligence, and tender with compassion. She thought he was a good man.

He'd show her! *Oh, Lily, why have I been made to suffer so? When will my peace come? When can I rest?* Tears slid from his eyes, and he wept. *Oh, I want to die so much... Oh, I want her so much...*

The Dark Caress burned and twisted painfully through his system, threatening to reduce him to a sobbing, tortured wreck. *Gods, I can't take this!* The Dark Caress was at its peak now, riding him like a whipped horse, heedless of direction or destination. The humiliation he felt was crippling, like a Crucio that caused an indeflatable erection, mindless and consciousnessless, except for its target.

He was no longer a man; he was a driven machine, one that would chase her relentlessly until he had emptied every last part of himself into her, body and soul. That's all he wanted right now. He wanted it more than anything. More than his acceptance letter from Hogwarts, more than his first wand, more than his first set of fine dress robes.

More than Lily.

He wished he had his wand. He'd kill himself. It could only bring relief. The Killing Curse would be cold, as if stored in a block of ice... Yes, the Avada would feel like ice, cooling his fevered brain, as it sliced his body apart and he slipped away... *Hermione? Where are you? Take me away, please... where no one can see me, no one can find me, where no one can hurt me... don't let them hurt me anymore... If you could just hold me again, I would be safe...*

*I have never lusted after a student. I'm not one of those shabby little perverts who... oh, gods, I am, I am! Oh, why has this wild-haired little swot of a girl done this to me?*

He did not know that he wept in his fevered sleep, or that the Headmaster had heard his pleas for help, or that, deep in her sleep, Hermione had heard him as well, and had woken, frantic, frightened, longing for the arms of someone to hold her, and hide her away. She had tears on her pillow, and a feeling of complete and inconsolable desolation that caused her to sob unaccountably for almost an hour.

She had a guilty feeling that she'd called *aname* in her sleep.

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By the following Monday, Hermione was almost frantic with worry over her professor. Potions class had been taught by Professor Sprout, with the explanation that Professor Snape was feeling under the weather, and would return in the next day or so. No one except for Hermione seemed to mind that their Potions Master wasn't present. Draco had been so insufferably smug she'd wanted to smack him, but she kept her own council.

After dinner, Hermione sat in the Common Room, pretending to study, but in reality she was reviewing the events of the previous weekend. Had it really been just three days ago that she'd been asked to stay behind in class to speak with Professor Snape? It seemed like she'd lived a lifetime since then. Her strange, hot dreams returned. She ran aimlessly, looking for Professor Snape, not knowing why, only that they could protect each other. She seldom found him, and when she did, their liaisons were so intense, she was afraid she might be moaning in her sleep; she tried to stay awake until everyone else was asleep.

She found herself desperately wishing she were older, or at least, wiser. She was already looking forward to the Easter holidays; she needed to talk with her mother. Mum always had a gift for putting these kinds of things into perspective.

Later in the evening, when she heard Professor McGonagall's voice in the Gryffindor common room, Hermione knew instinctively the woman was coming to speak to her. There was no doubt in her mind, and before the older witch walked into the room and said, "Beg pardon for the interruption, but I wonder, Miss Granger, if I might have a word?" Hermione was already drawing her school robes over her t-shirt and denims.

Together, she and Professor McGonagall left Gryffindor tower, disturbing a mumbling, none-too-sober Fat Lady, who'd been having a nightcap with one of the witches from the Macbeth portrait. Hermione and her Head of House headed toward the infirmary.

As they walked, Hermione glanced at Professor McGonagall from time to time. For someone who wished to have a word with Hermione, the professor didn't seem to be in a very big hurry to do it. Finally, as they walked, Hermione plucked up the courage to ask, "Professor? Could you tell me what this is about?" Her voice sounded ridiculously loud in the empty hall, and Professor McGonagall continued walking.

"The Headmaster will be able to explain things better than I, Miss Granger," she said, fixing Hermione with a look that made her feel absurdly guilty. "I will rely on your discretion on these matters, especially with Professor Umbridge and her Inquisition Squad skulking about."

Shocked that her professor would say anything negative about another faculty member, Hermione nodded. "Yes, of course, Professor."

They entered the quiet infirmary, and something of the stark, clinical look of the long rows of beds made Hermione's heart beat faster. It was as if the walls of the ward held old memories. It felt as though spirit chalice of anxiety and distress hung from the walls of the room. Hermione realised she felt like this in every hospital she'd ever visited.

"Wait here, Miss Granger. The Headmaster will join you shortly." With those words, Professor McGonagall gave Hermione a brief smile, and left her alone with her thoughts.

Hermione was standing at the end of the main ward, beside a door she had never noticed in all the times either she, Harry or Ron had ended up in the infirmary. Instinctively, she opened the door and looked inside. There was one patient there.

As if being led by an unseen hand, Hermione drew near to the figure on the bed. She was shocked to see Professor Snape lying on the narrow cot. He looked painfully vulnerable, in his sleeping shirt, his body covered in sweat, restlessly moving on the bed.

Tentatively, she stepped closer. There was a small basin of water on the table beside his bed, and almost automatically, she dipped a towel into the water, squeezed out the excess, and placed the damp cloth on his forehead. He whimpered in his sleep, and at the touch of the cool compress against his skin, he gave a little sigh, and opened his eyes. They were bloodshot and unfocused.

"Miss Granger?" he whispered. Wordlessly, she nodded. He closed his eyes, and Hermione felt sick with pity. He looked so helpless. Every time he was called to that madman, he had to suffer.

Her professor coughed, a sharp bark of a noise. "Am I dreaming?"

"No, sir. If you'll remember, you felt unwell and asked me to leave, but Professor McGonagall brought me here tonight. The Headmaster "

"Listen to me!" His eyes were frantic, and he seemed to radiate heat. Hermione was starting to think he was delirious. "I need to speak with you, Miss Granger. You must help me."

"Of course, sir. Tell me what to do." Hermione leaned over, her troubled eyes gazing into his. He gave another of his short, sharp barking coughs. He closed his eyes, tightly, as if bracing himself for something unpleasant.

"So innocent. You are, aren't you? Such an innocent little girl," he murmured, and Hermione's breath caught. Something was terribly, terribly wrong. Her heart ached for him.

"I don't understand, Professor. Please try to rest. Don't distress yourself. You're not well."

Tears ran unchecked down her face, and when he opened his eyes, he frowned. "Why are you crying, Miss Granger?" His expression changed, became more knowing, sly. "Are you crying for me?"

She nodded. "You shouldn't have to suffer like this," she whispered, fearfully looking around, in case someone entered the room. "I'm sorry. This is my fault."

He licked his lips, and she poured a glass of water, and holding the back of his damp head, Hermione carefully put the glass to his lips. He drank it thirstily. Once his thirst was slaked, he collapsed back on the bed, his eyes a little clearer. "Your fault? Hardly, Miss Granger. I brought it on myself."

"What do you mean?"

He tried to rise, and that's when he must have realised he was restrained. "I would tell you, but I can't while I'm tied down." His eyes drifted out of focus, and a look of pain flashed across his face. He moaned, and again, Hermione's heart broke for him.

He turned to her, as if he remembered something important he needed to tell her. "Miss Granger, listen to me...."

She leaned in, closer. "Yes, sir?"

He smiled. "Closer, Hermione." There was a bright glint in his eye that didn't look real to her, as if he was a glamour. His voice was so tender, and when he spoke her name, it sounded like music, even through his tortured throat.

Obediently, she leaned down. As she looked into his deep, liquid eyes, he made a soft, little moaning sound. "Oh, Hermione." She felt her body tremble; and she leaned in closer to him, her body aching with this indefinable, overwhelming need for... what?

He shook his head, a soft smile playing about his lips. Sleepy-eyed and languid, he crooned, "Lay me low, where no one can see us, where no one can find us, where no one can hurt us..." His eyes were pleading, beautiful. The eyes of a lover. They were, at once, innocent and knowing, dark and light, gentle and wild.

Hermione gasped in surprise, as the words he had spoken in her dream came back to her. "What where did you "

He collapsed back on the bed as the Headmaster entered the room. Hermione guiltily stepped back from his bed; she felt as if she'd been caught sitting in his lap.

She turned to Dumbledore. "Headmaster! What has happened to him?" She looked down at her professor, concern darkening her eyes.

Dumbledore looked grave. His eyes followed hers down to the sleeping wizard. "Professor Snape has been cursed." He looked at her carefully. "Miss Granger, I need to ask you some questions, and I need you to be very honest with your answers."

Irrationally, Hermione's feeling of guilt increased. "Of course, sir." Although her voice sounded confident, she found it difficult to meet his eyes.

For a moment, Dumbledore seemed content to keep his gaze on his Potions master. Without taking his eyes off the man on the bed, the Headmaster asked, "Miss Granger, were you in Professor Snape's presence at anytime on the evening after he returned from his... meeting?"

Hermione hesitated. Dumbledore put an assuring hand on her arm. "Please understand, Miss Granger. You are not in trouble, I merely need to ascertain if Professor Snape made contact with anyone after his time with..." The Headmaster gave her a significant look, and Hermione dropped her eyes.

"Well, sir, I did see him for a short amount of time." She blushed. "I was worried about him. After the last time..."

A low moan made the two of them turn to the man on the infirmary bed. He twisted and turned on the sweat-soaked bed. Hermione turned troubled eyes on her Headmaster. "Sir, isn't there anything you can do for him? He seems to be in agony!"

"If his present course of treatment doesn't bring him peace, I will put him in an enchanted sleep, Miss Granger. He'll be able to rest easy then." Dumbledore gave her a piercing look. "You must tell me, Miss Granger. Did Professor Snape do or say anything, that seemed... inappropriate?"

Hermione stared at the Headmaster, shocked. Once again, she got the feeling that, whatever the Headmaster's agenda, it didn't include making his Potions master comfortable, or ease his suffering. "No, sir! He didn't seem quite himself, but he was a perfect gentleman!"

Dumbledore patted her shoulder again. "I never doubted it, Miss Granger. Now, you may return to your Tower." He turned away from her, and Hermione realised she was being dismissed again. Emboldened, she remained.

"Sir?" Dumbledore turned back to her, expectantly. She blushed again. "Could I help? I mean, he looks so helpless, and he's been so protective of me. Please?"

The Headmaster glanced up at Hermione. She was looking down at Severus with a mixture of concern and compassion, and her young heart was showing in her face. Whatever Severus Snape had ever done to this child, she undoubtedly cared for him. *So she is the target*, the Headmaster thought.

Dumbledore reached over the professor's body to Hermione. "Your wand hand, Miss Granger."

Silently, Hermione held out her right hand, and the Headmaster gently grasped her wrist, turned her hand palm face down, and laid her palm over her professor's heart. His body was shockingly hot.

Professor Snape jumped, as if he'd received an electrical shock. Then, his body relaxed, and a look of profound relief spread across his face. He made a soft sigh, and he settled into a deep, peaceful sleep.

"Fascinating," Dumbledore said, and released Hermione's hand. He muttered a spell that Hermione did not hear properly or understand. Professor Snape slept easily, and his entire body grew still and quiet. The only sound in the room was his soft, deep, not-quite-snoring breathing.

"You may remove your hand, Miss Granger," Professor Dumbledore said, startling Hermione out of her reverie. She found herself loath to take her hand away from the warm, moving chest of her professor. It felt right, to stand there, touching him. However, she knew she needed, for propriety's sake, if nothing else, to move away from the sleeping man.

Finally, as if in slow motion, Hermione took her hand away from her professor's body, and was surprised to see her fingers tremble. She looked up at the Headmaster, a look of complete bafflement on her face.

"It is apparent that you have some feelings for Professor Snape, Miss Granger." He cocked a stern eye at her. "I must ask you if your feelings are entirely suitable."

Stunned, Hermione felt her temper rising. *How bloody DARE he say such a thing?* "Sir, I can assure you that my feelings for Professor Snape are the feelings that any student would have for a teacher they admire deep concern and esteem. With all due respect, I find your insinuations insulting, sir."

Dumbledore turned to Hermione, a mixture of concern and warning in his eyes. "Miss Granger. You are dealing with a man who must risk his very life for our cause." With a sweeping gesture toward Professor Snape, he continued, "To distract him is to make him vulnerable to this sort of treatment on a regular basis. He is under tremendous pressure."

Hermione listened quietly, feeling her blood heating to the boiling point. Up to now, she had always admired, almost revered Hogwarts' Headmaster. Now, she did not like what she saw when she looked into his eyes. Eyes that witnessed her anxiety about Sirius, and dismissed it; that had watched Professor Snape suffer, and looked elsewhere; had regarded Harry's frustration over so many matters regarding Voldemort, and had not explained himself. And now, he was telling her to leave alone the one person who needed them both the most.

Through gritted teeth, she answered, "Professor Snape is under tremendous pressure because you bid him to prostrate himself before a madman in the name of your cause. I don't see evidence of your concern, other than how to use him for your best advantage.

"If I am a distraction, sir, then I will find a way to use that *to* his best advantage. Professor Snape has never done anything or said anything inappropriate, but I cannot say the same for you, sir!"

"Miss Granger, I must warn you - this is not the time "

"Then when is a good time for you to listen to the fact that the only person making inappropriate statements or gestures to me is Harry's godfather? You were only too ready to believe the worst of Professor Snape, but you all but accuse me of lying about the unwelcome advances of Sirius Black? You are more prejudiced than You-Know-Who!"

Hermione raised her head defiantly. "I will be by tomorrow evening to see after Professor Snape's health, sir. Until then, I bid you goodnight."

She turned on her heel and stalked away, shaking, gulping for air. When she reached the door, she fled.

Dumbledore turned to his master spy, lying helpless and pitiful on the infirmary cot. His eyes were thoughtful. "She has all but sworn allegiance to you, Severus," he said softly, to the sleeping form. "And you are sworn to protect Lily's son. She will be a formidable ally in preparing Harry, if you will but only treat her as such."

He sighed heavily. "And if you will not repay her infatuation with one of your own."

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After a more-or-less sleepless night, Hermione spent the next day in a haze of exhaustion, wondering how to convince her friends to leave her alone with her thoughts. Ron was nagging her to help him with his Charms essay, which actually meant he wanted her to write his Charms essay. She finally plucked the messy parchment from his hands with an irritated, "If I do this, will you please leave me alone?"

"You're a star, 'Mione! Thanks!" Ron said, then proceeded to ask Harry and Neville to join him in a game of Exploding Snap.

"The last time, I swear," she muttered under her breath, as she jotted down the salient points on Ron's parchment.

As she looked over Ron's hopeless essay, Harry approached her quietly. "Hogsmeade, this weekend." He dropped his voice conspiratorially. "Sirius is sneaking out of Grimmauld to meet us in the Shrieking Shack. I promised him we'd get him some chocolates from Honeyduks."

Hermione felt a sickness pooling in the pit of her stomach. She gave Harry what she hoped was an apologetic smile. "Actually, I wasn't planning on going to Hogsmeade this weekend." She gave a little shrug. "I've got a mountain of work to do."

Both Ron and Harry began to protest. "C'mon, Hermione "

"All work and no play "

"You can't miss Sirius. He wants to see us."

Hermione rose. "Look, I'll try, okay? Now, I have to go to the Library." Before either boy could respond, Hermione was heading out the door of the common room.

As she stormed down the hall, she heard the sound of someone calling her name behind her.

"Hermione wait up!" She turned to see Harry running to catch up with her. He fell into step.

"Hermione, is anything wrong?"

She turned and looked at him shortly. "What do you mean?"

Harry caught her arm, and pulled her to a stop. "Hermione, we've known each other for a long time." His expression was earnest. "I know something's wrong. Can't you tell me?"

Hermione looked into his tired eyes. This had been a hideous year for Harry. He'd spent a huge part of it being accused of lying about Voldemort's return. He'd been tortured by Dolores Umbridge, denied the chance to play Quidditch, and forced to take a large group of students in hand to teach them defense.

In an attempt to prevent Lord Voldemort from looking into his mind and discovering the plans of the newly reformed Order, he had tried, and failed, to learn Occlumency. Harry had so few joys in his life, and Sirius was one of them. Hermione realised she simply could not tell him what Sirius was doing. She would have to protect herself as

much as she could. Professor Snape or no, she had to learn to take care of herself after all, what was the DA about, if not learning to protect yourself?

So she smiled, and tried to put her friend at ease. "Nothing's wrong, Harry. I'm worried about my O.W.L.s, not to mention Umbridge's goon squad trying to shut us down at every opportunity." She gave him a little hug. "I'm going to do a little solitary studying in the Library. I'll be back later, okay?"

Harry gave her a quiet, contemplative look, and Hermione knew then he didn't really believe her. "Sure, Hermione. But give Hogsmeade some thought, yeah? You could really use the break."

She smiled. "What time?" she asked in a tone of resignation, but she kept her voice light. Harry returned her smile.

"He's going to meet us there around three o'clock. He's going stir crazy over at Grimmauld." He looked hopeful. "So you'll come?"

"I'll think about it, okay?"

With a nod, Harry turned and headed back to the Common Room, leaving Hermione to continue her journey alone.

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The infirmary was quiet, as Hermione slipped into the large ward. Madam Pomfrey was nowhere to be seen, and Hermione walked rather hurriedly to the private ward that held her professor. Her footsteps sounded unnaturally loud on the stone floor, and she felt like a fugitive, stealing into the room, long past visiting hours. She already had an excuse ready should Madam Pomfrey appear

"Miss Granger! What are you doing skulking around the infirmary? It's almost curfew!" The mediwitch's voice was pitched low, but Hermione jumped like a scalded cat nevertheless.

She whirled around and put on a bright, false smile. "Madam Pomfrey! You startled me!" She took a deep breath.

The older woman put her hands on her hips. Narrowing her eyes, she retorted, "I may remind you, Miss Granger, you're the one sneaking around. I believe I'm the one who's supposed to be startled!"

"Yes, Madam Pomfrey," Hermione replied, meekly. Trying to remember her cover story, she smiled uncertainly. "You see, I'm feeling a little bit well, it's sort of embarrassing, but " She gulped and tried again, growing flustered at the mediwitch's increasingly disbelieving expression. "Ginny Weasley is feeling a bit under that is, she's not "

Madam Pomfrey huffed, and something like a smile played about her lips. "Honestly, Miss Granger! You may be the smartest little witch in this school, but you are the worst liar I've ever met." Her expression softened, and she gave the door a quick glance. "If you wish to see Professor Snape, why didn't you just say so?"

Hermione, gobsmacked, stammered, "I didn't think you'd allow it."

Madam Pomfrey sniffed. "Well, normally, I wouldn't. It's highly irregular, you know." She sighed, and gave Hermione a pitying look. "But just between you and me, my dear, I'm not entirely happy with the Headmaster at the moment. He's making me work with my wand hand tied behind my back on this."

Hermione visibly sagged. "I know! Professor Snape was in so much pain when I came in, and the Headmaster just seemed so, oh, I don't know, reluctant to help him."

The older witch nodded. "I never wish to speak ill of Professor Dumbledore, but his behaviour has me puzzled." She looked at Hermione appreciatively. "I saw how Professor Snape reacted to you. You have a knack for healing. A witch doesn't have to earn a degree from St. Mungo's to be a natural Healer."

Madam Pomfrey straightened, and nodded to herself, as if she'd just made an important decision. "He's been very restless, even in his sleep." She gestured. "Come, child. Perhaps you can help where I cannot."

Hermione wordlessly followed Madam Pomfrey into the private ward, and together they approached the bed of her professor. In the soft moonlight, he looked like marble, if marble could frown and scowl and move, as if unable to get comfortable.

Softly, Madam Pomfrey leaned down and smoothed his hair from his forehead, in an unconscious imitation of the Headmaster. It was a tender gesture of affection, as if he were a small boy. "He's just so uncomfortable. Professor Dumbledore is having the necessary potion made for him, but until then..." the mediwitch sighed, and gave a little shrug. Hermione understood. It was hard, watching him suffer. Her mind went back to Grimmauld, on the night this all began, and the pain and humiliation she'd been witness to. All she'd wanted to do was to make him feel better, to give him some comfort.

Hermione pulled up a chair and sat down beside her professor's bed. Without thought, she laid her hand over his heart, as she had done with the Headmaster, and Professor Snape's shoulders relaxed, and he sighed in his sleep. It was a pitiful sound that tugged at the hearts of the two women. They looked across his still form at each other.

The mediwitch sighed. "He has suffered so much. He never complains, never says anything. But oh, sometimes he cries, Miss Granger. He doesn't even realise it." The older woman gazed at the wizard. "He's very proud. It would trouble him to know we were fussing over him like this."

A silvery Patronus, in the shape of a badger, appeared in the room with them, and the two women turned from Professor Snape to watch it. It opened its mouth and Professor Sprout's voice said, "Poppy, I've had a little accident with one of my flowering Crown of Thorns plants, and I'm in a bit of a snare here! Can you come down and bring some Essence of Dittany?"

Madam Pomfrey sighed. "The woman is going to be the death of me! Her plants cause more injuries than the Quidditch pitch any day." She looked uncertainly at the sleeping man, then back to Hermione. "Well, I suppose leaving you here won't hurt, and you do seem to be able to comfort him." She gave Hermione a smile. "I'll be back in two ticks."

And just like that, Hermione was alone with her professor, for the second time.

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The chapter title and lyrics are from the song, The Snake.

## Six: Love's Got A Lot To Answer For



That little white lie that you've been caught in seems to be the last straw...and if there's going to be some retribution...

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

*For Sempra and Mimi*

---

Severus had only pretended to be asleep when Hermione and Poppy entered his room. Inwardly, he wanted to cringe as Poppy confided to the girl about his condition, but he found himself too strung-out to care.

The Dark Caress sizzled and burned under his skin, especially around the Dark Mark. There, the tattoo itched and scorched, inflaming his mind and overloading his brain with intense signals from Miss Granger. It heightened his senses to a blinding peak. He could smell her scent; the soft smell of her soap, the even more enticing aroma of her body. She smelled warm and tangy and so delicious he wanted to...

*No. Don't think it, because the thought will start running around in your mind until all you can do is think about it. But she smells so delightful, and she would taste like nectar... all innocent and new and oh, she would respond to my touch as wondrously as I would to hers... Touch me, Hermione...*

He tried to tell himself it was the curse alone that made her so irresistible. But she had touched him, long before the curse had been cast. He was a fool if he believed that, once the curse dissipated, his feelings for her would return to that of a teacher for his student. *You make me feel safe, Professor* When would he feel safe? *I don't lust after students.* She was another burden to add to his growing list; first Lily, then...

When Poppy left the room, he decided he would try to salvage some sort of future for himself out of this situation. Barring that, something he could show the Dark Lord, so that his Master would not feel the curse had been given in vain. To a Death Eater, the Dark Caress was a prized gift from their Lord and Master. It would not do to show a lack of gratitude.

"Miss Granger?"

Hermione looked up, and saw her professor watching her, his expression one of puzzlement and pain. "Why are you here? Where is Madam Pomfrey?"

Hermione smiled, and pressed a cool hand against his forehead. Magic could do much, but the human touch was equally as powerful. "Madam Pomfrey was called away, so I'm afraid I'm the last biscuit in the tin again." She said it lightly, but in reality, her heart was pounding. Just being this close to him gave her such a feeling of conflict.

Even lying here, helpless, he was fascinating. His hair was tangled and oily, he was disheveled and sweaty, and yet she found herself feeling drawn to him. Riding fast behind her increasingly baffling attraction to him was her fear for his health, which drove her desire away with one guilty wave of its hand.

Professor Snape looked at her, his eyes squinting in the light. He looked so pale and fragile; it was strange hearing such a lovely deep voice, coming from his wasted frame. "Miss Granger, it's not safe for you to be alone with me."

Hermione smiled. "Sir, you are as weak as a kitten. And, in case you'd forgotten, you are restrained."

Her professor struggled briefly against his bonds. Without looking at her, he replied, "Do not presume to feel safe, Miss Granger. Restraints can be broken."

"I'm not afraid." She looked into his liquid, dark eyes with conviction. "I know you're the last wizard on earth who would hurt me."

He looked at her for a long time, and closed his eyes. Even with the curse scoring grooves of lust and aggression into his tired mind, he felt the most un-Slytherin-like compulsion to tell the truth. "I don't want to hurt you, lass." He looked at her. "I would never hurt you willingly. But there may come a time when I have no say in the matter." He dared to look into her soft, amber eyes. They were troubled, and troubling.

Hermione shook her head. "I'm sorry, sir, but I don't understand what's going on. The Headmaster won't even tell Madam Pomfrey."

Professor Snape snorted. "No, I suppose he wouldn't." He stole a glance at her. She looked so innocent, so good... so willing. "Miss Granger, I've been given the Dark Caress, and you are my target."

She stared at him for a moment. He could almost see her mental gears grinding together, trying to find some memorized reference on the subject. She shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I don't know what that is. What does it mean?"

"The Dark Caress is a curse created by the Dark Lord. It was given to Death Eaters to increase their strength, as well as their courage. In the early days, the newly initiated Death Eaters were given the caress before they went on Muggle raids. To the witch or wizard cursed, it fills them with desire to control and dominate their target. As the Death Eaters became more jaded and corrupt and depraved, they used it to enhance... sensations at the Dark revels.

"Most of us have a moral code that we will not break. The Dark Caress obliterates that moral code. It gives the cursed one a feeling that they have the right to do or say anything they desire."

In spite of his weakness, Professor Snape coloured slightly, and grimaced. "Now, it is primarily used to lower inhibitions of both the cursed and the target."

"And a Death Eater cursed you so that I would be your target?"

"No, Miss Granger. The Dark Lord himself cursed me." His tone was as bitter as gall. "It's like some grisly party favour to him. He knows I don't..." Hermione's professor pressed his lips together in a thin line. "I do not think of students in this manner. He was giving me permission to lose control with you." His sighed, in frustration. "I have brought this on myself. I apologise that you are affected by my weakness."

Hermione watched him carefully. She felt slightly ill. "Oh, Professor. I'm so sorry." She swallowed. "It's my fault; I caused this." At her declaration, Professor Snape looked at her thoughtfully. "If you hadn't been thinking about Sirius and me, the Dark Lord wouldn't have seen me, and you wouldn't be here." A single tear rolled down her cheek, and she brushed it away impatiently. "I'm sorry. My emotions are getting the better of me."

"It is part of the curse, Hermione." His voice was molten, dark. *Yes, that's right. Let her believe the Dark Lord discovered her. How would she feel if she knew you betrayed her to him?*

"It is a transference curse. The target of the curse feels the dark pull as well. That is why you must stay away from me. I can almost control myself if you are not physically so near. My emotions, my desires, my needs will reflect in you, and yours in me." He paused, and looked away. "You are the reason I am restrained."

A small, dark voice buzzed in his head, taking over and pushing truth beneath the desire to entice her, to intensify her feelings of protectiveness and care. "It is why the curse is so hard to break. It will fade in time, but it will not go completely away. Both parties become willing subjects to it until it is broken."

Hermione felt herself go cold for a moment. She was deathly afraid to ask the question, and yet, she already felt she knew the answer. She looked down into his dark, fathomless eyes, and something like his usual smirk passed across his face for a fleeting moment.

"The wheels are turning so fast I can hear them, Miss Granger." His eyes burned into hers, then he turned and looked at the ceiling. "Ask."

Hermione swallowed. With a mouth as dry as dust, she asked, "How is it broken, sir?" He was quiet for so long, she thought he would refuse to answer.

*Go on, lie!* the curse insisted. He resisted as long as he could, but the Dark Caress was still too fresh, too swift, still running too hard in his veins. He turned to look at her again. "How do you think, Miss Granger?" He gave her a look of pure hunger.

"Consummation."

Hermione felt her body flush. She could actually feel heat radiate from her chest, up into her face, and down into her groin. She stood very still, trying to master her thoughts, unable to meet his eyes, afraid that he would look into her mind and see them.

Severus cursed himself silently for the blatant lie. The curse would wear itself out after a few days, but it still compelled him to lie, to do whatever it took for her to come to him. It was a curse of subterfuge and manipulation. He tried to correct himself, and opened his mouth, but the curse would not let him speak. He lay back on his pillow with a growl of annoyance. Half-truth was about the best he could manage.

Fighting every instinct, he ground out, "The curse can be controlled. I have sworn to protect you from Black, Miss Granger. I will not have you swap one predator for another."

Hermione shook her head. "I'm sorry, sir. I don't know what to say. I'm not - " She felt a little queasy at the thought of saying this to anyone, much less Professor Snape. "I'm not ... experienced."

For a moment, he, too, was quiet, and Hermione realised he was as embarrassed as she. Somewhere in her mind, she wondered just how much experience he could boast of having.

Quietly, he replied, "That scarcely has any bearing on the situation, Miss Granger. Left unchecked, it wouldn't matter." He, too, was having trouble meeting her eyes. "Nothing would stop me from taking... From taking what I want. And, I'm afraid, Miss Granger..."

He met her gaze. She could see him struggling to remain in control. "Of what, sir?"

He spoke as if he hadn't heard her. "That is the way the curse works. It is an insatiable hunger that must be fed."

Hermione persisted, "Professor? What exactly are you afraid of?" She felt herself growing hot, then cold, the same way she had in his office, when he'd stroked her cheek, and called her his good girl. "What are you afraid of?" she asked again, her voice husky.

He turned his head, and his onyx eyes met hers. They glowed like wet coal. With a slight smile of pure sensuality, he purred, "I'm afraid you'll let me, Hermione."

She was in over her head. She knew it now. There was that feeling of being totally inadequate, that she so often felt in his presence. She wasn't mature enough to handle this, and knew she'd better get mature pretty quick, or this whole thing would engulf them under the tidal wave this whole situation had become.

She took a deep breath, and bit her lip. Now was the time for Gryffindor bluntness, not Slytherin guile. "I am attracted to you." The instant the words left her mouth, she wanted to pull them back in again. Any moment, he would be chiding her for her clumsy Gryffindor candor.

Instead, he replied, almost mildly, "That is the curse. Once I've touched you, it is ignited "

"No."

He frowned, irritated at the interruption. She held his gaze, and shook her head.

"No. I was... before."

He merely stared, his eyes hooded and unreadable. She flushed again. "I felt this way before you were summoned. Maybe even before that. The curse has nothing to do with it."

He shook his head. "You merely think you are attracted to me." *Don't hope! Don't think! Don't feel, you fool!*

"What is the difference in thinking and being?" she challenged.

He scowled. Even flat on his back, it was an intimidating frown. "May I remind you, lass, I'm a Death Eater, a spy, and almost twenty years older than you?"

Hermione stood her ground. "May I remind you that I knew all of this before? That you have always protected me and my friends? That you confessed to me that you cared about me? Before you were cursed? That your feelings for me have changed from a student to... something else?" She pressed on, blundering blindly, feeling her way through this awkward, intense tennis match played with words.

Professor Snape huffed and thumped his head down on the pillow. "My feelings are immaterial. I've learned that the hard way."

"They aren't if they - they aren't." Impulsively, Hermione put her hand over his. He calmed slightly. His eyes closed, and he lost some of the rigid stiffness in his limbs. Gently, Hermione asked, "Does it feel better when I touch you?"

He sighed. "Initially, yes." There was a faint line between his sensitive brows. "But it will become torture until we " He turned away.

"Please, sir," she said, and impulsively stroked his forehead. He sighed softly. He tried to move away, but the bonds held him in place. "Tell me to stop touching you because you don't want it, and I will stop. But tell me the truth, so I can at least try to make you feel more comfortable." She sighed. "Please tell me how I can help you."

Professor Snape turned and looked at her. Her eyes were full of compassion, and pity, and it made him feel sick with guilt. He had promised to protect her. He'd just spent the last ten minutes manipulating her into almost climbing into bed with him.

A few more soft groans of pain, a pleading look, a softly worded request, and she'd be straddling him, doing whatever she could to 'make him feel more comfortable.' Oh, gods, he'd let her. He didn't care if Dumbledore and Pomfrey and McGonagall and the entire fucking staff walked in on them, he wouldn't let her stop until they were both - *Oh, fuck it all!*

"Don't be so kind to me, Miss Granger. I do not deserve it." He spat the bitter truth of his words, and he wanted to die. This was another sort of humiliation, an almost unbearable one.

Hermione shook her head. "I don't understand you. Why shouldn't I show kindness to someone who has helped me?"

He looked at her. His voice hardened, lost its pearly luster. "Do you have no memory? I have treated you abominably over the years. I've insulted you, ridiculed you, scorned you "

"I know," she said, quietly. She smiled ruefully. "And there were times when you hurt me terribly." She took a deep breath. "But you're just going to have to get used to the fact that I forgive you for it."

"Do you know what they call you?" He tried to pour as much vitriol into his voice as possible. He sneered, "You're a popular subject of conversation amongst the Death Eaters." He gave her an appraising look through narrowed eyes. "They call you my little Mudblood whore."

She grew very still. She looked at him with great dignity. "Is that what you call me? Not there, I know you have to join in. But in here?" She touched his forehead. "Is that what you me to yourself?"

Severus sighed. She may be almost twenty years his junior, but she outstripped him in sheer courage and strength and yes, even maturity. She was finer made. He looked into her eyes and saw hope behind the expectant expression. If he said yes, she would know he was lying. He somehow knew it.

"No." He looked at her, and there was such conflict in his face. "I truly don't understand you." He watched her carefully, the relief flitting across her face. He would have to teach her to hide her emotions better. That would be their first task. Softly, he said, "You're a maddening witch, lass."

His words made her skin tingle pleasantly. Even now, his voice had the ability to cajole and bewitch; to make an insult sound like a caress.

To his surprise, she suddenly grinned mischievously. "I know. The sad part of it is, it seems to be one of my most attractive traits."

Severus looked at her thoughtfully for several minutes. There was tenderness in her gaze, and absolute trust. He took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly. Finally, he said, "Miss Granger, take out your wand." When she hesitated, he said, "I'm not going to try to talk you into releasing me. The Headmaster's spell can't be reversed, anyway."

Hermione, slightly hesitant, said, "But you could, couldn't you? The curse... You could make me do things against my will, couldn't you?"

His gaze followed the moon shining through the window, as if to avoid looking at her. He finally turned to her and gave her a look of pure shame. "Not after we do this."

With his head, he gestured down toward his right hand, and turned it, palm upward. "Miss Granger, draw a mark across my palm with your wand. As you do, incant 'Tergum Lubricus'."

He waited patiently while Hermione obeyed him, drawing the tip of her wand across his hand. She gasped, as a line of blood beaded across his palm. She looked up at his face, her own frightened.

He was slightly breathless. "Now, do the same for yourself. It won't hurt."

When she hesitated, Professor Snape barked, "Hurry up, girl! If you are so eager to trust me, you must trust me completely!"

With an unsteady hand, Hermione drew the tip of her wand over her palm. "Tergum Lubricus." It was more like a feeling of heat being laid across her palm, and soon the blood began to pool in her hand.

"Good." She looked up and saw Professor Snape watching her intently. "Now place your hand in mine, Miss Granger. Our blood must mingle."

"Are we doing blood magic? isn't that part of the Dark Arts?"

Snape sneered. "Intent, Miss Granger. Surely you remember your DADA notes: Intent is the difference between the dark and light. Hurry now, Madam Pomfrey will return any minute."

Finally, Hermione awkwardly placed her hand within his, bound as his was by his side. She had to lean down beside him, to press their hands completely together. She felt the warmth of his palm, as his fingers twined with hers. A tingle began in her hand, that shot up her arm and into her body. It felt like pleasure; it felt like torture.

Quietly, he lay back on his pillow, his eyes boring into hers, her face close to his. "By my blood, which flows to yours, I swear that I will not harm you in any way against your will, nor will I allow harm to come to you while I am able to prevent it. By this blood oath, I swear it."

He was looking deeply into her eyes, and their faces were close together, almost touching. Hermione, shocked, held on. "By my blood that flows to yours, I swear that I will not allow harm to come to you while I am able to prevent it."

She held on. Almost without thought, she looked into his obsidian eyes. Her mouth opened, and before she could give it rational thought, she whispered, "I swear I will never allow another to take what belongs to you. By my blood oath, I swear it."

He looked at her, shocked. "What did you say?" Their magic swirled around them, and Severus felt it enter him, like a flaming sword piercing a martyr. It was an agony that felt like ecstasy; it was a pleasure that felt like punishment. It felt beautiful and gruesome and somehow perfect and perverted all at once. Professor Snape looked at her in dawning horror. He had not meant for this to happen. "You foolish girl! What have you done?"

Hermione was almost leaning over him, their hands locked together, intertwined. Their fingers spasmed against one another's in a painful grip. Hermione felt the spell race through her body, into her chest. Her nipples hardened in pleasure. Her groin was suffused with delicious heat. She felt almost like her body was going to orgasm, and she froze in terror. She couldn't, not now! She realised their foreheads were touching, and both were breathless and sweaty now.

As quickly as it happened, it was gone, and she gasped, breathless with the mortifying thought that her professor might have noticed the state of her body.

Severus felt the dark pleasure race through his body as well. His face flushed, as his cock twitched into life, feeling the heat of arousal. It was thankfully, blissfully brief, and he, too, collapsed in relief.

For a moment, Hermione lay against his shoulder, too weak to move. Madam Pomfrey would be returning any minute, but it felt so good to sit here, her head against his pillow. Any moment now, he would bark at her for her shameless behaviour, but she really couldn't care less. She felt that comforting safety of being here. Even now, in his weakened state, he still felt like sanctuary.

Finally, he spoke, and she could feel his lovely voice rumbling in her ear. "Miss Granger, please sit up. Aside from being entirely inappropriate, it isn't helping my cause at all." Hermione sat up quickly, feeling sheepish and numb. She looked away guiltily, acutely aware of her body.

Finally, Hermione removed her hand. To her astonishment, the wound had completely sealed. There wasn't even a scar to mark it. As she looked down at her palm, he shook his head. "What on earth possessed you to take an oath like that?" He looked shocked and angry and frightened.

Exhausted, still breathless, exasperated, she replied, "We look out for one another! We are in this together, Professor Snape!"

"There is no 'together'! Don't be stupid! You've set yourself up to get killed!" With a growl, he turned away from her. "I am not worth you making such a foolish oath."

Hermione was stunned. "You've no right to tell me who is and isn't worthy of my help, even if it is you!"

Professor Snape looked at her carefully. For a long moment, he studied the young woman. How had they come to this? Finally, he said the only words to make her leave. "Why must you persist with this charade of caring for me? You're a child. A student!" He looked at her with cold, black eyes. "Can't you leave me a little bit of pride?"

Hermione watched him for a moment. She said, quietly, "I know you. You care, even though you want me to believe you don't. In fact, you care *so little*, you take a blood oath to protect me from harm, even from yourself. You ask me why I care?" She shook her head, and her eyes were tender and compassionate, and strong. "How can I not care, Professor?"

They heard footsteps in the infirmary, and Hermione, on impulse, leaned down and kissed his cheek. Her lips were a breath away from his. She rose quickly, and turned to

leave. Then changing her mind, she faced him again.

"Goodnight, Professor. I will visit you tomorrow. I will learn to be of use to you." Her eyes met his unblinkingly. "We can keep each other safe. Where no one can find us."

Hermione walked out of the room without looking back. Although the wound was gone, her palm still tingled, not only from the blood oath she'd taken, but from the heat of being held fast in the hand of her professor.

The next evening, he was less agitated, more lucid. While he was still magically bound to the bed, he was now able to sit up. Madam Pomfrey allowed Hermione a few short minutes alone, while she made her rounds of her other patients.

"It's Hogsmeade weekend, sir. Is there anything I can get you while I'm there?"

Her professor answered with a scowl. "And what, pray tell, would I want from Hogsmeade, Miss Granger? I'm scarcely on tenterhooks pining for a nose-biting teacup from Zonko's."

Hermione rolled her eyes. He could be so irritating at times! "I realise that, sir, but I thought there might be something you require from the apothecary, or some chocolate from Honeydukes."

He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. "Miss Granger, why are you telling me about this weekend? Why are you beating around the bush in very clumsy Gryffindor fashion?"

"You don't have to be so insulting!" She looked at him defiantly, and he scoffed.

"Don't sulk, Miss Granger." His tone softened imperceptibly. "What is troubling you?"

She hesitated for a split second, then gathered her courage. "Harry and Ron want me to go with them to visit Sirius on Saturday. He's going to sneak out of Grimmauld Place, over to the Shrieking Shack."

Professor Snape scoffed. His eyes darkened. He growled, "The fool! He's just itching to get caught! Here we are, fighting for our lives and he risks everything just because he's bored." He looked up at Hermione. Her expression was not one of commiserative frustration about Black.

*Oh. Very good, Severus. The girl is looking to you for help, and you use it as an excuse to bitch about his total laziness.*

"You could stay in the castle." He watched her carefully. "You don't have to go."

"Well, that's the thing. Harry is so insistent "

"Miss Granger, you don't have to do Mr. Potter's bidding!" he snarled, and she glanced toward the closed door, half expecting Madam Pomfrey to appear.

"I've decided that I'm going to go there early, and I'm going to have a talk with Sirius. I'm going to tell him his behaviour is out of order, and that I feel uncomfortable around him because of it."

For a moment, her professor stared at her, eyebrow on the rise. "Oh, really? Do you honestly think Sirius Black is going to heed your wishes, Miss Granger?"

Her chin rose. "He will, or risk having his bollocks hexed off!"

"Language, Miss Granger. Your attempted familiarity with me does not constitute having to listen to your fishwife's tongue. Five points from Gryffindor."

She coloured, fuming. "Sorry, sir." She took a deep breath, which stretched into a stifled yawn, and it was only then that Severus realised she looked exhausted.

"Miss Granger, are you not sleeping well?" Their eyes met, and she felt the heaviness in hers, and the disapproval in his. "I will not be amused if this affair has caused both of us to suffer, instead of just myself."

She smiled. "I'm fine, sir." She glanced at the clock, and jumped to her feet. "Is that the time? I'm sorry, sir, but I have to go. I have a " The letters 'DA' almost sprang to her lips, and she caught herself just in time. She gulped. "A study meeting, and I'm almost late."

He tilted his head in that skeptical way that said, 'I don't believe you, but I'll indulge you.' He sighed. "Very well, Miss Granger. Heaven knows why you come here anyway. I fail to see what you hope to accomplish, pestering me every evening."

She looked at him, shocked. Then she shook her head, a smirk playing about her lips. "It's been nice visiting with you, too, sir. Goodnight."

As she turned, he said, "Miss Granger?"

She turned back, her eyebrows raised in query. He opened his mouth to speak, closed it, then huffed. "If you wish for me to accompany you to the Shrieking Shack on Saturday, you have but to ask."

Hermione's shoulders dropped, and she gave him a smile that he felt in his gut *Bastard*, he told himself.

She shook her head. "Thank you sir, really." She almost glowed with pleasure. "I think I should try to take care of this on my own. But I'm grateful for the offer." She gave him a final smile, before she left him to his thoughts.

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On Friday, Severus declared that the curse was gone. A careful examination showed no lingering effects, no dark magic. Late in the evening, after Miss Granger had paid her daily visit, he returned to his quarters.

Once he'd settled back into his rooms, he approached the fireplace, took a handful of Floo powder, threw it into the fireplace and shouted, "Number twelve, Grimmauld Place. Black, no doubt I'm interrupting a stimulating evening full of invaluable work for the Order, but I wish to speak with you."

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Severus was already in the Shrieking Shack when Sirius slunk in, a black, unkempt mutt. Almost instantly, he transformed into his human body, and looked around briefly. He spotted a mirror above the deserted fireplace, and preening into it, Sirius muttered, "Right, then, Hermione love, hurry up before the boys get here."

A few minutes passed, and Severus stifled a laugh at Black's restless pacing. Azkaban hadn't managed to teach him patience, even after all this time. Restlessness and boredom were clearly written all over his face, and Severus allowed himself to be pleased at the small diversion he'd created, which ensured that the 'Golden Trio' would be late for their appointment with Harry's godfather.

Just as Sirius seemed to be ready to jump out of his skin, Severus decided to make his move. He stepped out of the shadows, wand drawn.

"Yes, it's very easy to get bored sitting around doing nothing all day long, isn't it, Black?" Sirius whirled around, to find Severus standing there, smirking at him. He grinned mirthlessly at Sirius. "Oh, yes, all play and no work makes Sirius a very, very dull boy."

Black, unnerved, managed to recover. "And what do I owe this honour, Snivellus? Surely you have better things to do than sneak around all weekend, spying on me?"

Severus snorted. "Oh yes, I do, Black. As a matter of fact, I have several things I have to do. It must be grand, sitting around in your house all day, waiting to do your utmost for the Order." The sarcasm in his tone slashed through the room like a hex, and Sirius' chin rose in defiance.

"You know," Sirius snarled, "I'm not even going to dignify you with a reply." He looked around the dusty room. "So when did you plan to tell me why you wanted to see me before Harry and Hermione arrive?" Severus noticed he didn't even bother to mention Ronald Weasley.

Realisation dawned on Sirius' face. "Oh, you must be here for Hermione." Baby-talking, he said, "Does widdle Hermione need big bad Snivellus to protect her from me?"

"She's a very capable witch, Black. She has no idea I'm here, and that is the way you will no doubt prefer it. I'm here to warn you to leave her alone. She doesn't welcome your advances." His subtle emphasis on the word 'your', did not go unnoticed.

"And you think she's welcoming yours?" Black laughed derisively. "You're even more pathetic now than when you were a snot-brained little oik slobbering over Lily." Sirius sneered at his old enemy. "Do you honestly think Hermione would feel anything but disgust at the thought of your touching her?"

A sudden, white-hot anger rose in Severus' belly, and his smile made even Sirius falter. With a quiet shrug, Severus drawled, "She hasn't been complaining so far."

Sirius scoffed, "Do you really expect me to believe that Hermione Granger wants you? I've seen the little chit up close. She's willing to spread them for anyone who'll give her a bit of sweet talk. And let's face it, Snivellus," Black said, "I'll get her. I always do. I had Lily, and I'll have her. It will be like old times, stealing the girl out from under your nose." He gave a little mocking bow. "And in the end, we'll have a right old laugh about you, Hermione and me."

Black fully expected Severus to lose his famous temper. He'd pushed all the right buttons, and the dig about Lily had led to crossed wands more than once in their long, bitter rivalry. He sat back and waited for the explosion so he could laugh. Snape could take a lot of shite, but laughing at him was like a red rag to a bull.

Instead, Snape pulled his robes around his waist, and Sirius' formidable self-assurance faltered, as Severus not only remained calm, but actually smiled. "You see, that's where you're wrong, Black. She and I have spent some very extensive enjoyable time together discussing this in private, and I'm afraid the joke is on you."

For a moment, Black looked at Snape, his expression uncertain. It soon turned ugly. "Oh, you must get such a hard-on, thinking she would want you. You really are a sad little man, Snape." Black was quiet for a moment. Almost gently, he said, "And what do you think will happen when I tell Harry that Professor Snape has been molesting his best friend?"

"I would think his best friend would then inform Mr. Potter that his godfather is the one who's been doing the molesting, and I'm merely her protector." Severus gave Black a smug little smile. He couldn't resist, even though he knew Miss Granger would be less than pleased with his insinuation. "What we do to and for each other beyond that, is, I'm afraid, between Miss Granger and myself."

Sirius shook his head. "And who do you think Harry will believe, Snivellus? A randy little witch, or the man who was his mother and father's best friend?" When Severus didn't reply, Black went in for the kill. "The Easter holidays are coming up soon, and everyone will be spending them with me. I'm Harry's godfather, Snape. We'll all be together, and I'll remind Harry how wonderful his parents were, and how much I miss them.

"I'll tell him how much his mother loved him, and how important he is to me." There was something disturbing in Black's eyes that Severus had never seen before.

Black continued, "And not only will Harry believe me, instead of his hated Potions master, but everyone else will, as well." Sirius smiled mirthlessly. "No one trusts you, Snape, especially where a lovely young witch is concerned. The question is: what are you going to do about it?"

Severus knew at that moment, he shouldn't have come. The effects of the curse had not left his system. He would have never risen to the bait, otherwise.

In his silkiest voice, Severus crossed his arms, and looked upward, as if contemplating. He replied, "Well, let's see. What am I going to do about it?" He smiled almost sensuously. "Oh yes, that's right."

His dark eyes were cold, and his voice sounded like smoke sliding over ice. His smile was positively feral with lust. "While you're convincing Mr. Potter and his syncophants to recommend you for sainthood, what am I going to do about it?"

In a lasciviously seductive voice, he purred, "I'm going to be tucked up in bed, popping a very, very sweet, juicy little Hermione-flavoured cherry." In an almost-feline gesture, he licked his upper lip slowly, to pour a little salt in the wound.

Sirius was looking at him when something caught his eye over Severus' shoulder. His smile grew equally smug. "Well, well. Hello, love."

Severus whirled around, and found himself face to face with a very pale, very livid Hermione Granger.

Hermione looked at the two wizards for a long moment.

Sirius, the first to recover, smiled and crossed to her. "How lovely to see you, Hermine! How long have you been here?"

"Long enough, Sirius," she said, her eyes never leaving that of her Potions professor. "Harry and Ron are on their way. I thought I'd try to get here a little earlier to speak with you, but it seems I wasn't early enough."

Severus stood still, waiting for the explosion. Merlin knew he deserved it.

Sirius was unmoved. "Wonderful! Professor Snape was just leaving, weren't you?"

"Yes, he was." Hermione looked pointedly at her professor. "And so was I." She gave him a hard look. "Professor Snape? May I have a word, please?"

"Certainly, Miss Granger," Severus replied, with a smooth calmness he didn't feel. He swept by her, and Hermione, after giving Sirius a look of pure disdain, followed in her professor's wake.

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Quote and Chapter title is from *Love's Got A Lot To Answer For* by Nick Lowe

## Seven: No Life I Own, No Liberty

And like a love-sick leannán sí, she hath my heart in thrall...

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

*I've been blown away by the response I've had to this story. Thank you so much. Your encouragement means the world to me, and I hope you will continue to enjoy the story.*

*For Sempra and Mimi, who told me that something is right for me to do, BECAUSE I am afraid to do it.*

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Where Lagan stream sings lullaby, there blows a lily fair

The twilight gleam is in her eye, the night is on her hair

And like a love-sick leannán sí, she hath my heart in thrall

No life I own, no liberty, when love is lord of all

---

Severus and Hermione walked up the path towards the castle without exchanging a word. As they reached the steps, Harry and Ron appeared, heading down towards Hogsmeade, in the direction of the Shrieking Shack. They took one look at Hermione's pale, rigid face, along with Professor Snape's stony scowl, and concluded the worst. It was only later, that Ron confided to Harry, that Snape and Hermione looked a little alike when they were both pissed off.

"Hermione? Is everything alright?" Harry said, his eyes challenging Professor Snape.

Hermione looked up at her professor, her eyes thunderous. "I can't come with you right now. I - I have to go with Professor Snape. I've asked for some help on a Potions project, and this is the only time the Professor has." She knew it sounded clumsy, even to herself, but it was the only thing she could think of.

"Why?" The boy's insolence was intolerable, but Severus didn't have the time, nor inclination, to call him on it. Instead, he glared at the boys as if they were somehow to blame for his inconvenience.

"Unlike your esteemed godfather, Mr. Potter, my spare time is rather more limited," Severus growled, inwardly cursing the girl for forcing him to play the villain yet again. "I actually *do* have matters to attend to. I do not feel the need to justify my actions."

"Hermione, are you okay with this?" Harry persisted, as he and Ron blocked their path into the castle. Potter looked up at his professor challengingly. "Why can't you help her during the week, instead of making her miss out on her weekend time?"

Hermione was so angry by now, she felt like exploding. "Harry, it's alright! Just " She huffed. "I'd like to get this done so I can finish the project. I'll see you later, yeah?"

Harry looked at their professor with impotent rage and hatred, and Severus merely sneered in reply. Blasted little toerag, having the nerve to question him!

Hermione pushed past the boys, and Severus followed her closely behind. As they entered the castle, she turned to him, her eyes snapping with fury. "I think we need to talk, don't you, Professor?"

Severus, bristling at the young witch's tone, said, "If you insist, Miss Granger."

Hermione's eyes grew wide, and she visibly crackled with anger. "Where is the most private place you know, Professor? Because I have a feeling this will not be fit for first- and second-year ears."

Severus pulled his cloak around him, as if pulling his dignity together. "Shall we go to my study, Miss Granger?"

Through gritted teeth, she said, "Lead the way, Professor."

Without another word, Severus turned on his heel and strode down the hall; Miss Granger's shorter strides forcing her to almost trot beside him.

By the time they arrived at the professor's study, Hermione's head had cleared of her blinding, humiliated rage, leaving only a chilling anger behind. They had walked (Professor Snape had walked and she had galloped beside him) in a silence that was churning with repressed emotions.

Hermione was still stunned at the conversation she'd overheard, and her mind was reeling at the implications of what both wizards had said. It was clearly a case of each trying to piss higher up the wall than the other, but it gave her a sickening feeling to know that it was all about her, and nothing to do with her academic prowess.

When did anyone start giving a monkey's about Hermione Granger? Even after her disastrous date with Viktor Krum during the past year, no one noticed her, beyond her grades. It was true, she'd filled out quite a bit in the last year, and she'd changed, but so had everyone else. She had grown up, pure and simple. Why on earth did these two wizards (three, if you count Remus) feel the need to posture and snarl around her? It was baffling, and frightening. It was also exciting, and she felt guilty for feeling so flattered that these three powerful wizards seemed to be increasingly interested in her.

*That's sick, Hermione, she told herself. The very idea of Sirius, or even Remus, showing some sort of romantic interest, is just... oh, no, No, NO.*

On the other hand, Professor Snape... why did he seem different? Of the three, he certainly wasn't the most handsome. It would be like calling Remus the least ugly. But Hermione was, if nothing else, completely, sometimes brutally, honest with herself. Professor Snape excited her. There was an energy, a restless knowledge within him, that called to her. She admired his brilliance, his precision, his strange, compelling physical attributes, which, taken individually, never quite summed up the whole.

She had felt it when he'd made Lockhart look like a complete berk during their 'duel' in Second Year DADA. He'd thrown himself in front of her to protect her from the transforming Remus, and he'd held her back when she'd tried to chase after Harry during that mind-bending night that she'd helped Sirius escape. Professor Snape had been so angry when he realised what she and Harry had done, she thought he might hex her. She certainly deserved it. She'd already knocked him out in the Shrieking Shack. She still burned with shame about it.

And last year, when she'd gone to the Yule Ball with Viktor, and everyone had whispered behind her back *What's SHE doing with Krum? Bigger that, what's Krum doing with HER?*, she'd gone off and stood in the snow outside, fighting tears of humiliation. For the first time in her life, Hermione had felt pretty, but after all the snide remarks, she felt the the callow awkwardness of being too young to be old and too old to be young.

As she stood on the steps, carefully trying not to cry, Professor Snape had passed by, glowering, angry, and she'd looked up into his eyes, and saw the same humiliation and helplessness she herself felt. He hadn't spoken, but had given her a formal nod, and resumed walking. She had replayed that nod over and over in her mind, and she still didn't know what it meant. She only knew that someone knew how she felt.

She tried to stem her rising feelings. She reminded herself of his contempt toward her, his sneering, hurtful remarks in the past... then she would feel his large, warm hand

caress her cheek, and call her name in that stunning, sensuous voice... *The Dark Lord knows I desire you, girl...*

Hermione might have been a virgin, but she wasn't exactly innocent. She had kissed several boys, and she had touched herself. She'd read her parents' *The Joy of Sex*, and had dreamed tremulous dreams afterward. But this was off the map here. She felt her inexperience as if it were a character flaw to be ridiculed. Would he ridicule her? Or would he be just as fearful as she?

She had just entered the hallway of the Shack, when she heard Sirius taunting Professor Snape (*Who do you think Harry will believe, Snivellus? A randy little witch, or the man who was his mother and father's best friend?*). She had purposefully contacted Sirius to meet her at two-thirty, because she wanted to talk to him privately, before the boys came at three. Feigning a trip to the library, she'd told Harry and Ron she would meet them at the shack.

What on earth was Professor Snape doing there in the first place? She had gone cold when she heard Sirius taunt her professor. She'd been so sick with anger and humiliation, she wanted to hex Sirius' bollocks into another country. France wasn't far enough away for it. Then Professor Snape had said - oh, gods, he'd said he would be...

She was still angry enough to be furious with his quip about 'popping her cherry', to be sure, but why did she feel her body traitorously respond in a way that was nothing like anger?

Once she and her professor were in his study, he warded the door, and placed a Silencing Charm on the outside. Together, they walked into the somber room, and Professor Snape set the fireplace ablaze with a flick of his wand. "Tea, Miss Granger?"

*Tea's not going to do it*, she thought to herself. Out loud, she said, "No, thank you."

Professor Snape's back was to her, and she could see the tensely drawn muscles of his shoulders, and the severe bearing in his posture *At least he knows he's ballsed this up*, she thought.

"Would you mind explaining to me what that little exchange was all about?"

Severus turned and faced the little witch. She was standing still, arms planted on her hips, looking at him with unwavering eyes. He said, coolly, "That was a private matter, between Black and myself. It is none of your concern."

She rolled her eyes. In a voice pitched low and angry, she shook her head and replied, "Are you really listening to yourself? Don't you dare try to bluff me, Professor Snape!"

His eyes narrowed. "I do not care for your tone, Miss Granger. You forget, you are speaking to one of your professors "

"Who just informed his 'rival' that he was going to take my virginity during the Easter holidays! Oh, please, Professor! Self-righteous indignation at this point is not only superfluous, but extremely bad taste!"

Severus stood, fuming, knowing the little chit was right, and there was nothing he could do about it. She had him dead to rights. He slumped, and he could feel colour suffuse his face.

Once again, he had been goaded into saying the exact wrong thing to the wrong person. All his life, he'd managed to push away everyone who'd befriended him, tried to care for him, or needed him. He'd just done it again. When he was younger, he'd blamed others. He'd blamed James Potter, he'd blamed Dumbledore, the Dark Lord, his parents. Everyone but himself. Now, he knew better.

He was so tired of feeling badly made, like an ugly doll, pieced together with mismatched parts. He didn't seem capable of fixing it, either. He closed his eyes.

When he spoke, his voice sounded devoid of any life or colour or tone. "Of course, Miss Granger. I cannot explain the whys of my behaviour. I scarcely understand it myself." He ventured a glance at her. She was still standing there, fuming, ready to pounce. "I fully accept responsibility for my words."

When she didn't move or speak, he sighed, and sat down in his chair. "I understand that you would rather not speak to me again, outside what is necessary. I accept this. I must ask, again, for your discretion." He pulled himself together. "I trust you can see yourself out."

Hermione stood, watching him, looking for traces of manipulation, and couldn't find any. He looked defeated, embarrassed, and tired.

"It's the curse, isn't it? You still feel its effects, don't you?"

He glanced at her, then shrugged. "Perhaps. And, perhaps, I just wanted to rub Black's nose in in something."

"Why?"

He shrugged again, and it was a strange gesture, full of defiance and discomfort. He thought of Potter during their last Occlumency lesson, rushing past his defenses, watching his boy-self in all of his gauche, ill-bred, humiliated glory. He wanted to kill Black. "Payback, perhaps? If there are other reasons, I don't want to explore them."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "Well, I think you're going to have to, Professor." She looked at the man who'd just boasted he would be her first lover. The strange thing about it was that she wasn't all that sure he wouldn't be. *Alright, Hermione, you wanted to grow up. It's time to grow up.*

"You and I are going to spend a little time talking about this."

Professor Snape looked at her strangely, as if he were unsure he'd heard her correctly. "My reasons for my behaviour are not important. I said some incredibly unforgivable things. And I said them to Black, of all people." He stared at the fire, and his long fingers gripped the chair, as if holding on to his own life. "My pride, my fear, my life, Miss Granger. I have nothing." His eyes glittered in the flickering firelight. "For a moment, I just wanted to have something."

Hermione stared at her professor and sat down opposite. She was breathing heavily, as if she were about to cry. Severus hated crying females. As with most men, he felt foolish and helpless and pointless when they cried. Especially when he was the reason for their tears. He'd made more than one student cry. There was a fleeting satisfaction in it, but soon he was left with the empty, hollow feeling of just how cheap the victory had been. It was like fucking a whore. A brief, passing contentment, then a sliding, fading diminishment of his own humanity, and that of the woman's.

He ventured a glance at her face, but her eyes were dry.

When she spoke, his eyes widened. She sounded like a girl who had decided to put away her childish things, and as she spoke, a woman emerged.

"Severus Snape, for the past few weeks, you and I have danced this little dance. You have allowed me to comfort you, you have suffered, you have pushed and pulled and turned my emotions inside out.

"You have treated me like a woman, but you've talked to me like I'm a child. You say you want me, and you brag to Sirius that you'll have me, but you won't even talk to me."

He stared at her, feeling the same, sick feelings when Lily walked out on him. Hermione was going to do it as well. He felt his heart falter, and the loathing and anger he felt for himself built to such a pitch that he lashed out, rather than implode.

"What are you and I going to talk about, Miss Granger? Dumbledore's Army? Oh, yes, I saw it in your mind," he sneered, as the colour drained from her face. He pressed on, knowing he had to, or buckle. "You're a child I'm responsible for. It doesn't make me a saint. That's Potter's domain. I'm just trying to survive here until I'm no longer of use, and then neither you nor anyone else can claim any hold over me again.

"Are we going to talk about the Dark Caress? About sex? What's the point? You're a virgin, and I'm twice your age. Get out, Miss Granger. I have nothing further to say to you."

He rose, waiting to hear the door slam. He deserved it. He needed her hatred, her contempt for him. It was the only thing he had come to expect from anyone.

A small hand closed over his arm and spun him around. Hermione was looking up at him, her expression unreadable. "That would be easy, wouldn't it? For me to just walk away, to leave you with your self-pity and loathing, to justify to yourself why you aren't worthy of anything good? It would be so easy to Obliviate me, so that I wouldn't remember your cries in the dark, and your pleas, and your hurt, and your bravery, and your fear." She took his hands in hers. "And your desire."

"Miss Granger," he growled, and behind the warning tone was fear, and hope, and they were equally as strong as the other.

"Are we going to talk about sex, Professor? Being a virgin doesn't make me dull or stupid, any more than being experienced brings wisdom." She could see him wavering, and she pressed her advantage. "Honestly, Professor, what do you expect? You've known me since I was eleven. Do you honestly think I'm going to leave this alone?"

"Bossy witch," he barked, against his will. He was looking off to the side, and Hermione thought she heard a trace of pride in the insult.

She nodded. "We are going to talk about you, and what has brought you here, now, and this bond between us that neither of us fully understand."

Severus closed his eyes, feeling as if he were drowning underwater. "What do you want from me, lass? Are you trying to take every last scrap of dignity from me?"

Hermione gave an exasperated little grunt. "No. I'm trying to convince you to trust me, and to believe in me." He gave her a searching look, and she smiled. "You're trying too hard to get rid of me. Well, I've got news for you, Professor. It won't work. You and I are going to try to figure this out, and we are going to do it together."

He scowled, and gave her a puzzled look. "Figure what out, Miss Granger? Do talk sense."

For the first time since they'd arrived, Hermione smiled. "Sit down, please, Professor."

"You really ARE the bossiest little witch," he reiterated, but he reluctantly obeyed her, his eyes never leaving hers. She resumed her seat opposite.

"It's true, I am. But I only boss those I really care about." He snorted, and shifted in his seat, but something like a smile pinked the corners of his mouth.

Hermione rose, and stood above him, looking down like a little inquisitor. "I want the truth, Severus Snape. From the beginning. From the day you arrived at Hogwarts as a first year, to five minutes before I walked into the Shrieking Shack."

Professor Snape scoffed. "Oh, so not too much, then? And what else do you require, Miss Granger? The Sword of Gryffindor on which to impale me, should my tale not be to your liking?"

She pretended to consider. "I don't know about that, but some tea might be nice." She waited quietly. He hadn't agreed, but he hadn't refused her, either.

"Do tell, Miss Granger. And if I comply with this Scheherazade fantasy of yours, what then?" He sneered. "Going to make me your pet project? Another S.P.E.W.? Plan on knitting me a hat?" His voice grew more clipped, more like his teaching voice, as he struggled to regain control of the situation.

Suddenly, Hermione was in his face, bearing down on him. Severus was stunned that she could move so quickly. Her wild hair flew around her, and she stared down at him like an avenging Valkyrie.

"What do you want out of life, Professor Snape? Do you want to push me away so you can tell yourself you weren't worth knowing? Do you want to seduce me, so you can rub Sirius' nose in it?" She moved infinitesimally closer. "Or do you want a friend, who can help you, who knows you enough to keep your secrets, who can be there for you right under Dumbledore's nose, under the nose of your Dark Lord himself? Where no one can find you?"

They were too close, Severus thought. He could see the smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose, the slightly greenish specks in her amber eyes. He could smell her scent, and he realised he was closing the distance. He leaned forward, breathing in the breath she'd just exhaled.

"What do you want from *me*, Miss Granger?" The silkiness of his voice was purposeful, as if brought to bear as a weapon. He was staring so hard his eyes were watering, and he blinked.

She looked down on him. "The truth, Severus Snape. From the beginning to now."

She turned and resumed her seat, looking at him like a queen to be entertained. "Now, Severus."

His breath left him in one large gasp. Insolent little witch! He felt rage burn within him, then dissipate. He felt contempt, which bled to nothingness. He felt fear, and it was wicked away. He tried to summon every emotion in his arsenal to fight this young woman and her imperious command, and they danced away from him like smoke.

It was then he realised he would do whatever she asked. And the agony and ecstasy of it was that he wanted to. His shoulders dropped slightly.

He closed his eyes. "I'm " He panted like an animal, the words forced from his lips almost against his will. "I'm afraid." He looked into her eyes, and he saw fear there, too. In fact, he saw everything he'd ever felt, mirrored in the eyes of this young, untried witch.

"It's alright to feel afraid, Professor. When you're afraid, you know you're doing what you need to do to survive." She leaned forward and gave Severus a smile overlaid with a delicate lace of irony. "Nowadays, I know something is right for me to do BECAUSE I am afraid to do it." She sat back and gave him an encouraging nod. "I'm going nowhere. I'm right here."

He took in a long, shaking breath. It was several moments, as he gathered his thoughts. He looked like a child; he looked like an old man. He looked like the poor boy he was, thirsting for love and acceptance. "My parents were Eileen and Tobias Snape. I was born in Spinner's End. It's a small town in Manchester." He drew his robes around him, and looked off in the distance. "A Snape is less than nothing in that town." And so, he began.

It was an evening that Hermione never forgot, and later, when her world crashed down and threatened to crush her and everything she knew, she remembered sitting in her professor's study, hearing his beautiful, beguiling voice. It had the barest hint of Northern inflection, rising and falling, spinning his tale into the night. He cast it over her like a spell in and of itself, and she remembered that, within this man, was her hiding place.

Severus talked through the next hour. Hermione made tea. He talked through the late afternoon. A house-elf brought them sandwiches.

At one point, he stood and paced, telling his tale. He spoke of his parents, and their neglect and abuse. He told her of Lily and Petunia, and learning about magic. He spoke of the Marauders and the bullying misery they spawned. The rage of the telling overwhelmed him. Hermione stood with him, feeling that he needed her to do so. At one point he wept, remembering the humiliation and fear. Hermione held his hand.

The evening shadows crept upon them, and still Severus talked. He was beginning to sound hoarse and exhausted. And still Hermione pushed and pushed him, like lancing a festering wound. The horrible accountability weakened him; they met it together. He spoke of Sirius, and the horrible trick he played that almost cost Severus his



life; of James, his rival, of Lily and his unrequited love, of the horrible day he pushed her into James Potter's arms forever.

He spoke of the Purebloods of Slytherin, who accepted him, and cultivated him into leaving his weedy Muggle roots behind; how they taught him how to walk and talk and dress like a man of breeding. He told of his initiation with the Death Eaters, the heinous things performed on him, the hideous things he was required to do. He tried not to shock her, but as Hermione listened, she was so appalled at what he'd been through, she wanted to hide him in a cupboard and never let him out.

They drank innumerable cups of tea. There was even laughter at some point, and wistfulness. And at some point, Hermione wept for him. He spoke of his betrayal, the plea for Lily's life, the loss of friends, the death of his first, his only love. He spoke of his hatred of James Potter, and why he hated the son for looking like the father. Hermione did not try to contradict, or come to Harry's defense.

Severus told of pacts made with Dumbledore. He spoke of the return of the Dark Lord and Severus' gruesome re-entry into the world of the Death Eaters, where he was, like with the Order, neither liked, nor trusted. He spoke of his hurt, his wish that he were not so different from everyone else, his belief that he was not destined for anything other than death and unhappiness.

Severus left out nothing, including contacting Black and arranging to meet him in the Shrieking Shack for the sole purpose of telling him to leave Hermione alone. By the time he'd finished, it was dark. He was exhausted, almost voiceless and cleaned out.

Hermione stood unsteadily, and knelt down beside her professor. He looked so drained, his skin was almost transparent. His large, dark eyes were red-rimmed and bleak. "So now you know, Miss Granger. I have told you everything." He shook his head, and sighed. "They say confession is good for the soul. I cannot say I agree with them, but there you have it."

Hermione felt as if she'd been punched in the stomach. Every time she tried to respond, nothing was adequate. Finally, she spoke her heart.

"I have one question. It is a very selfish question."

"Ask." His husky voice was wary, and he looked at her like she was about to deliver a physical blow. Hermione fervently hoped Tobias Snape burned in hell for hurting the boy that became the man before her.

"This whole thing with Sirius isn't really about me, is it? It's about Lily."

He looked resigned, as if he had expected her to come to that conclusion. "Perhaps it was in the beginning. It isn't anymore."

"How can you say that? You said Lily was the love of your life."

"She was the love of my youth. She was my first love and she broke my heart. And yes, I'll admit I thought of you as being similar. At first. In reality, you are nothing like her."

"Why?"

He sighed. How could he explain without hurting her? How could he tell her that Lily was stunning and beautiful, and Hermione was merely physically pretty? That Lily was a bit shallow and vain, and Hermione generous and complex and kind? That he had sworn to protect Lily's son, and ended up wanting to hide Hermione away for himself?

The only truth he could confess was perhaps the least useful. "Lily... Lily wouldn't still be here talking to me. She would have walked out long before this. Lily... had no staying power."

"Then why did you transfer your feelings from her to me?"

"I didn't!" he answered, suddenly angry. Angry and tired of having to explain himself over and over in the thousand different ways that life had shit on him. "You are different because you are different, witch!" He ran a distracted hand through his oily hair. "I wasn't the only one who saw it. Oh no."

He gave her a malicious little smile. "Why do you think I let it slip that Lupin was a werewolf during your third year? Because of Black? We had already discovered Pettigrew was the traitor! It was because I saw how he looked at you, even then!"

Hermione was stunned. "And you were jealous?"

He huffed. "It has nothing to do with "

"And were you jealous?"

"Think, girl! I thought Sirius had betrayed Lily to the Dark Lord! I wanted to see him punished "

"Were YOU Jealous?" He whirled around.

"Yes! Yes I was fucking jealous!" he shouted, suddenly ready to put lies and subterfuge behind him. "Yes, I wanted you! Clever little swot, who could do anything she set her mind to! Strong, brave, tough lioness, full of loyalty and potential! Barely bleeding, witch, and I fucking wanted you for myself! WE ALL DID!"

He wiped the fleck of foam from his mouth, and faced the young woman. He snarled, "Merlin's balls, witch, I don't know why! You're the biggest pain in the arse I've ever met and I still want to get down on my knees and worship you! You make me so furious I want to tear you out of my heart with my bare hands and obliterate you from my mind and I know I'll die if I do!"

He turned away from her and threw his teacup against the wall. It exploded with a horrific noise that was frightening and satisfying. "Gods, why was I born? I have done nothing but suffer and want and rage and hate and covet and it's all for NOTHING because I can never have what I want!" He collapsed, sobbing, his cries horrible to hear. "Leave me be, witch. Leave me be, you demanding, maddening, bloody-minded succubus."

And suddenly she was holding him, and he was holding onto her for dear life, weeping for everything that he'd lost. Everything he'd wanted, sifting through his grasping, clutching, useless fingers. His parents, Lily, his secrets, his lies, his fear. Hermione rocked him and soothed him, until they were sitting on the floor, his long robes pooling beneath them. "I hate my life," he sobbed. "I hate knowing I've lost you as well."

Hermione's answer was to hold him closer. "Don't be daft, Severus! If you've lost me, why am I still here, holding on to you?" She gave him a little shake. "I chose you, Severus. Not Sirius, not Remus, not the boys, I. Chose. You."

"You'll tire of me. You'll come to hate me as well."

She smiled, and rocked the troubled man. "I've tried hating you. But the reasons I like you far outweigh the desire to hate you." She almost laughed when she felt his breath hitch. "And as far as growing tired of you, well, you'll just have to make sure I don't."

Slowly, his tears subsided, and he found himself leaning back against her, in an unconscious imitation of their position on the night she found him wounded at Grimmauld. He was exhausted from talking and weeping. He felt like a flannel that had been wrung out, and left on the ground. The arms around him were strong and sure. If it had been anyone else on earth, he would have Obliviated them right now. But he couldn't. He wanted her to admire him, even love him, too much. For once in his miserable life, Severus Snape thought he might have found his true prize, but like always, it was too little, too late.

Quietly, he confessed, "I once thought Lily was perfect, but we let each other down. I insulted her, and she turned her back on me forever. I turned to the Dark Lord for

vengeance, and damned my own soul in the process. I've spent the last twenty years living a half-life, telling myself it was what I deserved."

"You don't have to live that life anymore. I'm here."

He moaned. "Hermione, you are too young to know what you're committing to!"

"I've known for the past five years what I'm committing to. I've got thick enough skin for both of us."

For a moment, they both were silent, considering her words. Severus felt an unfamiliar, almost frightening tug of emotion. It felt like hope.

Hermione suddenly giggled. "Hermione-flavoured cherry! Oh, Professor, I'm never going to let you forget that!" Severus could feel her laughing against his back, and the absurdity of it all caught up with them, and he laughed as well, albeit reluctantly.

"I'm sorry. It was the crudest thing I could think of."

She sobered. "It - it made me feel wanted."

He could feel her tremble. Softly, he said, "You are, witch." He felt her take a deep breath, and settle a little more comfortably. He thought that, for the first time in his life, he may have actually said the right thing.

For several moments, neither spoke. Finally, with a groan for his protesting limbs, Severus rose. His back was killing him, and he was sure Hermione's legs were numb from sitting in the same position for so long. He stood, and offered a hand to help her to rise. She stumbled, and when he caught and steadied her, she looked up at him with an expression akin to regard. It broke his heart open, and he knew something had happened that would change their lives forever.

As she stood, he moved closer, until they were holding each other, lightly; the way old friends will hold one another. Gently, he put his arms around her and pulled her to his chest. She was a warm, comfortable, solid weight. The type of weight that feels good, that the bearer feels privileged to carry. He sighed softly, and placed a soft, chaste kiss on her mad hair, pathetically grateful that this infuriating little witch was still here with him, would be with him. He had been right. She was finer made.

He wouldn't touch her. Not now. He would wait, and hope and pray to those indifferent gods to keep him alive long enough to give her something decent of himself when she came of age. And in the meantime, he would have to shield his true thoughts from The Dark Lord, from Dumbledore even. And he would have to teach her. She may have been his student for the past five years, but he had not begun to truly teach her until now.

"Severus?" she asked, his name sounding sweet in her mouth.

"Hmm?" he breathed, enjoying the feel of her warm, soft body against his. Now that he had drained himself of his emotions, he felt sleepy, almost sated.

To his secret disappointment, she quietly moved away from him. "I won't care for you any less if you say yes, but I have to ask." She took a deep breath and stiffened, as if preparing for a blow. "When you took me in your arms, were you thinking about her?" She faced him with immense dignity, as if she already knew the answer. "Were you were you wishing I was Lily?" She gave him a look that was patently pragmatic, but there was something behind her eyes that was preparing for death.

Severus swallowed. He owed this child this much. He owed it to her to tell her the truth. They were locked now. He had set this course in motion; he would see it through, and see her safe.

He looked into her mind, and opened his to hers. It was an incredible sensation, but it wasn't frightening or sordid. She could feel his desperation, and his fear, and his longing. And she could hear the soft, emphatic, honest, *No*.

He looked down at her hands. They looked like little birds, enclosed in his large palms. Softly, without guile, or intent, his voice nearly drove her to her knees with its beauty, its depth and colour and music. "For the first time in my life, lass, I find myself exactly where I wish to be."

Hermione took his large hand in hers and pressed it against her left breast. He gasped, until he realised she was pressing his hand against her swiftly beating heart. He looked into her eyes, and the child behind the man shone through. Almost outside of himself, he whispered, "I have placed my heart with yours now. If you break it, or give it away thoughtlessly, I will have nothing left. I fear I will not survive that."

Hermione looked up at her professor, and her voice filled the room with power. It was a beautiful, almost mystical sound, pre-erotic, female; it was the voice of the goddess. "I swear I will never allow another to take what belongs to you. By my blood oath, I swear it."

He took her in his arms, crooning, his eyes closed, an expression of bliss briefly lighting his face and making him beautiful. Hermione felt as insubstantial as a dandelion on the wind, and when he took her chin between his thumb and forefinger and tipped her face up to his, she felt her hips grow spongy and hot. He leaned down, and Hermione willed herself to keep her eyes open, to watch his liquid eyes close as he leaned down to touch his lips to hers. Her arms moved up on his shoulders, and she slid her fingers through his black hair.

His mouth was soft, and slightly swollen from crying, and as it moved against hers, it was warm and tasted of lavender tea. He smelled delicious, and he felt like home. Her belly swelled against his; she wanted to stay here forever...

The flame in the fireplace blazed up and they almost jumped apart from one another. From the flames, Professor Dumbledore called, "Professor Snape? Are you there?"

Putting a finger to his lips to keep Hermione silent, Severus walked over to the fireplace. "Yes, Headmaster. How may I help you?" A familiar, unwelcome face appeared in the embers.

"Ah, Severus. Yes, dear boy. Have you, by any chance, seen Miss Granger this afternoon?"

Severus felt his stomach lurch. They'd been talking for hours. "We spoke briefly, but I haven't seen her for quite some time. Is there a problem?"

"Quite probably, no. But I would appreciate if you could meet me in my office in, say, ten minutes?"

Severus' heart sank. "Certainly, Headmaster. I'll join you shortly."

"Thank you, Professor. Would you, perchance, check by the library? If you see Miss Granger there, where she no doubt is ensconced in one of the study areas, would you ask her to accompany you?"

Severus had heard that tone before. It was the tone Albus used to convey that, yes, I think you are lying, and yes, you'd better be able to cover your tracks and yes, you're in trouble.

Resignedly, he heaved a resentful sigh, and replied, "Certainly, Headmaster. I'll go and find the girl."

"Good man. Thank you, Severus."

Severus turned and looked at the young witch, and she rolled like quicksilver into his arms. He could still feel her soft lips upon his, and his body wanted more of her. Instead, he kept himself in check, remembering his promise to himself. He grew solemn.

He leaned forward, until their foreheads were touching. "We have roles to play, Miss Granger."

She nodded. "I know that, Professor Snape."

"Starting tomorrow, Occlumency lessons. Do not look Dumbledore in the eye. He is a more skilled Legilimens even than me."

Hermione nodded. "I understand that you will continue to treat me the way you always have. Understand I will still act indignant."

Severus smirked. "Well, Miss Granger, let's see if all those years at Stage School will pay for themselves." Impulsively, he kissed her smooth forehead, and they parted.

Roughly ten minutes later, they were ascending into the Headmaster's study. To Hermione's surprise, Harry was waiting. Professor Dumbledore was sitting with him, and looked as grave and unsmiling as she'd ever seen him.

"Ah, Miss Granger. I see that Professor Snape found you." He cocked an eye at Severus, who felt his hackles rising. Hypocritical old poofster...

"Yes, Headmaster. She was precisely where you thought she would be. Buried with her nose in a book in the library, oblivious to all." He gave Hermione a rather disdainful scowl. The Headmaster looked at Hermione as well, and she pretended to study a book on his desk.

"Your diligence will no doubt pay off in your exams, Miss Granger. I am sorry I had to take you away from your revising, but Mr. Potter asked to speak to me on a grave matter concerning you. And, unfortunately, Professor Snape, as well."

Hermione glanced at Severus almost indifferently. "Professor Snape?" She turned to her friend. Harry was watching Severus with angry, accusing eyes. "Harry, what's this all about?" She pretended to relax. "If this is about earlier, I told you it was nothing. I just needed to have a word with Pro "

"Hermione, you don't have to cover for him! If he's threatening you "

"Potter, what exactly are you insinuating?" Severus growled, his anger rising.

"Please, everyone. I must insist on calm." The Headmaster held up a placating hand. He turned to Hermione. "Miss Granger, I'm afraid Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley had a clandestine meeting with Sirius Black today in the Shrieking Shack, and were given some rather... unsettling news."

Hermione felt her lips go numb. "What sort of unsettling news, Professor?"

Harry, unable to restrain himself, blurted, "Sirius said when he arrived in the shack..." He swallowed, embarrassed. With a look of pure hatred, he directed his words to Severus. "He told me what you did."

Severus turned to Harry with narrowed, threatening eyes. "Did what, Mr. Potter? If I'm to be condemned, I would like to at least know what Black has accused me of doing."

Harry looked at Hermione. "Sirius told me. How he saved you from being molested by him." He pointed an accusatory finger at Severus.

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A/N: The title of this chapter and the opening verse is from the folk song, Lagan Love.

From Wikipedia: In Celtic folklore, the Irish: *leannán sí* "Barrow-Lover" is a beautiful woman of the *Aos Sí* (people of the barrow or the fairy folk) who takes a human lover. The name comes from the Gaelic words for a sweetheart, lover, or concubine and the term for a barrow or fairy-mound.

The *leannán sídhe* is generally depicted as a beautiful muse, who offers inspiration to an artist in exchange for their love and devotion.

## Eight: I Cover My Ears, I Close My Eyes...

Chapter 9 of 39

You don't know what a chance is until you have to seize one; you don't know what a man is until you have to please one.

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

*For Sempra and Mimi and TalesofSnape, all of whom make me a better writer*

---

*You don't know what a chance is, until you have to seize one; you don't know what a man is until you have to please one,*

*Don't put your life in the hands of a man with a face for every season, don't waste your time in the arms of a man who's no stranger to treason...*

---

Hermione looked from Harry to Dumbledore, shock choking utterance. She glanced at Professor Snape, who was literally about to explode. He hissed, "How DARE you accuse me of such a thing, Potter?"

Enraged, he took a step towards Harry, until Professor Dumbledore thundered, "Severus, NO!"

Panting, Professor Snape froze in place and looked at his employer, his expression incredulous. "Don't tell me you actually believe this... this whelp?"

"Stop it, all of you!" Hermione shouted, terrified for her professor, frightened for Harry. "Please, listen to me!"

The three males in the room froze and turned to her. She shook her head. "Harry, I don't know what Sirius told you, but he's lying! Professor Snape was protecting me from him!"

Harry was adamant. "No! Hermione, he's cast Imperio on you, or something! Sirius told me he saw Professor Snape. " Harry looked at the Potions master with all the disgust he could muster. "Sirius saw him undressing you! He said you were trying to make him stop but he was too strong!"

To Severus' surprise, Hermione laughed. "Harry, if I was being Imperused, why would I be fighting him?" Her laughter died, and her anger and indignation rose in its place. "SIRIUS IS LYING, HARRY!"

Harry shook his head, confident of his words. "I don't believe you! He's got you Confounded, then!"

Severus pounded his hand against the table in frustration. "Merlin's sake, Potter, clean the rubbish from your ears! The girl's trying to tell you something and you're not listening!"

"Shut UP, Snape!" Harry shouted in retaliation, "I've seen how you look at her when you think no one's watching "

"And have you seen your perfect godfather slobbering over her as well, boy?" Professor Snape roared, and the two squared off, with Hermione between them.

"You dirty pervert! I'll kill you if you've hurt my friend!" Harry screamed, near tears, and drew his wand. He was no match for a full grown wizard like Severus, and Hermione cried for the two of them to stop.

"Stop this NOW!" Dumbledore's magically enhanced voice shook and reverberated through the study, and the three of them whirled to see the older wizard standing, his eyes blazing, his magic swirling around them. "I will not have you fighting in this school! Calm yourselves, all of you! I will hear each of you, in turn, and I will have quiet from the other two if I have to place a Silencing Charm on you."

Harry, Hermione and Professor Snape stood still, resentment and antipathy emanating from the two younger men. Hermione looked between them, frightened for them both. Harry was angry, and when his temper got the best of him he could be unpredictable. Professor Snape, on the other hand, was a master duelist, a spy and a Death Eater, and a dangerous wizard in the calmest of times. His black eyes were flashing fire now, and Hermione realised she'd been holding her breath, waiting for the hexing to begin.

Dumbledore waited until the three of them quieted somewhat, and said, "Harry, it is a very serious allegation to accuse a Hogwarts teacher of an impropriety with a student. I would like for you to start at the beginning. Harry, would you please tell Miss Granger and Professor Snape what you told me earlier?"

Somewhat mollified, Harry gave Hermione a furtive glance, and began, "When Ron and I reached the Shrieking Shack, Sirius was there and he was very agitated. He asked me if I had seen Hermione and Professor Snape, and I told him that Ron and I had passed them on our way." He glanced at Professor Snape.

"I told him they both seemed angry about something, and Sirius said, 'Well, I know why Severus is angry! He didn't get to finish what he started. I walked in here and caught him with his hand down Hermione's knickers.'"

"That is not true!" Hermione cried, and Dumbledore held out his hand.

"You will have an opportunity to speak, Miss Granger. Go ahead, Harry."

Looking more uncomfortable, Harry said, "Sirius said he confronted Professor Snape, and Snape said "

"Professor Snape, please, Harry."

"Sorry, sir. *Professor Snape* said he was going to to..." Harry's face turned bright red, and he stumbled through the words, *Pophermionescherry*."

Professor Snape made a sound of profound disgust. "Really, Mr. Potter? Do I look like the type of wizard who would say something so grossly crude about a student? Especially," he flicked a rather disdainful glance toward Hermione, "Miss Granger?" He looked so disgusted, that for a moment, Hermione felt a bit offended.

"Severus, please," said the headmaster, holding up a hand to silence him. "I have stated I will hear both sides of the story, and I must ask you to cease until Harry has explained his side."

Suddenly, white hot anger coursed through Hermione. Over a week ago, she and Professor Snape had spent an hour trying to convince Professor Dumbledore that Sirius was acting inappropriately toward her. The Headmaster knew this was all shite. Why was he humouring Harry, instead of telling him the truth?

Hermione stepped up to Harry. "Harry, I'm only going to say this once, and you had better listen."

"Miss Granger "

She whirled on him, and Severus remembered just how intimidating the little witch could be when angered. "No! Professor Dumbledore, you know the truth, yet you are acting as if Professor Snape and I have been lying all along, and I won't put up with this anymore!"

Hermione, furious, turned to Harry. "Harry, the reason Sirius said that to you is because HE is the one who has attempted to molest me! Professor Snape has been protecting me!

"I am not Imperused, and I'm not Confounded, as Professor Dumbledore can no doubt attest. Sirius was bragging to Professor Snape that he could convince you that he was the one telling the truth, and it looks like he was right!"

Hermione turned to Professor Snape. "I'm sorry you've been dragged into this entire sordid mess, Professor Snape. I never in my wildest dreams thought it would come to this!"

"Indeed, Miss Granger," Severus said, rather enjoying himself. Intimidating, yes; alluring, most definitely. It was almost entertaining to watch her, providing her anger wasn't directed at him.

He turned to the son of his old enemy. "Think, Potter! Why would I wish to engage Miss Granger, AND in a place where she knew Black would be?" He curled his lip. "I have dozens of secret places in this castle at my disposal. Why would I attempt to molest a student in a public place, knowing that Black was expected there any moment?"

"You know why," Harry retorted, his eyes narrowed. "Sirius embarrassed you all those years ago and you wanted to show him - "

"Harry, ENOUGH!" Hermione said. She began to weep. "How could you think such a thing about a professor about me? I'm one of your best friends, and you'd rather believe Sirius than me? Harry, Sirius is the one lying to you. He's the one I'm afraid to be alone with!"

Harry paused. The raw honesty in her voice was unmistakable; as he had stated before, he knew her too well. He saw the body language between Snape and Hermione, and he realised not only did she not appear afraid of him, but that she was obviously neither Confounded nor Imperused. For the first time, his conviction faltered.

"Hermione, why would Sirius tell such a lie?" His shoulders dropped, and Severus smiled inwardly. The silly young fool was starting to see sense, no matter how much it troubled him.

"Because he knows how hard it is for you to believe anything good about Professor Snape! And yet, it's so easy to believe the only the best about Sirius! They don't like each other, and both of them use every opportunity to discredit the other!"

Harry looked at Severus coolly. "But why would Sirius lie to me? He has nothing to prove to me! And why were you there, anyway, Professor? No one knew Sirius would be there except " Harry stuttered to a halt, and looked over at Hermione.

"You told Snape "

"Professor Snape, Harry! He's our teacher!"

Harry almost snarled at Severus. "PROFESSOR Snape, then, that Sirius was coming to meet us? Why would you do that?"

"Because I didn't want to be alone in the same room with Sirius!" she all but screamed into the room. "I was going to confront Sirius and tell him to leave me alone, and I asked Professor Snape to come with me because he is the only one who believed me he was there in Grimmauld Place - he saw Sirius try to -" She buried her face in her hands in humiliation and cried, and Severus knew that if Sirius Black were in this room, he would kill him right now.

As he unwillingly found himself longing to hold and comfort her, Severus' palm suddenly grew warm, and a slight stinging sensation grew out of the invisible line Hermione had cut in his palm. His blood oath was calling to him. Hermione also looked down at her palm, and began to rub it absently with her thumb. She felt it, too.

Severus reluctantly turned away. "This is enough, Headmaster! Can't you see the girl is obviously distressed?" He turned to Potter, his voice venomous. "You disgust me, Potter. You accuse your best friend of lying, you hurt and degrade her in front of the Headmaster and myself, you insult me, and all you can do is berate the girl for being brave enough to tell you the truth." He gestured to Hermione, who was blotting her face with the handkerchief he had given her a lifetime ago. "This is why she wouldn't tell you she knew you wouldn't be intelligent enough to believe her!"

"I think that will do, Professor Snape," Dumbledore interjected, and both Hermione and Severus looked at him in shock. Ignoring them, the Headmaster turned to Harry and placed a fatherly hand on his shoulder.

"Harry, Sirius is not here to defend himself "

Hermione felt her blood run cold. The Headmaster continued, "But Miss Granger is quite adamant, and so is Professor Snape, that these allegations are unfounded. I think possibly Sirius saw the two of them conversing, and came to an incorrect conclusion."

Hermione shook her head in wonderment. She risked a glance at her professor, who stood like a statue, anger and resentment radiating from him.

"I'll question Sirius myself, but until then, I expect this matter to go no further than these walls. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said, his tone respectful, and he looked pleased that his concerns had been validated. Professor Snape gave the Headmaster a swift nod in reply. Hermione merely looked at the old man, her expression carefully neutral.

Severus glanced at her approvingly. She had dried her tears; she had not challenged Dumbledore further. She had, in fact, done rather much the same thing as he. She had erased all emotions from her face, and was waiting until she was given leave to go.

"Good," Dumbledore said, pleasantly, as if the subject had been dropped. "Harry, why don't you and Hermione run along? I'd like you to stay for a moment, Professor."

Harry left immediately, and Hermione turned to follow. She gave her professor a quick glance, and he returned it. To anyone else, their glance would have looked indifferent, accidental. But it was a look of approval, and Hermione accepted it as such.

After the young man and woman had departed, Albus turned to his Potions master. "Severus?"

He merely turned and looked at the Headmaster, an eyebrow raised in query.

Albus was unhappy. "If there is any truth at all to what Sirius said, I will find out. This is not the time to be distracted by something so insubstantial and fickle as physical desire. Especially for a student."

Severus remained still, then turned and looked at Dumbledore. He regarded the old man for several moments, his expression thoughtful and pensive.

Finally, Severus spoke. "I seem to recall that just under a month ago, I came to you, begging for help, because of what I revealed to the Dark Lord while under torture. I told you then that the girl was repulsed by me, that it would never work. And, what was it you said? Oh yes, 'you must find hidden depths with which to change that. Allow her to get to know you!'"

His smile was wolfish. "Well, I have, Albus. She's gotten to know me very well in the last few days, and we like what we've discovered. I'd say we've come to a very mutually beneficial arrangement, thanks in part to your advice, and I'm disinclined to change that right now.

"It's been a long time since I gave you my life for ransom, Albus." Severus' smile faded. "I was a foolish boy then, and I've been given no chance to grow up into anything other than a foolish man. I've reneged, but so did you, old man. I gave you the best years of my life in servitude here at this damned school. I made you a vow, to protect your precious Harry Potter, and I have kept my end of the pact very well."

Severus' eyes blazed with resentment and fury. "When the Dark Lord returned, I sat in my office and cried with pain from the Mark FOR DAYS. All because you wanted me to wait before I presented myself to him. You told me it would show him my loyalty to you, so that I could be a better spy. Do you remember what you said? 'Think of it as a way to atone, Severus'. Well, I've atoned. I'm absolved.

"You made promises to keep Lily safe, and you failed. You have polished my guilt every day since, and forced me to live a life which has been unmitigated hell every moment of every day, as your indentured slave." Severus leaned over, his face arrogant and cruel. "But you forgot that time passed, Albus, and Lily's memory has returned to its proper place. You can no longer bully or extort me into spying for you. I do it now because I choose to, and I will cease to do it when I so choose. You have no further power over me beyond what I sanction to myself."

Severus stood to his full height, and looked at his Headmaster. "And I will tell you this, old man. If you try to do anything, say anything, cause anything that will turn her against me, I'll leave. If your actions bring harm to one mad curl on her head, I'll take her, and we'll go so far underground neither you nor the Dark Lord will ever find us. We. Will. Disappear." His voice trailed into a hissing whisper, venomous and deadly.

He gestured to his forearm. "This can be removed. Now, I have told you what I will do. Now, this is what you will do. You will let us move forward in our plans to work together, and you will call Potter and Weasley AND Black off the girl. I've never performed the Killing Curse, but I would for her."

Severus glared at the Headmaster. "Miss Granger and I are working together now, on how to defeat the Dark Lord, and keep Potter alive long enough to do it. We are not lovers, but we will be. I'm not your toy for the Greater Good anymore, Albus. I'll help you, as long as it is gainful for me to do so."

Severus leaned over the older man. In a voice so liquidly wanton, it almost made the Headmaster shiver, Severus purred, "And if I wish to fuck her on the Head Table of the Great Hall, you'll allow it. You'll give me everything I need to continue this despicable job. And though it all, you will leave me, leave us, alone."

He turned to leave. "Do we have an understanding, Headmaster? You have your spy, you have your precious Potter, and I'll have a reason to live after this thrice-damned war is over. Do we have an accord?"

Dumbledore sagged for a moment, looking every one of his hundred and fifty-plus years. "Yes, Severus. Yes, damn you. We do."

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Once Harry and Hermione descended the steps from the Headmaster's office, he turned to face his friend. "Hermione, I don't know what to think, or believe." His troubled eyes met hers, and Hermione reluctantly felt sorry for her friend.

"Harry, I am telling the truth. Ever since last summer, Sirius has been harassing me every time we went to Grimmauld Place."

Harry shook his head disbelievingly. "Why would he do that?" At her rather stunned expression, Harry hastily added, "I don't mean, why would he find you attractive! I mean," he hesitated, trying to find the right words. "Why would he, you know, if he knew you didn't feel the same?"

Hermione sighed. "From what I know of him, Sirius was a bit of a player in school. I think he still thinks of himself as one." She smiled ruefully. "I don't think he likes rejection much."

"But why wouldn't you tell me?"

Hermione took pity on him. "Harry, I just felt it would be one more negative thing in your life right now. With all that's going on, between Dumbledore ignoring you, Umbridge torturing you, the Prophet vilifying you..." Hermione looked at her friend sadly. "I thought I could handle it on my own. But I couldn't. And then, one day at Grimmauld Place, Professor Snape arrived and saw Sirius..." Hermione's voice trailed off, too tired and embarrassed to continue.

Harry watched her worriedly. "And Snape really, well, sort of saved you?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "It's Professor Snape, Harry and yes! Think, Harry! He's always tried to protect us. I know you don't like him, and I sort of understand it all, but think about all the times when we were in trouble! Professor Snape was there, trying to make sure we were guarded!"

Seeing Harry's face still clouded with doubt, Hermione huffed. "Professor Snape isn't the enemy, Harry! He may not be the nicest man on earth, but he isn't the enemy. Sirius is playing you for a fool."

She gave Harry an impulsive little hug. "You know in your heart I'm right, Harry. If Professor Snape is guilty of anything, it's goading Sirius into making up this lie. Sirius hates Professor Snape, but you don't have to. We need him. We need to trust him."

Harry shook his head. "I'm never going to trust him, Hermione. You just want to see the good in everyone too much." Reluctantly, he added, "I'm going to see Sirius during Easter holidays. I'll talk to him then."

Harry walked away, leaving Hermione to her thoughts. "It didn't do any good."

Hermione whirled around, and saw her professor leaning against the wall, almost insolently. "Your little speech, no matter how persuasive, won't help. Potter and I will go on despising each other."

Hermione nodded. "I wish it could be different." She shrugged. "If the Headmaster had shown any support to you, it might have been. I don't understand him, either."

Severus frowned. "He's angry at me for daring to hope." His voice softened. "He's convinced you are a bad influence on me."

Hermione felt her heart flutter at his softly enunciated words. How was it possible for a voice to breathe so many insinuations into so few words? She looked up at Severus with a little knowing smile. "I'll try to be on my best behaviour, sir."

He nodded sagely. "See that you do, Miss Granger." He unfolded his arms and pushed himself from the wall. "I'll walk you back to your Common Room."

As they walked, they spoke briefly of the conversation with Dumbledore. Hermione's eyes widened as he told her of his ultimatum to the Headmaster. "But, Professor "

He stopped and turned to her. For a moment, he seemed to wage a brief battle with himself. "I'm your professor in the classroom, and in the company of others." He glanced around briefly, and took her hand. "I am Severus to you." He said the words with a faint scowl, as if not entirely pleased by it.

"This, whatever it is, between us..." His finely shaped brows knitted together. He glanced up at her through his curtain of dark hair. "I am a possessive man, Hermione. If you pledge yourself to me, I take it seriously."

She looked up at him, her scowl matching his. "You should. I made it in all seriousness."

"I consider that you belong to me now." Again, a faint anger in his voice, as if he expected a challenge.

Hermione smiled. "You're missing the point, Severus."

"And that is?"

Hermione hesitated a moment, gathering her thoughts. "I've considered that I belonged to you the moment I found you on the floor in Grimmauld Place. I knew then you were worth protecting. You were worth fighting for. And since no one else was there to do it, I could fill that space without having to worry about competing with anyone else for the position." She gave him a wry smile. "Then I could boss you around to my heart's content."

If she hoped he would smile, or react in any other way opposite to his dour nature, she would have been disappointed. Instead, he nodded. Then, he did something that surprised her, after all.

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it, then pressed it against his cheek. His skin was cool, like fine marble, and he closed his eyes for a moment, as if savouring the feel of her flesh against his own.

"Tomorrow, we begin Occlumency lessons. Seven o'clock, my study."

"Of course," Hermione replied, her voice quavering a little. His large hand enveloped hers, and she gave his cheek a little stroking caress with her fingertips.

His reply was to turn his face and press his lips against her palm. He opened his eyes, and glanced sideways at her face. His warm mouth parted, and he touched the tip of his tongue to her palm, causing a jolt of electricity to race down into her loins, and her breathing quickened. When he saw the dark heat in her expression, the obvious arousal in her eyes, he smirked, and tilted his head, almost flirtatiously.

"So, not entirely the 'boss' of this relationship, hmm?" he purred, his voice rumbling against her hand. When she swallowed with an audible clicking noise, he chuckled darkly, and lowered her hand to her side. He smirked inwardly to see her tremble, knowing he was the cause.

Hermione looked down at her palm. She could see the faintest trace of moisture in the centre, from his warm, mischievous tongue. It triggered a memory. "Tonight, in the Headmaster's study "

"I know. I felt it, too."

Hermione looked at her palm again. While there was no visible mark to commemorate the Blood Oath they'd taken, she'd felt a sting of sensation there. "Was it because we both felt the other was being threatened?"

He pondered. "Perhaps. Blood oaths are magical, and when they are made in earnest, can often warn the oath bearer of peril."

Hermione considered. "I could see where that could be advantageous."

He shook his head. She really could be such an infant sometimes. "Why do you think I made it in the first place, child?"

Before she could answer, he looked down at her, and his eyes flickered briefly over her lush, parted mouth, and he shook his head. "That does it. Off to bed with you, then. There's a good lass," he said, nodding toward the hall leading to Gryffindor Tower. "Goodnight, Hermione."

She watched him walk away, hoping he would turn around, but, rather perversely, told herself he wouldn't, and, of course, he didn't. It just wouldn't have been a very 'Professor Snape' thing to do.

She paused. Severus. He was Professor Snape in the school, in public, to the world. He was Severus in her heart.

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In the weeks following their long talk, she and Severus had drawn closer, and each day she spent with him taught her more about him to admire, to love and care for. He was still Severus Snape, however; companionship had not changed his tendency to pout, or lose patience, or grumble about the tiniest of things, or to exhibit fits of temper.

Hermione learned to deal with him, and she found that, when all was said and done, dealing with Severus Snape was not all that different from dealing with every boy she'd ever met. He could be ridiculously stubborn and bloody minded, and completely inflexible.

At times it was so tempting to hex the bollocks off the man who was presently berating her for cutting her daisy roots in three-eighths inch pieces instead of seven-sixteenths inches. Especially when the same wizard had kissed her into insensibility for almost two solid hours the night before.

It was sometimes all Hermione could do not to walk up behind him after class and magically bind him to his chair and force him to make love to her. She rather thought she would, if she stood a chance of success. When it came to iron control, Severus Snape was a solid rock. And she would know, having felt it against her hip as he kissed her into a swooning state of desire on a nightly basis.

The Sunday they began Occlumency lessons went absurdly better than Hermione had hoped. In reality, she had approached it with pants-wetting dread. Harry had told them all horror stories of Professor Snape's ruthless rape of his mind over and over, while taunting him to concentrate and control his emotions.

Hermione thought Severus might be going rather easy on her, because the first thing he did was to give her a Mind-Clarifying Potion, which helped her to concentrate better. "I'm only going to do this the first time, but it should give you an idea of how to accomplish the skill on your own."

As he walked away from her, he spoke, "I've used Legilimency on you before, and you recognised it, but the Dark Lord is very skilled. He can slip into your mind unawares. We'll be practicing both types of... penetration."

In spite of herself, Hermione blushed. He turned and stood for a few moments, allowing the potion to work, biting back laughter at her flushed face. Allowing his voice to drop in timbre, he asked quietly, "How do you feel?"

Telling herself that he was deliberately distracting her, Hermione concentrated hard. Finally, she said, "Like everything makes perfect sense in my head." She smiled. "It's as if everything is compartmentalized, and I can put every thought in its proper place."

He nodded, pleased. "Good. Now, I'm going to Legilimize you. Try very hard to block me away. I don't expect you to succeed the first, or even the second time." His mouth twitched. "However, by the third time, you should understand what is happening enough to block me."

He had been right, of course. She picked herself off the floor after the first attempt, with a bleeding nose and shaking from head to toe. He had been determined, but not too rough with her, and even as she dragged herself to her feet and he siphoned the blood from her face, she was thinking about how she might be able to block him.

The second time was no better or worse, but when he withdrew, she thought she might be having either an aneurism, or an epiphany. "Do it again! I want to try something!"

Severus regarded her for a moment, then shook his head. "I think twice is quite enough for one night, Hermione."

"Please? I think I have it really! If I don't, I promise I'll stop."

He sighed. "Very well. *Legilimens!*"

He strode into her mind, and she pictured him walking down a hall, with an infinite number of doors. Each time he tried to enter a door, she shut it firmly in his face. She could feel his surprise, and he turned immediately to the next door, but she managed to shut it as well. He sped up, and she could feel him pushing harder, moving from door to door with increasing speed. It became more difficult to concentrate on each door. Sometimes he would pretend to rush to one, only to dash through another.

For almost ten minutes, she was able to keep him out, but he finally managed to sneak through a door she'd left unprotected, and once he was there, her defenses weakened, and all the doors quietly unlocked themselves.

She wobbled, feeling all her strength draining from her body, even as her professor caught her in his arms. When her head cleared, she was astonished to find herself sitting in his lap, her head tucked against his shoulder, his arm around her waist. He was casually reading a book, and when she stirred, he put the book aside and faced her, frowning.

"Finally! I thought I was going to have to *Rennervate* you." He sounded irritated, but Hermione could hear the fear underneath. He had been afraid for her. She sat up, and a brief wave of dizziness passed over her quickly.

"Did I do it?" When he lowered his eyes and tilted his head, she grew excited. "I did, didn't I?"

He smirked. "You did, indeed." He grew serious. "But your method isn't very efficient, and as you discovered, can easily falter. You exhausted yourself trying to keep your 'doors' closed, but I could increase my pace in reaching each new one. But I will concede, it was an impressive start. Now, up you get." He patted her thigh. "My left leg is numb."

They discussed various ways to improve her performance, and Hermione left with the thrill of not only being able to prevent Severus from Legilimizing her, but the lovely feeling of nestling in the crook of his arm, sitting on his lap.

The second time she was able to block his invasion completely, she experienced a very different reaction from him. Flushed with success, she impulsively threw her arms around Severus' neck and gave him a massive hug. Almost the moment she did, she regretted it. She could feel his entire body stiffen; she could almost hear disapproval in his very breathing.

His hands, which had been locked by his sides, rose slowly, uncertainly, and lightly pressed against her waist. For a moment, she thought he would push her away, but she held on. She looked up into his unreadable dark eyes. There was a faint line between his silky brows, and Hermione steeled herself for rejection.

Gently, she said, "Severus, it's called a hug. People who fancy each other do it. It's a sign of affection." She drew back so she could see his face, but he was stubbornly avoiding eye contact. With an apologetic smile, she added, "It's usually reciprocated by the one fancied."

He looked at her strangely, and drew very still. Then his large hand pressed against the back of her head, and he plunged into her mouth in a devastating, demanding kiss. The world stopped turning, and Hermione felt the saddle between her thighs swell and pulse with each heartbeat. Her knees buckled; had he not been holding her in a sudden iron grip, she would have fallen.

His lips were warm and soft and hungry, and fit against hers perfectly, and when his tongue begged entrance and she opened herself to him, he gasped and swooped down on her with a startlingly deep, loud moan, like a man enjoying the most delectable dessert, and to Hermione, that was exactly what he was as well.

Hermione had been kissed before, but never like this. No one had ever made her body ache and shiver and burn like this. She was trembling as he teased her mouth with his tongue, and as she responded with a soft sweep of her own tongue against his, she realised he was trembling, too. Her hands were sliding through his silky hair, and when he cupped her bottom in his hands and pressed her against him, she whimpered into his mouth, and she felt his erection pulse against her pelvis.

They were clutching each other, mouths open, tongues battling, each drinking the moans from the other, twisting, trying to plumb every depth of each other. It was as if her entire being, heart and mind and body and soul were in her mouth, being licked and nipped and pleased by Severus Snape.

Her nipples were rock hard; she was sure he could feel them through her robes, and he smelled divine, like new mown grass, and parchment and soap. He tasted like wine, and she understood now why books called desire a hunger. She bit at his lower lip, and he growled and thrust his hips against hers, his arms sliding over her body like ropes to bind her heart, and Hermione never wanted him to stop.

Slowly, he gradually eased the intensity of his kiss, until their lips parted with a soft, sucking pout, and Hermione almost cried out at the loss of his warm mouth, his soft fragrant breath. He was as breathless and flushed as she, and Severus closed his eyes and drew her against him. She could hear his strong, steady heart pounding in harmony with hers. His velvety voice slid over her like the most sensuous of garments. "I think that is enough reciprocation, lass. I'm a man before I'm a wizard, and you, witch, are a lennan si, if one ever existed."

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Hermione was running, running down the hall, fear giving her feet the same wings as when she had spotted Severus and thought he was a Death Eater come to attack the school. She knew this outcome would be different, and she knew he was going to be furious if she survived.

Her heart was almost bursting, and she could still hear the wizard behind her, gaining ground. She almost sobbed, feeling terror and stupidity washing over her, tainting her sweat with a bitter, caustic edge, and she knew he would sense it, and use it against her.

She was so close to escaping, but, as before, her fear was making her panic, and she wasn't thinking straight...

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Title and quote is from the song *Telling Me Lies* from the amazing **Trio** Album. Words by Dolly Parton

## Nine: Take Me For Longing

Chapter 10 of 39

Time and hard lessons are one kind of wisdom...

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

*I've been blown away by the response I've had to this story. Thank you so much. Your encouragement means the world to me, and I hope you will continue to enjoy the story.*

*Huge thanks to Talesofsnape and dharkcharlotte for their alpha and beta skills. Thank you ladies, for making me look good.*

*For Sempra and Mimi*

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*Don't choose me because I am faithful. Don't choose me because I am kind. If your heart settles on me, I'm for the taking. Take me for longing or leave me behind.*

*I would be, for you, a fire in a rainbow; I would be, for you, an opening door. Time and hard lessons are one kind of wisdom. Try to forget them or love me no more.*

*I'm not asking your heart to believe me, I'm not asking for promise or pledge; whenever the answer is 'yes', that's the question; I am the fool dancing over the edge.*

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The winter gradually gave way to the beginnings of a rather grudging Scottish spring, and Severus and Hermione spent their precious, stolen hours practicing Occlumency and cautiously learning each other. With each passing day, Severus found himself admiring Hermione's developing maturity as a scholar. She had gradually emerged from the book-spouting little know-it-all, into an intelligent, clever young woman of depth and humour, capable of making impressive leaps of deductive reasoning, all the while making him want to laugh. He didn't, very much; he wanted to, very much.

She was diligent, and he admired that; she fretted about her O.W.L.s, but Severus knew the examinations well enough by now to know she would sail through them, even this early in the year. Her own hard-won self-confidence gave him the beginnings of understanding how to accept himself, not as a flawed, hopeless individual beyond redemption, but as a man with flaws, trying to do the right things. He had second-guessed his every move his whole life; Hermione was teaching him to trust himself.

Severus had little enough time to ponder this odd little relationship, but when he did, it comforted him as few things had done his entire life. Now that Dumbledore had backed off, and given them some breathing room, Severus could afford to enjoy his little Gryffindor lioness. He realised he liked her, though he felt he should be above such childish, mundane thoughts; he was a grown wizard, not a third-year passing love notes in class. (*Do you like me? Check Yes or No*) He had intercepted so many of those in his teaching career, he probably could have written one, had he chosen, to Hermione. Sometimes, after a few glasses of wine, he found himself sorely tempted to put quill to parchment.

It was the first time in his adulthood that Severus could actually remember not feeling like he was simply marking time until the Dark Lord decided he was too expendable to leave alive. That had been surprisingly hard to accept. It was all so easy to give in to the ease of fatalism, he admitted. Living was tougher. It was the startling, terrifying, hopeful realisation that he wanted to live past the war, to see what a future might hold. He'd botched up so many aspects of his life, but he rather thought with Hermione around, that might not happen so much. She wasn't the type to sit around and let those she cared about bollocks things up.

Severus had never known what it felt like to be truly part of a couple, albeit a clandestine one. His time with Lily was, as he now realised, much more about giving than taking. He was forced to admit that Lily had never really given herself totally to him, not like a true lover should. He found his self-directed loathing and anger losing ground over the reluctant, fearful desire to start over. Seeing all of his dark confessions behind him, Hermione had never, nor would ever have turned her back on him as Lily had. He was sometimes awed, sometimes dismayed, at Hermione's capacity for forgiveness, caring and acceptance.



Lily had been an ideal; the ultimate perfect woman, forever denied him. She blazed a trail through Hogwarts, all flash and vivaciousness, and he was the drab chimney sweep skulking behind her, always bringing up the rear. When he tried to picture the two of them together now, at his present age, he simply couldn't do it, yet he had measured every woman since her death against such an impossible yardstick.

When he had tried to do the same with Hermione, she cut the yardstick down to size so quickly it had left him dazed. One thing was certain Hermione was never going to compete with a ghost, and told him so. She had, at first, shocked him into silent resentment, then proceeded to make him create a new yardstick.

He knew Lily would always be part of him, but he was beginning to understand that maybe he didn't have to self-flagellate daily to prove to himself and the world that he had made a mistake, and felt remorse for it. For all of Lily's vanity and pride; in spite of her ultimate rejection of him, Severus believed that she would truly be happy for him to find some love amongst the living. The fact that he'd found it with a student shocked and worried and frightened him, but not enough to end it. He was no longer capable of walking away, even for Lily's son.

His little witch was every bit as voracious as him in the pursuit and discussion of knowledge; he enjoyed the cut and thrust of conversing with someone who gave him a run for his money. Even as young as she was, Hermione could hold her own, and his challenges, opinions and intellectual arguments only served to increase her understanding and confidence. It was the only thing about his life that he could remotely call pleasant, and he clung to it with an ever increasing dependence that concerned him more with every passing day.

He had come to understand a lot more about the Muggle-born witch who had taken him into her heart so completely; just as he had told her his life story in that mind-bending afternoon, she had chosen to return the favour over the days and weeks to follow. He had listened, stunned, at the revelations of her part in all of the exploits of the so-called 'Golden Trio', with a growing respect and horror for her cleverness and outright audacity. He kept most of his emotions concealed. He was, after all, still Severus Snape. He had not become a bloody Gryffindor overnight.

"So Minerva's Time-Turner trick was how you managed to get so many classes completed?" He frowned. "The implications of that are potentially devastating. I cannot believe she was so careless as to give a third-year student such responsibility for something with the potential for such dire consequences." In reality, he was jealous. How many times had he yearned to be able to turn back time? He knew it was an empty fantasy. That was not how Time-Turners worked. If he had the chance to change what happened, would he have done something different? Was destiny subject to change?

Hermione was nodding. "Looking back, even this short amount of time, I can't believe I did it, either." She gave him a little sheepish sideways glance. "I have to confess, I wasn't exactly honest with her. I abused it shamelessly."

Severus looked down his large nose at his witch, narrowing his eyes. "Indeed, Miss Granger. And what form, pray tell, did this abuse take?" He was truly intrigued how Hermione Granger, heretofore thought of as goody-goody extraordinaire, felt she had abused the use of her third-year secret.

Hermione had the grace to blush. "Well, I didn't use it to cheat, if that's what you're implying!"

He sniffed. "Merlin forbid, Miss Granger. I would never imply something so sordid. It would be very " He smirked. "Un-Gryffindor of you."

Rolling her eyes, Hermione dunked one of Severus' favourite chocolate biscuits into her tea, and chased the dripping cookie to her mouth. Chewing, she said, "It's just that, sometimes, if I really enjoyed a particular class, or wanted to remember something, I'd go back three or four times and repeat it."

Severus frowned. "How can that be? There would be three or four of you in class at once."

Hermione blushed. *Whoops*. She grinned sheepishly. "Well, I borrowed an invisibility cloak and just sort of... snuck in."

Severus was gobsmacked. "But who " He huffed. "Of course. Potter."

"I didn't tell you that!"

Severus mentally rolled his eyes. "Really, Hermione. Students think we professors are so blind. *We do* know things." He smirked. "Go on."

She sighed wistfully, as if remembering something pleasant. "I went back and slept for days at a time! And if there was a particularly good meal, I'd eat a bit, leave, then go back and eat more of it, because I knew I'd enjoy it over again, and then I'd have to return to exercise so I wouldn't gain too much weight..."

She gave him an apologetic smile. "Don't worry I didn't change time or cause a paradox! You'd be surprised, though, how basically little would change during the repeats. But it just sort of added up after awhile."

Unable to stop himself, Severus blurted, "Did you ever repeat any time... in this class?" The moment the words left his mouth, he chastised himself for sounding like the love-sick fool he was. He would be sending the Dark Lord roses at this rate.

Hermione smirked. "Why, Professor Snape! Are you hinting to see if I used my Time-Turner in order to spend more time with you?"

Feeling a bit of an arse, Severus gave her a stony stare. Unfazed, Hermione leaned over and kissed the tip of his sizable nose. "All the time, sir. Especially when you gave the lecture on Healing Potions. I snuck in using Harry's cloak."

"Why Healing Potions? Do you have plans to become a Healer?"

Hermione pondered the question while munching on another stolen biscuit. "I have considered it. But that's not why I repeated the lectures." When he steadfastly refused to ask why, she caved in. "You know you have the most beautiful voice when you lecture about something you care about." He could feel her smile slip under the waistband of his trousers and give him a little teasing caress. "Your voice has always given me a little shiver."

Slightly mollified, he accepted the compliment, appalled that he could feel his face growing warm, along with his crotch. After writhing a bit through this blush, Severus looked at her suddenly. "Just how much time did you add to your life with this Time-Turner experiment?"

She frowned in thought, reaching for the chocolate biscuits again, only to have her hand slapped by her professor.

"Oy, you!" She squeaked, rubbing her offended hand.

He grumbled, "Stop eating my biscuits."

"I brought them!" Hermione was laughing in spite of herself. He really was adorable when he was being truculent.

He looked at her imperiously. "As a present to me. Bring your own, tomorrow. Answer the question, Hermione."

She picked up her teacup, and beamed at him as he rolled his eyes and placed the chocolate biscuit on her plate. "Thank you, Professor." She narrowed her eyes in thought. "Well, by my calculations, I gained about a year and a bit."

At his stunned expression, she laughed. "I became obsessed with it. Professor McGonagall warned me about it the urge to go back, to return to certain moments. It gets addictive.

"I spent a lot of time in the Room of Requirement with a Pensieve, reliving a lot of moments. I probably spent as much time skulking around under the invisibility cloak. It was such a feeling of, I don't know." She frowned. "It was a real feeling of power, to be able to turn back time. There were several moments I returned to, just to relive over

and over again."

She nodded. "How many times do we get the chance to repeat a moment, to make it better? I had to know. Sometimes I could improve things. Sometimes, I didn't." She looked at him, and they both knew what she was thinking about - the night she and Harry saved Sirius Black from the Dementors.

"Severus," she began shyly. She gave him a little, bashful smile, and he watched her carefully. "I wanted to tell you this because well, because I you see..." She suddenly blushed.

Puzzled, he replied, rather sternly, "Out with it, Hermione! Our time together is quite limited enough without you resorting to stuttering." He quirked an eyebrow, and added dryly, "Unless you still have your Time-Turner and plan on repeating it."

"Oh, you could at least make it easy for me," she grumbled, colouring even more. "I'm trying to tell you that I turn eighteen soon, that's all." She watched him carefully. When he didn't reply, she pressed on. "I started school at nearly twelve anyway, and by my calculations, technically, I'll turn eighteen in a couple of months."

Severus, his expression unchanging, was suddenly aware of her stammering, her insinuations. She would be of age. She was telling him, in a rather uncharacteristically clumsy fashion, that she wanted them to be lovers. He watched her carefully.

He wanted her. It would be ludicrous to say or think otherwise. The evenings they spent together were wonderful, and excruciating in equal measures. To have her lying in his arms, breathless with his kisses, to feel the satiny, cool skin of her neck beneath his lips, to venture a warm palm over a pert breast, even through her clothing, was blissful, and a nightly exercise that bordered on mutual masochism. Each night, they would part, both hurrying to their respective bedrooms to seek some relief by their own hand. It was at times like this that Severus knew for a fact that self-denial and discipline were fucking overrated.

And yet, there was the sweetness of her innocence that brought a measure of calm to his heart, that made him feel outside of himself and the scope of his experience. To be wanted so, to hear her cry out beneath his moving hands (*'I don't care, Severus! Please don't stop!*), and to be strong enough to wait, to savour, to shiver in that much anticipation, knowing that one day, they would no longer feel the need to wait, was heady to him.

He would be her first. The first to touch her intimately; the first to taste her, the first to penetrate her, the first to thrust into her silken body. There were nights, lying in his bed, he would think these thoughts, and feel like a god. Her first. It was a privilege he would only experience with her once. No one else would have that honour, that gift. When the first of the firsts had been sampled, there would be no returning, even with Minerva's Time-Turner. The body would know, and remember.

Severus wanted to relish each first as it came to him. On those long, sleepless nights, he found himself planning each detail. He would start with her lovely breasts, then cover every inch of her nubile body with his mouth, his lips, his tongue, until he reached the core, the centre of her, of birth, of life. He would be creator, Adam and the serpent, to her Eve; giving her first knowledge of a man, how to please him, as well. Yes, it was heady stuff that made his increasingly harsh life bearable.

And yet, he wanted her to be completely sure. "Hermione, this is possibly the worst timing any lovers have shared since Romeo and Juliet."

"I know, but "

"Hear me out, please." He held up his hand. He looked at the young witch. She looked so confident and sure, and he thought he should harden his heart. He still thought the best, most noble act would be to tell her to stop thinking of him in a romantic fashion, that he wasn't destined for happiness or love. He waited, until he could do that, could say that.

He sighed. He couldn't. *Fuck nobility*, he thought. *I want this too much*. He slumped slightly. "Be sure, Hermione. I can only be so strong for so many causes. I want you, and I will not be able to stop myself. And once I've bedded you, witch, you'll belong to me, and I to you. I'm not afraid of physically hurting you, but I'm afraid you'll be caught in the crossfire of this madness that we live in."

Her reply was to walk around until she was standing behind his chair. Gentle, soft hands slid into his hair and began to massage his scalp, the same way she had the night in Grimmauld Place. He gradually relaxed, the feeling of being petted like a large cat too seductive to resist. After a few moments, he made a deep purring sound of contentment, and Hermione smiled.

As she moved her fingers through his silky, slightly oily hair, she said, "Oh, Severus, I know. I do know. Right now, I'm so frightened all the time. I'm terrified for you, every time you're summoned to... to him. I'm frightened for Harry, but most of all, I'm frightened that when the worst happens, and it will, that I won't be brave enough to do the right thing."

She walked around and sat in his lap, laying her head against his shoulder; a wonderful, welcomed weight against him, and without thinking, his arms were around her, pulling her close, sharing her warmth. "The only thing I'm not afraid of is how I feel about you. I just believe " Her voice changed, thickened, and Severus looked at her. To his surprise, there were tears in her eyes.

"I just believe that love is the only thing that is going to save us, like Lily saved Harry." She buried her head against his shoulder.

He grew very still. Delicately clearing his throat, he said, "Lass, are you telling me you love me?" He shook his head. "I'm not worth it, Hermione. I want to be, but I can't make myself believe I'm worthy of love."

Hermione sat up, her breathing harsh from her crying. "Severus Snape, you will NEVER say that again. I will not accept that. Of all the wizards I have ever met, you are more worthy of love than the lot! And don't bring up your past, don't bring up things that happened before I was born "

He groaned, feeling his heart splitting open. "Another reason not to continue this infatuation with me, Hermione! I'm so much older "

"Stop it! Stop trying to bring up excuses that even YOU don't want to hear!" she said, her amber-coloured eyes snapping fire. She poked him in the chest. "Don't forget, I know you. I know you're trying to push me away because you think that's what you are supposed to do! It's not going to work with me."

She put her arms around his neck and shifted her position, until she was straddling him. He moaned. "Hermione, please!"

She took his head in her hands. "Tell me to leave, Severus Snape, because you don't want this. Tell me you love someone else and could never love me. Look me in the eye, let me look into your mind and see these things, and I'll never pester you again."

Severus realised he was breathing hard, as if he'd been running. To his horror, he felt near tears, as well. He grew angry with himself for being so damnably weak. But he still held onto her. He still had an erection. "You unman me, witch," he whispered, not daring to look into her eyes. His hands, unbidden, slid up her thighs, to rest at her waist.

"No, Severus. I'm giving you the chance to be a man." He looked up then, and Hermione suddenly blushed again. "I'm giving you the chance to make me a woman. To say you are unworthy of love is to tell me I'm not worthy to know the difference."

For a moment, neither spoke. She bit her bottom lip, then slowly stood. His lap felt horribly light, relieved of its welcomed burden. She knelt beside his chair. "We're linked now. Sometimes, I feel we were linked at the beginning of time, and we were destined for this moment." She looked up at him with complete conviction. "I will never forsake you, Severus. No matter what happens, we will survive this, and we'll fight until we win. But you have to fight with me. You have to love me in return."

Severus looked down at the little witch, the confidence of youth bright and shining in her clean, lovely eyes, and for a moment, he wanted to run. Just take her hand and run away from Hogwarts, from England, from Europe, even. The thought was so sweet and perfect, for a moment he almost stood and asked her to leave with him. The real world pressed down on him, and he knew she would no more allow him to abandon his duty than demand him to run away with her.

Instead, he stroked her hair, and she laid her head against his knee. Severus saw the two of them together, man and woman, wizard and witch, Slytherin and Gryffindor, jaded and innocent. He saw their similarities, their single-minded concentration, their cleverness, their fear, their power. He slid his fingers through her hair, and felt an irrational sense of ownership, of responsibility.

She was his; she belonged to him. "Hermione," he said, his voice rich, full of power, of beauty. She looked up at him expectantly.

"Come here."

She dutifully crawled back into his arms, and he held her. There was nothing awkward, or uncomfortable, about holding her. With Lily, it had been all elbows and angles; bumping noses and self-conscious blushes. Age had covered a multitude of sins, but the simple fact was that he fit against Hermione. No matter how he held her, no matter how she nestled against him, the pieces fit, both mentally and physically.

He sighed, casting his fate to the gods. "I am yours, witch. You'll eventually realise you've inherited a shoddy bale of goods, but I'm yours." He held her in a painful embrace, but she didn't protest. "I will be your love." He sighed, as he planted a kiss on her outrageous hair. "A time will come when possibly that will be all I have left to give."

Her reply was to take his hand in hers, and press her lips to his palm. He gasped, as her pink tongue darted out and delicately licked the centre, causing his hand to twitch.

She looked at him fondly. "I can't wait."

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Outwardly, no one could tell any difference in Professor Snape or Hermione. He was still angry, biased, unfair, belligerent and prejudiced. He was snarky, bullying, partial and unreasonable.

Inwardly, he was deeply afraid, more afraid than he'd been since the Dark Lord returned. He was in love, and it was taking every ounce of his rock hard self-control not to show it. No one knew that the Potions master was happy. That wouldn't do at all. He was still, to every faculty member and student but one, the Bat of the Dungeons, the petty arse and greasy git. He drilled Hermione constantly on Occlumency, as much to strengthen his own skills as to develop hers.

Hermione was a little quieter, a little more cautious than before, and a bit removed from Harry and Ron. Harry still struggled with his own anger and self-doubts, and Ron, caught in between the two of them, had decided to form other attachments, namely with one of Hermione's roommates, Lavender Brown. Hermione barely noticed. She was too busy preparing for her O.W.L. exams, and hid behind this excuse.

School itself had taken on the quality of a nightmare; the Ministry had finally attempted to depose Dumbledore, causing him to leave the school in rather typically flashy Dumbledore fashion. Severus confided to Hermione not to be unduly worried; the Headmaster was in constant contact with the Order, and the new Headmistress Umbridge had her hands full just trying to keep control. Between the Weasley twins and the mutinous staff, the Headmistress was growing increasingly unstable.

Determined that she would be able to find out Dumbledore's whereabouts through the student body, Umbridge was driving everyone, staff and students included, mad with her 'Inquisition' Squad; it was only because of Professor Snape's respectful relationship with Mr. Filch, that Hermione was able to meet with him for her extra 'lessons'.

Harry still acted uncomfortable about Sirius, and the thin veneer of respect he gave Severus grew more brittle every day. It disturbed Severus not a jot, but it bothered Hermione that, even after the Easter holidays, Harry was still suspicious of Severus.

Hermione decided to spend the Easter holidays with her parents, much to her professor's displeasure. Severus was loath to admit it, but he missed the little swot. She was good company, when she didn't prattle inanely about subjects which held no interest for him. She could be very considerate, like making sure his tea was accompanied by the particular type of honey he fancied. She loved dark, dark chocolate, and would share generously her Honeydukes' purchases with him, and she never complained that he ate all the chocolate biscuits with his tea, leaving her the Rich Tea biscuits, which, in Severus' opinion, were shit for dipping in his brew.

She helped with grading the first-years' essays, and she did other little things, like mending the holes in his old scarf, so that he would be warmer outside on those cold nights on patrol. And when their lessons were over, they kissed like, well, like fifth-years. Severus had promised himself he would not touch her until she was eighteen, and he did not. He was content to feel her snuggle against him, to hear her soft little sighs of delight, to taste her sweet little heart-shaped mouth as it suckled against his. It was true that he had never wanked so much in his life, but he could live with that. It no longer seemed like such a pointless exercise.

When Hermione told him she wanted to spend some time with her parents, he gave no indication of his jealousy-rooted resentment. After all, it would mean she had an excuse not to attend the Order meeting, and thus would not be exposed to the mutt, Black. Severus had not told Hermione of the Dark Lord's command to take her with him to the next Order meeting, and Severus knew he'd have to come up with a plausible reason why he had defied the Dark Lord's wishes. He knew he would be punished, but his Hermione would be safe.

It was not as if she would not be returning after the break, and they had already planned to spend several weeks together during the summer. But he knew that while she was gone, he would be alone again, and while he had long become accustomed to eating, sleeping and living alone over the long, lonely years, it had been very easy to learn how to share his time with her. Her leaving him during the Easter break made him too aware of the loneliness that was once an all-encompassing part of his life. It reminded him too much of the man he'd been, the man he would still be, if not for her intervention.

In truth, as much as Hermione would have loved to spend more private time with Severus, she desperately wanted to speak with her mother. As confident as she was about their relationship, she was worried about disappointing Severus with her lack of experience. When she told him of her misgivings, he rolled his eyes. "And how many lovers do I look like I've enjoyed, Hermione? I'm not exactly a Malfoy, my girl."

Still, Hermione got the feeling he knew exactly what he was doing. His kisses were too perfect, too accomplished. This was no green boy; Severus was a man. Hermione did not permit herself to think of him during the day, during school; the distraction was incredible. Looking into his ebony eyes, feeling his large, warm hands enclosing her, his mouth knowing and insistent, Hermione could feel her body aching in unrelieved desire. Thinking about him, craving him in the middle of History of Magic class, had caused her to miss entire lectures on the Goblin Wars.

She longed for something she'd never experienced, and she could not fathom anyone else as a lover, especially her first lover. She wanted her first time to be the stuff she'd always read about, all trumpets and fireworks; but more than that, she wanted it to be the same for him. She wouldn't be his first, but she wanted it to be so good it would feel like his first.

She and her mother had always shared thoughts about anything under the sun, and predictably, Jean Granger approached her daughter's decision to take a lover with typical aplomb. She offered to share her Joy of Sex book, and Hermione didn't have the heart to tell her mum she'd already read it from cover to cover. Several times.

While her mother had not asked her outright who the lucky man was, and Hermione did not dare tell her, she did hint that he was older, with experience, and that they had very strong feelings for each other. Jean appraised her daughter carefully. "Do you love him, Hermione?"

Hermione thought carefully. "There is a lot about him to love. He's not classically handsome, Mum, but he is to me. He doesn't think he's worthy, but he is."

"Well, you'll no doubt set him straight, knowing you, dear," her mother laughed. She grew serious. "I know you well enough. If you think he's a worthy man, then he is. Just be careful, Hermione. Love and sex aren't the same thing."

"Oh, Mother, I know that!" Hermione said, rather indignantly. "It's a little complicated right now, but I believe in him. He's a good man." She looked at her mother carefully. "I can't think of another person on earth better suited for me."

She spent the rest of the day perusing her mother's shockingly large collection of books on the subject of sex and sexual techniques. "Why do you think your father always looks so pleased with himself?" her mother had quipped, when Hermione beheld the vast array of literature dedicated to the sexual experience. Blushing and laughing,

Hermione took the proffered lunch from her mother's hands, and resumed her perusal of the Kama Sutra.

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When the Order met during the Easter holidays, Severus arrived deliberately late, and sat in the back. He noticed that Black, too, was seated back from the group on the opposite side of the room, glaring at him. The meeting was dull and pointless; everyone was congratulating Potter on discovering his ability to sense the Dark Lord's thoughts and thus find a way to thwart him in discovering the prophecy. The less Severus heard of the damned thing, the better. The Dark Lord was starting to obsess about it, and his desire to find it had caused him to send Nagini to the Department of Mysteries to locate it. Potter, once again the boy-hero, had saved the day by envisioning Nagini's attack on Arthur Weasley.

Severus had nothing against Arthur Weasley; in fact, he liked the man rather well. It was just the fawning, sycophantic worship of Potter that raked his nerves. The boy was treated like the saviour of the world, but all Severus could see was the boy's arrogant resemblance to his bell-end of a father. Black was being exceedingly obsequious, and his fawning praise of Potter's potential greatness made Severus want to puke.

As the meeting petered out to little more than socialising, Severus stood to make his leave, and found his way blocked by the Mongrel. "And how is Miss Granger, Snivellus?" Black sneered at him, and Severus realised the man was swaying slightly.

Severus drew himself back, wrinkling his large nose at the stink of booze on the man. He purred, "Very lovely, Black. Very appreciative of my attentions." He risked a grim smile, and said so low that Black had to lean in to hear, "My thanks for all but pushing her into my arms. After that little stunt in the Shrieking Shack, she practically ravished me in my study." The look of hatred on Black's face was almost worth the aggro he would get when he told Hermione of this conversation. He gave Black a smile of pure lechery. "Detention fantasies, you see. She loves 'em, and who am I to argue?"

Black pushed at him, "You really are a pig, Snape! Do you honestly expect me to believe Hermione willingly fucks you every night under Dumbledore's nose?"

"I don't have to force her, Black." Severus purred. "I don't need to back her in a corner to get her to do what I want."

Sirius stepped up to Severus, looking less drunk by the second. "Don't let's talk about cornering people to get them to do what you want, Snape. You're very good at it. I still haven't forgotten what you did "

"Gentlemen, please - " Severus whirled to face Remus Lupin, who was watching both men with a troubled expression on his face. "I'm really growing tired of watching the two of your posturing like this. And, your voices are starting to carry."

Severus snarled, "As if this truly concerns you, Lupin!" He turned to Black. "That little stunt with Potter only served to drive a wedge between Hermione and him, not me. While you're sitting around here getting pissed and stirring up shit, Hermione and I are working on how to keep Potter safe, not alienating his friends from him." His eyes swept over the two wizards with open contempt. "You make me sick, both of you." He turned to go, as Black called out to him.

"We're not the ones pretending to fuck her for bragging rights amongst the Death Eaters, Snivellus." Without dignifying Black's words with a reply, Severus stormed out the door.

The inevitable summoning took place shortly after the Order meeting. Since Severus had promised Hermione she would not be required to attend, he struggled to convince the Dark Lord that Hermione had not attended because of her family's insistence that she go abroad with them for the holiday. Citing that it would have been almost impossible to circumvent her family's wishes, Severus endured the usual catcalling of Going Muggle, being pussy-whipped. Severus ignored them, focusing all of his attention on the Dark Lord, who studied him thoughtfully.

Voldemort was testy, still unhappy with the information Severus was bringing him, especially regarding Dumbledore and his whereabouts. He was angry that Nagini had been thwarted, although Severus was careful not to tell him that Potter had seen it in a vision. The only redeeming information he could impart was convincing the Dark Lord that his dalliance with Hermione was reaping results.

He had only to show his Master the fierce argument between Potter and Hermione, to illustrate Potter's supposed-growing instability, his isolation from Dumbledore, from those who did not wish to believe the Dark Lord had actually returned. Severus thought he might leave the meeting relatively unscathed, until the Dark Lord turned to him.

"Severus? No word of thanks for my... little gift to your pet? Am I to take this as a sign that it was unwanted and unwelcomed?"

Severus' heart sank. He bowed and gave his Lord a knowing, sensual smile. "My Lord, I haven't been so hard in years! I all but impaled the saucy little puss, and still she almost did me in." He dialed in a sensuous, languid tone to his voice. "Oh, to have the stamina of youth." There were several murmurs of approval, but Voldemort merely watched him.

"I would very much like to see that, my friend." His eyes glowed unnaturally, with a frisson of depraved, vicarious lust.

Severus bowed. "It would be my pleasure, my Lord," and filled Voldemort's very vision with his large, liquid eyes. He brought to bear Hermione's first kiss, and her breathless, moaning response, hiding well the revulsion he felt for being forced to share this most intimate of moments with this monster.

He recalled his encounter with the whore who resembled Hermione, hastily changed her voice, altered his surroundings, and soon his Master was sloe-eyed, watching his Potions master fucking his Mudblood concubine against the wall, like the dirty little receptacle she was. And through it all, as the Dark Lord pawed and slithered through his thoughts, Severus blessed the fact that he'd taken the precaution to hone his Occlumency skills, as well as Hermione's.

With an almost sucking pull, Voldemort left his mind, relishing the exhibitionistic image of the lovers. "So, your little pet enjoyed her Dark Caress as well?"

Severus widened his black, luminous eyes, knowing full well the effect they had on his reptilian Master. "She was transported, My Lord. It is something she eagerly hopes to experience again."

"Perhaps when the holidays are over, she can come and thank me in person."

"It would be an honour for us both, My Lord," he said, bowing, praying to himself *Merlin, please don't make me bring her here! Please let this farce be over!*

The Dark Lord watched Severus carefully for his reaction, but all he saw was Severus' joy at the idea. "Hmm. Perhaps her family is too much of a distraction. I would hate to know your wellbeing is being neglected for a pair of Mudbloods."

He grew quietly intense, and Severus felt his testicles shrivel in dread. "I like my gifts to be enjoyed, Severus. And I like being told they are enjoyed without having to ask. Perhaps *this* little gift will remind you in future, to show gratitude to your Master. *Crucio!*"

In her childhood home in Surrey, Hermione's palm burned for several minutes, and as she sat, the pain intensified to a throbbing, aching blaze, until it felt as if she were holding her hand in a fire. She felt sick with worry, knowing she was too far away to help Severus. She had known he would be summoned, and she knew exactly what this pain meant.

Without knowing if it would work or not, Hermione conjured the memory of her professor's kiss, and shouted, *Expecto Patronum!*

Hagrid found Severus an hour later at the Apparation point. He was on his hands and knees, vomiting, gasping in pain, but not nearly so much as on the night he'd made it only as far as Grimmauld Place. Hagrid helped the injured wizard to the Infirmary, telling Severus that, "A lovely great otter Patronus come an' tol' me ta be on the lookout fer ya, Perfesser. I don' know who sent it, ba they were determined that someone come an' find ya."

Severus, sick to his stomach and too weak to walk unassisted, recalled the night Hermione had run from him, raising her wand to conjure the cheeky little otter Patronus. And, she'd even been able to send it forth as a messenger. In spite of his pain, he felt his heart swell. Good, good, girl.

When she returned to school at the end of their two week holiday, Hermione entered her Potions classroom with her classmates, and prepared her potion according to her professor's instructions. When he asked a question, and no one but she and Draco Malfoy raised their hands to answer it, he chose Malfoy, who gave an incorrect answer. When Hermione raised her hand again, her professor rolled his eyes and said, "Yes, Miss Granger? Does our resident know-it-all showoff think she might have the correct answer?"

"Wormwood and Asafetida, sir, not Wormwood and Asphodel."

Severus gave her a look of barely concealed condescension. He crossed his arms imperiously, and drawled in a bored voice, "The emphasis is on the fourth syllable, Miss Granger. *'As a fa TEE da'*" In his rumbling, decadent purr, he added with a smirk, "Not so know-it-all now, are we?" The Slytherins laughed, and Hermione reacted as she always did, by lowering her head to her parchment and writing out her corrections. Severus continued his lecture, giving no indication whether she had given him the correct answer or not.

When class was dismissed, and everyone left, Hermione asked her professor for clarification on the potion in tomorrow's assignment, and he had sighed, and rather irritably agreed to discuss it. Once the final student had left, Hermione locked the door, warded it, and came to stand by her professor. She looked up at him, and before she could react, he flung his arms around her, his knees sagging, until she was falling to the floor with him. He trembled, and clung to her, and she to him, telling him it was alright, she was there now, and that, whatever it was, she would make things better.

Severus held on to the girl, cursing himself for his weakness and folly, chastising himself for being the coward he was, and begging her not to forsake him. In truth, he was so happy to see her walk into the classroom, he almost wept, blessing the gods for the one person on earth happy to see him.

Looking down at his little witch, Severus devoured her mouth with his, moaning at the sheer delight of taking her soft mouth, snaking his tongue past her teeth. He ached for her, and whispered every ounce of his desire into her mouth. He watched her eyes sliding closed in pleasure he'd given her, and the pain of his punishment, the horrors of his life, all seemed to fade. He pulled her against him until she was almost lying on top of him, and his mouth trailed hot kisses down her tender throat. She whimpered with desire, and it was like music to him, to know his mouth could give her what his body would not yet allow.

"Hermione, lass," he said, helplessly, his eyes closed. "Run to your Common Room. Leave me now, while I've got some self-control left." She laughed, a soft, sweet sound that made his erection painful in his trousers. "You're a horrid child! Go now, or I'll not be fit for anything later."

She rewarded him with a kiss on his large, aquiline nose. "Yes, you will. I've missed my share of you as well, Severus Snape." She was slightly breathless, and her mouth was wet. "You're not the only one who's been missing your mate."

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Chapter title and opening words from AKUS: Take Me For Longing

## Ten: Into The Belly Of The Beast

Chapter 11 of 39

I cried, My God, I am your child, send your angels down...

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

*I've been blown away by the response I've had to this story. Thank you so much. Your encouragement means the world to me, and I hope you will continue to enjoy the story.*

*Special thanks and a big heart-shaped box of choccies go to Talesofsnape, dharkcharlotte, and lilyevanssnape, who helped me through the toughest chapter of the story thus far. Thank you, all. This wouldn't be posted without you.*

*For Sempra and Mimi*

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*He threw me in the needle bed, cross my dress he lay, then he pinned my hands above my head and I commenced to pray.*

*I cried, My God, I am your child, send your angels down; then feeling with my fingertips, the bottle neck I found.*

*I drew that glass across his neck, as fine as any blade, and I felt his blood pour fast and hot around me where I laid.*

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As time passed, and Hermione became adept at Occlumency, Severus allowed her to practice Legilimency, and together they honed her skills to a razor sharp edge. Hermione was delighted to learn that, after Severus' tough-as-nails approach to Occlumency, Legilimency was child's play to her, and to Severus' relief, she was surprisingly subtle.

The day she Legilimized into his mind during class, without his initial realisation, thrilled her, and disturbed him. It forced him to admit that she was incredibly adept, and to have a serious heart-to-heart about the propriety of looking into his thoughts in the middle of lecturing on Pepper-Up Potion. It also proved to him that he needed to double his guard against that sort of unexpected attack.

Hermione soon learned why accomplished Legilimens were often feared. She found it so easy to slip into someone's mind; at most, it was an invasion, and at the least, very bad manners. Hermione never repeated her classroom stunt again, but she could understand the temptation. All it took to break her of Legilimizing into Severus' mind was finding him there, arms crossed, glowering at her, hissing, "Hermione, there are a rather large amount of house points in peril right now, if you don't remove yourself from my mind this instant!"

He was initially angry with her, but she had helped him to discover a serious breach in his protective armour; the most innocuous of moments could result in an invasion he was neither prepared, nor equipped for. He drilled her even more mercilessly afterward, this time in Legilimizing *him*.

As they worked with both disciplines, they soon realised the incredible implications of their combined skills:*With practice and discipline, she and Severus soon learned to communicate non-verbally, for short amounts of time and distance. Sometimes, from one end of the castle to the other.*

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When Harry collapsed during his O.W.L. exam, Hermione hurriedly finished hers, and raced to be with him, fearing the worst. His link with Voldemort had grown stronger all year, ever since the night Harry dreamt Arthur Weasley was attacked in the Department of Mysteries; the dream was later found not only to be a true vision, but crucial in saving the older wizard's life.

Rushing to Harry's side, Hermione was shocked at his pale, unnaturally pinched features. He whispered urgently, "It's Sirius! He's there! In the Department of Mysteries!"

Confused, Hermione asked, "Harry, why would Sirius be there? He knows he can't safely leave Grimmauld Place."

Harry turned to her, his eyes snapping with green fire. "He's there because your precious Professor Snape has goaded him into leaving Grimmauld! Snape, always taunting him for not being able to help he's there to help me, and they're torturing him!"

Ron was as baffled as Hermione. "Who is, mate? C'mon, Harry, you're not making sense!" He looked to Hermione, who shook her head. "Start from the beginning "

"Alright, but we have to hurry!" Flustered, Harry marshalled his thoughts. Rather sheepishly, he began. "I sort of fell asleep in the exam, and I saw Sirius in the Department of Mysteries." He turned to Ron. "It was just like when I saw your dad! Sirius was being tortured by Voldemort, and he kept asking him where it was!" He looked at Hermione, his eyes imploring and fearful. "We've got to get to him! Hermione, he's my family!"

"Let Professor McGonagall alert the Order "

He looked from Ron back to Hermione. "Professor McGonagall can't help she's been hurt! She's been transferred to St. Mungo's." He gave an exasperated huff. "What was the whole point of the D.A., if we can't use what we've learned to help each other?"

Hermione felt her friend's frustration and anxiety, but she also thought it was just too convenient. Sirius would never leave Grimmauld Place, even if he was angry at Severus' taunts. "What if it's a trick, Harry? What if Voldemort has come to realise he can manipulate your thoughts, and he's using your feelings about Sirius to make you do something reckless?" Harry looked at her as if she was mad.

At the High Table during lunch, Severus pinched the bridge of his nose, and scowled, as he felt Hermione's anxiety ramping up to a critical pitch. This was not merely exam nerves. From within his Occluded mind, he called to her.

*What is happening, Hermione?*

For a moment, he could sense her struggling to reply, as if she were too distracted, or too far away. The sensation was patchy, like static from a Muggle radio station out of range. *Harry had a vision that Sirius was in the -* Her thoughts faded, and once again he was reminded of sound giving way to white noise.

He left the Great Hall, his robes billowing as he passed several intimidated students, scowling at them in his usual manner. In his mind, he frantically tried to reconnect to Hermione. Usually, it was almost effortless; the two of them had grown adept at it, and every night, Hermione's agile mind reached out to his, and bade him goodnight, just so the last voice he heard before sleeping would be hers.

It was something he shamefully relied on, and it irritated him that he could not connect to her mind now, when it was needed most. He just had to push a little harder. He knew from experience that, if she was distracted or occupied, it was almost impossible to make contact. *Hermione! Answer me at once!*

Watching Harry as he paced, Hermione suddenly winced at the imperious command all but reverberating in her mind.

Finally, after what seemed a small eternity, Severus sensed her within. *Harry's had another vision, like the last one... We're going to...* The voice he had come to rely on for comfort, for information, faded, and Severus, no matter how hard he tried, could not connect with her.

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Severus strode down the hall at his usual pace, his long legs eating up the distance. The idiot Umbridge had requested his presence, which meant she wanted to dope up another student into telling her everything the poor wretch knew, which was always nothing. The fool was going through Veritaserum as if it was Gillywater, and he felt a smug satisfaction in being able to tell her she had used up his entire supply. Moronic woman! No style, whatsoever.

Hermione watched Severus, as he lounged in the doorway, surveying the sight before him. They were in Umbridge's office, surrounded by her Inquisition Squad and the members of the D.A. who had come to help and been caught at the same time.

Severus looked at the scene in front of him, and would have laughed, had the potential consequences of what he was witnessing not been so dangerous. At Hermione's insistence, she, Ron and Harry, tried, unsuccessfully, to ascertain if Sirius was indeed missing from Grimmauld Place. Foolishly, as it happened, for Umbridge had caught them in her office, and was now trying to convince Severus to make her more Veritaserum, to force Harry into telling her the location of Dumbledore.

Severus stood in Umbridge's office, surrounded by her minions and the members of the D.A., looking bored and completely disinterested, even as the new Headmistress put him on probation for not having Veritaserum on hand. Hermione felt his dark voice Legilimizing into her mind.

*What is happening, lass?*

Hermione pretended to study her nails. *We tried to contact Sirius at Grimmauld, and Umbridge caught us trying to use her Floo. She thinks we were trying to contact Dumbledore. She's making a lot of threats, but I can't believe she would act on them!*

Watching Severus' bored expression, as Umbridge berated him for his lack of cooperation, Hermione hoped her face was half as impassive. She'd never seen someone look so completely apathetic, in light of the current situation.

As Harry shouted to Severus about 'Padfoot being at the place where it's hidden', Severus looked at Harry with deadpanned disdain *I will go on to Grimmauld as soon as I am able, to find out if his vision is accurate. If you can create a diversion, try to get away from her goon squad. Stay somewhere safe. Give me a moment to think this through.*

*But what if Sirius needs*

*I'll alert the Order! If Sirius is indeed in trouble, someone needs to be at Headquarters to let them know. And I don't want students to be part of some foolhardy rescue mission for that mongrel, especially you! They are still monitoring the Floo. Just - be careful!*

*What kind of diversion, Severus?*

For the first time since he'd entered the room, Severus looked at Hermione. She returned his impassive gaze, and she could have sworn he cocked an eyebrow at her.

*Use that clever little head of yours, the voice all but drawled in her mind. But for Merlin's sake, don't do anything stupid!*

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As Hermione watched the centaurs carry Dolores Umbridge into the Forbidden Forest, she rather thought her diversion with Grawp and 'Dumbledore's weapon' might be something she and her professor would share a laugh over one day. If he didn't kill her for being so reckless, that is. She had the feeling that Severus might well classify the entire incident as 'doing something stupid'. Fortunately, it also worked.

As Harry, Ron, Ginny, Luna and Neville prepared to leave for the Ministry, Hermione begged them to reconsider. "Harry, can't you see that Voldemort might have set this up as a trap?" Hermione pleaded, for perhaps the twentieth time, as Thestrals, lured by the smell of blood, wandered into the clearing. "Let's at least stay hidden until we know more!" She frantically tried to think of a way to persuade him. "Harry, Professor Snape understood your warning I just know he did. He can get to the Ministry, to Grimmauld Place, to Dumbledore, even."

Harry looked at her in disgust. "Hermione, are you mental? Snape hates Sirius! I wouldn't put it past him to be the one who sent him to the Ministry!"

"It's *Professor Snape* and don't be daft! He is trying to help you!" she shouted, frustrated, terrified that Harry was walking blithely into a trap. "And what if Sirius is actually there? Do you think a handful of students can fight Voldemort?"

Harry shook his head. "You don't understand! Sirius is all I've got. He's the only family I have!" He looked at her pleadingly. "I have to try to save him. I have to."

Hermione looked at Ron, who shrugged helplessly. In that moment, she knew she was on her own. Ron would not help. The others would gladly follow Harry.

Softening, she tried again, "Would you at least start at Grimmauld Place, and find out if Sirius is really there?"

Harry, too upset and afraid to heed her advice, mounted one of the Thestrals. "You can go to Grimmauld if you want, Hermione," he said, looking down at her accusingly. "But Sirius is my godfather, and I love him. And I'm going to save him, with or without your help!"

Hermione knew her pleas were falling on deaf ears, and the others would follow Harry. Frustrated, she said, "Well, I'm not staying here on my own! Fine! I'm going to Grimmauld Place, and if Sirius is there, we'll join you at the Ministry. Just, please be careful and don't do anything stupid!" she screamed, as Harry and the others took off, straddling nothing but thin air. It was the strangest sight Hermione had ever witnessed. As she watched them disappear into the darkening sky, Hermione realised she was in the middle of the Forbidden Forest, no idea how to get out, surrounded by invisible Thestrals, and Merlin knew what else.

"Shit," she said, aloud, and closed her eyes, mentally reaching for Severus, but wherever he was, she was unable to contact him. Instead, her hands found the bony flanks of a waiting Thestral. Even though she could not see it, the beast waited patiently at her side, as if there for the sole purpose of allowing her to cadge a lift.

"Well, Hermione, you wanted to grow up. Here's another fear to face," she muttered aloud, and half pulled, half dragged herself up onto the Thestral's back. Before she could think, it was in the air, taking Hermione with it. She willed herself not to scream, biting back her sick fear and nerves.

The Thestral seemed to know where she needed to go, and they speeded through the rapidly waning light of the cold night air. Even as she flew toward Grimmauld Place, Hermione, dreaded meeting Severus there. He would not exactly jump for joy that she had defied him and not returned to the castle. After all, she had to tell someone that Harry and the others were on their way to the Ministry, didn't she? She hoped she could convince him of her reasons; if only she was completely sure of them herself. All she was really sure of was that, for the first time in her life, Hermione was hoping to see Sirius Black at Grimmauld Place...

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Severus decided to take a broom. It would help him to avoid the Apparation detectors the Ministry had established in a vain attempt to locate Dumbledore. It was also less taxing on his magic than flying under his own steam. He thought of taking Hermione flying. *Hermione is terrified of using a broom. I wonder if she would find it easier to learn to fly on her own?*

By the time he was able to leave the castle, Severus was seething with frustration. He had managed to become embroiled in every petty problem bubbling in the castle. He only just managed to send a message to Dumbledore, to warn him of a possible altercation, and Dumbledore had ordered him to Grimmauld, as Severus had known he would.

Floo and Apparition were still monitored, and Severus cursed the Ministry for their stupidity. Because Minerva was in hospital, and his Slytherins made up Umbridge's Inquisition Squad, he had to be seen supporting them. Umbridge had gone with Hermione and Harry, but had still not returned, which left him in temporary de facto charge of the school. Still, he had finally managed to extricate himself from the fracas, and headed toward the edge of the forest. He was almost certain he would find Hermione and the others there.

He had tried to contact Sirius without success, but Black often ignored him whenever possible, so Severus wasn't unduly worried. He felt confident that when he arrived at Grimmauld Place, the mutt would be there waiting, bored and restless as ever, and together they would wait until the rest of the Order had a chance to determine if there was anything actually happening at the Ministry. He was sure this was a false alarm he would have been notified of any Death Eater activity, surely.

In the back of his mind, he still worried. Lucius Malfoy had been eager for some time to prove himself indispensable to the Dark Lord, and he had hinted at jealousy of Severus' position with their Master. Lucius would have made sure Severus knew nothing about any raid he planned, in order to curry greater favour with the Dark Lord. There would only be one reason they would converge on the Ministry, and Severus had just negated that (he hoped!) by keeping Potter from going off half-cocked.

As he scanned the forest, hoping to find Hermione, Potter, and the others, his unease deepened. They were nowhere to be found; they were not in the castle, nor in Hagrid's hut, nor anywhere in Hogsmeade, that he could ascertain. A terrible dread began to rise in his chest.

The prophecy. He was mortally afraid the Dark Lord might have used Sirius to lure Potter to retrieve the thrice-damned prophecy; the one that Severus had overheard, and reported, when still young and smarting from Lily's rejection. It was the lynchpin to the door of his own personal prison; the wellspring from which seeped the recriminatory poison he had ingested every day since its foretelling.

Dumbledore had designed a hair shirt from it, then sewn in onto Severus' willing, guilt-ridden flesh, to remind him why he was allowed to live free from the threat of Azkaban. Severus hated that prophecy, almost as much as he hated himself for hearing it, hated Potter for living it. If he had never overheard the prophecy, if he had not been chased away from the door of Sybill Trelawney's room, thus missing it in its entirety, if he had not rushed to the Dark Lord to curry this ultimate favour, if, if... His life had become one long string of ifs.

Another 'if' slipped unbidden into his thoughts. What if Black had somehow been lured to the Ministry? What if Black was sending the Order to their deaths by his foolish restlessness and ennui? He pushed the broom harder. *Merlin, please*, he thought, the biting air narrowing his eyes down to slits in the dark, *don't let this godsdamned prophecy continue its destruction of more innocent lives. Not this chance. Not the students. Not her; not us.*

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Hermione entered Grimmauld Place quietly, hoping not to startle Mrs. Black's portrait into screeching its anti-Muggle epithets. Every time she awoke the portrait into screaming, prejudice-fueled fury, Hermione would vow that the next time she arrived, she'd bring turpentine to spray on the old hag.

She almost called out for Severus, but the deathly quiet intimidated her into silence. She listened for any sounds in the house, but she could hear nothing, not even a clock ticking. She was almost sure she had somehow beaten Severus to the house, and the fact that it seemed empty filled Hermione with dread. She fervently wished Severus would hurry and arrive, so they could go and help Harry. She had no choice but to stay now; leaving without Severus was not an option, and she didn't dare send her Patronus to warn Harry, in case she compromise Severus' cover.

She swallowed. What a fool she'd been! She should have sent her Patronus to Severus before embarking on this entire idiotic fool's errand. He would be furious with her! After a moment's thought, she decided to risk sending it - she could at least tell Severus that Grimmauld appeared empty. Then, she would send it to Harry, to tell him to be

on the lookout for Sirius.

As she reached the top of the stairs, Hermione thought she heard a noise, but couldn't place it. It was an old house; it creaked and shuddered and groaned like an old man, and Hermione accepted it as such.

Her heart started to pound; if no one was here, then was Harry's vision of Sirius true -

"Well, well."

Hermione yelped in surprise, and turned around to see Sirius, watching her from the doorway of his bedroom. He smiled lazily. "What on earth are you doing here, all alone, little Hermione? Come to kiss and make up, for getting me into trouble with Snivellus?"

Hermione felt her heart leap into her throat. She could smell liquor from where she stood. "Sirius, listen, Harry "

"Oh, it's alright, Hermione," he slurred, giving her what he must have thought was a seductive smile. He lurched toward her. "If you've come to ask forgiveness, I accept." His eyes raked her in drunken appraisal. "I'm a very charitable wizard. I'm sure, after Snivellus, you're ready for a real man."

He gestured inside the door, an invitation. "I'm only happy to oblige. Come in, and I'll show you. It's been awhile since I've had a virgin, or did Snivellus make good on his promise to pop your little cherry?" He said the last words with lewd, lascivious, sing-song emphasis, and it made Hermione's skin crawl, in spite of the urgency of the situation.

She was backing up toward the landing, shaking her head. "Sirius, you have to listen to me. We have "

"NO! You'll listen to me, you little high-tit bitch!" His sudden, blazing lust was palpable, and Hermione jumped, and began to shake. "I usually don't take Snivellus' leftover whores, but in this case I'll make an exception. If I'm going to die of fucking boredom in this godsforsaken house, at least I'm going to die of fucking!"

Sirius advanced on Hermione, and she backed up against the top stair. "Sirius, this is an emergency! Professor Sn "

"Fuck's sake, be quiet, you little slut!" Suddenly, Hermione was unable to make any sounds. He had cast a Silencing Charm on her, and no matter how loud she shouted, no sound issued from her throat. It was as if he'd switched her volume off completely. She looked at the dark-haired wizard, and in her mind, she knew if she stood here, he would hurt her. She was frozen to the spot, and Black sneered and took a menacing step toward her.

And then Hermione was running, running down the stairs, down the hall, fear giving her feet the same wings as when she had spotted Severus, and thought he was a Death Eater, come to attack the school. She knew this outcome would be different, and she knew Severus was going to be furious if she survived.

Her heart was almost bursting with fear, and she could still hear the wizard behind her, gaining ground. She almost sobbed, feeling terror and stupidity washing over her, tainting her sweat with a bitter, caustic edge, and she knew he would sense it, and use it against her.

She was almost at the front door, so close to escaping, but, as before, her fear was making her panic, and she wasn't thinking straight...

Severus had given up his frantic search through the perimeters of the Forbidden Forest for Hermione and the others and reluctantly started toward London. As he flew through the dark, he suddenly felt a pain in his arm, and for a sickening moment, thought he was being summoned. In the biting, confusing cold, he cast a warming charm, and it was only then that he realised it was his palm that was stinging.

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Sirius caught up with her at the door of the library, and grabbed her hair, yanking her neck back ruthlessly. He throttled her around the neck in a punishing grip, which made breathing difficult. "I normally like hearing my lovers calling my name, but just in case you might stupidly mistake me for your dear professor, I think we'll keep you quiet for awhile. Calling me 'Severus' would put me off my stroke, as it were."

Hermione could smell his breath, rank and sour with whisky, and she began to struggle in earnest. She fought, hard, but he was strong and too inflamed with lust and alcohol. As he dragged her into the Library, he laughed. "What a little wildcat you are! I'll bet you give Snivellus a right old run for his money! Well, you don't have to whore for me, my dear I promise it'll be so good you'll end up wanting to pay *me!*"

She tried biting his hand, and he smacked her with a glancing blow across the head, which caused stars to explode behind her eyelids. Her stomach lurched sickeningly.

A strong hand grabbed hers, and she screamed silently as he deliberately snapped her index finger. "That'll calm you down," he growled. He gave her another hard cuff on her temple, and she fell to the floor in stunned agony.

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Flying through the night, Severus calculated he was close to London, when he felt a sudden sickness in his gut that almost made him vomit. He broke out in a cold, slimy sweat that caused him to shiver in the chilled night air. Shaking his head to clear his vision, he felt the stinging sensation in his palm intensify to a slicing, knife-stabbing pain across his hand, and he almost fell off his broom.

*Severus? Severus, please! Hurt... rape... please don't hurt me! Severus... hurt...hurt...*

Severus tried to clear his mind, but the pain in his hand burned almost as hideously as his Dark Mark, and he knew Hermione was in grave danger. The flashes of her mind's eye were brief, like the images of a fevered nightmare. She was trying so hard to reach him, and Severus scanned the ground, looking for a place to land. Ministry tracers be damned. He would Apparate to her. She was at Grimmauld Place, alone with *him*.

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Hermione lay face down on the dusty carpet, as Sirius grasped the hem of her robe and tore it, from the hem almost to the nape of her neck, throwing each half on either side of her prone body. He bound Hermione's arms behind her with magical ropes, and he used them to lift her onto the sofa. She greyed out as her arms were pulled unnaturally away from shoulders, causing her broken finger to scream, and Sirius laughed at her discomfort.

Tears of humiliation streamed from her eyes when Sirius barked, "Plain cotton knickers? I thought Snivellus would have you wearing something a bit tarted up." He leaned down over her, and she could hear him fumbling with his own clothing. His breath reeked in her nostrils, as he slurred, "Snape likes his women on the whorish side, doesn't he? I guess it's because that's the best he could do, until you came along! Well, I'll see to it that you start wearing something more appropriate. Because, my dear, once I've fucked you, you won't want to give old Snivellus the time of day. His precious Lily was just the same."

With a vicious rip, Hermione's knickers were torn from her body, leaving her completely exposed. A hard hand slapped each globe of her backside hard enough to increase her struggles.

"That's more like it, Hermione! Where's that fire you demonstrated a few moments ago? I want to see a little lioness, not a cold fish!" She bucked furiously, trying to throw him off and haul herself onto her feet, but he was too heavy. He pressed down on her neck, forcing her face into the carpet, until she could barely breathe.

"Since you're in this position, I think a little doggy-style is more than appropriate, don't you, my dear?" he growled. Sirius' weight shifted, and Hermione felt the hot, slavering breath of an animal against her back, the hot saliva as it dripped over her, and the burning, slashing pain of claws, ripping the skin on her back into streamer-like strips... Oh gods, he was going to take her in his Animagus form...

Hermione saw black dots swimming in front of her eyes, as lack of oxygen caused her body to shut down. She could feel Sirius forcing her thighs apart, growling, snarling, snapping at her flesh, but she was too weak to fight anymore. She just wanted to pass out and be done with this...



"*Expelliarmus!*" Hermione heard a furious shout and a surprised *yiking* sound, and the crushing weight was off her back and she could raise her head and breathe.

"*Finite Incantatem!*"

She took a deep breath and released an hysterical scream of pain. Powerful arms gripped her and pulled her from the floor. "Please, Sirius, DON'T!" she wailed, then realised it was Severus, his eyes snapping with fire, fury warring with his fear for her.

"Severus! Oh, thank the gods!" she sobbed, and tried to throw her pain-deadened arms around him, but they were lifeless and limp. To her unbounded relief, he pulled her as close to his body as he dared without rubbing against the scratches on her back. "I tried to stop him "

"I'm sorry, lass. I'm so, so sorry," he cried, over and over, covering her face with kisses, rocking her in his arms. Anger and alarm fought for supremacy. "What the bloody hell are you doing here? I told you to stay somewhere safe until I came for you!" he roared, hating himself for shouting at the terrified girl. She cowered beneath his ravaging anger. He looked around. "Where are the others?"

Hermione was gasping, in pain and fear. "They wouldn't listen to me! They're already at the Ministry! I tried to tell Sirius, but he was drunk, and he wouldn't listen "

"Damn him!" Severus ground out, too distressed to think rationally. He wrapped her in his arms, throwing his cloak around the both of them. "Damn Dumbledore for keeping the mutt around! If it wasn't for Saint Potter - " He looked at her swollen face, the bruising on the side of her head, the index finger crooked at the unnatural angle. Severus chanted a hasty series of spells to heal the long scratches, the bruising on her head. With a sharp cry, Hermione allowed him to reset her finger, cursing Sirius for his cruelty. His heart cramped with love for her, and fury against Black. He looked at her searchingly. "Did he has he molested you, Hermione?"

Numbing exhaustion crept into Hermione's limbs, leaving her drained and shaking. "No, no. He morphed into a dog, and he was going to - " Fear choked her words, as Severus' face turned ashen, and he stared at her, quite stunned at his own anger.

He made a harsh sound in the back of his throat. He hissed, "I'll kill him!" His onyx eyes were clouded with rage; he was consumed with the idea of wrapping his hands around Black's throat and squeezing, squeezing, until he shut his taunting mouth for good.

He would make it up close and personal; no Avada for Sirius Black that was too good for him. No, he would kill him the old fashioned way; his father's way. The way a half-breed, Manc mill trash boy would do a privileged, pureblood cunt like Sirius Black...

In the tense silence during her wizard's homicidal fantasies, Hermione's head cleared, and she remembered their mission, and shook Severus. "Harry! Oh, Severus! Harry and the others. They're at the Department of Mysteries! The Dark Lord must have tricked him. They might be walking into an ambush!" She clutched at his robe with her uninjured hand.

Her hoarse, entreaty voice snapped Severus from his dangerous musing, and he looked down at the tender, bruised face of the witch he'd vowed to protect, and he pushed away the temptation to act out his retaliation to Black. His first obligation was to take care of Hermione.

He quieted, and placed a gentle kiss on her lips. "Shh, my girl, rest easy." Severus soothed, stroking the wild tangles of hair from her face. He forced his mind to calm, so that he could calm her. "Shh. That's my girl," he crooned, in his beautiful, softly velvet baritone.

As he Legilimized into her mind, he soothed her, running a calming hand down the corridors of her recent memories, smoothing the rough edges, softening the pain. Hermione gradually calmed beneath his stroking, sensitive fingers, her trembling gradually subsiding. "A cadre of the Order is supposed to be there now. They won't be alone."

There was a low moan from the corner, where Severus' spell unceremoniously threw Sirius. Morphed back into his human form, Black woke with a start, and found himself on the business end of Severus' wand. Hermione still clung to Severus, his left arm around her protectively, his cloak covering her nakedness.

"I've never forgiven myself for not killing you two years ago when I had the chance. Give me one reason not to kill you now, Black!" He growled, holding Hermione in a crushing grip. "If you've hurt her seriously, I'll be happy to put you down like the mangy cur you are! I told you to stay away from her, but you had to play to type yet again!"

Sirius sneered, shaking his head to clear it. "Oh, yes, the great Snivellus Snape, come to save the day! How pathetic you are, lusting after this little piece of trim! She was practically throwing herself at me!"

"Is that why you tied her up and broke her hand, you disgusting prick?"

Hermione's jaw set firmly, and her eyes narrowed in anger. Sirius watched, as Hermione looked intently at Severus, who nodded, and quickly retrieved her wand. She joined him in holding Sirius at bay. "I ought to hex your slimy little bollocks off, but I think I'll let Harry do it for me! He might be fighting for his life in the Department of Mysteries right now, because of you!"

Sirius sobered quickly. "Harry? What do you mean, fighting for his life? What's going on?"

Hermione all but screamed, "I was trying to tell you, you fuckwit, but you were too drunk to listen!"

Black looked at Severus in alarm. "I demand to know what's going on!"

"You're in no position to demand anything, Black!" Severus spat, his fear-roughened voice dripping with contempt. "Your precious godson was tricked by the Dark Lord, and he and his friends are at the Department of Mysteries." He sneered at the concern on Black's face. "And if something happens to them, you can thank the Dark Lord yourself, for tricking Potter into believing you were too bored and stupid not to stay away!"

He turned to Hermione. "Do you think you can come with me?" He gestured toward the other wizard. "I'm not about to leave you here with this..." His lip curled in disdain. "Mongrel."

Sirius was shaking his head. "I'm going to the Ministry. If something is truly happening, I have to be there to help Harry." He looked at the couple. "We can discuss this later, if you like, but I think our priority should be to Harry, don't you?"

Severus growled, "You should have thought of that before you tried to rape his best friend, Black!"

"Please, both of you!" Hermione said, hoarsely, holding onto Severus' coat, her eyes searching his, pleading. "Please, let's just go! Just to make sure!"

Severus repaired her torn clothing, his eyes narrow and furious. He turned and looked at Sirius. Black met his gaze, then Apparated away. *This isn't finished, Black. If you've ruined her for me, I'll happily send you to hell tonight,* he promised himself, as he placed his arms around Hermione, to prepare her for Side-Along Apparation. Severus indulged himself, and kissed her fervently, and promised the gods all manner of things as long as he could keep her safe.

The three of them Apparated into hell.

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It was as if the Ministry was a battlefield of demons; a circus constructed of every nightmare and warped trip any junkie had ever experienced, and they'd just stepped into the middle of it. Hexes were flying all around them, and they began to defend themselves, almost without thought, the moment they Apparated.

Severus cursed himself for not being more prepared; he could easily be determined as the enemy by both sides. At least, in his Death Eater robes, he'd have less chance

being hexed by other, more experienced, dirty fighters.

He saw Bellatrix Lestrange, the Dark Lord's most trusted and violent follower, in the middle of the fray. She was completely barking, but her hexing prowess was devastating. She'd already taken down several of the young people with Blasting Hexes, and Severus pulled Hermione into one of the alcoves, out of the line of fire.

"Stay here, Hermione! Don't move until I come for you!" he hissed. He looked around frantically, trying to gauge the best way he could defend the students without getting killed. The Department of Mysteries was a hellish, surreal landscape. He briefly saw Lucius Malfoy fighting with Potter, trying to force the boy to give him the prophecy crystal. Severus thought grimly, *Now I know why I wasn't informed. Lucius wanted all the glory for himself.*

Severus transfigured his robes to resemble his Death Eater robes, and began to block the hexes of his fellow Death Eaters, in the guise of trying to hit Ginevra Weasley and Luna Lovegood, both of whom were holding their own. Neville Longbottom was down, and trying valiantly to defend himself. Severus blocked a curse meant for Longbottom, making it look like one of his own, gone wild.

Everything seemed to happen at once for Severus. He saw Potter running away toward his godfather. He threw a minor hex into the room. It went high, wild and handsome, just as he heard Bellatrix's mad laughter, and Sirius Black's answering taunt. He saw a flash of something out of the corner of his eye, and Black cried out, and staggered backward toward the arch in the middle of the room. From Severus' sidelong viewpoint, it was as if Black fell back through the plane of a stone wall and disappeared in a flutter of ragged black material.

Potter cried out for his godfather, and the Death Eaters pressed their attack. Severus saw Longbottom and Weasley throwing curses toward their enemies, enabling Potter to escape. There were shouts and threats slicing through the chaotic air. Severus threw several more hexes and lurched into the shadows just as a dark, purple slashing hex arced through the room, like diabolical electricity searing the air. Another, lighter spell pulsed in the air in answer to the first. Severus heard an almost inhuman scream of panic, and whirled around to find the source. The battle was moving into the next room, and through the haze of smoke and hex work, he heard a low, whimpering moan of the seriously injured.

He found the Weasley girl kneeling on the ground, huddled over someone, and as he approached, he transfigured his robes. He couldn't risk the trigger-happy girl mistakenly hacking his bits off. He'd seen her Blasting Hex and knew she was more than capable.

He flew to her side, and she looked up at him, her large eyes almost crazed with fear. "Professor! One of the Death Eaters tried to throw a hex at you, and she blocked him she stepped right in front of you, and refused to move- you've got to do something "

He looked down at the prone figure of Hermione, her robe slashed open. He'd never seen so much blood pumping out of a living person. She was shuddering, going into shock. He could see the wound; it started at her sternum and reached almost to her pubic bone. It was gaping and bleeding profusely.

She looked up at him, pleadingly, her lips turning blue. He wrenched her up into his arms and Hermione's answering moan of pain raised the hair on the back of his neck. He pressed the sides of her torso together to close the wound. "Miss Weasley, we're going to have to help Miss Granger."

"What do you need, sir?" she asked, her teeth chattering. The poor girl was terrified. He looked down at Hermione's chest. He attempted his most reliable Healing Charm, but he could tell no discernable difference. She continued to bleed profusely. Nothing he could think of was slowing down the blood loss. The Weasley girl gasped as she tried to rise, and it was only then that Severus saw her swollen ankle.

He muttered another hasty Healing Charm for Ginevra, with a little more success. "You can get that reset later. For now, I need you to help me. You're going to have to apply pressure to the wound. I'm unable to stem the bleeding!" He transfigured Hermione's robe into a thick towel. "Fold it several times and press it firmly to the wound. Hurry!"

As Miss Weasley complied, pressing hard on Hermione's breastbone, Severus looked around frantically. "I need you to help me find a working Floo! We've got minutes to get her to a Healer!" He Disillusioned the three of them, and they ran.

Together, he and the frightened Weasley girl raced to the main Hall of the Ministry, where the Dark Lord and Potter were fighting with Dumbledore. Severus gave them only the barest of glances.

He felt the Weasley girl's arm tugging at his. "This one is active!" she shouted, and she and Severus ran to the Floo point.

He could feel Hermione struggle feebly. She was frantically trying to speak to him. "Don't talk, lass. Just stay awake. Stay awake for me, please!" Severus was already stepping to the Floo point. He could not travel directly to his final destination. He would take her to the one mediwitch he trusted above all others: Poppy Pomfrey. "St. Mungo's!"

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From the Wizarding hospital, Severus and Miss Weasley transferred to the Hogwarts' infirmary, and he carried Hermione into the large ward. The towel on Hermione's chest now showed two bloody handprints where Ginevra Weasley had pressed down on the fabric to staunch the blood. It didn't seem possible that one small girl could lose that much blood and live.

As Severus shouted for Madam Pomfrey, Hermione drifted into consciousness. "Severus?" she whispered, her voice barely a whisper.

Severus looked down at her, and it was only then that Hermione felt afraid. He was covered in blood; it was on his black robes, it flecked the snowy white collar and cuffs of his shirt, it was spattered on his face and in his hair. "Are you hurt?" she said, confused.

"No, Miss Granger!" He turned into the room. "Poppy! Merlin's sake, hurry, woman!"

"What is it, Severus? Are you Circe's nightgown!" she cried, her face contorting in horror, seeing the bloody figure in the arms of the wizard. "What happened?"

She listened carefully as Severus explained the curse, all the while running diagnostic spells, chanting healing spells, and Summoning potions from her stores.

Dimly, Hermione heard Madam Pomfrey say, "We've got to get her stabilized, Severus. Her vital signs are growing erratic." Hermione closed her eyes. She was so tired. It had been such a long day...

"Hermione! Try to stay awake!" She could hear Ginny, her voice shrill and frightened. Couldn't they just leave her alone?

"It's the blood loss that has me concerned," Pomfrey was saying. She turned to Severus. "Three vials of Blood Replenishment Potion."

As Severus uncorked the stopper, he glanced at the vial. It was marked in his own spidery handwriting, along with the date it was created. He had made the potion. As he gently parted Hermione's lips to pour its contents into her mouth, he froze. *I made this potion.*

Without hesitation, he tipped it into his own mouth, grimacing as the potion mixed with his own saliva.

Poppy looked at him, then nodded curtly. "Good idea, boy. That might give us the advantage we need." Severus nodded, his mouth full of the dark, foul-tasting solution.

When Severus could taste the change of the potency, he looked down at Hermione, and leaned over her, took her face in his hands, and with his eyes locked with hers, covered her mouth with his. Hermione, shocked that Severus would kiss her in front of Ginny and Madam Pomfrey, felt him force the potion from his mouth into hers.

*Swallow this, lass. I made this potion, and my essence, my saliva, will help your body to absorb it faster.* Hermione's eyes widened, and for a second, their tongues mingled.

*That's a good girl. Swallow it down...*

"Swallow, Miss Granger," Madam Pomfrey urged, and Hermione obeyed, half-choking in surprise.

"What is he doing?" Miss Weasley whispered, looking on in stunned disbelief, as her Potions professor proceeded to repeat the action twice more with the Blood Replenishing Potions. The second and third time, Hermione swallowed without coughing, and gradually she rallied.

Four more potions; Professor Snape poured each one into his mouth, waited several grimacing seconds, then forced the potions from his mouth into Hermione's. Each time, the professor took longer to transfer the potion, until the last time looked no more or less than a deep, open-mouthed kiss. His long fingers gripped and stroked Hermione's face tenderly. Ginny Weasley watched them; the two of them looked as if they'd kissed before.

"Salvires Venenum, Miss Weasley," Madam Pomfrey replied briskly, cauterizing the wound with the tip of her wand, all the while applying Essence of Dittany. "You'll study it in is it sixth-year Potions, Professor Snape?"

Trying not to swallow the backwash of the potions, Severus nodded at Poppy, in answer to her question. He sat up straight, feeling the residue of the potions swirling in his mouth. For a moment, he was mildly nauseous, and he plucked a towel from the bedside and spat into it twice, scrubbing his tongue on the cloth.

Grimacing at the residual taste of potion after potion layered on his tongue, Professor Snape stared down at Hermione, watching her closely for any change in her condition. He spat again into the towel, then tossed it aside.

As Madam Pomfrey concentrated on sealing the large wound, Severus explained, "Sixth-year Potions class, Miss Weasley. The magical signature of a Potion can be enhanced with the addition of the Potioneer's own bodily fluids - blood, tears, sweat, semen and saliva. Any of those fluids mixed with a standard potion will augment its potency exponentially. It will either increase the strength of the potion, or, in this case, its rate of absorption."

Never taking his eyes off Hermione, Severus continued, "The Potioneer imbues the potion with his own magical signature, therefore he or she can perform this only with potions they have themselves created, and only at the point of ingestion. Blood is the strongest component, being the most difficult to obtain.

"Mixing the potion with the Potioneer's saliva is called Salvires Venenum. It's the weakest of the bodily fluids, being the easiest to obtain, and it will enable the body to absorb the potion more quickly. "

He watched Hermione carefully. "For Miss Granger's sake, at least, I hope so." He realised he was lecturing on fucking Potions while his reason for living was fighting for her life. He uttered a short, barking laugh at his own madness, and the two women, young and old, gave him a look of quiet, comradely understanding.

Madam Pomfrey muttered Cleansing Charms and other Healing spells on Hermione, as the three of them huddled around the little witch. Severus could feel the band of anxiety around his heart loosen, as Hermione's colour returned a little, and her breathing and heartbeat stabilised to an acceptable level.

Poppy asked Severus and Ginevra Weasley to allow Hermione some privacy, while she removed the injured girl's blood-soaked clothing, and made her more comfortable. She took a few minutes to heal the Weasley girl's ankle as well.

As they walked to the other end of the ward, Severus turned to Molly Weasley's youngest, and thought how she would be proud of her daughter today. Now that the crisis and conflict were over, however, the young girl looked as if she were about to cry.

In his calmest voice, Severus demanded, "Who did this? Who hexed Miss Granger?"

The red-haired girl frowned. "It was Dolohov. I remember his picture from the Prophet. He was aiming at you, sir, and Hermione just put herself between the two of you and refused to move. I don't know why, but I really couldn't believe he was going to curse her until he started shouting at her!"

Severus looked at the girl. She was so young. Quietly, he said, "He is a Death Eater, Miss Weasley. He will kill without compunction. You were most fortunate you were not cursed, as well."

"He didn't have time. I hit him with a Blasting Hex. I knocked him out cold." She smiled grimly. "I wish I was there so I could do it again. "

Forcing his voice to sound stern, Severus intoned, "Miss Weasley, I shall be sending a strongly worded owl to your parents this evening, citing your recklessness and foolhardy behaviour tonight."

Miss Weasley stared at him in shock, her eyes narrowing in anger. "But - but I helped you! My friends were in danger - "

"The danger was Potter's own doing!" he hissed, trying to intimidate the girl, while at the same time keeping his voice quiet, as not to disturb Hermione. "Miss Granger told me she implored you all to stay on the grounds, but you ignored her excellent advice! Not only did you leave school grounds without permission, but Potter endangered your life and the lives of your friends!"

He pointed toward the door. "Return to your House immediately. The only thing preventing me from deducting every point from your House is the fact that your efforts in assisting me with Miss Granger may well have saved her life! If she does survive, it will be no thanks to the foolish actions of you and your friends tonight!"

He turned and walked away, knowing the Weasley girl was staring daggers at him, and he didn't blame her. She had fought at the Ministry with skill and bravery, and without her, he wasn't sure Hermione would still be alive. He only hoped he would survive long enough to tell her these things, and to one day thank her for helping to save the life of the woman he loved. He almost stopped in his tracks. Loved. Hermione. He loved her. *She blocked a curse, knowing it was meant for me. Oh, gods, She was going to sacrifice her life for me.*

As he walked back to the ward, Severus was struck by the terrible realisation that he had almost lost Hermione, not once, but twice. The arrogance of his actions was like a smack in the face. Thinking he would be at Grimmauld, she had gone to the dog's own kennel, without once thinking that she would arrive first, or more likely, that Sirius would actually be there.

Severus had taken his time before leaving Hogwarts, hoping Potter was right again, and that Black actually was at the Ministry, being tortured by the Dark Lord. Merlin knew, Black deserved it.

Instead, the pureblood bastard had tried, almost successfully, to rape Hermione. Bastard! He was no better than Mulciber or Macnair, raping Severus for sport. He thought back to watching Black fall toward the archway Severus had seen from the side. Black had disappeared like some sort of sleight of hand magician's trick. What did it mean? Had Black been sent somewhere else, or sometime else? It was, after all, the Department of Mysteries, which meant it could mean, well, anything.

Severus asked himself if he would be happy if Black were now dead. Of course. Potter would blame him, no doubt. Lately, if a sparrow fell to a hawk's talons, Potter blamed Severus for it. He chastised himself for his petty thoughts. He walked back to Hermione's bedside. Poppy had removed Hermione's blood-soaked, mended school robes and dressed her in a simple, blue nightshirt. She looked frighteningly pale and tiny in the bed.

Poppy came and stood beside him. Quietly, she said, "Her parents will have to be informed, but I think she'll be alright." She turned to him. "You did well, Severus, bringing her here so quickly. It was quite serious. She will have a tough recovery ahead of her. It was a nasty curse; it's going to leave a large and disfiguring scar."

"At least she's alive." Severus watched Hermione's chest rise and fall, counting each breath. Each one felt like his own.

"Yes, but a horrid scar like that is going to be difficult to adjust to, especially for a young witch. It will be hard on her self-esteem. Wizards, especially, can be unkind."

Severus scoffed. "Those wizards are imbeciles. She won't have to worry about it." To himself, he added, "She will never be made to feel unattractive because of it."

"No, I don't suppose she will." Severus turned and looked at the mediwitch, who favoured him with a reassuring smile. "You're a mess, Severus. You need to go and get cleaned up."

He nodded, unable to remove his gaze from the still form in the bed. Poppy shook her head, marveling at the dour Potions master.

A chair was conjured for him, and Poppy brought him a mug of tea. "Funny, that. Most of the time it's *you* in this position, with the rest of us fussing over your bedside."

"I never asked you to fuss over me, Poppy," he said, quietly. To his surprise, she put a warm hand on his shoulder.

Almost fondly, she replied, "No, you never did, did you, Severus? But we did anyway. You don't stop caring for someone just because they don't want you to, young man." Poppy nodded at the figure in the bed. "She never has, at any rate. That's not how love works."

Severus sat down beside his witch. After a few moments, Poppy left him, closing the curtain around them, hiding them away from the world, where no one could see them. Severus took Hermione's hand in his, and kissed it, and pressed it against his heart, trying to will his strength into her. In the turmoil of his emotions swam the conflicting thoughts: was Black dead? Why did Dolohov try to curse him?

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Opening lines are from Caleb Myer lyrics by Gillian Welch

## Eleven: I am the Spear as it Cries Out for Blood

Chapter 12 of 39

I am the depth of the great pool, I am the song of the blackbird, I am the wind, that breathes on the sea...

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

*Many thanks to Talesofsnape, Lilyevanssnape and dharkcharlotte for their magical alpha and beta skills. This chapter would be a pale imitation of itself, were it not for these amazing angels.*

*For Sempra and Mimi*

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*Step into the silence, take it in your own two hands; and sprinkle it like diamonds all across these lands.*

*Blaze it in the morning, wear it like an iron skin; only things worth living for are innocence and magic, amen.*

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Severus had only just returned to his chambers, to rid himself of his blood-stained clothing, when the summoning came. He had, in truth, been expecting it, and as his Mark burned and pulsed, he thought for a moment that this might be the last time he would be summoned. The fact that Dolohov had tried to curse him did not bode well, and he half-expected that the game might finally be up for him on this night.

When he'd left Hermione in the infirmary, she was unconscious but stable, and he'd surreptitiously kissed her forehead, before returning to his chambers. As he walked down to his usual Apparation point, he wished he'd said goodbye before leaving. He would have wanted her to know he was gone. If this was indeed his last night on earth, it would have been good to give her a message. Perhaps it was for the best that he had not. Leaving her, knowing it might be their last moment together, would be unbearable.

He pondered his own possible death, and found the idea much less palatable than it had been at the same time the year before. Then, he had welcomed it; in those days, he'd left for each summoning almost wishing for it. He did not relish the pain, but the idea of this whole ordeal of life finally being over had been a source of strange comfort to him.

It was different now. His association with Hermione Granger had given him a taste of what life could be like for him. He had gradually started to hope that they might share a future together. He had felt the change within him, sometimes welcomed, sometimes disturbing, calling him to cast off his hair shirt and his self-hatred, and to embrace the possibility that he, Severus Snape, might be a man worthy of love, worthy of loving.

Tonight, he was almost sure, marked the beginning of the end for him. There was only one thought that enabled him to put one foot in front of the other and walk to his death. The shimmering, precious knowledge that, if he were to die tonight, there was someone who would grieve, who would miss him; there was a beautiful little witch who would shed tears over him. It was a thought that comforted and carved him at the same time. In a life marred by a lack of fairness, it seemed the unkindest cut of all.

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Poppy Pomfrey wiped her eyes, and turned from the enchanted mirror she had been using to communicate with Albus, during his Ministry-imposed exile. Now that Umbridge was gone, and You-know-who had been seen in the Ministry by several witnesses, the Minister had reinstated Albus, and he was returning to Hogwarts with terrible news.

Poppy blew her nose, and took several deep breaths. In all her years, she had seen some terrible things associated with Tom Riddle, but this was one of the worst. Albus had contacted her shortly after the fight at the Ministry, to tell her that the prophecy had been destroyed and Sirius Black had fallen through the arch in the Department of Ministries. Voldemort had been seen by scores of witnesses, and the reality of his return was no longer being met with disbelief.

"And Harry Potter, Albus? Is he...?"

The newly reinstated Headmaster nodded. "He is well, Poppy, although very upset, of course, about Sirius." The older man's eyes were dim with sadness. "But there's more, my dear. It concerns our Miss Granger..."

Poppy, calmer now, made her way silently through the infirmary, to wait for Miss Granger to awaken. Minerva, by default, should be the one to break the news, but she was

still in St. Mungo's. No one else was here to do it. Poppy squared her shoulders and looked down at the sleeping girl, and pity filled her heart.

Severus knelt at the feet of his Lord and Master, and kissed the hem of his robe reverently. To those surrounding the Dark Lord, Severus was the epitome of the serene, dark wizard, showing his allegiance to his Master. There was no trace of the turmoil that roiled in his gut like poison, or the fear and dread that filled his heart.

"Severus," Voldemort said, in a welcoming tone. His hissing, asp-like sibilants made Severus' name sound like a love ballad, sung in Parseltongue. "A rather dreary episode tonight, wouldn't you say?"

The Dark Lord's cryptic statement left Severus uncertain as to how to respond. If he agreed with him, the Dark Lord would no doubt blame Severus and take out his frustration on him. If he downplayed it, he would be punished for underestimating the circumstances. Severus realised he would be damned either way, and therefore, he decided to do neither.

He lowered his head, as if anticipating the moment when the blow would land, and waited. His long black hair fell forward like a dark curtain, hiding his face from all but the Dark Lord.

"I see you, too, are at a loss as to what happened, Severus," the Dark Lord continued, rather approvingly. "It is a trivial matter, really, is it not? A minor setback to my plans, but a setback, nonetheless." Though his words were casual, almost indifferent, Severus could hear the barely concealed anger in the Dark Lord's voice. Someone would be punished for tonight's unsuccessful mission. Severus had ever been a handy scapegoat for the Dark Lord's failures.

"One, no doubt, you will find a way to use to your advantage, My Lord," Severus answered smoothly, still keeping his eyes downcast. He felt Voldemort's dry, smooth hand caress his dark hair, and he closed his eyes. It would happen now... he felt his heart pounding in his chest, as he waited for the Killing Curse to land...

Suddenly, the hand was gone, and the Dark Lord sat back on his chair. "Losses on all sides, my dear Potions master. Our own Bella lost her estranged cousin tonight. Lost, without a chance for redemption through my grace..." There was a smattering of laughter, and out of the corner of his eye, Severus saw Bellatrix preen, and heard her obscene giggle at her Master's blasphemous words. Merlin, he hated Bella, her warped, twisted depravity.

As always, he hid his revulsion with obsequiousness. "Of course, as the godfather of Harry Potter, it was, no doubt, a crushing blow to the boy. Most demoralizing, I'm sure," Severus replied, careful to leave a smear of sarcasm within the folds of his silken voice, leaving no doubt as to his own opinions of the matter.

"Ah, yes, Severus, an old enemy gone. One you will no doubt miss?"

"My Lord, the heart sings to know I will never have to see that mongrel ever again." His tone left no doubt as to the sincerity of his words. Whatever he was to anyone else, Sirius Black would always be a symbol of anger, humiliation and betrayal to Severus. He was not sorry Black was dead, nor would he ever be. Aside from all that he had done to Severus in the past, there was still the score left to settle regarding his treatment of Hermione.

"And why were you there, tonight, at the Ministry of Magic? Why were you not at school, seeing to your charges?"

Severus smiled. For the first time since he'd arrived, he knew his actions could be justified. "My Lord, your deception worked so perfectly that Harry Potter collapsed during his O.W.L. exam, crying to his friends that you had captured his godfather and were torturing him in the Department of Mysteries."

"Oh, dear, that is unfortunate," Bella cooed, and the others laughed with her.

Cautiously, Severus continued. "I encouraged Potter to go to the Ministry, and I sent my my lover to Grimmauld Place to see if Black was there." Severus allowed his true feeling to show, and his eyes darkened to dull flint. "But the fool was drunk, and he overpowered and raped my witch."

"That is grievous, Severus." The Dark Lord looked at Severus thoughtfully. "I can only imagine your anger! If it were my witch, I would have desired to kill him."

"I did desire it, My Lord greatly! But I realised that if I sent him to the Ministry, I could kill him there, and it would look like he died attempting to defend his godson - none would be the wiser." He bowed toward Bellatrix. "I had hoped to be able to avenge my witch, but Bella's talents proved too much for her cousin." Bella returned the bow as homage to her terrible skills.

Voldemort continued to stare at Severus closely. "I have only one question, Severus. If you were so sure I would be successful, why would it matter how or where Black died? If you were so sure of my ultimate triumph over Harry Potter, why would you need to make it look as if Black died defending his godson? Who would be left to care?"

Severus looked at his Master, and wanted to drop to the floor. He was sure now that the holes in his story were large enough to fly a Quidditch team through, but he had hoped to bluster his way out of it. He decided to tell the truth, and if that didn't work, by Merlin, he'd take as many of them as possible with him as he fell, starting with Bella, the smug, mad bitch.

"I am not entirely confident that Lucius and his faction would succeed. He had not informed me of his plan, and I did not know you would actually be at the Ministry, My Lord." He bowed to the ground. "I will confess, when I saw you there, I was only thinking how sweet it would be to see the light fade from Sirius Black's eyes at the same moment as you stole the sight from Potter's."

"How dare you, Severus!" Bella snarled, affronted by the dark wizard's insinuations. "We had Potter and his little army under control, until you and Black and the entire damned Order showed up!"

"I gave you Black and Potter on a silver platter. I brought them to the Ministry. The Order was Dumbledore's doing," Severus answered smoothly, frantically trying to make sure all the pieces fitted together. "The fool Potter managed to contact Dumbledore using Umbridge's Floo connection before she caught him. I only found this out after the fact. After," he turned to Dolohov, his expression cold, "Dolohov cursed my witch, and almost killed her."

The Dark Lord turned in his slow, serpentine fashion to Dolohov, who stood ramrod-straight, arrogance and pureblood privilege emanating from him. "Antonin, is this correct? I hope this was a case of mistaken identity, or accident. Surely you wouldn't deliberately harm your brother's concubine?"

Dolohov coloured, and looked at Severus, angry. "My brother? My brother, who just stood there, while the Order members swamped us?"

"I assumed the fight was lost you certainly weren't winning. How else would the blood traitor Weasley's youngest child get the drop on you? She's what - all of thirteen?" Severus growled, allowing his anger to rise. He was a hairsbreadth away from death; it didn't matter now.

Dolohov turned to their Master, but Voldemort gave no indication of siding with him. Almost desperately, Antonin spat, "It was a heated battle. It was a curse that flew wild "

"When Hermione refused to move away from me, you told her to, 'Have a little taste of pureblood magic, Mudblood bitch.' These words do not seem to be a fair indication of a badly misthrown curse, Antonin," Severus hissed. "I had a word with the blood traitor Weasley's daughter. She saw you take aim at me, but Hermione stepped in between to block your spell. That's when you 'threw your curse mistakenly'."

"You lying little half-breed " Dolohov drew his wand, and was thrown to the ground by an effortless wave of the Dark Lord's hand.

"That is enough, I think, Antonin," Voldemort said, looking at Severus closely. "I was very distressed to hear that your little pet was so critically injured, Severus, but I am distressed even more to find it was a deliberate attempt of one brother against another."

Dolohov all but whimpered, as he picked himself up from the floor. He stepped back, and waited until the Dark Lord turned his basilisk's gaze from him, back to Severus.

"It grieves me to see my children squabble, Severus. Especially over a misunderstanding."

"Yes, my Lord." Severus lowered his gaze again, thankful all the more for the hours he and Hermione spent in practicing Occlumency. He could feel the Dark Lord pushing gently against his thoughts, and he provided only scattered images, of Hermione, lying battered on the floor of the Grimmauld Place Library; rushing her to the infirmary, as her blood dripped down the leg of his trousers.

"I forgive you, Severus. I had thought your calculations to be a lack of faith. I see it was all a lack of communication instead."

"Yes, my Lord." *Hermione. I must leave here alive for Hermione.*

The Dark Lord smiled. "To demonstrate the renewed faith I have in you, I have prepared a little gift. Your brother Antonin assisted. He was most insistent that he contribute." The Dark Lord looked at Dolohov. "I see now he was trying to apologise for his actions."

Severus looked up into the face of the Dark Lord, and his heart stuttered in his chest. A dreadful fear crept into his veins like a spider, and it took all of his discipline to remain looking into the hideous visage of the madman, calm and supplicating.

"I will give you a way to spend more time with your little pet, my dear Severus. I remember your disappointment when she was called away by her Mudblood parents, just when you needed her presence the most. I know how advantageous to your wellbeing it is to spend your time enjoying her." His smile was terrible; it made Severus' chest ache.

"Yes, my Lord." Were these the only three words in the English language? Why was he frozen here, muttering them over and over, listening to this evil creature chuckling about Hermione. *Oh, gods, no. NO!*

The Dark Lord smiled, and stroked Severus' damp hair, like a parent petting a child. He loved the silkiness of Severus' hair, and it was all Severus could do to stand there, feeling the cold fingers sliding through it. "The Muggle authorities will take care of the bodies. It will be called a great tragedy, no doubt... I prefer to call it, 'Keeping My Potions Master Happy'."

"You do me too much honour, My Lord," Severus said, breathlessly, pasting a grateful smile on his numb lips. Inside, he was dying. He had lost everything, again. She would curse him and turn away in disgust and she would have nothing and he would have nothing...

"Yes, I do, Severus, but a happy Death Eater is a loyal Death Eater, and I'm feeling quite generous toward you today. You flushed the prey," he hissed, casting his eyes at Bella and the others who managed to avoid capture. "It is not your fault the hawks failed to bring it to ground." Without breaking his gaze into Severus' dark eyes, Voldemort hissed, "Antonin, come here, please."

Nervously, Dolohov approached his Master. Still stroking Severus head, almost sensuously, Voldemort smiled. "It saddens me to see my faithful ones turn against one another. Severus, you may wish to address Antonin, regarding this matter." He turned away and resumed his seat. "In any manner you choose."

As if in a dream, Severus turned to Dolohov. He remembered how it felt, running into the Grimmauld Place library, seeing Hermione, shivering with fear as Black, morphed into his animagus form, mounted her, his red prick exposed and ready to thrust; he felt her body huddled against his, felt the word *safe...safe...safe...safe*, over and over, flooding his mind, her litany of relief, in his arms. He saw her bleeding to the point of death, as he and another student raced toward Hogwarts' infirmary.

And now, his foul gift from the Dark Lord. Her parents, dead. Because of him. As punishment, for bringing Black and the Order to the Ministry, and not fighting with the Death Eaters there. Hermione would never, never forgive him. Dolohov would beg for forgiveness, but Severus would deny it, just as Hermione surely would deny his.

He raised his wand. Glancing at Macnair, he pointedly looked at the man's crotch with so much pretended heat, he could see the degenerate's cock twitch under his robes. "Care for a little fun, brother?" he said, his voice deep and silky; the voice of a man preparing to fuck.

Macnair gave him a crooked smile. "Always up for a little sport, brother." As Dolohov listened to the exchange, he felt Severus Legilimise into his mind *The last time I was punished, you held me down and laughed, and told Macnair and Mulciber to fuck me harder. You're going to feel his dick all the way up into your belly by the time we're finished with you.*

Severus smiled. It was a happy, joyful, mad, cruel, terrible smile. He pointed his wand at Dolohov casually, lazily, and tilted his head almost playfully. Hermione would have recognised the gesture. Magic swirled around Severus, filling him with unholy, dark lust. *This is for holding me down. And cursing Hermione. And killing her parents.*

"*CRUCIO!*"

---

By the following noon, Hermione was sitting up in her infirmary bed, sipping carefully at the broth that Madam Pomfrey spooned into her mouth. She tried to persuade the mediwitch that she was perfectly capable of eating on her own, but finally gave up, and allowed herself to be fed. Severus had told her arguing with Poppy Pomfrey was an exercise in futility, and Hermione was beginning to concede his point.

She felt exhausted; the sort of weariness that seeped into the bones and until you never felt rested. She tried to put the events of the past twenty-four hours out of her mind, but the images were still too fresh, too raw. She hoped to be able to use a Pensieve and remove them soon. She had a feeling that, if she didn't, they would replay on a loop in her dreams for some time to come.

She could still feel the paralytic fear of having Sirius' animagus body poised over her. Contrasting with this was the detached numbness of watching him die in such an abrupt, meaningless way... Hermione knew she should feel sorry for Harry, but she couldn't make herself. She could still feel the tender skin of her back stinging, as Severus muttered the hasty healing spells, before Apparating them to the Ministry.

Her curse wound burned and itched and ached; Madam Pomfrey was very reassuring, saying that it would heal, but she told Hermione the curse would leave a scar, a large one. Hermione, like any young, unblemished woman, felt that keenly. She worried about it. Would Severus be repulsed by it? Would he turn from her in disgust? She tried to picture the encounter in her head, but she couldn't see him being quite so shallow. After all, he had scars. She had seen them, in the evenings, when he removed his teaching robes and wore a shirt or jumper with his trousers.

Once, he had leaned over his sofa to pick up a book, and his old green jumper had ridden up his pale torso, to reveal a twisted, dark scar on his left flank. A little gift from one of his Death Eater 'brothers', he'd explained. She had touched it, gently, and he'd flinched, but not pushed her away. He enjoyed her touch. Would he still enjoy it when she came to him, scarred, imperfect?

"Madam Pomfrey?" Hermione looked beyond the mediwitch sitting at her bedside. Her Head of House was standing close by. Hermione had been so lost in her thoughts, she'd not seen the woman approach.

"Hello, Professor McGonagall," Hermione said, alarmed at how weak she sounded. "I heard you were in St. Mungo's!"

Minerva McGonagall smiled gently at the young witch. "Hello, dear. I was, but it's hard to keep a tough old Scotswoman down." She sobered. "How do you feel?"

Hermione tried to return the smile. "I'll be alright," she answered neutrally. There was something very wrong; she could see it in the older woman's eyes. She looked as if she'd been crying.

"Perhaps, I should stop back by when you're feeling a little stronger, Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall said, and turned to go.

"No! Wait, please, Professor."

Minerva looked into the young witch's face; it was pinched and strained. "I think perhaps later, when you're up to visitors."

Hermione was frightened now. "Please don't go, Professor. Something's happened. I can tell it from your face." She swallowed. "Has something happened to Harry?"

When Professor McGonagall did not reply, Hermione cried, "Is it Professor Snape? He's not hurt, is he?"

Minerva, surprised, said, "Why, no, Miss Granger, not that I'm aware." She sat down on the side of the bed. "My dear, that's not why I'm here."

Hermione felt her body grow cold. "Professor, you're frightening me. Please tell me what's happening."

The older witch took Hermione's smooth hand in her weathered one, and held it gently. "Hermione, my dear, I must ask you to be very brave."

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Severus Apparated back to Hogwarts shortly before the lunchtime hour, hurrying in through one of the secret entrances to the castle. He stank, and wanted to bathe. He had to face Hermione, and he at least wanted to be clean when she cursed him and spat on him.

The body of Dolohov lay burnt and twisted in the wreckage of The Granger's house. The coroner's report showed that an assailant entered the house, apparently intent on burglary, alerted the family, killed them, then set the house afire to destroy evidence. The unidentified assailant was overcome by smoke inhalation, and perished along with the homeowners.

Severus did not care that the attacker died with an arse and a belly full of the semen of several different men and some animals; he did not care that the coroner would be puzzled that most of the vital organs of the intruder were damaged in a way that had nothing to do with smoke inhalation. Antonin Dolohov would curse no more Muggles. Severus was profoundly grateful that Hermione would never know what he'd done to exact his terrible vengeance. It had not been his finest hour.

Severus had Crucio'd Dolohov until he was magically depleted. By the time he had finished, Dolohov was bleeding from every orifice, and violated in most. Severus was nothing if not thorough. He would step back, allow his fellow Death Eaters their fun with Dolohov, then step in with even more power. The power of a Crucio was insidious and all encompassing, and he was rock hard when the shuddering, bleeding body of Dolohov was dumped unceremoniously at his Master's feet. He looked up at his Master, his eyes blazing with fire, his body thrumming with dark, unspeakable lust. The Dark Lord smiled.

"Go, my friend. Return to your castle. Reserve your strength, and welcome Professor Dumbledore back to Hogwarts for me." His smile faded. "Tell him, when we meet again, he will have to work harder."

Severus had backed away, trembling, his wand shaking in his fist, happy as ever to leave the Dark Lord's presence with his body and his sanity intact. As he prepared to leave, the Dark Lord called to Bella, and asked her to dispose of the trash at his feet. Bella, flushed and aroused at the sight of Severus torturing Dolohov, all but orgasmed as she cast the Avada. Nothing excited Bellatrix Lestrange as much as watching someone suffer.

Severus walked away. He'd seen enough death tonight. He'd caused many, but he could say with a clean heart he had never cast the Killing Curse. He could at least look Hermione in the eye and tell her he had not killed the man. That was about all he could look her in the eye and say about what he'd done tonight.

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As he walked toward the infirmary, Severus' grim, short-lived satisfaction over avenging Hermione was a dim, distant memory. Leaving the Dark Lord's presence, his joy had turned to revulsion. By the time he'd returned to Hogwarts, he'd been struggling to keep nausea at bay. His stomach felt leaden, and his bowels churned.

Severus may have gained ground from the hypersensitive, overbearing, self-conscious man he had always been, but he was not above inflammatory bouts of self-pitying martyrdom. He had not turned into an avenging angel overnight, any more than Hermione had turned from the bushy-haired, buck-toothed know-it-all, into the confident, thoughtful swan that had stolen his heart away from the incendiary ghost of Lily Evans.

Approaching the infirmary, knowing that he would have to face her wrath, he allowed his self-serving anger to flare within him, fueling his inner monologue, and his rehearsed speech to Hermione took on the stilted, brittle, self-righteous manner of old. How dare she blame him? Look at all he had done for her! He would face her childish, petty wrath, and stalk away, his head held high, knowing he had done his best. His heart would go on beating...

As he turned the corner toward the infirmary, the figure of Albus Dumbledore met him in the hallway *Merlin's hairy sack*, Severus groaned, inwardly. *This is all I need.*

"Severus, my boy. I trust you are uninjured from last night?" Albus looked at his Potions master warmly.

Severus looked at Dumbledore carefully. He was in no mood for Albus' games. "If you don't mind, Headmaster, I'm off to the infirmary to see to Miss Granger."

"Ah, yes, dear boy. Terrible, terrible news." He placed a warm hand on Severus' shoulder. "I would like to keep the news of her parents' murder between the four of us - you, me, Minerva and Poppy."

Severus nodded. He had been thinking the same thing. "Agreed. To broadcast it would be to validate the Death Eaters. Furthermore, it would only cause Miss Granger more distress." He tried to keep his own guilt at bay, lest Albus sniff it out and exploit it as well.

"Quite so. But the prophecy is safe now, and so is Harry." Severus stared at him stupidly. *Of course. Let the entire world go to hell as long as St. Potter is safe!*

Albus watched him quietly. "I know what you are thinking, Severus. I have to think this way. I have to see the boy lives to fulfill the prophecy. That is all I exist for. But I am not unaware of your feelings, or those of Miss Granger."

For the first time since their argument in his study, Dumbledore looked apologetic. "Forgive an old man's foolishness, Severus. I had been afraid that your relationship with Miss Granger would distract you from your mission. Last night only served to show me how committed both of you are to the Greater Good."

Severus kept his face impassive. *Fine. Let the old fool think that, if it means he'll leave us alone.* "I have to go, Albus. Miss Granger will need me."

Dumbledore patted his shoulder again. His touch was fatherly, and Severus unwillingly felt the tug of concern from the old man. "Of course. Please tell her I will come and visit her shortly, to convey my sympathy over her loss." He looked around the halls. "I'm afraid my temporary replacement has left the school in a bit of a mess. Mr. Filch and I have a lot of work to do." With another fatherly pat, Albus turned away and walked down the hall away from Severus.

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"Hermione, child, I don't know any other way to tell you, but I have terrible news." Professor McGonagall looked into the face of her secretly favourite student, and cringed inwardly. The girl was still fragile from her injuries, and Minerva held the cool little hand in hers, hoping to be able to soften a blow that could not be softened.

"Please, Professor, whatever you have to tell me, please say it." Hermione steeled herself. It was not Harry; it was not Severus. In her heart, she knew what her professor was going to say. She began to shiver.

"Hermione, dear, last night, after the attack on the Ministry, there was a sighting of the Dark Mark in the sky. It was - it was over your house."

Hermione sat shivering, her eyes growing larger, and she couldn't seem to breathe properly.

Minerva closed her eyes, and spoke. "They the Muggle authorities were called to your parents' house. It was - it was on fire. They tried to rescue your - your parents, but,"

she swallowed and looked into the young girl's face. "I'm afraid they were too late. Your parents were k-killed by Death Eaters."

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Severus was almost at the infirmary door when he heard the sound, the keening, lamenting wail of grief from his witch.

"Mum! Oh gods! DAD! No, not my mum and dad! Nooo - MUM!" Dimly, Severus could hear Minerva speaking to the girl in a soothing voice, trying to calm her, but the harsh, desolate sound of her loss careened off the walls and into his heart, and his thoughts of self-righteous anger were torn from his selfish soul and batted away with each sob of pain, each anguished, pleading heartbroken cry for her mother. It clawed at his heart, and for a moment, he sagged against the door.

Severus thought of his own parents: his worthless, mill rat of a father, who had dealt with every problem with a pint or eight, accompanied by his fists; his mother, well-meaning but so ineffectual as to be worthless. Neither had really raised him any better than a mushroom, feeding him shit and watering him just enough to allow him to grow in the dark. He no more missed them than his outbreak of adolescent acne.

The Grangers were so different from his own parents as to be another species. They had raised Hermione with care and love. They had embraced a world they did not fully understand with tolerance and open mindedness, for the sake of their special child. In the midst of all the incredible changes in their lives since they'd received Hermione's Hogwarts' letter, they had nevertheless managed to instill in her a sense of security.

They had given her a deep, abiding loyalty for her friends, a sense of justice and fairness; they had been encouraged her quest to champion the weak and those who could not defend themselves. And in the end, they were snuffed out like a candle. They had deserved more; Severus vowed he would make a tribute to them. They would not have died in vain.

He made himself walk, though he wanted to run. He made himself stoic, when he wanted to weep. Yes, he was to blame, and yes, she would turn away from him, but he would accept it, and beg her forgiveness. He was all she had left in the world. He would *make* her forgive him, and together they would make sure her parents were remembered for how they lived, not how they died.

He walked into the infirmary, as Minerva and Poppy were trying to comfort Hermione, who was weeping, almost screaming in grief. Poppy was trying to make her take a Calming Draught, but Hermione pushed the vial away. Severus understood why. To deaden the pain was to cheapen it. His blood oath scar burned, and the significance of this grieved him.

*Hurt, Severus Snape, he told himself. Hurt as if hurting could take her pain away. You haven't known pain yet. Wait until she spits in your face and tells you she never wants to see you again. Wait until she calls you a murderer. Wait until she tells you she'll never forgive you. Wait until she's told you a hundred times, and wait some more until she's finally managed to purge it all, until she can forgive you again.*

As he approached the bed, Severus felt the fear, the dread of facing her. But he would - he would face anything for her. He had faced death for Lily; he would face life for Hermione, and it was ten times more frightening.

For a moment, he stood by her bed, silent, waiting for her to notice him, for the anger to set in. For a fleeting moment he considered handing her his wand, in case she wanted to hex him. He deserved it.

Poppy glanced up, and she put a hand on Hermione's shoulder. The sobbing woman looked up and saw him. She stopped crying, and looked into his face, gasping. He bowed his head, and watched her, waiting for his punishment. Nothing the Dark Lord could ever do to him would be as painful as what this little witch would do, but he accepted it, so they could move on - together.

Suddenly, she pushed Minerva away, and raised her arms to him, like a child. "Severus! Oh, thank the gods you're safe!" Her eyes were tortured and beseeching. "Severus, they killed Mum and Dad!"

All thought of self-pitying martyrdom flew out the window; the grace he felt for her was like a benediction. He moved a startled Minerva out of the way and took his witch, his woman, his love, in his arms. "I know, I know... Shh, sweet girl," he murmured to the sobbing witch, holding her close, his face pressed to hers. "I'm here now." He rocked and soothed her, pouring comfort and solace into his voice, his arms warm and secure around her. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, lass. That's it... let it out.... shhh..."

Hermione pressed against him, as if welcoming the pain of her injury, her face contorted, her eyes blank with anguish. "Don't leave. Please, don't leave!" He held on, rubbing her back gently, murmuring non-words of comfort, crooning to her, knowing his voice, his beauty, was all that mattered at this moment. She clung to him, a fragile, tiny kitten in his arms. He pulled her into his lap, and pressed her head against his shoulder, as she sobbed and wailed and shook and cried for her mother and father.

From above, he heard the spluttering, indignation that was Minerva. "Professor Snape! What on earth is going on here?" she gasped, while Potions master sat on Hermione's bed, holding her as gently and tenderly as the fondest of lovers. "Kindly explain the meaning of this."

"Come, Minerva, let's have a cup of tea," Poppy said, pulling the professor away from the couple. "Give Professor Snape a moment to calm her."

Minerva allowed herself to be led to Poppy's office, and the mediwitch poured them both a cuppa. "Sit down, Min." She took a minute sip of the scalding liquid and sighed. "Terrible thing, that. Poor child."

Minerva nodded unwillingly. "Poppy, what was that " she gestured toward the ward, "all about? And why do I have the feeling you know something I don't?"

Madam Pomfrey shrugged. "What is what all about? A student being comforted by a teacher? Isn't that what you were attempting?" She ventured a tiny smile. "Some are better at it than others."

Minerva paused, completely flummoxed. "What are you saying? That Severus and Miss Granger are "

"I'm saying nothing, except that the girl is completely devastated, and she is being comforted. Who cares who does it?" Poppy took another sip, found the temperature of her tea to be to her liking, and took another. "Ah, that's better." She looked at Minerva blandly.

"Honestly, Min. It's not the dark ages. I've stopped counting how many times that poor boy has come into this infirmary ripped to shreds, all for the sake of Albus and your precious Order. If anyone deserves a little comfort, it's him."

Professor McGonagall looked at her old friend of many years. Beneath the No-Hippogriff-Shit-Allowed exterior, Poppy Pomfrey was a very good-hearted woman with a supreme lack of prejudice and a talent for not asking too many questions. Whatever was between the two people on the bed, Poppy wouldn't share with anyone else.

As if she realised her message was sinking in, Madam Pomfrey smiled at her friend. "Besides, Minnie, who's to say who is comforting who?"

After a while, Severus felt Hermione's exhaustion take over, and she quieted a little. He drew back, and her eyes were so full of sorrow and pain he felt his throat tighten. He brushed her hair from her face, and used his thumbs to wipe away the tears on her face.

Hermione reached for a handkerchief, and blew her nose. "I seem to do nothing but cry around you," she sniffled, by way of an apology. "I've drenched your coat." She sniffed, and daubed at her eyes.

He sat quietly, his hands on either side of her hips, facing her. "Shall I ask Madam Pomfrey for a Calming Draught now?"

She shook her head. "No, please. I feel doped up as it is." She looked at him in abject misery. "I need to know: did they suffer?"

He wanted to lie, and tell her they were the victims of the Killing Curse, but he had put his lies behind him where she was concerned. "I don't know, lass. All I know is that "



He hesitated. Now would be the hardest part. "That the Dark Lord told the Death Eaters it was my desire that it happen. So that you would have no recourse but to be with me. You may hear these things from my Slytherins," he said, bitterly.

Hermione looked at him in horror. "Oh, no! Oh, Severus!"

As if she hadn't spoken, Severus ploughed on, his eyes bleak and full of remorse. "In truth, he had them - killed, because I went to the Ministry last night, and he was told I fought against the Death Eaters. It was a warning to me. He will tolerate you, only as far as he tolerates me."

Hermione put her arms around his neck and he held onto her. He continued, "I blame myself, and expect you to do the same. But if you can forgive me, we will ensure your parents are remembered, and honoured."

She looked up at him, her tired eyes filled with confusion. "How could I blame you, Severus? How were you to know what he would do?"

"I told them your parents forbade you to come to the Order meeting during the Easter holiday. The Dark Lord had ordered me to take you there, to cause an altercation with Black and Potter and myself." He shook his head. "I couldn't do it. I couldn't make you go, not when you wished to visit your parents so much." He looked away, and muttered, "I should have made you stay; I should have made you go with me, and taken my chances with Black. Perhaps if I had, he wouldn't have "

"Don't! Don't do this, Severus!" she whispered. She took his face in her hands and forced him to look down at her. "Don't blame yourself. You might as well blame me! I would have gone home no matter what, and perhaps we would have argued, and you would have fought Sirius there. We don't know why things happen, but I won't allow you to take the blame for their deaths." She looked up at him apologetically. "How else can I bear it?"

Severus held her hands in his, and closed his eyes, numbly grateful. "Thank you for..." He sighed. "Thank you." He looked at his little witch, and kissed her forehead. "I know you are devastated, but I need to leave and report to the Headmaster. Professor Dumbledore has returned. I have to speak with him."

Hermione was shaking her head. "No. He can wait. I can't. I need you here, now." She looked up at him. "I'm sorry to be clingy, but I need you, Severus. The whole time Professor McGonagall was going on and on about how Mum and Dad would hate to see me grieve, I kept thinking, Severus would just let me deal with it all. He'd deal with it with me'."

Severus looked down at the diminutive witch who had captured him, changed him, dragged him from Lily's grasp and given him a rebirth. He moved toward her and raised his wand. "Don't fight this, Hermione. Just allow me to move you." Wordlessly, Hermione felt herself rise from the bed, as if being lifted by strong, unseen hands. Severus slipped onto the bed, his back propped against the headboard, and lowered Hermione back into his arms, until she was lying back against his chest.

"Do you have any relatives? Any next of kin?"

Hermione shook her head. "Mum and Dad are were only children, like me. Both sets of grandparents are gone. I'm alone."

Alone. Severus thought of his worthless parents. How different his life might have been, had they been more like the Grangers. The idea of family had always been one of those elusive concepts he'd desired, but never really trusted or understood. It had both terrified him and compelled him. He'd never planned to be part of anything as intimate and binding as a family. Until now.

"You are not alone. You are never alone." Severus took a deep breath. "I am your family now, Hermione."

He felt her shudder. "Thank you." He could hear the tears filling her again.

He felt his own throat tighten. "You are all I have, Hermione. You are my family now."

"Yes. Always." Her voice was a whisper. She threaded her fingers with his, and kissed his hand, and stroked it against her silken cheek.

He sighed. "Thank you," he whispered, and his words sounded like a prayer. He turned her, until she lay enfolded in his arms, and he warded the curtain, so that no one would disturb them. It would not do for Weasley or Potter to barge in and find their friend lying in the arms of their most hated professor.

Hermione relaxed against Severus, and something about the encompassing, protective nature of their embrace released her tears again, as he had known it would, and she lay in his arms until her grief was spent, and she slept, truly slept, for the first time since the entire ordeal started.

Poppy felt the magical signature of Severus' ward, but he had set it to allow her to pass through. When she parted the curtain, she was met with the sight of Hogwarts' most feared and loathed professor, propped against the headboard of the bed, cradling Miss Granger in his arms. She lay against him, sleeping soundly and without any aid, and what's more, Severus slept with her. His arms were around her protectively, and his face was quiet in sleep, a slight frown between his brows, as if scowling, even in repose. Poppy smiled sadly.

"Who is comforting who?" she whispered, and left them to heal.

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Chapter title is from the song Wind On Sea, by Anuna

Opening words are from Bonnie Raitt, Silver Lining, Lyrics by David Gray

## Twelve: My Dear Someone

Chapter 13 of 39

One little star, shining so bright, knows where you are...

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

*I've been blown away by the response I've had to this story. Thank you so much. Your encouragement means the world to me, and I hope you will continue to enjoy the story.*

*Big boxes of Godiva chocolate for my alpha, Talesofsnape, and betas, Lilyevanssnape and dark charlotte, for not only letting me know what I've done wrong, but what I've done right.*

*For Sempra and Mimi*

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*I want to go all over the world and start living free, I know that there's somebody who is waiting for me*

*I'll build a boat, steady and true, as soon as it's done, I'm going to sail along in the dreams of my dear someone...*

---

The following days were a blur to Hermione. Madam Pomfrey informed her it would be several more before she was allowed to leave the infirmary. She spent all her time pogo-ing between bouts of sadness, boredom, restlessness and heartache. Her parents' death was a constant, nagging ache in the back of her mind, like a song she'd heard, and every time she thought she was shed of it, it would come back to harass her.

By the second week, her scar burned and itched maddeningly, reminding her of Harry's scar, and how it irritated him. Hers bothered her so much she had to take Calming Draughts just to keep from clawing at her chest. Madam Pomfrey warned her that to irritate the wound would only make the scar worse, and Merlin knew it was bad enough left untouched.

Ron, Harry, Ginny, Neville and Luna came to keep her company each day, before they left for the summer, and tried to inject a bit of normality. Ginny was especially attentive; she was still smarting from Professor Snape's harsh words in spite of her conviction he had truly saved Hermione's life. The subject of Sirius' death was a delicate one, and each attempt to discuss what had happened in the Department of Mysteries seemed to back double onto him.

Harry was a bit quieter of late, and on the Saturday students were to leave Hogwarts for the summer, he showed up at her bedside, alone. Hermione was surprised to find him still on the grounds.

"Hello, Harry," Hermione smiled. "Why are you still here?" With a bit of their old teasing banter, she said, "I thought you'd be champing at the bit to return to the loving bosom of your family!"

He gave a short, rueful laugh. "Only returning as long as I have to. I'm planning on spending most of the summer with Ron at the Burrow. The train's leaving in a few minutes. I've got time if I run." His smile faded. "I had a bit of a row with Snape earlier and he "

"Professor Snape, Harry!"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Professor Snape, and he told me to get down to the station, but I thought I'd stop by, seeing as I was at a loose end."

Concerned, Hermione asked, "What sort of row? Honestly, Harry, he is our professor and you "

"I don't care!" Harry flared, his eyes turning angry. "He's a bully and a git and he's the reason that Sirius is d "

"Harry, please!" Hermione all but wept. "Harry, listen. I saw it all. Bellatrix Lestrange cursed Sirius, and he tripped backward, and fell through that arch, or whatever that was. Professor Snape was nowhere near him when it happened!"

"I don't care! Sirius didn't deserve it! He should be here with me! If anyone deserved to fall through that arch, it was Snape!"

Hermione looked at her friend, the boy she had known since she was a scared first year on the Hogwarts' Express. She thought of Severus; the man who had saved Harry over and over again, simply because he'd loved Harry's mum, and in the course of time, had come to love Hermione. The painful knowledge that her best friend wished Severus dead with such vehement conviction overwhelmed her, and Hermione put her head in her hands and sobbed.

Stunned at her reaction, Harry looked around for Madam Pomfrey. "Hermione? Are you okay?" He risked a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Look, I didn't mean to upset you! I still don't fully understand what happened between you and Sirius, but - "

"Oh, Harry, understand what happened?" Hermione looked up at him, her tear streaked face contorted with fury. "It's time past time you accepted the truth! Sirius tried to rape me that night!"

Harry gasped, and slumped in his chair. He shook his head, sadly. "Hermione, Sirius was the closest thing to real family I've ever known. I " His bright green eyes were haunted. "I just didn't want to believe he was capable of doing... of forcing you to "

"I know you don't want to believe it. But I was telling the truth, and if it hadn't been for Professor Snape, he would've raped me."

Harry turned to her. "Hermione, will you tell me what happened that night?" He looked uncomfortable. "I mean, what happened to you at Grimmauld."

Hermione shuddered. She didn't want to remember. "That night, I went to Grimmauld Place to make sure Sirius wasn't there."

She wiped her face with the back of her hand, and sniffed. "Well, he was! And he was drunk, and he held me down and tore off my clothes!" She could feel her fear and anxiety growing with every breath. It wasn't just Sirius. It was the Department of Mysteries, and being cursed, and her Mum and Dad, and Harry's disbelief, and Dumbledore's secrets. And through it all, Severus, taking the blame for every little thing that had gone wrong.

Hermione's face grew pinched. She knew she was rubbing salt into the wound, but she couldn't help herself. "Have you ever been fucked by a dog, Harry? Well, neither have I, but if Professor Snape hadn't arrived at Grimmauld when he did, I would have firsthand knowledge of how that feels! Yes, Sirius changed into his Animagus form to do it!" She looked into Harry's stunned face. "Professor Snape's not perfect, Harry, but at least he's never tried to rape me!"

Harry looked at his friend, shock and disgust warring with his pitiful need to believe in his godfather. "Hermione, I'm so sorry. Sirius always seemed so I know you told me over and over but - I don't know what to say "

"Then best you say goodbye and make ready to leave, Mr. Potter." Harry and Hermione turned to see the Potions master standing in the infirmary, arms crossed, a scowl darkening his features. "I believe I've already ordered you to the train station, Mr. Potter, not to come and upset Miss Granger."

"What are you doing here?" Harry hissed, his hackles rising.

Severus stepped up to the boy, cold anger rising from him like vapour on ice. He hissed, "What I am doing here is none of your concern, Mr. Potter. Your train is leaving any moment, and I daresay you will have to run to make it. Say goodbye to Miss Granger." The last words were spoken in a low, cutting tone that made them sound both ominous and slightly dissolute. Severus' obsidian eyes flashed, and for a brief moment Hermione was sure Harry was going to challenge their professor again.

Instead, he merely stuffed his hands in his robe pockets, and turned to go. As he passed him, Harry looked at Severus with undisguised hatred, but Severus merely stared back, coldly imperious, silently challenging the young man to question his authority again.

"Bye, Hermione. I'll owl you this summer, yeah?" He looked back at Hermione, and threw a murderous look at Severus, who gazed at him with the impassivity of a marble statue. Together, he and Hermione watched Harry leave the ward, his shoulders hunched with careworn sorrow and resentment.

"Wonder what it's like to have a quiet life?" Hermione quipped, as she blew her nose.

"He should not have come here if his only reason was to upset you," Severus growled, still furious at the exchange he'd overheard. Grubby little scrote; he had no right to drive her to tears. She was still fragile, and the death of her parents was still as raw a wound as the one on her chest. And here comes Potter, skulking in, to talk about losing his precious godfather. Typical Potter, to think of no one but himself.

"He's still upset about Sirius," she said tiredly, wincing as she tried to find a comfortable position in which to sit. Watching her carefully, Severus helped her to sit up, and then sat behind her. It was the only position she found bearable any length of time.

"I know this can't be exactly comfortable for you, Severus," Hermione began, as he gently pulled her back, to lean against his chest.

"Does it matter? Your comfort is paramount now, and if you can rest, you will recover faster," he purred, allowing his voice to slide into its soft, hypnotic cadence. His body was warm, and she could feel the buttons of his coat, and that strangely soothed her. The first time, he placed a Cushioning Charm against her back, but it wasn't as satisfying. She presumed it was simply because she couldn't actually feel him.

Once she was settled, she gave a little sigh and felt her limbs relax. He smelled so nice, and his warmth enveloped her and made her feel safe. She felt the rumble in his chest as he made a little moan of contentment. "Besides," he drawled, his voice close enough to tickle her ear, "I never said it was not pleasurable for me. Holding you in my arms has never been a hardship."

He pressed the softest, most teasing of kisses on the shell of her ear, and Hermione smiled, and threaded her fingers with his. Lying back against him, she dozed a little, and he felt his heart almost burst within his chest with a hopefulness that was unquenchable. He had tried to keep it at bay, to stiffen his resolve against the yearning for their future together. In the quiet hours of the night after he returned from his summoning, he had given into it. Nothing, he vowed, would keep them from their chance at a real life. Hope had kicked him in his crooked teeth too many times; this time, it seemed hope might be on his side. If he could continue walking the tightrope between Dumbledore and the Dark Lord...

He smiled as she sighed and stroked the hand now threaded with hers. In the few short months since they had come together on the floor of the Grimmauld Place library, he had changed so drastically in his mindset it was hard to believe he was the same person inside. No one else could see any discernible difference. Even Albus, who had once asked him why he eschewed the good opinion of others, barely noticed a ripple in the fabric of Severus' attitude. He proudly hid it well; no one, save the little witch in his arms, knew exactly the breadth and depth of his altered life. Poppy had her suspicions, but he'd grown used to her keeping his secrets.

It was a furtive little game they played, with the aid of Madam Pomfrey. She made sure Hermione wasn't disturbed, and Severus made sure Hermione would rest. She leaned on him, and he spoke to her about various subjects that interested them both, and they made plans for the summer. Sometimes he would speak in his lovely, low, silken voice for the sole purpose of lulling her, knowing his own abilities to coax and seduce a response, using his one beauty. Even as he spoke, he could feel her body relaxing, moving into a deep, healing sleep.

During the past two nights, she had experienced nightmares, but it took little more than a gentle shifting of her body to ease her out of them. There were moments she cried in her sleep as well, and called for her mother, and her plaintive calling tore at his blackened soul. When he spoke to her, even in her sleep, she gentled, and her restlessness settled. The knowledge that he could do this gave him a quiet sense of power that had nothing to do with darkness, or even magic. He only knew he felt like a god, when she nuzzled against him with soft little murmurs that stirred both his softening heart, and his hardening cock.

As they sat together, they quietly made plans to deal with the dreaded process of taking care of funeral arrangements and inspecting the burned house. It would be a Muggle service, and none but a select few knew of it. The Headmaster had discussed it privately with the both of them, and they had come to a mutual agreement of the best way to proceed. Because of their 'special relationship', as Dumbledore called it, Severus was to accompany Hermione to Surrey, to both assist and protect her against the possibility of further attack.

It was an empty reason, and they all knew it, but they all played the game. Hermione was no more a candidate for attack from Death Eaters than Severus at the moment, as far as Dumbledore knew. Severus, however, knew the Dark Lord was ever capricious, and none were exempt from his whim.

On Monday, they planned to Apparate to her parents' home, where she'd been given permission by the Fire Chief to inspect the ruins for any items of value. Severus had already gone ahead and placed a powerful deflection charm on the house. Any would-be looters approaching the property would feel a sudden desire to go to Sutton Hospital to have their eyes examined.

Finally, on Tuesday, they would go to the funeral home in Morden, where Hermione would pay her respects, see to it that the bodies were cremated, and meet with her parents' solicitor. There had been no mention of her parents' deaths in the Wizarding papers, and Severus was profoundly grateful. He had hinted to certain Slytherins that the indication of any knowledge of any Muggle deaths was akin to accessory to murder, so they remained quiet. If they spoke, it was amongst themselves.

Severus was troubled for more than one reason. The Department of Mysteries debacle snared several Death Eaters, who were now incarcerated in Azkaban. The Dark Lord was furious with his lieutenants, especially Lucius Malfoy. While Lucius languished in disgrace in Azkaban, Severus knew the Dark Lord would exact vengeance for his failure, and Severus feared Draco would be the instrument of his revenge. Draco had been quiet since his father's capture and imprisonment, and although Severus tried to reassure the boy that his father's liberation was not far away, he could sense Draco's growing lack of faith in him. It was an issue that would have to be addressed soon enough, and Severus mentally added it to his growing list of concerns, along with Albus' increasing absent-mindedness.

Dumbledore was proving a worry. After being gone Merlin knows where during his 'little vacation from Hogwarts', as he had taken to calling his unceremonious sacking, he was off again, pursuing something he assured Severus would 'assist in Tom's demise once and for all, and prepare Harry Potter for his final date with destiny'. It bothered Severus that Dumbledore was being so cagey about it.

The Headmaster had, as promised, visited with Hermione shortly after his reinstatement as Headmaster. He had been accommodating, even lenient with them, almost to the point of inviting Severus to have Hermione move in with him. In the end, he and Severus had decided the best option would be to allow Hermione to stay in the adjoining rooms to Severus' in the dungeons for the summer. Hermione had been pleased, Severus surprised. He had thought the Headmaster would put up a bigger fight. It had been almost too easy.

There was something about the Headmaster that troubled both Hermione and Severus. Professor Dumbledore had seemed preoccupied, distant, and more than once they'd had to repeat themselves to jar him from his reverie. When asked if he was feeling well, he smiled indulgently and patted their shoulders like one would a child, citing a bit of tiredness from the hard work of returning the school to its pre-Umbridge state. He also hinted at his more personal 'project' as he called it, but would reveal nothing to either of them.

"When all the pieces are in place, I assure you, I will let you know," he smiled, and gave them a cheery wave as he departed, muttering to himself.

"Do you think he's alright?" Hermione whispered to Severus. Within her mind, she heard his voice, sardonic and dry *Barmy old poof. Whatever it is, you can be guaranteed that Potter, the Chosen One, is at the heart of it.*

More than Dumbledore's increasing vagueness, it bothered Severus that Hermione's curse scar had still not healed. Poppy had dealt with her fair share of curses and hexes. Severus had lost count of the times she'd treated his own hex- and curse-induced injuries, and he knew how quickly the mediwitch was at regenerating the tissue.

"It was a terrible curse, Severus," Poppy had told him, when he returned from seeing off his Slytherins for the year. "It's going to take days, perhaps weeks, before it's fully healed." She gave him a warning look. She quickly contained them both in a consultation shield, so that no one could hear their conversation.

"I don't presume to know what is going on with you and that girl, Severus, but I know you. I can't believe this is just some passing diversion, to be discarded when Albus next tells you to jump."

Severus hid his astonishment at Poppy's frankness and grew shuttered, his expression stony. "You are quite correct, Poppy. It is none of your concern." He softened slightly. "However, I can tell you confidentially that there is an 'understanding' between Miss Granger and me. That is all I will divulge. Suffice to say the Headmaster is aware of it, and is being kept abreast of the situation."

Madam Pomfrey huffed. "I don't care about that, you dozy prat! I want to make sure that she understands there's to be no fun and games until that curse scar heals. I know she's not sexually active." She gave him a stern look. "Yet."

"Nor will she be until she is of the age of consent, Poppy," Severus said, feeling as if he were sliding down into quicksand of his own making. "Nimue's nightgown, Poppy, I'm not a predator!" His jaw worked angrily. "I'm not Sirius Black," he muttered under his breath.

Poppy looked at him intently. "Ah, thus explaining the half-healed scratch marks on her back." Severus nodded.

"I was fortunate to stop him, but not before he clawed her. I healed the scratches as best I could, thinking we would return here and you could take care of her." He looked away, the hideous events of the battle playing in his mind. "The fates had other plans for us."

The two of them looked up as Minerva McGonagall entered the infirmary, and Madam Pomfrey immediately dropped the shield. "We'll continue this discussion at another time, Severus," she said, quietly, then marginally louder. "Hello, Minerva. I'll be right with you."

Poppy turned back to Severus. "Right, now, off with you! Minerva's here for her follow-up examination, and you need to start working on summer potions for me, young man. I've got a very large list," she said, almost smugly, and handed him a foot long parchment.

He sighed. "Why is it that the number of Healing Potions I am required to brew increases with every passing year since Mr. Potter and his little gang of Gryffindor miscreants arrived? If they don't hurry and leave school, I'm going to have to borrow a Time-Turner to get all this brewing done." He looked at Minerva pointedly as he spoke, and, with a nod to Poppy, left the two women.

"And what was that all about?" Minerva asked Poppy with a slight smile.

Poppy returned her smile with a shrug. "What is anything ever about with Severus?" She beckoned. "Come along. We'll take care of this matter with Miss Granger first. Then I want a good look at you, young lady." She was rewarded with a most un-Professor McGonagall-like tongue poked out in her general direction. Laughing, the two women walked over to Hogwarts' last patient of the Battle at the Department of Mysteries.

Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey approached Hermione, who was stretching, having finished her nap in Severus' arms. To Minerva, she looked a little stronger, more like her old, bossy self.

"Right, Miss Granger, why exactly did you wish to see me?" Professor McGonagall approached Hermione's bedside. "How are you feeling, dear?"

"I'm better. Thank you, Professor," Hermione said, biting her lower lip. She was not looking forward to this. "I wanted to ask you about my current state as regards to my age in the Wizarding world."

Puzzled, Professor McGonagall said, "I'm not sure I understand the question, dear?"

Hermione blushed. "Well, I would like to record my actual age on this date, and I'd like for you and Madam Pomfrey to be witnesses." She tried to sound calm, but in reality her heart was pounding. "I have to meet with my parents' wizarding lawyer at the end of the week, and I'd like to be able to show him that I'm an adult in the eyes of Muggle Britain, and therefore not to be considered as an orphan, or ward of the state."

Madam Pomfrey frowned. "I'm sorry, Miss Granger, but I'm afraid I'm still a bit in the dark. Why do you need me to tell you your actual age? Surely you know what day and year you were born! Only those who have meddled with time." She turned and looked at Professor McGonagall chidingly. "So that's what Severus' little parting shot was about." She gave her friend a chastening look. "Really, Minerva? And I thought the Ravenclaws were the overachievers."

Professor McGonagall looked back at the mediwitch with blithe aplomb. "Miss Granger was a perfect candidate for the use of a Time-Turner, Poppy. And she returned it after her third year." She gave Hermione a little puzzled frown. "However, dear, I cannot imagine you added very much time to your life during the year you had access to it."

Hermione coloured slightly, as much as her damaged body would allow. "Professor, if I'm to be perfectly honest, I think I might have added a bit more than I originally led you to believe."

Intrigued, Madam Pomfrey looked from her patient to Professor McGonagall. "Hphm. All right. Let's see then." She made a complicated series of patterns in the air with her wand, and pointed it straight at Hermione's heart. "*Sagacit teraevum!*"

The three women watched as Madam Pomfrey's wand produced a spiraling, blue light. It danced against Hermione's chest, and then formed into a "0". The number changed, and the spell began counting, the numbers increasing rapidly, measuring the days of her life. The symbols increased so quickly, they looked like a blur against her chest.

As the numbers reached their final tally, they slowed down somewhat, until they reached:6630.

Madam Pomfrey muttered, "*Diesut Annus.*" The numbers quickly rearranged themselves, until the results appeared across Hermione's chest: 18Y1M4D10H34M38S. The last two numbers increased, one per second, as the older women looked at the moving symbols.

"Hmm. That's quite interesting, really," Hermione murmured, looking down at the numbers flashing over her chest. "I thought it was around a year and a half, and I was almost right." She smiled up at her Professor, as if she'd achieved a special goal.

Minerva McGonagall spluttered, "Eighteen years and one month? What is your actual date of birth, Miss Granger?"

Hermione gulped. "The Nineteenth of September, 1979." She almost laughed at Professor McGonagall's expression. Madam Pomfrey did a quick calculation, using her wand as a pen in the air.

"You added almost SIXTEEN MONTHS to your life?" Poppy Pomfrey squeaked. "Gods, girl, nothing *is* that interesting! You must have been bored out of your skull by the end of the year, repeating it so much."

In spite of all that had happened, Hermione was struck by the outlandish statement, and for the first time in days, she laughed, and then grimaced as the curse wound ached. Madam Pomfrey laughed with her, and Professor McGonagall left to issue the newly validated birth certificate, shaking her head. "Never again! I will never allow a student a Time-Turner!"

It was only after she left that Madam Pomfrey said, "Oh dear! The whole point of Minerva coming in today was to give her a follow-up examination." She fixed Hermione with a baleful eye. "No more surprises, young lady. I've got my hands full enough this summer as it is."

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Hermione felt the slightly sick feeling, as always, as Severus Apparated, with her in tow, to a back lane around the corner from what had been her parents' house. While she struggled to keep down the meager contents of her stomach, Hermione mentally steeled herself for what she would see. The house she'd grown up in was nearby, and as Severus took her arm, they walked toward it.

Hermione tried not to buckle when she saw what was left. The roof had remained intact, but the rest of the Surrey home was a blackened shell. The local arson investigator, Martin Hugo, met them, his tone sympathetic and rather puzzled.

"I've never quite seen fire damage like it, miss," he said, shaking his head. "The blaze was quite localized, and burned itself out quickly." He gave her a kindly smile of sympathy. "Most likely, your parents succumbed to smoke inhalation, just as the intruder did." He watched as the young girl nodded, then looked up at the man with her.

The girl was a budding beauty, that's for sure, and it was just as obvious to the Muggle investigator that she was completely head over heels for the dark-haired man with her. They were both dressed in black; she in a black dress and low heels, he in a black suit so severely tailored he looked like a jaded, debauched priest.

To the outsider, they looked like polar opposites, extreme, yet perfectly suited for one another. The man was just as darkly stern as she was brightly pretty, and as dour as she was lush, but together they formed a symmetry that was oddly pleasing, like a balance of two aspects of a single personality. Oh, no doubt, they were together; it was written all over them.

The investigator cleared his throat. "Ah, well, I'll just let you have a look around. The main damage inside is from the hoses, and the upper floor has been declared safe for inspection as well." He tipped his hat. "Please give me a shout if you need anything." The young woman looked up at her escort, who nodded, and assisted her into her former home.

As Hermione walked through her parents' ruined house, she forced herself to concentrate on what was salvageable. She would not think of her parents now. When she and Severus returned, she would hide away in the dark recesses of Hogwarts, taking herself off alone, and give vent to her grief. She would be strong until then. She did not wish Severus to see her as a weeping, helpless girl, but at that moment, that was exactly how she felt - pathetic, clingy little girl, wanting her mother. Hermione sniffed, and squared her shoulders. She would face this with the dignity her parents deserved.

She had made a very big deal about her technical age so she would not have to go through the trauma of being declared a minor and taken into care. She had to act her age now, or be forever seen as a child, masquerading as a woman.

Severus followed her dutifully through the smoke-blackened rooms. Almost to a fault, Hermione was meticulous and thoughtful, but kept little. When she found an item she wished to keep, she silently handed it Severus, who shrank it down, and placed it in a little box in his pocket.

Going through most of the house had been difficult enough for Hermione, and she forced herself to be very restrained regarding the things she decided to take. Her room was mostly filled with books and old toys; she picked out the volumes most dear to her, and when Severus gave her an admonishing look, she sheepishly swept them all up, shrank them, and added them to Severus' little box.

"I have the same love of my books, Hermione. I would not have you leave any behind."

"They're water and smoke damaged "

He smirked, and rolled his eyes. "Remember who and what you are, witch. I can help with the charms to restore them, if you like."

It was when she entered her parents' bedroom that the tears she had been fighting finally escaped. Her mother and father, passionate beings that they were, kept this room strictly off limits. To be in here, in their private inner sanctum, unbidden, made their deaths final. She turned and looked at Severus, her face a mask of pain.

He stood a little removed from her, as if a bit uncomfortable to be alone with her in a bedroom, albeit one that was exposed to the elements from the broken windows. In the grey day, against a backdrop of smoke-blackened walls, waterlogged furniture and the acrid smell of smoke and ash, he looked every inch the dark sorcerer he was. Pale and austere, his arms crossed in front of him, he surveyed everything with an unreadable look, his features bland and immobile.

He turned at that moment, and looked at her, and something in her face must have stirred him, for he walked toward her, and put his hands on her shoulders. "Hermione? Are you feeling unwell? You are extremely pale."

She shook her head, and attempted a smile. "No, I feel alright, considering. To be honest, I'm getting a little overwhelmed." She looked around, her eyes exhausted. "I don't know what I was expecting to find here, but it's almost too perfect. I was thinking it would be..." she trailed off, shrugging.

Severus understood exactly what she was thinking. The fire had been set as a diversion. The Grangers were long dead before the fire, and it had only burned briefly before Sutton's fire service showed up. If the house had been ruined beyond recognition, it would almost be easier to bear.

"Hermione, we can return on another day. I feared you were pushing yourself. It is too soon for you."

Hermione smiled up at her wizard. His trademark scowl was in place, but she could see the concern and the love behind it now. It was strange; it had been there for a long time, but she noticed it automatically now. Perhaps it was their blood oaths, perhaps it was her close brush with death, but he was like an open book to her.

She looked around, and soon found the one thing she knew she must remove from this room. In a small, locked box, she found her mother's private 'literature'. She did not want strangers pawing through her parents' belongings and giving food to the gossipmongers. There was a brief bittersweet ache in her heart as she recalled her last holiday here, giggling with her mother over her euphemistically entitled, 'special box of muckies'.

Although Severus had no idea what the box held, Hermione's face was flaming as she shrank the box and handed it silently to him. He took it without comment, but quirked an expressive eyebrow at her obvious discomfiture. Hermione also found her mother's jewelry case, and took those personal effects, along with the fire-proof box containing their important documents. All went into the little box in Severus' pocket.

She went from room to room, a silent little waif, Severus in tow. It was beyond sad, seeing the remains of her family, her life. She took surprisingly little; only her parents' belongings, the photos, the seemingly trivial little gifts, and her books. Those were the only things she wanted to take from this house.

"That's the lot," she said, when they'd gone through each room, and taken what Hermione wanted. "The rest can go to the charity shops." She looked around, and Severus was dismayed at the bitter edge to her expression. So little to take, so little left of two lives, all shrunk down and stored in a little box in his pocket. What would be left of him, in the end, worth keeping? Would Hermione wish to keep them, tucked away in a little corner of her heart?

Hermione stopped in the front room, and picked up an object on a table. It was a small vase, of no particular aesthetic or monetary value; it was neither pleasing nor offending. It was merely a vase, and Hermione studied it carefully for a long time. Just as Severus opened his mouth to ask her if she wanted to take it, she suddenly turned away from him and, grunting with the effort, threw it with all her might at the fireplace, where it exploded with a crystalline smash that was strangely satisfying.

"Hermione?" he asked, just as she whirled and grabbed another unremarkable knick-knack and sent it to join the first against the marble fireplace. She grabbed another, and another, until she was red-faced, reaching for anything to throw, to destroy, throwing her body into it with a straining cry as each hurled object flew to its end. Severus allowed her the release, until he saw her face turn a sickly pale, and she reeled. Cursing himself for allowing her outburst to go too far, Severus caught her in his arms, and she grabbed his shoulders, as if to both pull him into her arms, and push him away.

"Such a fucking waste!" she screamed, and her voice echoed off the damaged walls. "Why didn't I think to protect them better? Why did I believe Dumbledore when he said that they were safe here?" She looked at Severus for a moment, shaking her head. She gritted her teeth, and held onto him; his own fingers bit into her shoulders and pulled her against him, giving her an edge of pain that would allow her emotions to give full sway to their outlet.

"I can't help it I'm so damned ANGRY!" she cried, her voice sounding muffled and harsh against his coat. "I hate the Dark Lord for killing them! I hate him for what he's made you do, and what he's done to me!"

She looked up at Severus, a mixture of grief and incredulity on her face. "And in the middle of all of that, I have to be grateful to him I have to thank him as well!"

Severus looked down at the young witch, alarmed at her words. "Hermione, lass, what are you talking about? You don't know what you are saying!" He looked into her mind, frantically urging her to calm, but her barriers were fully occluded and chaotic.

She was shaking her head, and she laughed shakily. "It's true, Severus. Had it not been for him, I wouldn't have you."

She looked up into his shocked face. She shook her head. "You would never have given me a second thought, had it not been for Sirius, or that night in Grimmauld." Her amber eyes blazed into his. "You would still think of me as the irritating little know-it-all who pissed you off in class, the ugly little swot with buck teeth!"

"You wouldn't have fallen in love with me, if not for that inhuman monster." She shook her head, tears filling her eyes. "I hate him for taking away my childhood, but I have to thank him - for you!"

Severus took her in his arms, and captured her face in his hands. "Never thank him, Hermione! He's done nothing! You must listen to me!"

She looked up at him, her face full of misery. He pulled her close, so that his lips were close to her ear. "You said yourself we were meant to be, from the beginning of time. That it was our destiny to come together. I believe this, Hermione. Even if there had been no Dark Lord, no Dumbledore, no Sirius Black, no Harry Potter, I do believe we would have found each other. I believe love would have found a way."

She watched him closely, and he opened his mind to her, to show her his true feelings. "I would never have said that to another living soul. Not before you. Not even to Lily. I would never have had the courage." He took her head in his hands and kissed her. It was a warm, soulful, healing kiss, and it healed him as well. "You have made me believe that I actually understand love, witch. Only you."

As they stood together, in the ruined shell of her father's house, Hermione rose on tiptoe, and caught Severus' mouth with hers, and returned his kiss, his healing. He held her, and closed his eyes. When he opened them, they were blank with fear and dread. "I believe there is a day of reckoning coming, Hermione. I believe we will wade in blood before this is over. I do not know who will win. I hope it is the light."

For a moment, he looked like the little, lost boy Hermione was sure he'd been. His voice was tender and fervent. "I've fought so long, and I'm weary of fighting. But I can keep fighting."

He trembled in her arms. "I will fight for the light to win. I cannot promise we will win, but I will promise you this: whatever happens, I will never forsake you."

Tears fell from her eyes. One splashed on her hand, and he regarded it for a moment, then leaned down, and kissed it from her skin. When he looked up again, tears were clouding his own eyes, like rain on smooth stones. "You stood in front of me. You took a curse for me; a curse that could have been my death. You risked *death for me*, Hermione. No one has ever done that before."

His onyx eyes blazed brightly, intense with power and promise. "I do not know what the future will hold, but my back will be against yours, and my wand will defend you to my death. Because I love you."

For a long time, the two of them held each other, and wept for all they had lost separately, for all they had gained together. There was a feeling, like a bubble building in Severus' chest; it threatened to burst and render him helpless in her arms. He held her as she sighed, and pressed closer against his Muggle suit.

"Come, lass. There's nothing here for you now."

Hermione nodded, and stepped back, taking a shaking breath. She looked up into his face. In the natural light, she would admit, he was not a handsome man. His nose was too large, his skin too pale, his scowl too fierce. But he had beautiful, liquid black eyes, and silky, expressive brows that were arched and delicate. His teeth were crooked, but his lips, when not pressed together in anger or twisted in a derisory sneer, were softly sculpted.

He was ever a study in contrasts: blue-black hair and pale skin, dark and light, cunning and incorruptibility, discipline and tenderness. Severus Snape did nothing by half-measures; he was the genuine article. As Hermione stood in the remains of her Muggle life, something about his harsh countenance soothed and awed her, and gave her the feeling of being in exactly the right place.

When he reached to stroke her cheek with the back of his pale hand, she met his gaze with a renewed strength. Severus, looking down at his witch, knew that the bubble in his chest was the complete, indubitable realisation that he was the source of that strength. It was another burden he knew he must carry, and he shouldered it with gratitude and pride.

His gaze softened, his lips relaxed from their thin, repressed line, and his expression changed; it became sure, more tender. Hermione gasped, looking up into his face. "You know, you are a beautiful man, Severus Snape." She placed her tiny hands on either side of his face. "I think you are most beautiful man I've ever known."

For a moment, he looked down at her, and the cautious hope and desire to believe made him even more alluring. Then, something of the old mask slipped back, and the trademark smirk twisted his lips. "I can only ascertain that you are suffering from post-traumatic delirium, my pet," he replied, dryly. He offered his arm. "When you feel you can, we will leave this place."

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The spell *Sagacit teraevum* comes from the Latin *sagaciter aevum*, accurate age.

Title and Opening Lines are from "My Dear Someone", by Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings.

## Thirteen: When We Dance, Angels Will Run and Hide Their Wings

Chapter 14 of 39

If I could break down these walls and shout my name at heaven's gate, I'd take these hands and I'd destroy the dark machineries of fate...

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

*I've been blown away by the response I've had to this story. Thank you so much. Your encouragement means the world to me, and I hope you will continue to enjoy the story.*

*Many, many thanks to Talesofsnape for her alpha skills, and lilyevans\_snape and dhark charlotte for beta-ing I don't know what I did before these ladies came along.*

*For Sempra and Mimi*

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*If I could break down these walls and shout my name at heaven's gate, I'd take these hands and I'd destroy the dark machineries of fate;*

*Cathedrals are broken, Heaven's no longer above, and hellfire's a promise away, I'd still be saying I'm still in love*

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The memorial to Hermione's parents at Morden Crematorium was small and sparsely attended, according to their daughter's wishes. It irked many of the Grangers' friends and patients, but they bit back their complaints and gossip, in deference to the circumstances. The few who were invited cast covert glances at the Granger's only child, and the unusual, severe dark-haired man who accompanied her. The girl looked pale and wan, and more than once the stern figure at her side grasped her hand in comfort, and at a particularly poignant part of the service she leaned against him, to hide her tears.

It took a supreme effort to keep from crying throughout the entire ceremony, but Hermione was kind and gracious to everyone, and by the time the caskets rolled on the conveyor belt into the incinerator to be cremated, Hermione was shaking, and a little dizzy. She had accepted the sympathetic words of the mourners with quiet gratitude, and silently accepted the small box of personal effects from the funeral home director. Her parents' ashes, she was told, would be combined and shipped to her in Scotland. Hermione approved. Her parents had been inseparable in life, so would they be in death. It was a comforting thought.

Upon returning to Hogwarts, Madam Pomfrey, along with Severus, forced Hermione to take a Calming Draught and a Draught of Dreamless Sleep. Later, both Healer and professor stood, looking down at the young woman who slept peacefully, as tears slid silently from her closed eyes.

"It's a terrible thing to lose one beloved parent, but both at once," Poppy said, shaking her head. Her eyes never left the sleeping girl. "My father has been gone almost fifty years, and I still miss him every day."

Severus, stooping from time to time to wipe the tears away from Hermione's face, murmured, "I do not miss my parents at all." There was a lonely bitterness in his tone. "I don't have one good memory of my father, and mother was so beaten down..." Hermione shifted in her sleep, and sighed.

"I know, boy," Poppy answered, and Severus felt her warm hand on his shoulder. "A bad parent is as useless a thing as can be found on this earth, but a good father is priceless." She gave his arm a little reassuring squeeze. "I have often thought that you might make a good father, when you grow up."

Severus snorted. "*When?* I hate to interrupt your moment of temporary senility, Poppy, but *lam* in my thirties."

Poppy smiled. "What does that have to do with it?" Severus' eyebrows shot up almost to his widow's peak in reply.

Poppy laughed silently at her colleague of many years, and she gave a little nod toward the sleeping figure in the bed. "That one is years older than you in many ways, Severus. Age has nothing to do with it. Let her teach you, and you teach her in return."

"I take back what I said about momentary senility. I think it's permanently settled in." He looked away.

Poppy merely handed him a mug of tea. "Goodnight, Severus. Get a good night's sleep." Poppy reached down and smoothed the covers of Hermione's bed. "She's going to need you tomorrow."

Severus merely nodded, and Poppy left him to his vigil at Hermione's bedside, knowing full well that when she raised the privacy wards, he would slip into the infirmary cot and take his witch into his arms. Poppy smiled. Wizards could be such children sometimes.

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On the following day, Hermione and Severus made their last stop in the process of settling her parents' estate: the Grangers' wizarding solicitor, Mr. Aloysius Godfrey.

For perhaps the hundredth time, Hermione thanked the gods she'd talked her parents into instructing a wizarding lawyer instead a Muggle one. Everything was much easier to deal with, from the signing over of her parents' business to transferring money from their Muggle bank to Gringotts.

"Miss Granger, it is lovely to see you. I'm only sorry it is not in happier circumstances. A terrible accident; what a tragedy for you," Mr. Godfrey said, shaking her hand. Hermione felt an inappropriate urge to laugh out loud; she wasn't sure if it was from the events of the past two days catching up with her, or simply the fact that her parents' solicitor looked just like Severus would in forty years' time.

Tall, dark-eyed, aristocratic, Mr. Godfrey could have easily passed as Severus' uncle, or cousin. He even had the same deep, lovely voice. The two men seemed oblivious to this fact as they shook hands. Severus, having been introduced to Mr. Godfrey as Hermione's 'companion', was there to make sure the lawyer didn't try to force Hermione into relinquishing any of her rights as an adult or heir to their estate.

Finally, the obligatory small talk ended, and Mr. Godfrey set upon his course. Looking at all the legal documents from her parents' safe, including her newly updated birth certificate, he frowned, and then shrugged. "Time seems to get away from me more quickly with each passing year." He smiled at the young lady. "I was thinking you were only around sixteen or so."

Hermione smiled at the older man. "Yes, sir; time flies. I turned eighteen last month. I'm finishing at Hogwarts soon." It was a little lie, and true enough.

"Ah, yes. Have you decided on a course of study, then?"

Hermione stole a glance at Severus. "I thought I might go into the field of Healing. I seem to have an affinity for it."

"Indeed! A noble profession, Miss Granger. Especially in these trying, uncertain times." He also glanced at Severus, but seemed unable to come up with an opening gambit for the severe, sombre man with Miss Granger, so decided to press on. "The contents of your parents' wills are very simple. No surprises. Everything goes to you, of course, and the funds are in Barclays Bank, but we can arrange for their transfer as soon as..."

Severus looked on as Hermione perused each parchment carefully, before signing. He noticed that Mr. Godfrey managed to avoid speaking to Hermione with the patronising, condescending tone so prevalent in the Wizarding solicitors Severus had encountered from time to time. His own dealings with his family's lawyer over the meagre leavings of his parents had been infuriating in the extreme. Severus was pleased that Mr. Godfrey seemed to sense that, should he try to grandstand Hermione Granger in any way, she could, and would, give him a run for his money. Not that she would ever need to.

"I don't know how much you knew of your parents' portfolio, Miss Granger, but you are a very well-off young lady now. Because of the nature of your parents' deaths, their Muggle insurance policies will pay in full. Their dental surgery was extremely successful, and they invested well and wisely over the years. They also set up a trust fund for you, to be used for any field of advanced education you wish to pursue. You will have no problems making ends meet during your apprenticeship, my dear."

Smiling gently, Hermione chatted and charmed the old man until he reluctantly rose and signaled the end of the meeting, citing another client appointment. "It has been a pleasure to see you again, Miss Granger, and although I cannot possibly say anything to make this horrible tragedy bearable, I do wish you success in future." He turned to Severus, and shook his hand as well. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Snape." He looked at Hermione and tipped Severus a wink. "Take good care of our girl here."

Shocked into replying, Severus stuttered, "I will. Thank you." Together, they walked out into the London sunshine filtering through Diagon Alley, and Severus Apparated them back to Hogwarts.

"But I need to go to Gringotts and convert my pounds!" she was saying, as he whirled her away. "And there's the matter of appointing an estate agent for selling the house property, and making sure the dental practice is transferred to their partner, and -"

"And this will wait for another day, lass!" Severus turned toward her. "You're practically falling down as it is. You will return to the infirmary, and you will ask Madam Pomfrey for another Calming Draught, and another Dreamless Sleep Draught, and you will rest," he said, his voice stern. "You overtaxed yourself yesterday, and I will not entertain any argument today, Miss Granger."

Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but a perfectly poised eyebrow gave her pause to close it again. If the truth were known, she was shattered. Rolling her eyes, she held up her hands in mock surrender. "Yes, sir," she said, meekly, but gave him a little smile as she put hand to heart. "I promise to be a good girl."

"See that you do, Miss Granger," he said, with equally false gravitas, looking down his large nose at her, a smile quirking the corners of his mouth. "I have some matters of my own to attend to." He patted his coat pocket. It was the same Muggle suit he'd worn to inspect the house, and it still held her belongings in the small box hidden in the pocket. "I need to speak with the Headmaster regarding your future accommodations here at Hogwarts."

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By the end of the week, Madam Pomfrey declared that Hermione was fit to leave Hogwarts' infirmary permanently, and on Friday evening, Hermione found herself being escorted by the Headmaster down to her temporary accommodations. Severus had been brewing for Madam Pomfrey all day, and they were to meet after Hermione had settled in.

"I think you will find these rooms acceptable, Miss Granger," Professor Dumbledore was saying, as he lowered the wards. "You will need to reassert your own wards, according to your preferences, my dear." He opened the door and led her into a large suite of rooms. She was pleased to see her belongings had already been brought from her dormitory room, and the items from her parents' home waited only to be unpacked and enlarged.

She turned to Professor Dumbledore. "It's perfect, sir. Thank you."

The headmaster bowed, and as he turned to go, he added, "Oh, and Miss Granger, I would hate for your summer here to be idle and unproductive. Professor Snape mentioned today that you've expressed an interest in becoming a Healer. I've arranged for you to spend some time during the school holiday with Madam Pomfrey, for some extra credit work toward that aim, if you are so agreeable."

For the first time since she'd received the news her parents had been killed, Hermione beamed. "That would be perfect! Please thank her for agreeing to do this for me!"

"A pleasure, Miss Granger. We'll speak over the particulars on Monday. Enjoy your weekend, and do try to rest, my dear." He gave her a friendly, rather absent-minded little wave, and was gone.

As the Headmaster left Hermione, she came to the realisation that this was the first time she'd been truly physically alone in weeks. She was always with someone: Harry and Ron, Lavender and her other roommates, Severus, classmates. In reality, Hermione had always felt set apart from others; she thought it might be why she had always been attracted to Severus. They were so alike in this respect. Hermione's days of feeling she must fill the air with chatter to prove her intelligence were behind her. Now, when she and Severus were together, they enjoyed their mutual solitude, as much as their affections. Now that she was by herself, it felt strangely liberating, yet frightening.

She had been afraid that, once alone, she would fall apart and give into her grief. She sat quietly, trying to summon the spirit of her parents, but she could not. She could only feel the hollow knowledge that they were gone. Picking up one of the photo albums Severus had stored in the little box, she enlarged it and looked through it. She'd seen this album of photos for years, sitting in her mother's front room. It had been part of the furniture. Now it was a precious heirloom. She wished she'd looked at it more often when they were alive.

The need to cry, to release the guilt and the sadness, seeped into her slowly, slyly, and she allowed herself to give in to it, and to tell them goodbye.

"I'm sorry I didn't protect you enough, but it doesn't mean I don't love you very much," she said, speaking aloud, as if they were in the same room with her. "Thank you for being such a wonderful mum and dad. Thank you for loving me. I'll miss you. I'll make you proud, I promise," she choked, and sat on her sofa, allowing the tears to slide down her face.

After a time, she felt peaceful, and a strange comfort stole into her heart. She smiled, as sweet memories played in her mind. Once she'd calmed and her tears had released more of the grief, she rose, cleaned her face and set about getting settled in. Her parents had always been pragmatic and supportive, and she was sure they would understand.

She spent the next few hours unpacking, letting the rooms get to know her, and learning them in return. She enlarged the remainder of the belongings from the house, wrinkling her nose at the faint stink of smoke they still carried. With the exception of her mother's box of books on sex, Hermione looked at each item carefully, and placed it somewhere in the room where she could see it clearly. Her mother's special books she hid away, beside the bed.

The bedroom was rather Spartan; she wondered if Severus' was the same. It struck her as funny that the two of them had been as close as any lovers, but she'd never been in the room where he slept. Thoughts of Severus Snape, lounging in bed, formed a little tight ball of heat in her abdomen, and with it came the first shade of anxiety.

In the past year, she'd read enough about psychology to know that one of the first things grief-stricken individuals feel is the need to connect with someone. Sometimes it was as simple as a hug or embrace, to dispel the feeling of being alone. Then she remembered seeing Severus the moment he'd walked into the infirmary, after Professor McGonagall had clumsily told her about her parents' deaths.

Seeing him, looking down at her, she'd been in pain, and devastated, but just as powerful was the undeniable knowledge that a heated, sudden, reluctant lust had bloomed in her loins, and by the time he had taken her in his arms to comfort her, she was wet. If they had been alone, she would have pleaded that he make love to her. It had stunned and shamed her, but she could not disavow it.

Now that she was alone, and had time to contemplate it, she admitted to herself the burning, overwhelming want for him. It made heartbeat pulse in her crotch, and although he had never so much as tried to undo one button on her blouse, she knew his answering heat was more than a match for hers. Her innocence was its own reward; she felt deep desire, without fully appreciating its enslavement. She knew, however, that Severus would know exactly what to do, and although he was more than willing to wait for her, Hermione was not sure she was equally as patient.

She had read her mother's books, she had touched herself, and she and Severus had kissed passionately. She knew the physical aspects of desire. She knew what she wanted, but she was at a loss how to ask for it. She and Severus had discussed sex, and he had been adamant: he would not initiate it, until she was ready, and her body healed of its injuries. But how would she know she was ready? How did she know she was not ready now?

Before the Department of Mysteries, she would have been nervous, but eager to give into her own passions with Severus. Now, she was afraid of her body. She was afraid of seeing his ardour shrivel and die as he looked at her.

She took a deep breath and slapped her knees as she hauled herself onto her feet. No use in sitting around wondering about it. She walked into the sitting room, where a large mirror stood in the far corner. It was a long, oval mirror, very modest, but stately, in its oak frame.

"Good evening, dearie," it croaked rustily, obviously long unused to greeting anyone. It had most likely been awhile since the mirror had serviced any of the occupied rooms.



"Good evening," Hermione replied politely. "I was wondering if you wouldn't mind keeping silent for awhile. You see, I have to look at a rather bad scar, and I..."

"Say no more," the old mirror wheezed. "I completely understand, love. Just give me a call when you'd like a second opinion."

Slowly, swallowing back her unease, Hermione removed her clothes, not looking at herself. She chastised herself for her cowardice *Not looking at it won't make it go away!* she told herself firmly, but the real truth was she was afraid of what he would say. Would he turn away in disgust?

Finally, wearing only her long, blue dressing gown and a pair of plain, white cotton knickers, Hermione walked back into the sitting room, and faced the mirror.

The young woman who gazed back at her looked tired. Her hair was curling and slightly frizzy in the humid air of the room; Hermione was tempted to use the Hair Smoothing Charm Severus had taught her those long months ago. She saw rather shapely legs, and firm, but not too heavy, breasts. She was a pleasing shape, and more than once her wizard had given her a silent, but appreciatively appraising look when she wore, say, his favourite shade of blue. She was trembling, and as she nervously chewed on her lower lip, she untied the belt of her robe, and slowly opened it, to see her cursed body fully for the first time.

For a moment, Hermione stood, and looked at herself, and tried very hard to be stoic about it. Dolohov had hit her right between the breasts, and the scar started there, and trailed down to her naval in a nearly perfect straight line. The top was wider, about two inches across, and it tapered down to a pencil-thin line near her pelvic bone, bisecting her belly button. The skin, stitched together by the combined spells of Severus and Madam Pomfrey, looked like fragile, striated webbing between the long "V" shaped edges of the scar.

Although it no longer hurt, it was red and angry-looking, and to Hermione, it was hideous. Quickly, she closed the gown and tied the sash tightly around her waist. At that moment, Hermione was forced to confess she was far vainer than she'd ever realised. A lone sob escaped her, and she sat down and mastered it.

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In his private lab, Severus was finishing another batch of Pimple Potion, and was planning to join Hermione afterward for a light supper. He felt a twinge in his palm, and reached out to his witch. *Hermione? Are you unwell? Shall I call for Madam Pomfrey?*

She immediately replied, rather scratchily, *I'm fine. Just tired, and a little upset. I'm looking at my scar...*

Severus could sense her emotions: the shame, the worry, the fear of rejection. How many times had he looked at himself and thought the same things? *I will join you shortly.* He finished the solution he was preparing, and took a deep breath. Tonight, it would seem, their relationship would enter another stage.

He took the short walk from his lab to her chambers to examine his own thoughts. Severus had ever been overly sensitive about his looks, or rather, the lack of pleasing features fate had seen fit to bestow upon him.

Shortly before he began his schooling at Hogwarts, he had asked his mother if she thought he was handsome. She had looked down at her overly bright, sensitively hopeful little son, and answered truthfully. "I would have to say no, Severus. But your face has a lot of character."

He had been crushed, but he was old enough to understand that her words were not spoken in anger, or malice, as so many of his father's epithets. He knew his mother was trying, in her own way, to be kind. As he'd grown and watched arseholes like Sirius Black strut around, cruel and secure in their good looks and popularity, he came to resent the easy, unasked-for handsomeness of those like Black and James Potter.

What had come so effortlessly to these privileged few was mysteriously out of his council-house grasp, and he had deeply resented his helplessness and inability to obtain, it no matter how hard he tried. It had taken Severus years to see how others had used his insecurities and covetousness to bend him to the Slytherin dogma of pureblood supremacy.

Still hurting from Lily's outright rejection of him, and the constant feeling of being laughed at behind his back for any number of incomprehensible reasons, Severus had been ripe for the Dark Lord's brave-new-Wizarding-world rhetoric. The disenfranchised of the world have always been vulnerable to those eager to exploit them, and Severus had bought and espoused the Dark Lord's vision with the fervent conviction of a zealot, in the hopes that he'd truly found his place in the world.

Eager to prove he was just as worthy as any Slytherin, Severus had acquired a lot of polishing from the elegant Slytherins he tried to associate with. He'd tried so hard to imitate wizards like Lucius Malfoy, and even Regulus Black, Sirius' brother. Both seem to have their own effortless grace and style that Severus coveted as much as, well, Lily.

When Lily had died, Severus had stopped trying to improve his looks. He had long since cast his lot with Dumbledore, who falsely told him he would try to protect Lily, but nothing had gone his way since.

Who was there to care if his hair was washed every day, or that he took better care with his appearance, or wore anything other than his formal teaching robes? Girls hadn't exactly been falling out of bed for him when he was a student, and being only three or so years older than his oldest students when he started teaching, he certainly didn't want to invite *that* sort of attention. He found that thought supremely ironic, in light of recent events.

Every taunt, every malicious comment made by every student had been filed away in his heart. Hermione had been right; his skin was much thinner than hers when it came to the cruelty of others. He had never learned to take it. Perhaps his father had been right he was too sensitive for his own good. Once Sirius had been reinstated in the Order, it had started again. It didn't matter that Sirius had been proven innocent in betraying Lily. It had made Severus hate Sirius all the more. In many ways, Sirius had still betrayed them, by seducing Lily away from him, by trying to molest their son's brightest and most important friend.

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Entering Hermione's rooms gave Severus a strange feeling of déjà vu. Dumbledore had placed him in this same room the year he found out his mother had died. It was between his sixth and seventh year, and he'd gone to Albus, begging to stay here. The Headmaster, sensing the young man's fear of his abusive father, and his growing infatuation with Tom Riddle's Death Eaters, had allowed him to stay. It was the first time Dumbledore had treated him with sensitivity and concern. Severus should have known better than to take his sympathy and fatherly mien at face value.

The quarters looked the same, but with one exception: his witch lived there. He could smell her comforting scent as he arrived, and her wards allowed him to pass through effortlessly. At the entrance, an orange blob scrutinized him carefully. Upon further inspection, said blob turned out to be a large, ginger cat with the most smashed-in face Severus had ever seen. He deduced this to be the famous Crookshanks, Hermione's familiar. The two males regarded each other suspiciously, until Severus drawled, "Well, sir, am I to be welcomed into your den?"

With a swish of his large tail, Crookshanks gave Severus a rather haughty look of acceptance. Ruefully, Severus could not help but feel he'd just been critiqued and found marginally acceptable to pass muster. As he stalked toward the door to seek his entertainment elsewhere, Crookshanks turned and gave Severus what could only be called a smug look. His entire countenance seemed to mock Severus, as if he were saying, "I share Hermione's bed every night; where do you hang *your* trousers, wizard?"

"Jammy bastard," Severus muttered, as the feline haughtily strutted past him.

Just inside the sitting room, Severus found Hermione. She was sitting on the old leather sofa, her feet tucked underneath her, staring into the fire; it may have been June, but it was June in Scotland, and the Dungeons were always at least twenty degrees cooler than the rest of the castle.

Hermione looked up at him as he walked through the door. He was wearing one of his old white shirts reserved for more hazardous potions-making. It had several small, round burn holes in the cuffs from straying sparks; the buttons were mismatched. He wore plain black trousers and dragon-hide boots on his slender feet. Even in his less-than-auspicious clothing, he still carried the dark, intense appeal that Hermione found so desirable in him. The thought of his being desirable made her feel even more insecure.

For the longest time, they looked at one another. It was comfortable, sitting in this place, simply gazing at one another, and neither seemed in any hurry to speak. Finally, Severus took a deep breath, and placed his hand on his shirt.

"Hermione, I'm going to remove my shirt. If that makes you uncomfortable in any way, I will stop and dress again." He looked as if carved from solid rock. "Do you trust me?"

Hermione looked at him carefully. He looked stoic, but underneath, he looked almost frightened. "Of course I trust you, Severus." She rose from the sofa and faced him. "I know you wouldn't do anything I wasn't ready to do."

He nodded. "Just so." He looked down, as if gathering his courage, then pulled his shirt from the waistband of his trousers. Gazing down at the floor, his long, elegant fingers pushed the buttons through the holes purposefully, almost modestly, as if undressing for a Healer, instead of a lover. From time to time, he glanced up at her, and his face flushed slightly beneath her concentrated scrutiny.

When he had finished unbuttoning the garment, Severus repeated the movement with the cuff buttons. By now, Hermione could see the pale line of skin peeking from between the edges of his shirt. He swallowed, and she could see his Adam's apple bobbing. It was obviously difficult for him to reveal himself to her, and the act was made all the more prized for it.

Hermione whispered, "Are you sure you wish to do this? I don't want make *you* uncomfortable, Severus."

His eyes shot up to hers, and for a moment he looked suspicious, as if he thought she was mocking him. Looking into her soft, tawny eyes, he realised she was concerned for him as always, and his discomfort dissipated somewhat.

Taking a deep breath, Severus removed his shirt, and laid it on the arm of the sofa, his eyes downcast. Like a model, he held out his arms from his sides, and slowly turned, to reveal that, like her, he too had scars.

He heard her gasp as he turned around, and he grimaced. His back was a mass of white, criss-crossed marks. He hesitated, and closed his eyes, offering his back to her like a sacrament, as if she had the ability to heal him, to make his pale skin flawless again.

A soft hand tentatively touched his bare back, and he shivered, looking straight ahead. His heartbeat sped up almost immediately.

Hermione felt tears prick her eyes at his hideously ruined back. What torture this man had endured! She knew these marks had been made on the first night he'd returned to Voldemort's side last year. Severus had told her how Albus had made him wait several days after the initial summoning, before he presented himself to the Dark Lord. During that entire time, his Dark Mark had burned and throbbed until he had cried from the constant pain. There he'd been, the puppet between these two powerful wizards, each using him to play their terrible power games of one-upmanship.

Finally, when Severus had bowed before the Dark Lord that first time, Voldemort had been pitiless, and at his most savage, using Severus as an example to the others of the consequences of keeping the Dark Lord waiting. Voldemort had used an enchanted whip to scourge Severus; it forced the victim to relive the pain of the initial beating over and over, and left permanent scars that could never be magically eradicated.

After the Dark Lord grew bored of this sport, Severus had been given over to the other Death Eaters, who raped and Cruciated him repeatedly. He was then dumped unceremoniously back at Hogwarts, a gruesome message for Dumbledore, to remind him how the Dark Lord rewarded defiance.

Severus had been unconscious for almost a week, and the lacerations made by the enchanted whip were bone deep, and ached for months. Some of the worst still ached, in spite of Madam Pomfrey's most powerful Healing Charms and his own formidable Potions work.

Looking at Severus' scarred body, Hermione found herself hating Albus Dumbledore almost as much as the Dark Lord. He was supposed to be one of the good guys, but he'd made those marks just as surely as Voldemort's enchanted whip, with his ideas of subterfuge and power struggle. Hermione hated that her wizard was the hapless plaything between Voldemort and a man who was supposed to be Severus' friend. Severus had taken the beating and the abuse stoically; only Poppy heard his pitiful, wretched cries of suffering and humiliation during his almost month-long recovery. He thought he had deserved it, after all he'd done.

When Hermione's hand reached out of its own accord and she gently touched Severus' back, she felt him shiver, and before she could stop herself, she slid her arms around his waist, and laid her head against his disfigured back.

"If I could take these to myself, I would, if it would take them away from you," she said, in a still, small voice.

Severus heart began to thump in his chest, and he felt a wave of gratitude threaten to overwhelm him completely. Hermione pressed her body against his back, and placed the flat of her palms against his abdomen, and Severus felt the soft touch her lips against his back. A soft, almost boyish sigh escaped his lips, as he felt her warm mouth move over his back, kissing each mark, and each kiss felt like a blessing.

"Hermione," he whispered, closing his eyes to this tender veneration of his body. He was almost panting, and his nipples grew hard, along with his cock. "Merlin's sweet sake, girl!" he moaned, knowing he should ask her to stop, but all he succeeded in doing was lacing her fingers with his, to move her hands over his chest, up, always up, because if he lowered her arms, he would not stop until he'd enclosed her hands around his raging erection.

Her mouth moved over his cool back, over ridges of scars that were twisted and ropy, where lash layered over lash. Some were raised, like twine running under the skin; others were silvery threads stitched in and out of his flesh. Hermione kissed them all, as Severus shook and panted and pressed against her soft hands.

"Severus," she said, her voice husky. "I need you to..." She leaned against his back, feeling the power underneath the pain; the sinewy muscles of the hard planes of his body. He was not a large man, but years of striding the length and breadth of the castle had given his body stamina and physical power, and his muscles were firm. His body felt like silk layered over stone.

His head fell back, and his dark hair, oily from hours spent over steaming cauldrons, fell over his shoulders, tickling Hermione's forehead. He whispered, "Tell me. Tell me what you need, and I will give it..." He brought her hand to his lips and kissed each finger.

Then he did something that made Hermione moan with longing. He gently took the tip of each finger into his mouth, and suckled them in turn. He smiled as he heard her ragged breathing grow rapid, until it matched his gasping, trembling breaths.

"Tell me. Please," he begged, his lovely, silken whisper made more beautiful by the needful desperation, the desire that raged through him, and gave his voice a slightly ragged edge. His long fingers threaded through hers again, and held her close, knowing he would do whatever she asked. If she wanted to crawl inside his skin, he would open himself up and sew her within, to keep her safe.

To his profound disappointment, she pulled away from him, holding onto his hand, so that he was forced to turn around and face her. She looked at his lean torso, as battered and striped as his back, and, looking up at him with absolute trust and love, wrapped her arms around him.

For a moment more, she pressed her face against his chest, and gently kissed his pale skin with lips that felt soft and torturous. "Hermione, please," he all but whimpered. "I am, after all, mere flesh and blood." Her brand of torment was more cruelly perverse than that of Bellatrix Lestrange. Merlin, why was he thinking that now, of all things?

She looked up at him and stepped back. With trembling hands, she untied the belt of her long dressing gown, and gathering her courage, looked up into his midnight eyes. They were so dark, so intense, they scorched her, and she returned his hungry look. There was a difference, though, and Severus understood it, whereas Hermione did not. He knew what he wanted; Hermione only knew *that* she wanted.

"I want you to look at me. I want you to be honest. I want to know that you still desire me like this. Can you look at this every day and still want me?"

Incredulous, Severus held open his arms. In his most beguiling tone, he said, "Do you want me, Hermione? Do you desire me?"

"Of course I do! Why do you think I "

He caught the sides of the robe just as she tried to slip it from her shoulders. "Then why do you ask me the same question? You don't have to do this," he whispered. "You are beautiful to me." He shook his head and looked down at her lovely face. He tilted his head, and cupped her face with his hands. "How could I look at you and see anything but beauty?" He looked down at his own chest; the slashes, the welts, the marks of disfigurement he'd worn since the day he took his Dark Mark.

She had barely glanced at his Dark Mark; he had already shown it to her, of course, on the night they often referred to as 'Their Long Talk', in which Severus poured out his story to her, and made her his. He raised his arm again. "How can you be anything but beautiful to me, Hermione?"

She grimaced. "You haven't really seen it yet. The scar is "

"- Is proof of love, witch. You loved me enough to stand between me and what could have been the Killing Curse." He swiftly pulled her into his arms and kissed her deeply, feverishly, plunging into her mouth with hungry, sucking lips that teased her mouth open to him. He rolled his head sensuously until his was slanted against hers, his tongue beckoning her to taste him, to fill his mouth with her own.

As her tongue slid into his mouth, he moaned deliriously, and grasped the back of her head to pull her closer. His kiss changed, grew slow and sure, and with each suckling bite of his lips and his teeth, Hermione felt her body grow hotter, wetter, until she was pressed against him, her arms around his waist possessively. He sucked her tongue into his mouth almost painfully, and they pressed against each other until they were both panting, both moaning with each breath.

He pulled away from her, sucking her bottom lip. Hermione clung to him, eyes closed, mouth opened, gasping, waiting. He rewarded her with another yearning, deep kiss. As their lips parted, he whispered, "All I see is the woman I love, inviting me to look at her, to admire her." His voice almost sang with its prism of colour and timbre. "To worship her."

She felt the heat of his gaze, and, lulled by his seductive, velvet voice, she swayed against him. "I just didn't want to..." She shook her head, desire blossoming within her, making her feel reckless and nervous at the same time. "I want... I want..." Frustrated, she opened her mind to him, and he Legilimized into her mind with gentle, measured steps, until he found what he sought. He nodded, as he recognised what she could not articulate.

Severus took her hand, and led her to the mirror in the corner. Together, they faced the mirror, and Severus moved to stand behind her, his arms loosely draped around her waist. They gazed at each other's reflection, and Hermione leaned back against him, her breathing slow and languid. He placed a kiss against the side of her neck with lips that felt like warm silk against her skin. With something like mischief in his fathomless eyes, he whispered, "*Teresdec Orocurus*."

Hermione laughed as her hair began to slide and smooth and curl at once. It curled at the end in long, sleek ribbons which wrapped around themselves. Two curls slid around Severus' wrist, and one cheekily snaked over his arm and licked at his back. The spell turned her hair into long, shining, twirling tendrils, ropes to ensnare his heart.

"Do you see?" she whispered, leaning back against him. "Even my hair is in love with you. It wants to be as close to you as I do."

Turning his head, he whispered in her ear, "It does, does it? Shall I tell you what *you* want, lass?" She nodded, caught in the web of his enchanting, seductive voice, the softest hint of Northern inflection.

He stood behind her, close enough that she felt the heat from his body, just shy of pressing hard against her. She could hear his breathing.

"You want to know that what we shared before Black tried to molest you is real, that sex is not forced by anger or alcohol. You want to be cherished, and touched with love and tenderness. All those nights we held each other and spoke of becoming lovers you want what I want, my lovely girl. You want to know that you control every moment, every aspect of our physical joining, and that your 'no' is my 'no'."

He spoke to her in an almost matter-of-fact tone, as if speaking to himself, and as he spoke, she could see his face relax, and his eyelids slowly closed. His eyelashes were like long, inky brushstrokes against his pale skin, and in his mind and his voice, she saw and heard only concern and care.

"Hermione, I have told you countless times, I will not take this any further until you are ready. I will not force you to share my bed." He lowered his mouth to her shoulder, and his raven's-wing hair tickled her skin as he touched his lips to her sensitive flesh.

His voice feather-light and sweetly erotic, he whispered, "Oh, make no mistake, witch, I desire you. Merlin, I desire you. More than I've ever wanted another woman." He smiled, as if at a pleasant memory. "More than I wanted my Hogwarts letter; more than my first wand, more than my first set of dress robes." He took a deep breath, considered the words he wanted to say, and found he could speak them in truth. "More than Lily."

"More than Lily?" Even as the question left her lips, Hermione wanted to bite of her own tongue. Why on earth did she have to question him?

He nodded to her reflection. With a voice soft with understanding, he said, "I wanted Lily, because she was the only girl who treated me as if I was like everyone else. But I love you, because you treat me as if I'm different from any wizard you've ever known."

"You are precious to me," she said, leaning back against his chest, reveling in his warmth. Haltingly, she continued, "I do think about what happened with... with Sirius, and I don't believe that sex and intimacy can be equated to that." She took a deep breath. In for a sickle...

She looked into his obsidian eyes, and trembling with want, she whispered, "I want you to show me the difference." She saw his expression shift, and he slowly licked his lips. She swallowed. "Tonight."

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Title and opening words are from Sting's "When We Dance".

Hair spell "*Teresdec Orocurus* is from the Latin *teres decoro curo*, straighten, beautify, manage

This spell is dedicated to Sempraseverus, whose beautiful drawings of Hermione's hair are so wonderful. She once told me Hermione hair winds itself around Severus because it is as in love with Severus as she is.

## Fourteen: Love is Not a Victory March

And even though it all went wrong, I'll stand before the Lord of Song, with nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah...

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

*I've been blown away by the response I've had to this story. Thank you so much. Your encouragement means the world to me, and I hope you will continue to enjoy the story.*

*Many, many thanks to Talesofsnape and lilyevans\_snape for their alpha and beta skills I can't imagine what this would be like without your invaluable input!!!*

*For Sempra and Mimi*

---

*I did my best, it wasn't much, I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch, I've told the truth, I didn't come to fool ya,*

*And even though it all went wrong, I'll stand before the Lord of song, with nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah...*

---

Severus closed his eyes, and opened them slowly, his penetrating eyes pinning Hermione with dark intensity. His grip around her waist became at once looser, and more possessive.

"What do you want, Hermione? What do you crave, what do you... desire?"

Hermione closed her eyes. How could one word, spoken from his sinful, wicked lips, have so many colours, meanings and shapes? How could each colour and shape make her skin feel as if it were on fire?

He looked at her reflection in the mirror, and Hermione could actually feel herself burning under his gaze. He was like a blazing, spellbinding flame that she knew would scorch her to cinders. Deep within her there was a indefinable longing for the possession his fathomless eyes promised.

His hands stroked her gently, teasingly. His lips were soft against her ear; his voice softer, more magical still. "You don't have to answer, Lass - I know. I know what you want. You want the same things I want.

"You want me to undress you, slowly. You're in no hurry, you tell yourself. We've waited for a long time now, and the few minutes spent teasing you will be part of the enjoyment." His purring, mesmeric voice was sensuous and irresistible. "You can be patient. You tell yourself you can be patient, Hermione, because you've never lain with a man.

"You've only just discovered what it's like to ache for a lover's touch, and so you think patience is a virtue. You've never felt the hunger of wanting to tear a man's clothes from his body, just to touch him, to taste his skin."

Hermione was shaking her head. "That's not true," she whispered, "I want that now." She whimpered as his grip tightened, and he growled softly in her ear.

"My rules, pet. I'm here for you now, but once you do what you wish with me, you'll never be patient again. Oh, you may take your time, to prolong the act, to torture me, but you won't be patient, witch."

Hermione tried to turn in his arms, but he held her fast. "Patience, Lass. Patience. You've never known how many nights I've said goodnight to you, and had to take my relief at my own hand, all the while calling your name. I have never been a patient man, but I will happily be patient for you."

Hermione closed her eyes, almost feeling her robe being opened by the sheer will of his words alone. His silken, sinful voice teased, "You want me to peel your clothing from you, and you want to be admired; your lovely skin, the curves of your body, the soft, ripe firmness of your flesh, all waiting beneath my fingers.

"And you want me to touch you, don't you, Lass? You want youache to be touched. It's a feeling, deep between your thighs, and it hurts and it feels wonderful, and you know you only need the slightest touch, to make you moan and cry." His voice, dark and rich and bitter like the finest chocolate, flowed over her, as if he planned to lick it from her body afterward.

"Your breasts are so firm, and you want me to cup them in my hands, to feel their weight, to cradle them, like a gift. You want to feel my fingers on your nipples, plucking and fondling them, twisting them until they pucker and harden. It is such an exquisite pain, isn't it, Lass? You tell yourself that it's a pain that only I know how to heal."

His warm breath tickled the soft skin of her neck. His voice was velvet and wine, and so luscious she could taste it. She felt as if she would faint if he continued. She thought she would die if he stopped.

He closed his eyes, and they swayed a little together, both caught up in the beauty of his seduction. "And you want me to teach you. To instruct you. You've obeyed my voice for so long, and you want me to command you now. You want me to show you how to please me, how to make me beg for your touch, how I will make you beg for mine. You want me to speak to you, to make you feel wanton and desirable, even though you need no instruction in those things."

Hermione was standing on the precipice of desire, and she knew a few more words spoken in this softly sinister tone would take her over the edge. He smiled at the complete power he had over her at that moment; a stronger man would have stopped. A better wizard would not say these things to a virgin witch.

Unable to stop himself, Severus trembled. "And you want me to say filthy things in your ear while we make love. You want me to talk dirty. You want me to lick and nip and bite. You want me to suck your tits, and lick your pretty little cunt until you come. And you want me to fuck you until the demons blush." Hermione moaned shamelessly, and pressed back against him like an animal. Severus could feel his balls beginning to ache; his cock throbbed painfully in his trousers. He briefly wondered what he was doing, but his mouth was running away, and he was powerless to stop it.

"You want to say those things to me in return, don't you? I am correct, am I not, Hermione? I would hate to be mistaken." Hermione, panting with desire, felt almost ready to climax. She nodded, whimpering with sheer lust. He uttered a soft, deeply sensuous chuckle, and she shivered.

"For the time being, I only want a little lick. Just a little flicker," he said, and his wicked tongue snaked out and flicked against her neck, causing her to cry out and press against him harder. He, too, was shivering; he would stop if she asked him, but he was praying she wouldn't. He understood her conflicting feelings, and he understood that perhaps he was rushing things, but he couldn't make himself stop unless she commanded it. He wanted her too much.

His voice grew softer, and took on a sweet, curling edge that slithered over her skin. "And one night, when you are ready, when you ask for it, I will take you on your hands and knees, and erase the memory of Sirius Black from your body forever."

Hermione, almost outside herself with desire, made a soft, growling sound. "Yes, yes, please, Severus!" *Oh gods, please touch me!*

His answering chuckle told Hermione that he had sensed her thoughts. "With pleasure, my darling girl."

His left arm wrapped around her firmly, possessively, and his right hand rose slowly to her chest. Hermione gasped as the tip of his middle finger touched the scar between

her breasts. "This is beautiful to me. You are exquisitely beautiful."

His long, calloused finger slid down her body, as if unzipping her skin, and she moaned deliriously at the sensuousness of his first truly intimate touch. When his hand reached the top of her knickers, it continued to slide down between the cloth and her skin, and he hesitated, his hand warm and large against her soft belly. His fingertips ghosted over her abdomen, causing the skin to pebble with gooseflesh.

"Tell me to stop and I will, my pet. I promise you that." His voice was dark and soft, and she gave her head a little sharp shake, and his questing hand slid lower....lower...

Hermione felt his large, warm hand cup her pubic mound, and whimpered, "Please..."

"What are you begging me for?" he whispered, teasingly, and she could feel his own lust, could taste it on her tongue. "Tell me, lass. Do you want this? I'll do whatever you ask." He was shaking, praying that she would let him...

"Yes, I want this," she cried out, her eyes fixated on his in the mirror. "I've wanted this since the first time you touched me. Please, Severus, don't stop," she moaned, leaning against him, and she cried out as his middle finger slipped effortlessly into the hot, moist, tightness of her. He gasped, a ragged sound of lust and desire, and his grip around her waist tightened almost painfully, as he felt the evidence of her consent slickly coating his fingers.

"So wet," he marvelled, breathing hard. Gods, had he ever wanted a woman this much? Had a woman ever felt this much desire for him alone, for his own sake? "Are you wet for *me*, Hermione?"

"Yes, Severus. Only for you! Oh, god," she moaned, as his finger found the hard, little nub he sought, and began to stroke her gently, his finger moving in slow, languid circles over and around her clitoris.

"Do you want me to make you come?" he crooned, his voice so full of silken promise, Hermione would have fallen to her knees at the mere *sound* of it, were it not for his strong arm about her waist.

"Please..." she begged, beginning to shudder. "Severus, yessss..."

She could feel his erection pressing between the cheeks of her bottom, and the sheer want for the man was making her moan and pant and shiver against his torturing finger. His movements were unhurried and sure, and no matter what she did, he never hurried his deliberate, sweet torment.

Hermione could feel her body gathering, the feeling of trembling on the edge, waiting for pleasure like she'd never experienced before. She knew it would be so good she would seek him out, just to make her feel this way again and again.

In this moment, he became more than just a companion and a lover - he had become an addiction; she was his slave, his wanton, his witch. She was not afraid; she was a goddess being adored. She could do anything. She was keening now - a soft, mewling sound of helpless pleasure.

Severus moaned in his throat. His lips were feather-light against her ear, and his voice was like a silken lash across her consciousness. "Oh, my sweet girl, come... Oh, such a good girl, you're so close, aren't you?" He moaned, pressing his hips to hers, rubbing his cock against her, trying to control his own passions. She was untouched, oh gods, she was so ripe...

Suddenly, his finger ceased its slow, maddening circles, and he flicked hard against the swollen nub. She all but wailed his name, and he purred, "Come for me, Lass... that's it, let's see you come... Yessssss, good girl..."

Hermione's face was taut with passion; her eyes dark, her lovely mouth soft and slack with desire. Watching her, feeling her body preparing to climax, was the most erotic sight Severus had ever witnessed. His own body was betraying him, and he tried to hold on, but he knew he was almost as far gone as her. He could stop now; but it was so good, touching her, feeling her slick heat between his unrelenting fingers. He could stop, couldn't he?

Unbidden, the thought flashed through his endorphin-addled mind: *I'm the first man to touch this scrumptious little clit* and the thought itself tightened his balls, and he clenched his teeth, as his cock swelled and pulsed. Then the unbearably sweet scent of her sex reached his sensitive nostrils, and he felt crippling, aching pleasure push through his cock, until it felt as if it would burst out of his skin. His impending orgasm stole his breath and threatened to do the same with his sanity.

Hermione opened her eyes as Severus threw his head back, his face a mask of intense, painful bliss. He was so beautiful, so abandoned, so completely undone, and Hermione realised it was because of her. His lust-saturated thoughts Legilimised into hers, and she gave into his teasing, insistent fingers, his command to do his bidding.

Her orgasm crashed down within her, splitting her into pieces, and Hermione cried out, "Severus! Gods, Severus!" She flew apart, helpless, her body pulsing, shuddering, her voice a keening wail of ecstasy, and every wondrous cry was his name.

Severus felt her shatter in his arms, and his own body surged. Before he could stop himself, he was coming; coming in his pants like a fourth-year adolescent, and gods, it felt so good he thought he would lose consciousness. He shouted out his orgasm as he held her in a crushing grip; his hands spasmed against her body, as his cock leapt and twitched and sprayed his semen inside his underclothes. It was the type of orgasm that he'd not had for years; the kind that had once awoken him from deep, adolescent sleep, trembling, on the verge of exploding. In time, he'd learned to stop them. Not this one. Nothing could have stopped this. Nothing would ever stop him again, with this witch.

The two of them held onto one another, both gasping, whimpering, as the intensity of their orgasms thrummed and pulsed through their bodies. As her mind cleared, Hermione turned slowly in his arms, until she could lay her head against his chest, tasting the salt of his sweat against her lips. They clutched at one another fiercely, and their kisses were slow and languorous, breathless and satiating.

"Gods, witch," he growled, his lips never far from hers, "You may be a virgin, but you are a temptress." He put his arms around her, and her dressing gown fell open, and they both moaned as her hard little nipples dug into his chest. He held her close, his brain overloaded with the twin sensations of the touch of her skin against his, and the mortifying realisation that he'd just ejaculated in his pants.

Hermione's entire body was tingling, like a live wire. She was amazed her hair wasn't standing on end. Her legs were shaking, and she leaned against him as much for support as for intimacy.

Severus, slowly coming back to his senses, shook his head. "I cannot believe I have just come in my trousers like a thirteen-year-old." His face was flushed, and he looked profoundly embarrassed. "I'm afraid, Lass, when it comes to you, I have all the *savoir faire* of a garden gnome."

Hermione, breathless and giddy with her climax-induced euphoria, laughed, "I had no idea garden gnomes were so sexy." She pulled him toward the sofa. "Let's sit down before we fall down."

Together they collapsed on the aging sofa, and Severus muttered a hasty cleansing charm. Now that the feverish frenzy of their coupling had passed, they looked at one another, incredulous of the passion that had transpired between them.

"Have you ever " Hermione said, not even sure how to end the sentence.

"Made a beautiful young virgin orgasm while watching her in a mirror? Engaged in more or less mutual masturbation? I'm afraid not." He took a deep breath and let it go slowly. His arm slid around her shoulders almost absently. "It seems we are destined to share many firsts, my love."

"Do you regret it?" Hermione said, misreading the expression on his face.

He shook his head. "Regret my complete lack of discipline? I should, but I cannot. I wanted it too much," he confessed, shaking his head. "You have bewitched me." Her answer was a feather-light kiss, full of tenderness, acceptance, apology.

Together, they lay on the sofa, talking late into the night, and when Severus asked Hermione a question and she didn't answer, he looked down and saw that she was fast asleep, nestled into the crook of his arm.

Quietly, he picked her up, and carried her into her bedroom. Muttering a floating charm while he turned down the bedclothes, he recalled the night he had stumbled, battered and half-dead, into Grimmauld Place, where Hermione found him, and cared for him.

He remembered so vividly waking up in the early hours, warm and cosseted in a small but comfortable bed, and even though pulling himself to his feet had been hideously painful, he had known he needed to return to Hogwarts. He had turned and found her, fast asleep, sitting uncomfortably upright in one of the least accommodating chairs in the room. She had been drawn up tight on herself against the cooling air. The memory of what she'd done for him had degraded and angered him at the time, but something about her trusting, deep sleep had reluctantly stirred his jaded soul.

He had managed to stand, and as quietly as he'd been able to, he had tucked the blanket around her shoulders and beneath her feet. The simplest of movements had hurt like fuck, and he'd been in agony by the time he had finished, but she'd taken such tender care of him that he had felt he had to reciprocate. He had returned to Hogwarts, damaged but alive, and strangely comforted that someone had given enough of a shit about him to make sure he'd been clean, safe and warm.

Now, in her new living quarters in Hogwarts, Severus lowered her to the bed and slipped between the covers with her, tucking her in with him. Seeking his warmth, she curled up against him in her sleep, and made a sweet little purring sound of contentment.

Severus had never literally slept with a woman before; with most of his infrequent encounters usually being of a somewhat more transient nature, either his partner or he usually left before sleep could descend. Sleeping with Hermione was pleasantly easy to get used to, and he softly kissed her forehead as she nuzzled against his chest.

Sometime in the night, Hermione rolled over and Severus spooned against her, and they both slept deeply and dreamlessly, their quiet slumber blameless and innocent.

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Hermione found life at the castle during the summer holidays quiet and amazingly full. She spent time with Madam Pomfrey during the day, learning the basics of formal magical healing. Because she was at Hogwarts when the O.W.L. results arrived, Hermione was given special permission by Professor Dumbledore to receive hers before the results were owed to the returning sixth-years. Being the overachieving swot she was, Hermione was so nervous, she made Severus read them to her.

"I fail to see why you are so anxious, Hermione. You know perfectly well you are one of this school's brightest students. I know of only one other student who had grades comparable to yours."

"Really?" Hermione, basking in his praise, was nevertheless intrigued. "Who was that?"

"Your lover," he purred, smugly, and she rewarded him by stealing his last chocolate biscuit. He gave her a thunderous look. "Another misstep and I will throw these results into the fire." The threat, both of them knew, was as empty as the biscuit tin. He was as anxious to see her results as she. Giving her a smirk, he broke the wax seal and opened the document, scanning it with his dark eyes.

"Hmm." He frowned, and regarded her expectant, fearful expression with disdain. In a rather disappointed voice he said, "Well, it seems that the past year has affected your grades, Miss Granger. You only received ten Outstandings and one Exceeds Expectations."

Hermione's shocked face almost made Severus laugh. Finally, she spluttered, "I received " Her brows came together angrily. "What did I receive the Exceeds Expectations in?"

"Defence Against the Dark Arts."

Hermione was livid. "Ohh, that gruesome Umbridge woman! I could throw her to the centaurs all over again!" She huffed.

Bemused, Severus drawled, "May I remind you that you and your classmates earned that grade by virtually teaching yourselves?" He quirked his eyebrow maddeningly at her. "Think what you might have done had you had an actual teacher?"

It was almost easy to believe that they led normal lives, as June waned into July, and there were moments when they almost had the castle to themselves. On the morning Hermione was scheduled to visit Madam Pomfrey for her check-up, she all but skipped to the infirmary, hopeful that this was the last time she'd have to be examined. Her scar had not hurt for almost two weeks, and while it still looked less than wholesome, it no longer bothered her.

Severus had given her a special salve to keep the scar tissue supple, and in the evenings he very gently applied it to her skin, his sensitive fingertips moving over the scar tissue with sensuous deliberation that left her breathless and wanting. He still had not initiated sex, and during their heated kissing, he would deny her, telling her he could not, would not, until she was given the all clear.

"It would be more than my job's worth, to face Poppy and tell her I injured you because I could not keep my base desires to myself," he drawled, fending off his randy little witch. "And stop pouting, you wicked creature! You were sent by the gods to drive me to madness." She would reward him with a knowing little smile, full of feminine power. She might have been young, but she was woman enough to know how to all but bring him to his knees before her.

In truth, he wanted her so badly that it was hard to concentrate when she was in the room. After that first, intense night in her chambers, they had continued to learn more about one another's bodies, and Severus would sometimes think of himself as the most perverted masochist in the Wizarding world, especially when Hermione straddled him, begging him to make love to her, pleading for him to touch her. She could be the most maddening witch at times.

There were moments when he would indulge her begging, sliding his fingers inside her lacy knickers. He would caress her, until he felt her shudder and rasp and moan, as he played her with his clever fingers, their mouths fused together. He chastised himself, even as he made her come, over and over. Her body was so deliciously responsive to his touch, and he was unable to stop himself from mapping the erotic signs of her impending climax.

Why was he so impatient? Hadn't he promised himself that, when they were ready, it would be a heady night of firsts for her? Why was he whittling those 'firsts' away? Why had he said yes, when she asked to watch him masturbate? Why had he said yes, when she asked to touch him? In spite of what he had told Hermione, he had always had patience to spare. Why not now? Why was she tormenting him so, and why was he letting her with a secret smile on his lips?

They were on borrowed time, and they knew it. They expected Severus to be summoned any day, and each evening they lay tangled in a fierce embrace, as if to hide one another, where no one could find them.

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Hermione arrived in the infirmary optimistic that she'd be given a clean bill of health. If Madam Pomfrey didn't, Hermione was considering lying about it. Severus was driving her mad. In those few days they'd been left alone, Hermione had been given a taste of what life would be like for them, and it made her happy.

She refused to think about the reaction of her friends. While her relationship with Severus had to remain a secret, Hermione knew that eventually Harry, Ron and the others would have to understand that Severus was not the enemy. She would make them understand. The idea that this man had been so vilified by her and her friends in the past still made Hermione feel sick with shame, and she spent every possible moment trying to show her appreciation of his love and devotion.

She found that quite easy to do, especially in light of the fact that he excited her so much. Sometimes, he had only to look at her and she would feel her body surge with longing and lust. A whispered word could make her so wet she had to change her knickers. An endearing touch could reduce her to a needful mess in his arms. And still he would stand there, arms crossed, smirking at her, smug, pleased with himself that he could and did reduce her to this quivering mass of longing so easily. He could be

the most maddening wizard at times.

She did not mind. She told herself this was one way she could distract him; make him temporarily forget the dangerous chess game they played with the darkness. By unspoken agreement, they did not discuss Harry, or the Dark Lord, or Dumbledore. They spoke of the future together. It all appeared possible; it all seemed within their grasp.

Hermione greeted her mentor as she entered the infirmary. During the summer, Madam Pomfrey was quite informal, even so much as wearing everyday robes instead of her Healer uniform. She was always brisk and no-nonsense, she brewed a mean cuppa, and just as often as not, they found their subjects of discussion to be far beyond the realms of healing. Hermione found the mediwitch to be warm and inviting, and, in time, almost motherly, whether by accident or design.

"Well, Miss Granger, let's have a look, shall we?" Madam Pomfrey said in her usual, efficient manner. She ran several quick scans, and gave Hermione a smile. "Well, Hermione dear, I think we can safely say your injury has fully healed."

"Wonderful," Hermione breathed, relief flooding her. "I'm so glad, really, to be done with it. It sort of gives me a sense of closure, pardon the pun." She smiled sadly. "Of course, there are some things that it can't heal." Poppy, as Hermione had come to think of her, gave her a gentle hug.

"Just remember, dear, I'm here, should you need a shoulder." She gave Hermione a look that was almost teasing. "Although I rather think you already have a convenient shoulder." Hermione found herself smiling back without the first hint of a blush. Severus was definitely rubbing off on her.

As she pulled on her robes, Madam Pomfrey gave her a searching look. "Hermione, dear, has Severus brewed a contraceptive potion for you yet?"

Shocked at the frankness of the question, Hermione stammered, "N-No, Madam Pomfrey! I mean," she said, stammering, "I mean, I'm not, well, sexually active."

Madam Pomfrey's face showed her surprise. "Do you plan to be?"

Before she could stop herself, Hermione blurted, "Merlin, I hope so."

Poppy laughed outright. Now, *there* was the blush! Laughing, she said, "Perhaps you may wish to start your first course. One never knows."

Hermione rolled her eyes and willed her face to stop burning. "Thank you, Madam Pomfrey."

The mediwitch waved her hand dismissively. "I think we're past that stage now, Hermione. Please call me Poppy. Only during the summer, of course." She fixed a mock stern eye at the young woman, who laughed.

"This is an immediately acting potion, so you can take it now or even afterward and it will be effective. Just be sure to take it." Her face softened, and she put a motherly hand on Hermione's shoulder. "I will tell you because I know you will keep it to yourself, but that boy has been through hell. Somehow, I think you and he are almost two sides of the same coin. Take good care of him, Hermione. He deserves it. Most people would disagree, but..." she nodded, as though overcome with emotion.

Hermione, on impulse, gave the older woman a hug. "Not me. He's my family now, Poppy. We're going to get through this, and when it's all over," Hermione gave her a determined look, "I'm going to make sure that wizard is never unhappy again."

Poppy looked at her carefully. Her eyes narrowed, as if truly seeing the girl for the first time. "Yes. Yes, Hermione - I believe you will." She rose to fetch a vial of contraceptive potion.

Hermione beamed, and was about to thank her mentor, when a searing, tearing, burning pain slashed across her palm so viciously, she bit back a cry of pain, and clutched her hand to her chest, gasping.

In retrospect, she was merely happy that Poppy hadn't seen her react to her Blood Oath.

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Severus had been in his lab working on the inevitable mountain of potions requests Poppy had given him at the beginning of the summer. It was not in his nature to be stingy about supplying her with her requests; she had been too good to him to even contemplate cutting corners. If anything, he tended to overfill her requests anyway.

A chime rang, signaling a message from Albus. Severus walked over to the Floo connection, and saw Dumbledore's face reflected in the fire. "Yes, Headmaster? May I help you?"

"Severus, come at once!" His voice was weak and querulous, "I've been cursed!"

Severus flew up the stairs and ran to the headmaster's office. He shouted the password on the run, and dashed up the stone steps.

As he entered the room, breathless, wand out, he looked around until he saw Albus slumped weakly in his chair. The headmaster was wheezing, his breathing harsh and laboured, and as Severus knelt by his side, he saw Dumbledore's hand, blackened, withering, the curse creeping up his wrist under the skin like black ink stealing into his veins, even as Severus gasped in horror.

A ring with a cracked, black stone lay on the table. It was heavy and elegant, and strangely compelling. A skeletal hand reached out and snatched it away so quickly Severus could be forgiven for believing he'd dreamed it. Dumbledore clasped it to his bosom, and Severus turned back to him.

"Gods, Albus!" He looked at the headmaster, and to his shock, tears were flowing down the man's weathered cheeks. "In Merlin's name, what have you done?" When the older man didn't immediately answer, Severus caught the wizard's face in his hands. "What have you done, old man?" he roared.

Dumbledore looked up at him, a mixture of pain, humiliation and remorse written clearly on his tear-stained face. "Don't chide me, dear boy. I couldn't stop myself. Please, don't chide me."

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Title and opening lines from Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah".

## Fifteen: For the Want of a Nail

Chapter 16 of 39

I've been wrong, I had plans so big, but the devil's in the details. I left out one thing: no one to love me...

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

*Many, many thanks to Talesofsnape for her alpha skills and lilyevans\_snape for beta help I couldn't do it without you two!!!*

*For Sempra and Mimi*

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*I've been wrong, I had plans so big, but the devil's in the details. I left out one thing, no one to love me...*

*What's all this talk about horses and war? Put yourself in the place of the man at the forge, and day after day you live a life without love, til the morning you can't take it anymore and you don't get up...*

*Everything seems to fail, and it was all for the want of a nail...*

---

Hermione rushed down to Severus' chambers, her heart in her throat. She had tried to contact him, but he was fully occluded, and something about the feeling of his leaking emotions terrified her beyond anything she'd ever heretofore experienced with him. Her palm had stopped burning, but it was replaced with a sensation that Hermione could only associate with hopelessness.

As she entered his chambers, she was struck by two things; the smell of alcohol, and the lack of light. She found Severus slumped in his chair, a glass of whisky in his hand. He did not look up when she walked in.

"Back from the infirmary already, pet? Clean bill of health? All ready for fun and games?" he said, his voice slurry, and so unlike his usual tone Hermione felt fear crawl up her spine. It was the same whisky-roughened tone that Sirius Black had the night he'd

Hermione shook her head. This was NOT Sirius Black. "Severus, what's wrong?" Hermione came into his view, and he drunkenly waved her closer.

"Step into my parlour, said the serpent to the lioness," he said, drunkenly, giving her a conspiratorial smile. He rose unsteadily to his feet and lurched at her, beckoning her closer, his voice unfamiliar and unpleasant. "C'mon, c'mon, Lass, I won't bite. I'm not that desperate, at any rate." He laughed harshly. "Yet."

Instinctively, Hermione took a step back, crossing her arms in front of her chest. "Severus, you're scaring me." *This is your lover*, Hermione told herself, *and something is terribly, terribly wrong*. Tentatively, she dared to walk closer. She wasn't as much afraid of him, as she was afraid ~~for~~ him. "Severus, please talk to me. You're drunk, and I want to know why."

He looked up at her with eyes that were bloodshot and red-rimmed from crying. "You want? You want a lot, witch, do you know that?" His voice turned ugly. "I wanted a lot, too, but I keep wishing in one hand and shitting in the other, and I can't fail to notice which hand fills first!"

Recoiling at the vehemence in his voice, Hermione turned away to leave the room. A Sober-Up Potion was called for-

Before she could take the first step, he was behind her, his arms wrapped around her waist. "Don't leave me! Please, Hermione!" A sob escaped him. "I'm sorry! Please don't." In a small voice, he whimpered, "I couldn't bear to know I pushed you away again."

Hermione turned, and Severus sank to his knees, burying his face against her robes. "I'm frightening you. I'm sorry, Hermione. I'm just so..." He looked up at her beseechingly, tears filling his bloodshot eyes. "Please don't go," he whispered. "Please don't leave me." He lowered his head and sobbed. "Oh gods, I can't bear this alone!"

"I'm not. I won't! You won't be alone! I'm just going into the loo." She tried to give him a reassuring smile. "I'm not leaving you. I promise."

Shakily, Hermione waited until he released her from his tight grip, and walked to his bathroom. She opened the cabinet that held his potions and reached for three neatly-labelled bottles. Walking back into the room, Hermione realised with alarm he was sobbing pitifully, his face buried in his hands.

Running to his side, Hermione knelt, put her arms around him and rocked him. "Please, Severus, please!" she cried, tears springing to her own eyes. His face was a mask of despair and hopelessness; it was the most heartbreaking thing she'd ever seen. "Please tell me what's wrong let me try to make it right!"

"You can't, you can't!" he cried, holding onto her. "Please go away and forget me, Hermione! I'm a dead man! I'm a dead man!"

"What?" Hermione froze. She tried to open one of the vials of potion, but he wouldn't let her. He was holding on to her arms painfully.

"Please, Hermione, if you want a chance for any happiness in your life, it will not be with me! Just go now, go and forget the name Severus Snape!" Perversely, he still held her in an agonizing grip.

Hermione had never felt so afraid, not even when Severus had carried her into the infirmary, and she thought she was going to die. Using her teeth, she pulled the cork from the vial, and, pinching his nose closed, ruthlessly forced the potion down his throat. Without waiting to see if one vial was enough, she repeated the process with the second.

The Sober-Up worked quickly, and Severus blinked as his head cleared of the copious amount of whisky he'd ingested in the short few minutes before Hermione had arrived. He looked at his witch, and his tears began anew.

Almost helplessly, he jumped to his feet, pacing like a caged animal. "He's done it. The old bastard has done it." He sounded angry and hurt, and underneath it all, frightened out of his wits.

Hermione was terrified for her lover. He was irrational, his black eyes gleaming with rage and grief and something Hermione couldn't define. His face was covered in tears and mucous, but he didn't bother trying to clean it. Trying to quell her own fear, Hermione grasped his arms and forced him to stop.

Speaking in a low voice, as if to calm a wild beast, Hermione said, "Severus, I realise something unspeakable has happened, but I cannot help you unless you talk to me." When he looked at her with a complete lack of comprehension in his eyes, Hermione almost panicked. "Severus, for Merlin's sake, if you love me, tell me what has happened!"

The word *love* seemed to be the only thing strong enough to reach into the depths of his despair. It snagged deep down, and pulled him back to the surface. He sagged, and Hermione caught him and led him back to the sofa, where he slid down until he was lying against her breast. It was several moments before he could speak.

He shuddered and groaned, his body twisting as if in pain. Hermione held him, tears streaming from her own eyes at his agony. "It will be well, Severus. It will be well. I will *make* it so."

Severus calmed. For several moments the room was quiet, save his occasional snuffle. He relaxed a little in her arms, and when she shifted, and pressed him to her, he leaned in and sighed. It was the harsh, inconsolable sigh of a heartbroken, motherless child, and Hermione could hear herself in it as well.



Finally, in a voice devoid of any emotion, he said quietly, "You would, wouldn't you? Move heaven and earth to save me? Merlin knows why. I'm not worth it!"

Hermione shook him impatiently. "Stop it, Severus! This is old ground, and we've no time to cover it! Tell me now, and we can make this right!"

Severus drew himself up to full height as if she'd physically slapped him. For a moment, he looked like the imposing, dour Potions master of her younger days - the wizard who could, and did, reduce her to tears with a carefully worded, beautifully uttered cruel remark. His voice was quiet, and expressionless.

"What if you can't? What if I tell you that Dumbledore has destroyed me, and you will be destroyed as a result of it?"

Hermione pondered his words, and realised that what he was about to reveal would change things so irrevocably that she would wake tomorrow and look and behave like a different person entirely. "Then I will tell you that nothing is impossible! We're two powerfully magical folk. We can be well, Severus." She shook him gently, like a parent trying to wake an overly tired child. "But you must tell me what happened, and we *will* resolve it together."

Severus sat up, and buried his face in his hands. "I do not know that we can. He has signed my death warrant today, along with his own." He looked up at her and took her face in his hands. "I am to be the sacrificial lamb, Hermione. I am to place my head in the noose for the Greater Good." He looked at her, his eyes bleak with misery, and the absence of the hope that had so recently bloomed there caused Hermione's heart to cramp.

Hermione took his hand, shaking her head. "Not bloody likely." She leaned forward and kissed him fervently, and he returned the kiss with desperate longing.

Gently breaking away, Hermione covered his face in tiny kisses, and he turned his face to her gratefully, like a man feeling the sun after a long darkness.

She reached for the last vial, and silently handed the Calming Draught to him. "You're not thinking clearly. We WILL resolve this. We WILL defeat this." She stroked his head tenderly, as he drank down the faint blue liquid. As the potion took effect, he took a deep breath, and looked at his witch. Though tears stood in his eyes, he allowed the potion to do its job, and Hermione could almost see him physically pulling himself together.

His eyes softened, and the chaos and terror that had made him flee to his room to polish off almost a complete bottle of Firewhisky lessened its hold around his chest. "Whatever happens, Hermione, I have made promises to you. I won't break them." He took her hand and kissed it, reverently. "I love you." He sighed, and it turned into a sob. "Gods, this is a fucked up life! All I want is for us to have a little chance at happiness. It is too much to fucking ask?"

Hermione felt her own eyes filling again. "I love you, Severus. *We will* be well." *Yes, Hermione, say it until you both believe it.* "Tell me, Severus. Start from the beginning."

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Thirty minutes later, Hermione was walking toward the Headmaster's office, seething with resentment, her face suffused with fury. Back in his chambers, Severus was sleeping under the strongest dosages of Calming Draught and Dreamless Sleep that could be prescribed for a wizard of his age and weight.

Hermione hissed the password and ran up the stone steps. She walked straight in to the Headmaster's study. When he looked up, he smiled. If he was surprised to see her, he did not show it. Nor did he bother to hide his cursed hand.

"Hello, Miss Granger. To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

Hermione smiled. It was a smile that made the Headmaster visibly tense. It was Severus' smile - ruthless, self-centred, smug and utterly confident.

"The pleasure of this visit? Very simple, Headmaster. Insurance."

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Hermione sat back, almost breathless from pouring her heart out into what was most surely the gutter. Dumbledore had listened without speaking, his eyes occasionally straying from hers, but snapping back when she made a salient point, or mentioned Harry's name. It had not been a pleasant conversation in any way, and Hermione felt the slight sickness that comes with knowing you've set yourself upon a course that can neither be deviated from nor returned to afterward.

Once she'd finished, Professor Dumbledore merely looked at her for several minutes. His gaze was calm and as confident as she tried to feel. Finally, he replied, "Do you not realise I could Obliviate you, Miss Granger? You would walk out of my study having no knowledge of any of this."

"If you could, you wouldn't have threatened me with it, Professor; you would already have done it. You don't have the strength, and ultimately, you need me." Hermione hated to berate an old, sick wizard, but she had to protect Severus; she had to protect *them*. She fully intended to save Harry, but she would first have to save her wizard in order to do it.

Professor Dumbledore looked at her with a mixture of awe and disdain. "Why are you doing this?"

Hermione hissed, "Because someone has to look out for that man's life, and it isn't you! You have used him enough, Professor!"

"And what are *you* doing, Miss Granger?"

Hermione was furious. Severus had told her that the curse Professor Dumbledore had brought upon himself made him irrational at times. Angrily, she retorted, "I'm saving him! Something you are disinclined to do!" She gave the old wizard a beseeching look. "He's worth saving, even though you don't think so. I want him to have a life after this war."

Albus said, diffidently, "He will have a better one as a martyr. He will die a hero's death, and his life will be honoured. If he lives through this, everyone will remember him as a spy and a traitor to both sides he'll be a pariah!"

"That's a chance we'll have to take a chance he won't have if he follows your plan. You can't leave him like this! You have to give him a reason to live! Please, Professor, you know and I know he's worth ten of any wizard in Britain! You cannot send him like a lamb to the slaughter for anyone even Harry!"

He sighed. "We all must all do our part for the great "

Hermione shouted, "I refuse to listen to that shite! If you had your way, you'd do it yourself, but you need Severus and Harry to die for your precious cause!"

"You forget your place, Miss Granger." The Headmaster's eyes were cold and thunderous, but Hermione stared him down, until he finally broke her gaze.

Quietly, Hermione continued. "Grant me what I ask. Firstly, you will put your best teacher on DADA Severus. We need the best wizard for the job to teach us how to win this war. That is not open for discussion." As if he needed further convincing, she added, "It will convince the Dark Lord even more of your determination to defeat him, and make your death all the sweeter to him."

Dumbledore shrugged, and then sighed. "Agreed. I had thought as much myself."

"Secondly, you will treat me as if nothing has happened. I will deal with Harry myself. You will NOT interfere with Severus and me, or we will go."

Dumbledore said, rather petulantly, "He vowed to obey me. To do anything to save Lily "

"No, Professor. He vowed to do anything in exchange for you keeping Lily safe, and you didn't. Don't rewrite the story," Hermione retorted, shaking her head.

" - To make sure everything was in place so that Harry could fulfil his destiny," Dumbledore continued, as if Hermione had not interrupted him. The headmaster's voice was

truculent and threatening, but Hermione could hear the fear behind his words. He needed Severus; therefore, he would need her.

Hermione sneered. "Oh, and we all know how well *that* went." She fronted out the old man. "I have admired you from the moment I stepped foot in this school, Professor Dumbledore, but you're no saint. You don't give a damn about the individuals you use, Professor, as long as they do your bidding for the bloody Greater Good. You're no better than Tom Riddle!" Hermione stared him down, her amber eyes snapping. "You will do this, Professor, or I swear, we will forsake you, just as you've forsaken him! The only thing keeping him here is his honour, and I'm not prepared to sacrifice him for that!"

"He brought that on himself, Miss Granger. He made his deal with the devil, and was cast out of paradise."

She gave his withered hand a pointed look. "You could say the same for yourself, and you're a grown wizard. Severus was just a boy, a vulnerable boy whose feelings had been hurt, whose heart had been broken, and you shamelessly used all of that to make him your weapon, and you even had the nerve to make him believe you were doing him a favour. You have used him for the last time. This last deed cancels all debts to you."

Professor Dumbledore looked at the young lioness and attempted to Legilimize into her mind. To his surprise, her occlusions were very tensile and subtle, almost elegant. Severus had taught her this, he realised, and his admiration for both of them reluctantly rose.

Sensing his probing thoughts, Hermione allowed the professor access to that which she deemed appropriate for the old wizard to see. Looking into her mind, Dumbledore saw that she was as loyal and strong as any wizard or witch he'd ever known. Not for the first time, he wished that destiny had chosen her as his champion, instead of the boy. Harry, good-hearted and earnest as he was, was no match in out and out ferocity and cunning to this little witch.

"I have often wondered why you were sorted into Gryffindor, Miss Granger. Now I know why."

"Don't flatter yourself, Professor. House traits mean very little at this stage of the game." She held out her hand. "Give me the documents I need. I'm taking him in the morning."

The Headmaster rose slowly, and Hermione felt a pang in her heart that she'd been so cold with him. She reminded herself that he'd brought the curse upon himself when he placed the ring on his finger, hoping that it would bring him power. He had known all the while that it was death and destruction, but the lure of it was too great even for the Great Dumbledore. Now the curse was poisoning his system, and he had perhaps a year left.

How dare he tell Severus, "**You must kill me.**" How dare he tell Severus that Draco's soul was worth more than Severus'?

"We'll make sure your little scheme is carried out, Professor, but you will not make Severus your martyr. If I hear wind of it, I'll make sure we'll go so far underground neither you nor Voldemort ever find us."

Dumbledore looked at the little witch, with her steely, determined frown. He sighed. "I should have made him take an Unbreakable Vow."

Hermione shook her head in contempt. "Incredible. You would have, wouldn't you? But you couldn't risk another's involvement to invoke the vow, could you? You had to keep your schemes to yourself."

"So that Tom couldn't discover them!"

"More like so that you could keep you minions in order!" Hermione retorted.

Dumbledore blinked. "Your lover said almost the exact same thing to me not a year ago. You are a formidable duo. A dangerous one."

"Only when you threaten us, Professor. But we can be dangerous *for* you. We are sworn to do the right thing, and we're doing it for the right reasons."

"The two of you, then, must help Harry in his quest."

Hermione's eyes narrowed angrily. Proudly, she drew herself up to full height. "One or the other of us has been doing that since he was born, Professor. We're not about to stop now." Exasperated, she continued, "What you've never seemed to grasp, Professor Dumbledore, is that there are ways to accomplish that without adding more deaths."

"Other than my own." Now a self-pitying, crabbed tone crept into his voice, laced delicately with bitterness.

"That cannot be visited on Tom Riddle, Professor, as much as you'd like it to be."

Dumbledore gave Hermione a look that could almost have been considered devious. "You know that Severus is in love with Lily Evans, Harry's mother?"

Hermione knew he said it to derail her, to fill her with doubt and jealousy. Fortunately, she had access to something even Dumbledore did not: Severus' Legilimized memories. "Lily Evans is dead. Harry Potter is not, and we're going to keep it that way. If it means that you die, and Draco is redeemed, so be it. But I'm only doing this on one condition: Severus will not be set up for death."

Hermione sighed, feeling her stomach drawing in knots. "Now tell me what we need to know to start preventing that " she pointed at his blackened dying hand, "from taking you over, and more importantly," she said, knowing it sounded as cruel and heartless as Dumbledore's directive to Severus, "to keep the same thing from happening to anyone else."

The Headmaster regarded her for so long Hermione thought he would not answer. Finally, he said, quietly, "Have you heard of a Horcrux, Miss Granger?"

Hermione thought for a moment, and then shook her head. "No. What is it?"

Professor Dumbledore sighed, and reached into a large box. He withdrew a fine leather pouch and gave it to the young witch. Hermione opened it; it looked to be roughly several hundred galleons.

He waved his hand toward the leather bag. "We can discuss Horcruxes when you return. That should be enough for you to do what you have to do." When she gave the Headmaster a puzzled look, he smiled for the first time since she entered the office. "I promise you, Miss Granger, I will still be here when you return. We will discuss Horcruxes then. In the meantime," he indicated the pouch, "Think of it as a gift."

Hermione nodded, and then turned to go. "I have to go and wake Severus. We have a lot to discuss." She turned back to the Headmaster. "Sir, I'm truly sorry to be so harsh. But harsh times call for harsh actions." She sniffed, and cursed herself for showing weakness to this of all wizards. "I cannot let him go. Not now."

The Headmaster nodded. "The time for apologies and remorse is behind us, I fear. Insurance, Miss Granger. This is our bargain, and I expect you to hold up your end of it."

Hermione stiffened her spine, and she was unsurprised to feel her heart stutter in her chest. She was committed now. There was no turning back, and Hermione found, to her unbounded relief, she did not want to turn back. Now that she had committed herself, there was no more conflict, or indecision. "Insurance, then. Agreed, Headmaster."

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Severus slowly drifted to the surface of sleep, stretching fully, trying to shake off the residue of the Dreamless Sleep still in his system. Hermione had given him no choice but to take it, and he hated the feeling of coming out of it. He stood up slowly, swung his long legs over the bed, and leaned forward, his head in his hands.

So the Dark Lord's revenge was Draco. Killing Dumbledore. Gods, what a mess. Severus rubbed his face, feeling the day's growth of stubble rasping against his hands. He

had known the moment he started trying to heal the curse that it was no use. The sheer magic that had drained from him into the wound told Severus it was impossible to curb the effects of the curse.

It had physically sickened him to see it crawling up Dumbledore's arm, blackening the veins on the old man's thin arms. He had managed to contain it and lessen the advancement of the curse, even so much as to draw it all back down into the headmaster's hand. And of course, Dumbledore would not see Poppy, who might have been able to aid Severus in slowing the curse down. Oh no; the secrets could not be allowed to permeate beyond him - and Hermione.

Severus scoured himself with loathing. When Dumbledore calmly informed him that Severus had the happy task of publicly killing the old man and thus securing his place with the Dark Lord forever, Severus had walked back to his chambers in a daze of despair and hopelessness. He thought of those silent, pitiless gods he'd prayed to, asking for one bright thing in his life. He should have known better. When they granted his wish, they had taken it all away from him at the first opportunity. Whom the gods destroy, they first make mad...

He thought of Hermione. She would be his deity now.

The one light in his life. The only light that had sought him out, and deigned to saturate him, to purge the darkness from his soul. And what had he done? He'd played true to form once again. He'd only gone and swallowed most of a bottle of Ogden's Firewhisky and lecherously hit on her the moment she walked in the door. He was damned lucky she hadn't hexed him six ways to Sunday and run screaming from the room, never to return. He had acted no better than Sirius Black at his drunken worse.

And being the Gryffindor do-gooder she was, Hermione had forgiven him. His self-hatred settled in like iron, stiffening his aching limbs and weighing him down so that climbing out of bed became impossible. The very fact that he was mentally deriding her capacity for love, after all she'd done, said some pretty sick things about his state of mind.

His mind whirled at the implications of what must be done, and he could see no light at the end of the tunnel. He'd tried to send Hermione away, to tell her to make some sort of life outside of the short one he was destined to live. *Yes, Severus, but you were holding onto her so tightly at the same time, she could barely breathe for the stench of your alcohol-laden breath.*

She had listened to the entire sordid tale: Dumbledore, putting the ring on his finger, in hopes of gaining power for his own agenda; the resulting curse; the Headmaster's impending death; Draco's instructions to kill Dumbledore, and Severus' ultimate murder of the headmaster in order to secure the complete trust of the Dark Lord and thus save Draco. It was all so simple, tied up in that neat, little blood-stained package.

Dumbledore had as good as told Severus that he would be the final true casualty of the war, if the chess board played itself out like he'd envisioned it. Severus listened with a heart bleeding hope. *I am to be Harry Potter's martyr.* The irony of it should have made Severus laugh. Instead, he barely made it out of Dumbledore's office before he was vomiting on the stone floor. The thought of one's impending death often did that.

He looked at the clock and realised that several hours had passed since Hermione had held his nose and tipped the Calming Draught and Dreamless Sleep draught down his throat, and led him to bed. She had looked as heartsick as he felt, and the last thing she'd done before the potion kicked in was to kiss him gently and say, "Enough of this nonsense about sending me away, Severus. That was never and will never be an option. We are going to find a way around this, and I promise you when it is over, we will leave this place and never return. I swear it."

He wanted to believe his little witch with all his heart, but he could see no way out. He had all but made an Unbreakable Vow with Albus all those years ago, to protect Potter. As much as he despised the boy for being his father made over, he could still see the ghost of Lily in the boy's eyes, and for that, Severus had thrown himself under the wheels of every bus Potter had gleefully jumped on throughout the years, without any thought for safety of himself or his friends. Severus had the distinct feeling this last bus might just be the one that finally mashed him into a pulp.

Severus sighed harshly. They had been so close! Close enough to taste hope, and it had been so sweet he should have known it would be snatched from his crooked teeth before he could take a really big, juicy bite of it. He wanted to believe Hermione. More than that, he wanted to believe in *them*. And still he could not make himself stand.

That was how Hermione found him; sitting on the side of his bed, holding his head in his hands, looking hung over and defeated. His five o'clock shadow, dark in the waning light, made him look harsh and world-weary. When Hermione walked into his bedroom, he looked up at her with eyes that were bleak and devoid of hope.

She reached out and gently brushed his tangled, oily hair from his eyes, and smiled down at him with such tenderness his heart ached. What had he really ever done to make this witch love him so?

"How do you feel?" she said, somewhat emptily. He sighed, and held out his hand, and as she took it, he drew her toward him. She sat down on the bed beside him, and they put their arms around each other.

"I feel as if I'm getting ready to walk a rather steep, very short road."

She sniffed, and he looked at her carefully. She'd been crying; that was evident. But there was also something else in her eyes. It was a cautious, chary sort of resolve. It made him feel faintly curious and the fact that he still could make himself care was a miracle, in and of itself.

Quietly, he said, "Where have you been? You look like you're... up to something." He was rewarded with a ghost of a smile.

She stood, and looked down at him. "Severus, I've been speaking to the headmaster."

Puzzled, Severus replied, "About what? Surely, everything that was needed to be said has already been said." Bitterly, he added, "There's nothing left to do but to let this little tragedy play itself out."

Hermione's eyes flashed. "Severus, what you cannot do is wallow! I need you to be strong for a little while longer, and then I'll take over."

Severus looked at his witch with an expression of such confusion Hermione almost laughed. "Witch, what in Merlin's name are you babbling about? Take over what?"

Stiffening her spine, Hermione said, "Professor Dumbledore and I had a very long talk. I forced him to tell me the entire story, and I told him you would NOT be facing a firing squad or Azkaban." She smiled, and knelt down beside him. "But you're going to have to dust off your Muggle suit one more time."

Looking down at the little witch, Severus reached out and tucked a wayward curl behind her ear. With something like his old smirk, he drawled, "And why, pray tell, do I need to do that, my little problem solver?"

For the first time since she'd entered the room, Hermione's unshakable confidence diminished. Unsmiling, she reached into her robe and, taking his left hand, she placed a ring on his finger. He looked down at her, nonplussed.

Hermione smiled, and took a deep, courage-giving breath. "Severus Snape, will you marry me?"

# Sixteen: Buy A Dream and Hide Away

Chapter 17 of 39

Take your wildest fear, multiply it by twelve, drop it in the sea, and you will have an inkling of how afraid I am right now...

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

*This chapter also marks the beginning of the most beautiful friendship I've ever known in fandom. Stgulik, my beta, wrote me one day and offered to beta for me, and now I cannot imagine a life without her. Jules, you are my angel, the Rogers to my Hammerstein, the Lerner to my Lowe, the Taupin to my John, the Lennon to my McCartney.*

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*Into the mists of time and space where we have no say over date and place*

*Don't get embarrassed if it happens a lot, that you don't know how you started or where you're gonna stop*

*And if at times it seems insane - all the tears in searching; turning all your joy to pain - in pursuit of learning;*

*Buy a dream and hideaway - can't escape the sorrow... as we head into tomorrow*

*Round and round like a twisted wheel, spinning in attempt to find the feel, find the path that will help us find a feeling of control over lives and minds*

*Into the stars and always up, drinking from a broken cup whose golden gleam is fading fast, praying that it has not passed into tomorrow...*

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Severus looked down at the ring on his left hand. It was a narrow, platinum band, without decoration of any kind. He recognised it immediately: it was among the personal effects given to Hermione at the funeral home. Her father's wedding band. It fit Severus' ring finger as if made for him.

Severus stared at the ring for at least a minute. His mind appeared to have shut down at Hermione's question, "Will you marry me?" He was so unnerved he could neither accept nor decline. Breathing in and out seemed to be the extent of what his brain was willing to coordinate at this moment.

Hermione watched him with growing dismay. She was not exactly sure what she expected his reaction to her proposal to be, but staring into space was not it. The longer he sat there, blinking in shocked silence at the sight of her father's ring sitting snugly on his finger, the surer Hermione was that Severus was going to reject her proposal.

It had never occurred to her that he would say no. Of all the scenarios going through her head on the way down to his chambers, a rejection was not on the list.

She placed a trembling hand on his arm. Lightly, she said, "Severus? I know it's a little unusual for a woman to propose to a man, but it is customary when one's hand is requested in marriage to respond one way or the other."

Her voice snapped Severus out of his stunned stupor, and he turned and looked at Hermione as if he'd just come out of a trance. Softly, he said, "What in Merlin's name do you think you're playing at?"

Recoiling slightly, Hermione said, "I'm asking you to marry me." She gave him an uncertain smile.

Severus closed his eyes and shook his head. Stupidly, he said, "Are you mad, witch? In the midst of all of this, you want to plan a wedding?"

Hermione huffed, and hauled herself off the stone floor. She sat down beside him on the bed. "No, you daft man! We don't have time for that!" She looked into his eyes closely. "Are you sure you're fully awake from the Dreamless Sleep?"

Severus shook his head, and looked down at the ring again. "Perhaps I'm still a little confused." He looked into her eyes. "Hermione, what exactly is happening here? I feel as if I'm in a dream."

Hermione laughed shakily. "I suppose I did rather spring it on you, didn't I?"

Severus shrugged. "Putting a ring on my finger and asking me to marry you is a dirty great spring, is it not?"

Hermione laughed again. "I suppose it is, but I've had all afternoon to come up with this plan, and I think I've done it." She produced the large leather pouch the headmaster had given her. As Severus opened the bag to inspect its contents, Hermione explained, "This is a wedding present to us, of sorts."

"From?"

"Dumbledore. Now, I have completed all the documentation that we need. All I need is for you to Confund the registrar into believing that we've been there earlier in the month to start the paperwork, and that you were there seven days ago to finalise it."

Severus gave his head a shake, as if to clear it. "Sorry Hermione, would you please stop babbling and start from the beginning? Why did Dumbledore give us a bag of galleons as a wedding present? We started the paperwork last month for *what*? Confund the registrar into believing we've been *where*? This is making no sense, Lass. Where is *where*?"

Hermione smiled. "Gretna Green."

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Severus paced up and down in his bedchambers, as Hermione told him her plan for the third time. He was frantically trying to pierce holes in it, to find the chink in the armour of it. He could not. It was completely sound.

It was not that the idea of being married to Hermione was unsavoury. Quite the opposite: he just could not fathom why she'd want to marry *him*. Dumbledore's latest stunt had set his hard-won hope back so far he couldn't see any point. He was slated to kill Dumbledore. If they were married, Hermione would be seen as an accessory to the deed. He himself was slated to be killed in the war, and Hermione would become a pariah.

"I can't allow that to happen."

"What?" Hermione said, stopping in midsentence. "Can't allow what to happen?"

Severus crossed the room to sit next to her. "I can't allow you to be remembered as 'the traitor's widow'! You are one of the so-called 'Golden Trio'! One of Harry Potter's best friends! You cannot throw away your life by marrying me!"

Hermione made a soft growl of frustration. "Listen to me "

He turned on her. "I've listened! Your little scheme is madness manifested! Now, you will listen to me, witch!"

Bemused, Hermione watched him resume his pacing. Running a shaking hand through his oily hair, Severus said, "Do you have any idea how dangerous this is for you for both of us? The Dark Lord will find out, and use you like a whip over my head! Not to mention the purebloods like Malfoy and Bellatrix! They'll eat you for dinner, little one!"

"I'm supposed to take the life of the closest thing to a father I've ever known because he has named me his murderer, just as the Dark Lord named Potter as his. All the pieces must fall in the right order or the game is lost!"

Hermione jumped to her feet. "This is not a game, Severus! That's Dumbledore talking! It does *not* have to be that way. We can either be masters of our own destiny, or slaves to it! We can do this, but you have to trust me." Her voice softened. "You have to live." Her eyes blazed. "I can keep you safe as my husband, but not as my lover."

Severus looked at his witch, and he felt his resolve crumbling. The plan *was* flawless. The logic *was* sound. Every twisting, turning, backstabbing piece of it was perfectly placed, perfectly timed. It could work. And in the end, they could escape. Far away, where no one could find them. A hideaway ...

Fear. Fear was the catalyst to his hesitation. It always had been. Next to this courageous witch, with her unshakable faith in him, he was the worst sort of sniveling coward. Severus believed with all his heart that, in his rather long list of character flaws, cowardice was the worst, and the one he most hated to acknowledge.

Cowardice had been his downfall. He had nursed it, cradled it to his bosom, and protected it, so that he could flagellate himself with it, when faced with situations like the one before him now.

He took her in his arms. "Hermione, I beg you to give this more serious consideration. Not for my sake, but for yours. What will happen to you when I "

Severus gasped as his Dark Mark suddenly flared to life. They broke apart. "Oh, gods, this bastard's timing!" he moaned, and struck the table in frustration. "I have to go! I have to, lass!" he looked at her entreatingly.

Hermione stood, panting, sweat popping out from her forehead. Her hand felt as if nails were being driven through it. She looked at her smooth, unblemished palm, and held her wrist. Tears of pain sprang into her eyes. "Is this how it feels?" she moaned.

He took her hand in his, as if he could physically draw the pain away. "I'm sorry! I had no idea you would feel it through the blood oath!"

Hermione shook her head. "I know you didn't! Of course, you have to go now," she said, running to his room to fetch his robes and the hideous mask. Periodically, the pain would swell, until it was almost unbearable. If it was this excruciating to her, how much more so must it be to him?

As Severus shrugged on the hated Death Eater robe, a bright flash of light burst into the room. A silvery Patronus, in the form of a delicate leopard, followed in the wake of the light. It gracefully crossed the room to speak to Severus. Hermione was stunned to hear the clipped, imperious tones of Narcissa Malfoy issue from its mouth.

"Severus, I have been requested by the Dark Lord to ask you bring your ... companion, Miss Granger. He wishes to see you both. Today's is to be a private meeting."

Severus barely missed a beat. When he spoke, his voice sounded silky and bored. "Thank you, Narcissa. We will see you shortly."

The Patronus vanished, and the two of them looked at one another, horrified. Hermione was stunned. "Severus, why would he want me to come with you?"

Severus shook his head. "I don't know, lass. We have no choice but to obey him. We'll go and tell Albus, and "

He looked at her suddenly, his eyes dark and luminous. Softly, he said, "Come here, witch." He drew her into his arms, and plundered her mouth, his lips urgent and demanding. He kissed her passionately, as if claiming her. He grasped the back of her head, and penetrated her tender mouth, forcing his tongue deeply into the warm, moist haven. She responded wildly, with a feral moan, and flicked her tongue over the roof of his mouth, and he answered her with a growl of passion.

They fused together, and Severus pressed against her, pulling her off her feet, their bodies hot and needy, devouring one another. Severus whimpered against her soft, warm tongue, frantically trying to draw the flavour of her into his mouth, to remember, and be comforted. She tasted of tea and tears, and their tongues danced and twined.

Severus' kisses were passionate and breathtaking, and his demanding mouth left her gasping and mewling helplessly. Hermione, her hands clutching at his body, was mapping his very being, committing him to memory, tasting, touching, in case

Severus broke away from his witch, and his eyes mirrored the fear that Hermione felt in her heart.

"Hermione " He paused, breathing hard, his mind blank with fear. "Lass, I don't know if we'll "

Hermione pressed against him, and they held each other until they could hardly breathe. "It will be well, Severus," she said, shivering, trying to believe it.

Severus kissed her forehead, her cheeks, her eyes. She was so frightened, and it moved Severus that she was trying to be brave. Severus knew he had to pull himself together or they would both be lost. Her fear strengthened his resolve. He had to be strong, to protect his witch.

"Hermione," he warned, "focus. We have trained every day for this very contingency. We can survive this." He pulled away and took her head in his hands, his obsidian eyes blazing into hers. "And when we walk away from him tonight, Hermione," he said, kissing her gently, "I will take you to Gretna Green, my brave girl. I will be honoured to be your husband."

Hermione looked up into the face of this imposing, aloof man, and gave a deep sigh of happiness. She leaned against him. "I love you. Remember that, no matter what happens. We will survive. We will be married." She felt his lips against her hair, and she breathed in his clean, comforting scent.

Severus closed his eyes and focused inward. For a few stolen moments, he went through scenario after scenario in his mind. Then he looked down at his witch. "I think I know what to do. It is a terrible risk, but I believe we can do this."

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As Severus walked Hermione up the path to the remote manor that served as the Dark Lord's secret abode, he was struck by her absolute trust in him, and despite her terror. He could sense her tremendous fear through their blood oath scar. Yet her mind was fully, obliquely occluded; try as he might, he could not winkle in through the tiniest crack. *Good girl*, he thought. Her courage stiffened his spine, and he felt calm stealing over him.

He held her hand as they walked up the steps and through the door, which was held open by that odious rat, Peter Pettigrew. The little rodent of a wizard gaped at Hermione, but Severus swept past him as if he were nothing more than a bit of rubbish on the floor. Hermione followed suit. Once inside, Severus released Hermione's hand, and grasped her by the back of the neck, to convey his dominance and her submission.

Hermione could hear Wormtail, Ron's former pet, scuttling behind them, but she held her head high, remembering Severus' instructions on the way.

"Do not speak unless spoken to," he had said, "and choose your words carefully. Don't be cowed by the Death Eaters; be very humble to the Dark Lord, but not toadying. You'll see enough of that to know what *not* to do."

Approaching the Sanctum Sanctorum of Voldemort's lair, Hermione realised she might very well be walking to her death. Her chin lifted imperceptibly. If she were going to die, she wanted to show these pure-bloods how it was done. She was a powerful witch. She was loved. She would protect her mate. Reading her thoughts, Severus gave the back of her neck a little reassuring caress.

At the antechamber of the Dark Lord's receiving room, Hermione saw Narcissa Malfoy and her sister, Bellatrix Lestrange, standing to one side, talking desultorily. The last time Narcissa Malfoy had been in her presence, she'd looked at Hermione as if she were dog muck. It had been during Hermione's fourth year at Hogwarts; it seemed like a lifetime ago.

Hermione regarded the older woman carefully. She had to admit that Narcissa was honestly the only pure-blood witch who'd ever made Hermione feel inferior. Her beauty and her natural grace seemed like an entitlement. Next to Narcissa's cool, blonde patrician poise, Hermione felt like a drab, lumpy mutt.

Bellatrix Lestrange, on the other hand, was the polar opposite of Narcissa. It confounded Hermione that the two women were sisters; they hardly looked as if they could be related at all. As dark as her sister was light, Bellatrix seemed to Hermione to be the embodiment of Dark magic. Bella was laughing the last time Hermione had seen her; laughing, as Sirius Black fell through the veil at the Department of Mysteries.

Bellatrix's lidded, dark eyes narrowed further when she recognised Hermione, and she preened as she approached Severus, her walk sultry, her body language insolent and overly familiar.

"Severus! How kind of you to bring us your pet to play with," she cooed, and her voice reminded Hermione of biting on aluminium foil. Bellatrix pressed her body against Severus, and ran a long-nailed finger over his buttoned coat. "Yum, yum. Mudblood on the menu tonight. Hungry, Sev?" She looked up at him with cool, base lust in her dark eyes.

Hermione met Bellatrix's gaze and was about to drop her eyes, but something prevented her. She saw something strange in the dark woman's mind. Like a bandit, Hermione slipped in and was out so quickly Bellatrix had no time to register the invasion. It puzzled her, and she made a mental note to mention it to Severus.

Severus' long nose wrinkled with distaste. "I'm sure we can find you a saucer of milk, Bella, if you're peckish. Our Lord requested I bring my concubine, and she is overjoyed at the opportunity to pay her respects to the Dark Lord, and to thank him personally for his continued favour."

The sound issuing from the dark woman's lips was akin to a snarl, and she gave them both a thunderous look as she disappeared through a set of double doors. Severus ignored her, and turned to Narcissa Malfoy. He gave her an almost courtly bow, and took both her hands in his.

"Always lovely to see you, Narcissa. I hope you are well."

Narcissa nodded almost imperceptibly. She ignored Hermione. "Thank you, Severus. I am well, as is Draco." There was tension around her ice-blue eyes. Very quietly, she leaned forward. "Are you spending your summer at Spinner's End?"

Severus nodded. "It is my intention. Why do you ask?"

Before she could reply, the doors opened and Bellatrix lounged in the doorway. "The Dark Lord will see you now. You, and your " she sneered at Hermione. "-pet." She stared down at Hermione as they walked by, and Hermione met her gaze with all the serenity she could muster, as they all entered the receiving room.

The room was long and narrow, with an enormous, square table at the closest end. Hermione surreptitiously looked around for others, and saw an honour guard of two Death Eaters, one on either side of a large chair that sat at the far end of the room. From within her mind, Hermione felt Severus reach out to her. *Calm yourself. I am with you. No matter what, I am with you. Always.*

Hearing his words of comfort, Hermione relaxed, and focused her attention on the figure in the chair at the end of the room. Seated there was the creature that had terrified and paralysed the entire Wizarding world.

As Hermione approached Lord Voldemort for the first time, she was struck by how fragile he looked. He was much shorter than Severus, only a little taller than, say, Harry, but he was weedy and thin, and looked so frail it was hard to believe the power the wizard commanded. Hermione felt her heart-rate increase, and again she willed herself to relax. She knew the walls of her occluded mind were stronger when she was calm.

"Severus, how kind of you to join us this evening. I'm pleased you received my message, and brought your concubine."

As one, Severus and Hermione bowed at the Dark Lord's feet, and touched the hem of his garment to their lips in unison. "You and your companion move as one, Severus. Like dancers," Voldemort murmured, watching the two of them rise together.

He beckoned to Hermione. "Come forward, child. Let us have a look at the young lady who has so warmed the blood of our dear Potions master."

Shaking, Hermione looked quickly at Severus, who imperiously gestured her to obey the Dark Lord. With a pounding heart, she stepped closer to the monstrous wizard, keeping her head lowered, until she heard Bellatrix's mocking laughter. In an obscene parody of baby-talk, Bella cooed, "Ooh, is the ickle Mudblood all scared?"

Amidst the uneasy laughter of the others in the room, Hermione looked at Bellatrix coolly. "I would think that obvious, Mrs. Lestrange."

She turned back to focus her attention on Voldemort. "Though I am little more than an infant in your service, My Lord, I have great respect for your power. I cannot afford the arrogance of fearlessness, My Lord," she said, glancing toward Bellatrix, "I am not a Pureblood."

Bellatrix snarled, "Why, you filthy little "

"Bella, my darling," the Dark Lord said, "one must never be rude to a guest. Especially," he turned his gaze onto Hermione's averted face, "when they are correct."

Severus could feel his heart pounding. He stole a glance at the Dark Lord, who was watching Hermione intently. Finally, Voldemort rose from his chair and cupped Hermione's chin in his smooth, dry hand. Hermione met the Dark Lord's gaze, matching his with a calm, slightly aloof expression on her face. Severus felt his heart swell with pride, and fear drain from his body. His mind cleared of its panic.

"I must insist on manners, my dear Bellatrix," the Dark Lord hissed, with exaggerated courtesy. It made Severus' skin crawl. "Our guest is here because she is the consort of my most trusted spy, and therefore she is my trusted spy as well. Your reputation precedes you, Miss Granger."

Hermione smiled at the Dark Lord. It was a knowing, sensuous smile, and Severus reached out to stroke her hair. He felt her relax almost imperceptibly. His touch, intimate and possessive, was not lost on the Dark Lord, who tilted his head, throwing his reptilian features into greater relief. He released Hermione, and she stepped back to stand beside her lover, who stroked her cheek and playfully pinched Hermione's earlobe. She smiled up at him adoringly.

Voldemort regarded the two lovers for a moment. "What news, my dear Severus? Are you well?"

"I am quite well, My Lord, and I thank you for your concern," Severus purred, using his voice to maximum effect.

Voldemort watched his spy carefully. "And what news do you bring me from Hogwarts, and our friend Albus?"

Severus bit his lip. "The headmaster has assigned me to the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"Excellent, news, Severus. After all these years, he is finally acknowledging your worth. I'm sure it is very gratifying, albeit twenty years too late."

Severus did not bother to hide the bitterness in his eyes. He had begged for the post for years. It had always been Dumbledore's subtle punishment, to deny Severus the position he'd desired the most, only to taunt him with a series of the worst sort of bungling fools to stumble their way through a classroom. Lupin had been passable, but the years of animosity had clouded Severus' judgment....

Severus continued. "Potter is with his Muggle relatives and therefore protected, but he plans to spend part of the summer with the blood traitor Weasleys. Dumbledore has confided in me that when the school term resumes, he plans to give Potter 'special lessons' in Defense. He will tell no one the extent or form these 'special lessons' will take. He grows more frightened with each passing day that Potter will fail in his quest."

"It must be devastating for Albus, knowing his champion is quite unsuitable for the task."

"Indeed, Sire. The question of Potter failing is no longer 'if', but 'when', My Lord. I predict that 'when' will be this year."

Voldemort was nodding. "This is positive news indeed. I, too, believe that this will be the year that all the pieces will fall into place."

The Dark Lord regarded Severus for a moment. "I must ask you, Severus ... what is the band on your finger? Tell me. I'm ..." the Dark Lord licked his thin lips, "curious."

Severus looked down at his left hand. He smirked. "A gift from Hermione, My Lord. A token of her appreciation."

Voldemort looked at Hermione. "Indeed? A ring is a very personal gift, my dear. Come, tell me about this token of yours." His voice was pleasant, almost kind.

Hermione looked into the Dark Lord's reptilian eyes, and within her mind, she heard Severus' voice.

*Now, Hermione.*

Hermione dropped to her knees, and looked up at Voldemort, her expression rapturous. "My Lord, firstly, I would like to thank you for asking me to accompany my Master today." She looked up into his eyes, and she opened herself to the Dark Lord. She felt his slimy violation into her mind. She had prepared for this; it seemed like she'd planned for this moment since the first time Severus Legilimized into her mind.

She allowed certain images to appear before the Dark Lord; she and Severus, kissing, their mouths fused together ... Severus' hand sliding down her knickers as they watched themselves in the mirror ... Hermione straddling him ... screaming in passion ... facing Harry, angry, resentful, trying unsuccessfully to convince Harry about Sirius Black, tearing at her back, mounting her ... Severus, rescuing her from Black, carrying her to the infirmary to stem Dolohov's curse ... Dumbledore placating Harry, defending Sirius ... All the images she revealed were true, if embellished somewhat. Each was at least grounded in reality.

Now Hermione pushed open a door in her mind, beckoning the Dark Lord to follow, and he obliged. Hermione showed him a 'memory' of Severus, comforting her after Dumbledore accused her of lying to Harry; Hermione placing Severus' hands on her belly, as he smiled at her with lust and ownership; the two of them in quiet discussion, as they spoke of their anger and betrayal at the hands of Potter and Dumbledore; and their commitment to destroy them ...

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, Hermione felt the cleansing release of Voldemort leaving her mind. For a moment, he watched her intently, almost hungrily. He turned to Bellatrix. "Leave us ... all of you."

Bellatrix gave Hermione a look of pure, jealous hatred, as she and the two guards left the room.

When Severus and Hermione were finally alone with the Dark Lord, he regally sat back in his throne-like chair. For a moment, he regarded the two of them. Finally, he turned to the dark-haired wizard. "How far along?"

"Two months gone, My Lord," Severus replied. He and Hermione waited, breathless. Without fear of reprisal, Severus took her hand. *So be it. We are here together. We've done the best we could with the shitty hand we've been dealt. It is a good plan. He will either take the bait or he won't. It is in the lap of the gods now. I am with you, Hermione.*

"I had heard rumours that Miss Granger was with child. Our own Bella thought this might be why you were so ... occupied at the Department of Ministries," Voldemort said, cryptically. "Tell me Severus, why did you put your seed into your consort? To please her, or to ensure her complete submission to you, and her complete betrayal of Harry Potter?"

Severus, still holding onto Hermione's hand, led them to their knees. They bowed at the Dark Lord's feet. He smiled demurely. "You know me all too well, Sire. I had hoped this was the reason you requested her to accompany me." Severus turned himself away from Hermione. "My concubine belongs to me now, Sire. Dumbledore and Potter betrayed her. Black is dead and she cannot accuse him. She is my slave now, as you knew she would be when you removed all other ... distractions from her life.

"You gave us the key, My Lord, when you freed her from her Muggle world. We believe, My Lord, that together we can facilitate the destruction of both Dumbledore and Potter. Hermione still has access to the boy that few can afford, and Dumbledore is growing weaker and more paranoid as the days pass. Soon, he will be useless."

Voldemort made a dismissive gesture with a skeletal hand. "So I've heard," Voldemort said. "In the meantime, I understand Potter is very distraught over the death of his godfather." Hermione looked down, a gesture not lost on the Dark Lord. "I am sure, my dear, that you do not share his views."

Hermione kept her eyes averted in shame. "Sirius treated me no better than an animal, My Lord. I thought he was someone to be trusted, just as I thought Harry and Dumbledore could be trusted. I have no compassion for them anymore. They deserve your wrath," she said, bitterness and contempt darkening her voice.

Voldemort looked from one to the other, first Severus, then Hermione. "Quite clever of you, Severus. You chose well with your little lioness. Albus betrays the girl's faith, and you avenge her by fucking her right under his nose. It would be a bitter blow indeed if Albus were to find out about Harry Potter's best friend, hiding her swollen belly under her demure school robes, while Potter's most hated professor bends that best friend over her desk between classes."

"She is quite the randy little minx," Severus purred, stroking his hand sensuously against her cheek, as if to praise her. "My Lord, the day you strike Potter down, I will happily fuck her over Potter's dead body, if it would please you to watch." As if to illustrate, Hermione kissed Severus' hand fervently, her eyes bright and full of desire. Severus looked down at her with a sneer.

Voldemort laughed. He had ever enjoyed Severus' coarseness; it had creativity and finesse, something many of his minions lacked greatly. He reached forward and stroked Severus' face, almost sensuously, like a lover. "Who would have thought such a clever little thing would have heated your blood so, Severus? I am pleased now, in any case. Not only does your little pet share your hatred of Dumbledore and his anemic champion, Harry Potter, but she seems to have obviated the memory of Potter's mother from your mind as well. I had despaired that you would be forever mooning over your first love."

His sensuous stroking continued, and Severus closed his eyes, as if being pleased by it. Voldemort continued. "I had once thought your misplaced loyalty might be a liability, perhaps one that Dumbledore would exploit, but I see my misgivings were unfounded. Of course, he would no doubt ship you to Azkaban before nightfall should he discover your little indiscretion. It would be a tragedy to have your lovely consort cast out, to fend for herself, as the discarded whore of a spy. Much better that we keep you protected, shielded from the dangers Albus and Harry Potter represent.

"Yes, this is valuable knowledge, Severus. But how can I use it?" He looked at the two of them carefully. "Tell me, my dear, how can a half-blood spy and his Mudblood concubine win me this war?"

Hermione paused for a moment. In a low, respectful voice, she said, "My Lord, I know Harry Potter. I can deliver him to you when the time is right. He and the Order trust me implicitly, and I can convince him that I'm still fighting with him. Say the word, and I will give him to you, as a sign of my devotion."

She looked into the eyes of the monster, and pretended he was a god. "My Master and I can be a formidable weapon for you. We are trusted by those who would plot your downfall. I do not seek glory, My Lord. All I ask, when you come into your kingdom, that I be allowed to serve you, for the glory of my Master." She looked up at Severus with such devotion and fervor, for an ugly moment, Severus saw the shadow of Bellatrix in her eyes.

Voldemort watched her carefully as well. "Such passion. Severus. Such fire. I see why you enjoy fucking her so much." Hermione, acting the part of the wanton with perfection, leaned against her mate, and closed her eyes. Severus stroked her 'pregnant' belly, and together they knelt. "Both of you are so eager to bow to me. So eager to debase yourselves."

Hermione looked into the Dark Lord's eyes. "The Wizarding world has debased us. Dumbledore has debased us. I dedicate all my power to you. Together, I believe that my Master and I can be the perfect weapon to give both Harry Potter and Dumbledore to you."

Voldemort looked at Severus. "I'm pleased, Severus. You have trained and molded her well. Perhaps the child she carries will be the first to be born in our brave new world."

"It would honour us both, My Lord." Severus willed himself to stand.

Voldemort rose, and faced Hermione again. "The ideals of pure-blood supremacy are the foundation of our new world. You will have to understand this. Jealousy is no respecter of breeding."

Hermione bowed. "I understand, sir."

Voldemort gave a short, hissing laugh. It turned Hermione's stomach. "I confess, I did not believe you worthy of my Potions master in the beginning, but I see you are made of strength, in spite of your youth. You're ambitious, ruthless, passionate and powerful." Voldemort's voice grew cold and his eyes narrowed. "Everything my Death Eaters despise in a Mudblood."

Hermione felt her lips go numb. She was sure the blood had drained from her face. When Voldemort's voice changed, it was as if the temperature of the room dropped, and she was now sure she was a step away from death. *I'm sorry, Severus...*

Voldemort laughed again. "It is also everything I treasure in your Master, and he is also equally despised by them."

"I agree: you are a formidable team. I look forward to watching you destroy Hogwarts from the inside out. Once Hogwarts falls, the rest of the Wizarding world will follow. Mudbloods will be persecuted. Bring me Potter, and I will promise you my protection."

Hermione forced herself to remain looking at the Dark Lord, and she didn't even flinch when he placed his hand on her magically swollen abdomen. "And when the war is over and Potter and his ilk are no more, this child will stand as a symbol of the power of Voldemort. There will be rewards for all who are faithful to me, Severus. Your reward will be your life, and the lives of your family."

Severus watched, as Hermione's face lit up with joy, and she turned to him with tears standing in her eyes. To any observer, it appeared that Hermione was overcome with happiness at the Dark Lord's promise. Severus knew the reality was much more visceral.

The two of them dropped to their knees and kissed his robe again. "We will *never* fail you, My Lord," Severus said. Hermione was looking up at Voldemort as if he were the sun, and for a moment, Severus could almost believe she was indeed with child, glowing and blooming with his seed in her. The thought of it made his heart flutter.

Voldemort was looking at Severus, seeing emotion play across the dark wizard's face. "Yes, I'm very pleased with your plans. To show my pleasure, I will grant your request, Severus."

Severus paused. Delicately, he asked, "Request, My Lord?"

Voldemort tilted his head in that strange, reptilian way. "Why, to marry your little Mudblood concubine, of course! It is saturating your thoughts, or did you think you could hide them from me?"

Severus did not have to pretend to be surprised. "I did not dare presume to ask, Sire!"

Voldemort smiled. "Think of it as insurance, Severus. You would never risk betraying me for the sake of her life, and she would never betray you for the sake of her child." He sighed. "Haven't we learned that lesson with your former lover, Severus?"

Severus turned the full battery of his beautiful dark eyes to Voldemort. "You will never have to question our loyalty, My Lord. Others may try, in their arrogance and jealousy, to weaken your faith, but we will give you no cause. Thank you for this honour, My Lord."

The Dark Lord dropped his hand, and sat back on his throne-like chair. He raised his wasted arms in a gesture of blessing. "Go. Marry your cunning little concubine. Flaunt your impropriety right under Albus' nose! I look forward to watching your child grow, my dear."

He made a subtle gesture of dismissal. "I assume you will return to Spinner's End after you bed your bride. I will send Wormtail ahead, to make it ready."

Severus hid his distaste perfectly. "That is most kind of you, Sire. I will adjust the wards to allow him access tomorrow."

"Excellent." Voldemort looked from one lover to the other. "It is a pity that neither of you are magical folk of pure blood. It does make my Death Eaters nervous to think my judgment may be influenced by those of lesser status. Then again, many of them are currently suffering from their own lapses of judgment by sitting in a cell in Azkaban."

He grinned, and Hermione could feel acid pool in her stomach. "Perhaps, when our future is established, a magical relative or two may turn up in your family tree, my dear. While I care little for politics, I do care that my favoured advisors are regarded in esteem by those of purer blood."

Voldemort turned to Severus. "Congratulations on your new appointment, Severus. I'm sure your instruction will be very informative. Who knows? Perhaps Mr. Potter may find himself the tragic victim of a classroom demonstration gone wrong."

"Indeed, My Lord. The end game is nigh; we will not fail you. We will deliver your enemies into your hands."

As Severus and Hermione backed away from the now disinterested Voldemort, Severus once again marveled at the young witch at his side. She had been clever, devious and fearless. At one point, he was terrified she'd made a misstep, but the Dark Lord, ever a will-o-the-wisp with his whims, had overlooked it and turned it into a compliment.

It stunned Severus how delicately Hermione had played the most powerful dark wizard the world had ever created. However, it also terrified him that they were now inextricably linked in the Dark Lord's mind. As long as one was of value to him, so would the other be; should one ever be found wanting, the other would be sacrificed as well.

Strangely, as they turned and walked through the door out into the corridor, Severus no longer felt the crippling fear that had been a part of him for so long. It was as Hermione had said: once they embarked on the course, they were committed, and there was a sort of fatalistic 'thy will be done' feeling about it. They were no longer marking time. The wheels of the end game were now set in motion.

They walked silently toward the door to leave. From the shadows, Narcissa Malfoy appeared, and beckoned to Severus. "I must speak to you," she hissed, urgently.



Severus looked at her closely. Narcissa was pale, tearful and clearly terrified. His heart sank. It could only be about Draco. He had been keenly aware the Dark Lord had neglected to mention his plans for Dumbledore and the part Draco was to play. It troubled Snape more that Dumbledore had already known. Who had told him?

He sighed. "I will be at Spinner's End in a few days' time, Narcissa. Feel free to call on us then."

"Us?"

Severus turned to Hermione. "Come, pet. The hour grows late." He placed a possessive arm around her, and together they walked from the manor. As they left, Hermione turned and looked at the lovely woman, and their eyes met. Narcissa did not flinch, or sneer, or turn away in disdain. Stealthily, Hermione Legilimized into her thoughts. Amidst the chaos, the only strong, sure thoughts were of Lucius, languishing in Azkaban, and Draco, and Narcissa's fierce, all encompassing determination to protect him.

*She and I aren't so different*, Hermione thought. *We're both frantic to protect our men from the war, and we'll do anything to that aim.*

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The air was cool as they walked from the manor. The last of the light was fading, turning the sky a beautiful midnight blue, and the two of them stopped and simply looked at it, grateful to be alive. The air smelled unbearably sweet, and they clasped hands and breathed in the night, as if it could dispel the slime of their encounter with Voldemort.

Severus heard a sharp sound, and turned to find tears flowing down Hermione's face. He took her in his arms. "It's alright, lass. I feel this way every time I leave this place."

She nodded, but the tears continued to flow, and he recognised the carving, curling sweetness of looking death in the face and walking away. He had done it many times, and it still left him feeling weak and half-mad.

He soothed and crooned, "Shhh, little one. No tears. Not now. You were sublime. You are the most amazing witch," he marvelled, kissing the tears from her face. He took her hand and they Apparated away.

When they were still again, Hermione looked around. Instead of seeing the familiar grounds outside the gates of Hogwarts, they seemed to have landed in the alleyway of a dirty, run down neighbourhood. Hermione wiped her eyes with his handkerchief and sniffed, wrinkling her nose at the smell of garbage and offal. "Severus, where are we?"

He smirked. "Spinner's End, lass. My home. I'm not taking you back to Hogwarts tonight. I'm going to keep you with me and make sure you marry me, before you come to your senses and change your mind."

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Chapter and opening lines: "Into Tomorrow" from Paul Weller

## Seventeen: Wedding Song

*Chapter 18 of 39*

Returning from the Dark Lord into the light...

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

*Apologies for the delay in this chapter. I promised some citrusy bits, but DMuse had other plans.*

*Special thanks to the queen of the betas, stgulik, for her tireless efforts to keep the Ashwinder mods from AK-ing me for my grammatical skills (or lack thereof). She deserves an Order of Merlin, First Class. Without her, this chapter would not be buffed to a pearly sheen. She is a treasure. Any mistakes are there because I couldn't resist piddling on it a little more before I posted it. Sorry, stgulik but I wanted you to have something to look forward to you haven't already read!*

*For Sempra and Mimi*

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Spinner's End was not Severus' first choice to take Hermione, but he had wanted to get away from the Dark Lord quickly, and it was the only secure place he could think of besides Hogwarts. For some reason, the idea of returning to the school was abhorrent; he told Hermione he felt just as protected at Spinner's End. The honest truth was that he wanted simply to be alone with her, and this was the only other place he felt safe.

He could feel Hermione trembling beneath his fingers, and he understood her reaction completely. Returning from the Dark Lord unscathed always left a slick feeling of violation in his soul; it was that sensation of having touched something corpulent, rancid, which left him feeling unclean. Hermione felt it, too, and was now shivering in reaction to the taint of her audience with Voldemort.

Severus felt fiercely proud of her; she had managed to deceive one of the greatest Legilimens the world had ever seen, and they had lived to tell the tale. He was also frightened at the knowledge that they had tricked him into believing that Hermione was pregnant. This was something they had to discuss, and try to find a solution quickly.

If Severus was completely truthful (*and this is a time for truths, isn't it?* he thought ruefully), riding throughout his consciousness was the exhilarating relief of surviving the Dark Lord's audience, and the undercurrent of lust that always followed it. Looking down at Hermione, Severus felt that same dark desire that had driven him to Knockturn Alley all those months ago, looking for a whore with curly, honey-brown hair.

It now imbued him with an almost irresistible craving for Hermione. It would be a long night, by his reckoning. He'd waited this long; he would be disciplined enough to wait until tomorrow. His will would just have to be stronger than the drives of his body, no matter how irresistible the temptation.

Once he'd locked the door and warded it with his heaviest charms, Severus and Hermione looked at each other and relaxed. Severus sighed, slumped into a nearby chair and held out his hand. Like the obedient little witch she was, Hermione crossed the room to touch him. He looked up into her face, which was as lovely to him as Lily's had never tried to be. *Gods, I am sending her into the jaws of death, and she is going there happily because of me. When the time comes, let me be worthy of this witch.*

*Please don't let me fail her.*

"Welcome, my darling," he said with a smirk and an ironic sweep of his long-fingered hand, "to the venerable Snape family manse."

Sobering again, he gently drew her toward him, until she was standing between his knees. "Hermione, I come from nothing; not even my mother's Pureblood status could wash Toby Snape's Muggle taint from me. So I cultivated a posh accent and aped the way Purebloods dressed and acted. I learned to put it on and take it off like my first robes, which were given to me by a charity, by the way. I've got little money," he added, and looked around the dreary room with a look of disdain. "This house is the only possession I actually own besides my wand and my clothes and books."

"I've made so many mistakes in my life, I don't even know how to catalog the things I do right anymore. The Dark Lord uses me because I am a handy tool; when I am no longer useful, he'll discard me. Now that you are associated with me, he'll discard you, too."

Hermione saw the desolation and the fear in his eyes. Impulsively, she took his hands in hers and looked down into his careworn face. "You used to believe those things about yourself. Then you dared to believe the truth, and because you started to hope, Dumbledore callously snuffed it out of you like a candle. I wish I could curse him for killing the hope in you that Voldemort had been incapable of even bruising."

She looked into his eyes with so much love his throat tightened. With a voice full of conviction and surety, she declared, "I will reignite that hope. And as far as your Dark Lord is concerned, we will become indispensable to him. He will never think of us as surplus to requirements." Her voice softened. "I'm not under any illusions, Severus. You've told me your background; I know you don't have much money, and I don't care. You heard my parents' solicitor; I have enough money to keep us comfortable, and when this is over we can decide what we want to do with it. And as for positions and society, I've never been one to care much for them; the Wizarding world broke me of that the first time Lucius Malfoy turned his nose up at me for being Muggle-born."

She sat in his lap, and his arms enfolded her automatically. Looking into his severe, harsh face, Hermione sighed. "I love you, Severus Snape. For better or worse. I will have you as my husband. Y-you once told me your back would always be to mine." Her voice broke, and tears spilled from her amber eyes. "That we would always fight alongside each other, until there were no more enemies to fight, and together we would win! Separately, my love, we can't do it. But together, we can do anything, because love will keep us safe! It's all we have left!"

Hermione became aware that Severus was holding her in a punishing grip, and she sobbed, "So help me, Severus, I'm too far in now. You have too much of me now. It's not a matter of living as your widow. It's a matter of living, full stop. And I'll gladly, gladly face death if it means you are walking this earth."

Shaking his head incredulously, he cried out, "What makes you think I would want to walk the earth without you by my side?" Suddenly, he crushed her to his chest so tightly she could barely breathe. Cupping her face in his hand, he frantically kissed the tears from her cheeks, murmuring, "I will keep fighting alongside you ... I will..."

Hermione returned his kisses with equal fervor, and somewhere, in the middle of this reaffirmation, their litany changed from "I will... I will..." to "We will... We will..."

Suddenly, a silver phoenix burst into the room, and Hermione jumped from Severus' lap, even as he moved to shield her from the Patronus. He felt a brief, feral surge of satisfaction that Albus had been too impatient to wait for him. The curse was already affecting Dumbledore's mind, making him a bit more unpredictable than usual. Severus was still confident that his own power over the older wizard was enough to keep him in check. It was a dangerous game he was playing with the headmaster.

The glorious Patronus said, "Severus, I'm glad to know you have returned safely, dear boy. I require a word with you in private." The Patronus disappeared in a swirl of shimmering magic. Severus stared at the spot where the phoenix had stood, trying to decide whether or not to indulge the old man. Fuck it; he was feeling generous.

Severus turned back to Hermione, his smirk fading on his lips. With a start, he realised the girl was almost asleep on her feet. She looked up at him with the soft, blank expression of an exhausted child, and his heart ached with a tenderness he had once thought himself incapable of feeling.

Without a word, he scooped her up in his arms and carried her to his bedroom. She didn't protest, but merely laid her head on his shoulder. The events of the day were draining; any time spent in the presence of the Dark Lord was exhausting, as if his very essence siphoned happiness and energy from the room. More than once Severus had returned from a revel and slept for a full day; even Dumbledore was unable to rouse him on those occasions.

Severus kissed Hermione's forehead, and laid her on his bed, tucking her in. She looked at him sleepily, and held out her arms like a child. He held her, a fierce protectiveness flooding his being. Once again, he vowed to do anything to keep this woman, his woman, safe. He kissed her soft lips as tenderly as his own turbulent emotions would allow, and cursed Dumbledore and the Dark Lord for making him spend one second away from her.

Softly, he stroked her cheek with his own, and murmured, "I have to speak with the headmaster. This house's wards are unbreakable, so don't try to breach them, even if someone comes. Unlikely, I know, but don't answer the door. The wards will hold."

She nodded and yawned. "Hurry back." Her eyes flew open. "Severus! Will you retrieve something from my room at Hogwarts and bring it back with you?"

Bemused, he said, "Of course. What do you want?"

She smiled sleepily and lay back down. "On my bed is a beaded bag. I really need it."

"Done." Severus rose, straightening his robes. "I confess, I am intrigued. What's in this bag that's so important?"

She gave a secret smile. "Everything."

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An hour later, Severus returned, clutching the beaded bag in one hand and his temper in the other. He had never had such a fruitless conversation with the headmaster before. Albus had listened to his update, frowning when Severus told him of Hermione's pregnancy ruse, then merely shrugged as if to indicate he thought the whole matter of little importance.

He blithely refused to answer Severus' questions about Albus' uncanny knowledge of Draco's mission to kill the headmaster, merely repeating his earlier edict that he would require Severus' continued help on keeping the curse at bay until the proper time presented itself to take his life. It chilled and angered Severus that Albus could be so matter-of-fact about it.

"Albus, how do you expect me to help you if you make me fight blind?" Severus fumed, his dark eyes flashing. "Why won't you tell me what I need to know to keep everyone safe?"

Albus patted his hand almost fondly. "Such things aren't necessary to know just now, dear boy. In time, all will be revealed. You must learn to trust me."

Frustrated, Severus turned to leave. "I can see you are in a mood to be capricious. I know I'll get nothing from you now." He whirled to face the headmaster. "But if your caginess causes harm to Potter, upon your head be it."

Dumbledore's eyes snapped. "I would never endanger Harry, Severus. Everything I am doing is to prepare him."

"For what, Albus? What is to happen to the boy? What does the prophecy mean? Why won't you tell me?" Severus could feel bile rise in his throat, his frustration at Dumbledore's reticence making him feel ill.

Almost patiently, the headmaster replied, "All will be revealed in the fullness of time, Severus. I know you will understand in the end."

Severus stared at Albus for a long time, then turned again to leave, shaking his head in anger and frustration. As he approached the Floo, Albus said, "Severus?"

Severus turned back once more to the man who had been his friend, his jailer, his saviour, his master. Albus was looking at him carefully. "I assume your impending

nuptials are still taking place in the morning."

Unwilling to discuss it, Severus nodded curtly. Albus returned the nod. "Very well. If you are to do this deed, I only ask that you and I must come up with a way to keep it concealed from the student body. I suspect Voldemort wishes it as well, or he would have spoken to you about it publicly."

With more composure than he thought himself capable, Severus replied, "Indeed, he was very careful to make sure no one was in the room but Hermione and me. He didn't want the news coming back to you, probably for fear you would have me locked up in Azkaban by nightfall."

"I would, too, if I didn't need you so badly," Albus retorted, his tone uncharacteristically petulant. "I don't condone it, but my hands are tied." He sighed, and looked at the younger wizard carefully. "I acknowledge the two of you share a magical bond the like of which I have seldom seen. I am forced to trust it. I am forced to believe that you and Miss Granger are doing this because it is the best recourse."

Severus pressed his lips together. He finally said, "Is that all, Albus? I have a very long day ahead of me, and I don't like leaving Hermione alone right now."

Dumbledore looked puzzled. "Why not? Surely the Death Eaters will leave you alone at Spinner's End?"

Severus stared, dumbfounded. The older man's continued disregard for Hermione's needs, her safety even her word of honor as a victim of Sirius Black's near-rape suddenly astounded Severus beyond measure.

"Albus, she has lost her parents. She is recovering from a life-threatening curse, and I'm all she has in this world."

"She has her friends. She has Harry and Ronald "

"Oh, yes, Headmaster, they certainly possess the wisdom and maturity to help her! If Potter hadn't gone off half-cocked to the Ministry on a quixotic rescue mission, her family and her health would be fine."

"No, you caused their deaths, Severus. You were the reason she stepped between you and Dolohov." Albus held up his blackened, twisted hand. "I am not judging you, dear boy. I am not trying to hurt you."

Severus, trembled with sickening anger, knowing every word Albus had spoken was true, and ground out, "No, you're not trying to hurt me, Dumbledore. You are succeeding." His black eyes flashed, and Albus leaned back slightly as Severus walked toward him. "Yes, you know me so well, Albus. You know the best way to destroy me is with the truth." His voice dripped with contempt. "Bravo, well played, Albus. Yes, I was the reason her parents were killed. I was the reason she almost died." Severus drew himself up then, and deep within he felt *her* there with him, telling him not to be ashamed. "And I'm also the reason she's alive. And I'll tell you this before I go."

With more love and passion in his eyes than Albus had seen in years, Severus said, "She's also the reason I can still drag myself out of bed each morning, Albus." He closed his eyes, as if to picture her, lying in his bed. "She is the reason I can still fight, and I can still assist your precious Harry Potter. She is the reason I can still face the Dark Lord, knowing I'm a hairsbreadth away from death. Not you, not Lily. Hermione."

Albus could only stare in silence. He had seen this angry young boy grow into an angry young man. He had seen him apoplectic with rage, seething with resentment, spitting with hate. Until now, Albus had never seen him burn with self-righteous fire, blaze with life.

Severus sneered at his headmaster's stunned expression, delivering a parting shot as he strode toward the Floo. "Congratulate me, Albus. I'm going to be married in a few hours, and this time tomorrow, I'm going to be the best-laid man in Wizarding Britain."

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Hermione had been napping peacefully when Severus returned from Hogwarts. His harsh features softened at the sight of the lovely girl lying in his bed. He sighed, replaying the scene in the headmaster's office. Dumbledore might try and keep throwing the past back in Severus' face for his own purposes, but Severus finally, finally felt free of the constraints of guilt. The past was done. From now on, he would concentrate on the present and the future.

He glanced down at the innocuous bag in his hand, wondering with amusement why Hermione had been so insistent that he bring such a little trifle back with him. Curious, Severus unfastened the clasp and looked inside. And looked. And looked again, and then thrust his hand in. He buried his arm up to the shoulder inside the bag, and still couldn't touch bottom.

He withdrew his hand and, using his wand, muttered, "Lumos," and lowered his wand down in the bag. Severus peered down into the depths of Hermione's purse; it looked like a vault at Gringotts, and contained so many items it staggered him. Books, potions, parchments, bottles of ink and quills. Medical supplies, Muggle first-aid, clothing, empty vials, passports, even the small box she'd taken from her parents' room. All this in a bag so light, he had thought it empty.

Severus grinned, and stifled a laugh. He really was, after all, marrying the cleverest witch of her age.

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The simplest thing to do, they decided, was to Apparate to a Muggle train station and take the earliest train to Gretna Green. Hermione, refreshed and bright-eyed after her nap, found one of Severus' old formal robes in the sagging wardrobe upstairs and transformed it into a smart Muggle dress of olive green. Her shoes she managed to shift into smart, low-heeled pumps without too much bother. To her amusement, Severus refused to look at her handiwork.

"I thought it was bad luck to see the bride before the wedding," he said.

"It's just the dress, not the whole bride," she laughed.

He also staunchly refused to sleep with her for the short remainder of the night. "There is a sofa in the library that is passably comfortable. I shall sleep there and you will continue to use my bedroom."

Exasperated at this sudden insistence on adhering to Muggle marriage etiquette, Hermione rolled her eyes. "Since when have you troubled yourself with superstitions?" She allowed herself a little pout. "I had hoped we would spend the night together."

Severus fixed her with a baleful eye. "And what did you imagine we'd be doing, my girl - talking?" He scoffed. "Hphmm. And don't sulk; it's very unbecoming. I want to have my last night as a bachelor alone, because ... it's my last night as a bachelor." He gave her an appraising glance. "By the way, did you get it?"

"Get what?"

Severus smirked, and Hermione thought he must be relaxing a little, to allow his natural snarkiness to seep through. "The all-clear from Madam Pomfrey. That's where you were this morning, was it not?"

"Oh!" Hermione laughed, blushing brightly. "Actually I did. And I got more than that, as well." She gave him a little grin, and Severus felt intrigued in spite of himself. A single eyebrow, delicately lifted, asked the question for him.

Hermione, looking rather pleased with herself, opened the magically expanded beaded bag. "Where is Accio blue vial!" There was the soft slap of a glass vial hitting her palm. Hermione withdrew a small blue bottle from the bag. "She gave me this." Hermione dropped her chin and looked at Severus through her lashes, almost coquettishly. "Just in case."

Severus knew the contents immediately by the shape and colour of the bottle alone. Cheeky little witch. Something of Hermione's playfulness seemed to buff up against

him, and smooth some of the sharp edges of the day. Crossing his arms with mock imperiousness, Severus looked down at his fiancée. "And what, pray tell, is that, my dear?"

Hermione bit her bottom lip. "It's erm, it's a contraceptive potion." She rolled her eyes at her hopeless attempt to sound nonchalant.

A little imp settled behind Severus' left ear, and he looked at Hermione carefully. "I see. And you procured this... potion earlier today? Just how long have you been planning to propose, Hermione?"

She froze for a moment, and began to stammer. "Well, I well... of course I didn't know... I mean "

He decided to put her out of her misery. Holding up a hand to stop her, he shook his head. "Oh, Lass, one of the first things you will have to do as my wife is to get used to your husband's sense of humour." It was his turn to roll his eyes. "How long have you known me?"

Her eyes flew open wide, and Hermione suddenly laughed, blushing furiously. "I should have known you wouldn't make things easy!" She looked up at the man she would marry tomorrow, but he merely stood, looking down at her, a smirk twisting his lips.

It suddenly occurred to Hermione that she was talking about her Potions professor. Severus Snape, the wizard who'd driven her to distraction in class over the years. She was marrying him tomorrow. She was going to do all those things to him she'd read about in her mother's books, and that made her feel hot and cold at once. "I guess I still have a lot to learn about you, Severus Snape. Husband." She lowered her eyes. "I was just so nervous showing you the potion, I didn't think you'd end up teasing me about it."

"Nervous? Why on earth would you be nervous around me, Lass?" Severus' stance relaxed, and his expression softened. "You know more about me than anyone who has ever lived. You have no reason for anxiety around me."

"Unless you're being an arse."

He made a small moue of concession. "There is that."

"You're not *too* much of an arse. Except in class."

"I should think so, too, Madam Snape-to-be."

Hermione smiled at him fondly, and once again Severus was reminded just how much this little witch was sacrificing to protect him. She was so fine, so strong, and so beautiful. He shook his head in wonder.

"You humble me, witch," he said, his voice turning to liquid silver, and he saw her ribcage lift, as if remembering another time, a time when he spoke to her in these honeyed tones in order to soothe and stir. He sat down on the edge of the bed, and held out his arms to her.

"Come," he intoned solemnly, and drew Hermione into his lap. He pulled her legs up tight, until she was completely encircled by his arms, seated on his lap. She leaned against him and sighed, reveling in his warmth, his scent, his solidity.

He gazed down upon her, and she looked up at him, into those liquid, fathomless black eyes. His voice was rich and warm. "What a horrendously long day. I scarcely can comprehend that it was only this morning you went to visit Madam Pomfrey, then we survived a near-mortal audience with the Dark Lord, and then, to top it all off, Albus Dumbledore summoned me to award me the happy task of ending his life."

Hermione shook her head. "Severus, don't "

"Hear me out, Lass. We've lived a lifetime in the past twenty-four hours. In a very short time, we start a new life. I cannot hope to know what the next few months will bring to us."

His stern features looked harsh and angular in the light of the lamp. "Tomorrow night is our wedding night, Hermione. If you are ready, I wish to make you mine. I want nothing more than to show you how a wizard makes love to the witch he desires."

He planted a gentle kiss on her forehead, and they held each other, feeling their bodies stir for one another. In a soft voice, sweetened with longing, he crooned, "I do want you, Hermione; I've wanted you for so long, now. There is nothing about me that is hidden from you. And when I take you as my wife, I will not rest until you know how much you are cherished and desired."

Severus gently cupped her cheek against his large palm, and she leaned against his hand with a look of bliss softening her features. He kissed her smooth forehead again. "To tell you the truth, I want to sleep alone this night so that tomorrow I will remember what it was like to be without you, and know I will never have to be so again."

He stroked her hair absently, and Hermione turned to him. "I know it will hurt when you when you break the hymen " she said quickly, in a mad rush to say it without sounding completely foolish. "But I understand that. I'm not afraid of it."

He graced her with one of his rare, precious smiles, and Hermione felt her body yearn for him. He purred, "Well, that is one of us. I have never been with a virgin before, and I'm terrified of hurting you."

Hermione smiled. "It's alright, Severus. I'll be gentle with you."

He looked at her in surprise, then rewarded her with a lingering kiss that threatened to ignite into a blaze of passion, but he pulled away from her in time. It was too easy to give into the little witch's treasures.

"Rest now, little one. I want us both to be rested and ready, so that when we return tomorrow, there will be nothing awaiting us but pleasure."

Hermione's eyes closed in a slow blink, as his voice coiled around her. A sweet, hot little ball of desire bloomed low and molten in her belly, and she knew she was more than ready to give herself to this man. "I want that as well, more than anything. I want us to be able to shut out the world tomorrow."

Severus tipped her chin up toward his face, and planted the softest of kisses on her lips. "Then allow me this one indulgence, Lass, and tomorrow night, anything you demand of me will be yours." He felt her breathing quicken, and he smiled against her hair as she pressed her body against his. "*Everything* you demand will be yours, my girl."

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There was something about this couple that Registrar Leo Keown really liked. He mentioned it to his wife later that evening, and when she asked him why he liked this particular couple so much, he honestly couldn't tell her. He just knew that he did.

The actual fact of the matter was that he liked this couple so much because Severus had Confunded him into liking them. It made the procedure of paperwork and red tape all but disappear.

Registrar Keown was an optimist and a romantic; he knew many couples came to Gretna Green for the 'quickie wedding,' but he harboured a secret feeling that he had some say in their marriage's longevity. He truly believed in the power of the marriage vow, and hoped that every couple who stood before him and pronounced the words would stay together. He didn't bother to find out how many couples divorced, but he was laying bets with himself that this unusual couple would go the distance.

Both of them were intelligent and sharp you could see that in their eyes. Each was gentle and courteous to the other, and the little touches, like the man's hand on her waist, the woman's grip on his arm all told the Registrar these two were solid. His own wife would tell him to not be so daft, but he believed it.

Keown stood before the two people, and spoke the words he'd said four times already that morning, but for some reason, they seemed to signify so much more to this couple. For one thing, they seemed so devoted to one another. For another, there was something about them that broke the Registrar's heart a little: it was as if the two of them felt their love was so precious, they were almost in awe of it. There was the feeling that they knew life was all too short, and they wanted to treasure each day they had together. Or maybe Keown was just the silly old sod his mates always accused him of being.

The Registrar looked down at his prompt card, and began. "Friends, we are gathered together to celebrate the marriage of Severus and Hermione. They have come here today to declare their wish to be joined in matrimony, and we wish them Godspeed on their journey together as husband and wife. They do not enter into this lightly, but with all seriousness and respect for one another, and we are blessed to witness their joining."

Keown looked up at the dour man with the dark hair and pale, aesthetic features, and smiled. "Do you, Severus Tobias Snape, take Hermione Jean Granger, to be your wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, to protect, and be faithful to her until you are parted by death?"

The stern man looked down at his bride, and his dark, unyielding expression softened to the point where he was almost handsome. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "I will do all these things, until I am parted from you by death," he replied, and his voice rolled through the room like incense in church. Keown and the other witnesses looked at the man with new respect. His speaking voice was truly wondrous; low and vibrant, full of power and beauty, each word given depth and meaning and weight.

The young woman smiled up at her groom, love and desire blooming in her eyes. As the registrar repeated the vows, she kept her unwavering gaze on the groom's face, and she said, "I will do all these things, until I am parted from you by death!"

As she said her vows, Hermione mentally pushed her love, her devotion, her confidence, and her unswerving belief toward Severus. He almost reeled with the emotions washing over him, and his mind whispered, *It's alright, Lass. I'm not afraid anymore.*

Tears filled Hermione's eyes, and she sent a little message back. *I wish Mum and Dad were here. They would approve, you know. They would have understood* She slipped her father's ring on Severus' finger, and he placed her mother's ring on Hermione's. It felt like the right thing to do for both of them.

Registrar Keown smiled at the couple. "What has been joined together here today, let no one interfere with or threaten." He nodded. "I proudly pronounce you man and wife." He fixed his eye on the imposing groom. "You may kiss your wife now, Mr. Granger-Snape."

Severus, feeling ill at ease in front of the registrar and the two nameless, already-forgotten witnesses they had literally pulled off the street, self-consciously turned to Hermione. She looked up at him with a mixture of love and hope. Underneath was a soft, trusting whisper of innocent sensuality. It was that confident, untried lust that made him forget everything but Hermione, and Severus leaned forward and kissed his wife with soft lips that promised her all she wanted.

Severus turned to face the Registrar, and lifted his head imperceptibly. He was a new man, with a new life now. It would all be alright.

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By the time they returned to Spinner's End, it was already early afternoon. They had walked to the Apparition point in near silence, each suddenly acutely aware of each other, and their newly-married status. Severus stole occasional glances at his young bride. She looked calm and serene, even happy. As if aware of his attention, she turned and smiled up at him. There was a mischievous look in her amber eyes. "Husband. My husband, Severus Snape."

He rumbled, "Severus Granger-Snape, if you don't mind, wife."

She smiled again, a pink tint to her flawless skin. "Thank you again. Taking my name was -" she turned to him, her eyes bright with emotion, "well, it means a lot to me."

"Just so." He nodded, drawing her into his arms. "We could have stayed in Scotland for the evening." He gave her a dark look. "Given you a proper honeymoon. Merlin knows it wasn't exactly a proper binding ceremony. Or a proper wedding, for that matter."

Hermione put her arms around his waist and drew him closer. "It was what I wanted."

"You deserve more."

Hermione looked up into her husband's pale, austere face. He was looking down at her, his obsidian eyes so dark they seemed to reflect back to her the colours of the world. Her heart ached for this man, in every way. It was as if she was nothing but a creature of sensation now, aching to feel him, to know him, to be so close to him he would never feel alone again. "It's what I wanted. I want us to be man and wife. We start our married life in your home."

Severus looked at her. "It's 'our' home now, Hermione. Such as it is, it belongs as much to you now as to me." He looked down at his wife, and kissed her forehead. "Everything I am is yours."

Hermione pressed against his chest, listening to his strong, steady heartbeat. "I have wanted you so long, I almost can't remember a time when I didn't."

Stunned, Severus rested his forehead against hers. "My wife. Hermione Granger-Snape. The sound of it pleases me, as precious few things have ever done."

He could feel her tremble, and he tipped her chin up so that her eyes met his. "You're shaking. Are you afraid of me, little one?" he teased, his voice soft and tender. He smiled down at her, and there was something so warm and intimate in his gaze, Hermione's breath caught.

"No," she said, her mouth suddenly dry, and the thought came into her head *Sex. We're talking about sex. He's experienced; I'm not. What if I'm not good at it? What if I don't satisfy him?*

His eyes narrowed, and Severus chuckled. "You do realise your thoughts are screaming to me, don't you, Lass? That I 'heard' every word of that little crisis of faith?"

Hermione gasped and felt humiliation wash over her like a shower of cold rain. For a moment, she was tempted to turn away, or cry, or run into the bathroom and ward the door behind her.

Then, the courage within, the bravery that had determined her place in her House, that had tricked the most powerful Dark Wizard of creation, that had bolstered the will of the man before her, stiffened her spine, and she said, "Well, be that as it may, but rest assured, husband, what I lack in experience I promise I will make up for in enthusiasm."

Severus stared at her for a moment, then threw back his head and laughed. He laughed for the first time in Hermione's memory; deep belly laughs that made her shake her head in wonder. Tears spurted from his eyes, and he flopped on a sagging sofa, wiping his eyes. "Oh, Hermione," he said, several times, as if this was both declaration and entreaty. "Oh, Hermione."

His head fell back, and he took a deep, shuddering breath and drew a shaking hand across his eyes. "Oh Hermione." His voice changed, became softer, sweeter, and more tender. At that moment, Hermione realised she had married a surprisingly handsome man.

He finally looked up at his wife, who still remained rooted to the spot, bemused. Invitingly, he patted his lap. "Come here, wife," he purred, still smiling. "Come here, and tell me all about your marvelous enthusiasm."

# Eighteen: I'll Be Thunder, You'll Be Lightning

Chapter 19 of 39

Now I have loved you like a baby, like some lonesome child; and I have loved you in a tame way, and I have loved you wild...

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

*Okay, I will admit right here - I am taking full advantage of the TPP Review-A-Thon and hoping to tempt some new readers to my monster of a fic! If you are signing on for the first time, welcome - and if you've been lovingly leaving reviews, thank you!*

*Special thanks to the queen of the betas, stgulik. This chapter is dedicated to her, for getting me back on track and back to the story. And for knowing what should stay, and what should go. Thank you for being bold and courageous in the face of my Forbidden Forest of metaphors and similes! Any mistakes you see here are because I had to go back and piddle on it some more. Little Easter eggs for you to find on the way, stgulik, sweetheart!*

*For Sempra and Mimi*

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*There'll be a storm one night, then I will fly to you for shelter; soaked in welcome rain, falling to forbidden arms.*

*Too breathless, too helpless, too restless to explain needing you...*

*There'll be a storm one night, but you will find my place of hiding, we'll watch the lights like children, leave the fortress hand in hand...*

*There'll be a storm one night and I will find no other rescue; lost and far from home, crying for some guiding light.*

*Too reckless, too helpless, too hungry to refrain from needing you...*

*There'll be a storm one night, the wind will drive me to your castle; and you'll ignite the fire as if everything were planned...*

*I'll be thunder, you'll be lightning, and we'll collide on dry land...*

---

Oh.

It was one thing to tease Severus Snape. It was quite another for him to tease her in return. *Tell me all about your marvelous enthusiasm*, indeed.

She smiled down at him, and with surprise in her voice, she said boldly, "You know, I've just discovered something about you, Severus. You're a bit of a flirt, aren't you?"

His voice was as sweet as honey; as silvery as the moon. "Who better to flirt with than your bride? I will admit, though; I thought I had graduated to seducing you." His smile almost made her toes curl, especially as it was accompanied with the sight of his fingertips stroking the knee of his trousers. Hermione could almost feel them softly trailing across her own skin. He tilted his head, and smirked as she bit her lip, a tiny smile lighting the corner of her mouth.

"Seducing me shouldn't be too difficult," she said, enjoying his light mood. Recklessly, she added, "Keep looking at me like that and I'm apt to climb on the coffee table and do a strip tease for you."

Severus' expression changed, and grew serious and playful at once. "Are you, now?" He gave her a crooked, boyish little smile. He licked his lips, quite aware of the effect it had on her. "I confess, I'd very much like to see that, Lass." He spoke the words slowly, each chocolate-laden syllable rolling from his wicked tongue, and Hermione swallowed.

For a moment, Severus looked as if he was about to laugh, then decided to put her out of her misery. "It's alright, my modest little lioness." He gave her a gentle smile, and shook his head. "You don't have to act the wanton for me. Especially tonight."

As the Slytherin in him had anticipated, she could not resist his good natured challenge. Hermione blinked, and quickly muttered a charm, causing the table to widen. As he watched, Hermione stepped onto the table, and began to slowly, provocatively undress for him, her eyes never straying from his.

She saw the light in them change as she drew her transfigured wedding dress over her head, and tossed it onto a nearby chair. Her shoes and tights quickly followed, and Severus' expression grew darker, more languid, as she turned her back to him, unhooked her bra, and slipped the straps from her shoulders. She slid it from her arms and looked at him over her shoulder, playfully tossing the garment into his lap. He let the bra dangle from his fingers, then put it to his nose and sniffed. He hummed appreciatively. "Lovely. Still warm."

Her eyes widened at his little show, and not to be outdone, she hooked her hands into the waistband of her knickers, and lowered them to the floor. She bent over from the waist, presenting him with the most perfectly shaped, pert little heart-shaped bottom he'd ever seen. "Fucking hell," he growled under his breath. Once again, she looked over her shoulder flirtatiously and grinned at him.

Severus' eyes raked over her nude body slowly, and his expression changed from darkened arousal to wonder. His lips parted, and he licked his lips predatorily as his eyes narrowed. As Hermione straightened, and turned around, Severus slowly stood and walked to her. He gently placed his hands on her waist, and lowered her from the table, his long, slender hands stroking her gently from shoulder to hip. He looked at her body with a long, appreciative stare.

He caressed her soft cheek with the back of his hand, and she closed her eyes and leaned against his fingers, her face flushed with excitement and desire. She pressed her lips to his hand, which looked so large and pale against her rosy, glowing skin.

"You're so lovely," he said, softly. His gaze almost scorched her. "I've never touched someone so innocent, so eager for me. I've never been with a woman who wanted me this much." His voice flowed over her like myrrh, and it was slightly breathless, unsteady. "Do you know how erotic that is to me? It's more powerful than any lust potion I could ever imbibe. Every caress, every place my mouth touches, every piece of your flesh is uncharted. I am the first."

Hermione looked up at him with eyes that were naked with longing. "And the last, Severus. Never forget that."

Stunned, her husband looked at her. He nodded. "Perhaps, my love, that is more important even than being the first."

She held his gaze, anticipation in her eyes, but he sensed his own intimidation. She was not exactly afraid, but troubled. Finally, she stammered, "Would you undress as well?" He nodded, understanding. His black Muggle suit was reminiscent enough of his teaching robes to summon the persona of Professor Snape. She wanted Severus.

She watched as each piece of clothing was removed and draped onto the chair to join hers. He stood before her, suddenly as self-conscious as she. Hermione took in his body in one, longing look. He was so pale and lean, with a wiry musculature that spoke of a latent hint of power. The planes of his hips were completely flawless; the skin there was as modest and smooth as a boy's. His cock, semi-hard, was large and uncircumcised and daunting, but she wasn't afraid.

Severus, on the other hand, was already steeling himself for her disappointment in him. He knew he wasn't the most beautiful wizard, but looking in her eyes, he was stunned with their longing and intensity; she looked anything but disappointed. She took her time, her eyes roving over his body, before resting on his face.

She gave him a smile of affection, and trust, but there was something in her eyes, some reticence, that troubled him. It was that strained, overly-bright, eager-to-please gleam of old; it reminded him that he had known her first as a child, then a woman, and that gave him pause.

With one large hand, he tipped her chin until she looked up into his face. "Hermione, I will not rush you. If you are unsure, we can wait. There is nothing in this world that will allow me to force you against your will."

"Severus," she said reproachfully. "How could you say that?"

He swallowed, and turned to pick up his shirt. "I can say it because I will not make you"

She caught his arm, and plucked his shirt from his hands and tossed it back on the pile of clothes. "How could you say that I would want to be anywhere, or doing anything, other than being here with you, than wanting you to make love to me?" She favoured him with a crooked smile. "How long have you known me?"

He looked down his long nose at her, hearing her teasing tone as she repeated his own words back. "Hermione." It was his turn to sound reproachful. "I see it in your eyes. You are not sure. Therefore, you are not ready."

She shook her head. "I am! I am!" She threw up her hands in an apologetic gesture. "In spite of my Gryffindor bravado, I'm still so afraid of disappointing you with my lack of experience. You've done this before, and you certainly know what you're doing."

Severus' dark chuckle startled her. "My sexy little swot; still wanting to be the best in class!"

Hermione was shocked into laughter. "No!" Her shoulders dropped. "Well, yes." He was laughing, shaking his head at her need, her constant drive to excel.

She returned the laugh, even if it was at her expense. With great dignity, she retorted, "I can't help it if I want to be the best at something!" She dropped her eyes in confusion. "I want to make you feel as good as you've made me feel."

He stopped laughing, and looked at her with understanding. She gave a little shrug, and said quietly, "Can I help it that I want to be the best lover you've ever had?"

For a moment, he was still, and Hermione felt she would die if he were to deny her. Gods, she wanted she wasn't even sure what it was she wanted, but she knew Severus would know, and he would provide. He always had.

His arms encircled her gently, and she looked up into his liquid, beautiful eyes, and gently he spoke with all the tenderness of a lover's touch, his beautiful, hypnotic voice washing over her like mercury, heavy and iridescent. "You are already the best lover I have ever had." He smiled. "In so many ways, you are the *only* lover I've ever had.

"You will know what pleases me; I will teach you. It will be the most pleasurable tutelage I have ever given, my love." He drew her closer, and nuzzled her hair, breathing in its scent. "You must remember: you are bestowing upon me a precious gift, Hermione. Not just the physical gift of your body, but the gift of acceptance, the gift of wanting me." He breathed quietly in her ear, "I belong to you now, and you to me. We will learn to please one another together."

Slowly he knelt before her, and she looked down into his face and kissed him, their eyes open, each feeling the other's mind, and the visceral pleasure of sharing this kiss in this intimate way was at once stunning and disorienting in its familiarity. Their minds recognised each other, and connected at every level of consciousness and sub-consciousness, until they were fused together.

As Severus' mouth closed over hers, parting her lips and feeling her tongue move against his, they both whimpered softly, both experiencing the sensations, the emotions. It was the most intimate gesture Severus had ever shared with anyone, and he was thankful he was already on his knees, and didn't have to rely on his legs to support him.

Slowly, the kiss ended, and they broke their link. It was too physically draining to maintain it for what they desired to do to and for one another. Hermione smiled as Severus reached up and slid his arms around her shoulders, glorying in her lithe, lovely body presented to him so tantalizingly.

The scar from Dolohov's curse was still fresh and vulnerable-looking, but it only made her more real, more perfect. He looked at her with a mixture of compassion and tenderness, and he recalled the same look in her eyes when he first removed his shirt weeks before. She had kissed and caressed his scars then. Now he was returning the favour.

This was no Knockturn Alley whore, giving him her body for a price. This was no jaded reveler, drugged on the Dark Power, opening her legs for any cock that would feed her pleasure. This was a young, new woman, who had come to him, Severus Snape, because she simply wanted him. Because she loved and believed in him enough to marry him.

He gasped, taking it all in. "My beautiful wife," he whispered, and Hermione watched his cock grow hard and upright in a matter of seconds. He looked into her eyes. Almost unwillingly, he confessed, "Hermione, you worry because you have no experience. But I've never been with anyone... intact. Untouched." When she nodded, he leaned forward and pressed his forehead against her breastbone, feeling her heart beating wild and fast underneath the top of her scar. "The last thing I wish to do is to make your first experience unpleasant. After all," he added, wryly, "I plan on repeating it often over the coming years."

"So do I," she answered, huskily, her fingers running through his black hair. "I believe in you. This is all I want. Everything you've ever done was so wonderful. I know you will make this first time special and beautiful." She kissed his forehead. "I have faith."

"I will be gentle. It will be difficult, Lass." His cheeks coloured slightly. "I haven't been with a woman in"

"I don't want to know." Hermione shook her head, her eyes bright. "It doesn't matter. As far as I'm concerned, it is a first for both of us. I want no one else. I need no one else. I want you to be my lover, Severus. I've wanted this since the first day you touched me, and promised me you'd protect me. I'm not afraid."

Severus looked up into her lovely, cinnamon-coloured eyes, and saw the truth. He closed his eyes.

Once, a lifetime ago, in the throes of the Dark Caress, he'd fantasised about making her crawl to him, begging for his touch. He now found that it was he who was lost to her power; he was the supplicant. "I will make it pleasurable for you, I promise. There will be some pain, but -" He looked up at her like an adoring knight to his maiden. " - I will make you happy you chose me."

She favoured him with a glorious smile, then sobered, as arousal won over rational thought. In a voice glazed with longing, she whispered, "Oh, Severus. If you want me,

please touch me. *Explore me.*"

Long, wiry arms slid around her waist, and Severus pressed his body against hers in an embrace of boundless gratitude and barely controlled desire. Her words excited and aroused him beyond belief. They sounded erotic and dirty, and oh, so, decadent. Her hands stroked his head and his back and shoulders, and he purred appreciatively, reveling in the delicious feel of being fondled and petted. Each affectionate stroke of her hands renewed him, healed him, solidified his soul and enabled him. For a man starved so long of contact and affection, her healing hands smoothed away the pain of his past forever.

Almost beside himself with longing, Severus pressed his lips against the scarred skin between Hermione's lovely breasts. He turned his head, and smiled at the tiny, pert nipple, so hard and waiting, calling to him, all but begging for his greedy mouth. He nuzzled his large nose against her right breast.

His hands traced gentle circles against her back. Unable to help himself, already knowing the answer, he purred, "I am truly the first, Hermione? The first to see you like this? The first to touch you, to pleasure you?" He closed his eyes, breathing in her scent. "The first to lick ... and suck ... and bite you?"

"You know you are." Her voice was husky and unsteady. He felt a tremble shudder through her.

He closed his eyes, moaning with desire at her breathless words, treasuring this moment, locking it away in his scarred heart. He knew that, once he'd tugged the little bud into his salivating mouth, this first would be gone forever. The knowledge that no one, save him, had ever suckled this precious nub of flesh was beyond arousing, beyond erotic. He could feel her thrumming with the anticipation of it, and he held himself until he could hold back no longer and was trembling as well.

He studied the tender little puckered tip for a brief moment. Severus touched the underside of her nipple with a single, delicate fingertip, and lifted it slightly, as if to weigh the little button. She gasped at his touch, and he smiled. "Ah, it is as I hoped, then."

Tense with desire, needy and impatient, she whimpered, "What? What did you hope for?"

He moved his finger, and caressed the side of her lovely, satiny breast in his large hand. "Your nipples are as pink and hard and baby sweet as I had dreamt they'd be," and then it was in his mouth and oh! it was sweet and hard and soft and *her!* His hands fluttered against her skin, cupping her breasts in his palms and he almost swooned as he drew the little bud into his mouth, his tongue cradling it and his lips pursing around it as his teeth nipped and suckled and he licked and laved and flicked it with the hard tip of his tongue and sucked and sucked and he could feel her hands in his hair, pulling him closer, hearing her pounding heart and her hoarse cries of "Oh! Severus! Don't stop God, it feels so good!" and he was holding her so tightly and it was like the sweetness of an orgasm that never stopped...

His control broke, and he threw his arms around her as he feasted on the opposite nipple, tugging and sucking as if he could actually draw her milk from the ripe, innocent flesh. He was moaning helplessly; deep, throaty growls of unspeakable pleasure. She smelled new and perfect and he knew he didn't deserve it and for once he didn't give a fuck - it was so good, *so good!* He writhed against her body, unable to help himself, wanting her more than he had ever wanted anything else, more than he'd wanted to go to Hogwarts or his first good set of dress robes or his first wand or Lily...

He tried to stand without breaking his sucking grip on her rosy-tipped tit and overbalanced them both as he staggered forward against her, until he could right himself. He wrapped his arms around her waist and picked her up. Their mouths crashed together, almost painfully, and he was devouring her, and it was wondrous and new and he felt as if he were the hungry and edgy virgin instead of her. The most feral sounds were rippling through the air and he knew he was the source of them, and she answered him with a husky cry of her own. He was holding her too tightly, but he didn't care, as long as she combed her tiny hands through his hair and pulled him towards her sweet mouth. He sucked on her tongue as he drew it into his mouth, and she pulled on his hair, dragging him closer.

He must have carried her to his bed, because they were in it and he was over her, his weight on his arms, hungrily sucking kisses from her lips. She tried to pull him down on her, and when his arms dropped and his weight fell upon her, she took his head in her hands and opened her mind to him...

*They were back at Grimmauld Place, on the floor of the library, and he was pulling her underneath him, whispering, "Lie down with me, Hermione... where no one can find us..."*

He pulled away from her mind, not understanding, looking down at her in startled confusion. "How when?"

"I dreamed this," she moaned, deliriously, her face lit from within and glowing. "After the first time you and I were alone at Grimmauld Place. I dreamed your weight on me. It felt so good ..." She pulled him closer until his entire length pressed her into the mattress. "But it was nothing compared to this. Your body, your beautiful eyes," she smiled. "Even the way you smell! Gods, I want you, Severus Snape." She laughed, a sharp sound of desperation. "I'm on fire for you!"

He shook his head in wonder. "Merlin's bollocks, witch! You make me feel like a god."

"You are!" she cried as he swooped over her, his soft lips planting wet kisses down her belly, traveling down to the apex of her thighs, and when she boldly opened to him, his straining cock felt as if it would explode if he didn't put it inside her soon.

He paused, forced himself to calm. This was his prized witch, his wife, his woman; his untouched, intact, virginal woman. Another first, he thought, looking down at her, so open and trusting, believing that, whatever he did, she would have nothing to fear. He stilled, and gently stroked the triangle of curls at her mons. Her scent was intoxicating, saturating his mind all the way down to the most primitive, primal part of his brain, where nature programmed not only the desire to mate, but to make it so pleasurable to the physical body that man would continually seek it, scent it in the air, hunt for his female in heat. He knew in that moment that he was her slave; that he would gladly grovel at her feet, if she would merely allow him to bury his nose in this soft thatch of glistening curls.

Her flushed, swollen labia glistened with her juices. No witch had ever been this wet for him and him alone. It had always thrilled him to touch her, to feel her beneath his fingers, but to see the evidence of her desire for him, this soft, rosy nest beckoning to him, was enough to break him; to make him forget who he was and why he had ever thought himself undeserving of her.

Panting with desire, he deftly peeled the cleft apart with his fingers, as if parting the delicate wings of a butterfly. There, nestled in its hood, was her flushed, stiff little clitoris, gleaming in its succulent bed of velvet. He tapped it gently with the tip of his finger, and she shuddered and whimpered and grasped the bed clothes. Her tiny, virgin entrance quivered, making him almost mad with lust.

"Sweet Nimue," he murmured, entranced, holding himself back until he would not be able to physically stop himself. "Wait," he crooned, almost to himself. "So wet. Your cunt is bright red, and so wet. Did I do this to you?"

"Yes," she whispered, shivering, desire making her brazen and unafraid. "I want to feel it. Please, Severus, touch me..."

He smiled, "You beg so beautifully, my treasure, offering yourself to me. So open, so eager. And I'm the first to see it, to taste it." He realised his mouth was actually watering. "I'm thirsty, sweetness. I'm ready to be slaked by you."

She groaned in frustration. "Fuck! Severus, please," she cried. Boldly she grasped his hair, pulling him to her.

He actually laughed, hearing the desperation in her voice, loving her total lack of inhibition, and knowing she had no idea what desperation was. With a moan of anticipated pleasure, he lowered his mouth to her cunt and moved his lips and tongue over the turgid flesh. He felt the tremor pass through her, and, using his thumbs to open her further to his mouth, he sucked the pearly little clit between his lips and flicked at it with the sharp point of his tongue. She wailed his name, as if to invoke the heavens to open.

Hermione had read her mother's books, had studied their illustrations, had even found a video amongst her mother's private things that illustrated what he was doing, but she had not been prepared and would never in a million years understand how a wizard could completely rearrange her head without benefit of incantation or wand.



She had thought his wicked, talented fingers could bring her no greater pleasure. That had barely been a warm up. Now, she was reduced to a creature of sensation, of ecstasy that left her gasping for breath as his mouth moved against her. She raised her head and looked down at him. The sight of her husband, nestled comfortably between her thighs, was so erotic it was almost perverse. He moved over her flesh as if bestowing the most languid and sensual of kisses, his eyes closed, a nearly orgasmic look of arousal on his pale face. He sensed her watching him, and opened his flashing, onyx eyes, giving her a burning look that threatened to tip her over the edge into passion-induced madness.

He moved lower, and laved her dripping pussy from her perineum to her clitoris, lapping at her as if her juices were his favourite sustenance. Hermione felt her body gathering, like a storm brewing within. She felt the gentle pressure of his fingers sliding into her yielding passage, moving insistently within, as his tongue flicked relentlessly against her hard, swollen clit.

As her vulva flushed and quivered around his eager mouth, he probed her silken passage, stretching, pushing, even as he felt an orgasm cresting within her. She rose to its peak, holding on, trembling, almost unable to breathe, when Severus raised his head. He could feel her entire body shuddering, holding on. "Let's see it," Severus urged her, his fingers practiced and insistent, using his voice like an instrument of pleasure. "There's a good Lass... let's see you come... good girl... let me see you come...oh yesss..."

And the lovely young woman who had craved his praise, his admiration, who had fought for him and with him, who had loved him enough to take his name, finally let go, threw herself open to his plea, stepped from the edge of everything she had known up to that point about sex and wizards and herself and him, and allowed the wave to drown them both.

Her orgasm picked her up and snapped her in two, like a twig in the hands of a giant, and she cried out over and over, her hips and body thrusting toward his questing, talented mouth. Her magic, freed with this first mating, swirled around them, and Severus felt it push into him, from her eager, innocent body into his greedy mouth, filling him with a power he had never experienced. It was more potent than any drug or potion or spell he had ever cast, and for a moment, his head spun with the feeling.

Suddenly, his body arched, and he could feel his control tear away from him, unraveling down his spine into his balls, and he came with her, his unfettered cock jerking and spurting his issue onto the bedclothes. He barely registered it; he could not stop feasting on her. The combination of his own orgasm and her delicious, addictive essence almost caused him to swoon again.

He pushed her beyond her first orgasm, his mouth moving feverishly, frenziedly over her dripping folds, helpless in his own power, knowing he was her first, her prized, her last lover. The sweet, salty flavour of her juices ignited a current of desire and lust so powerful in his brain that soon he was painfully hard again. And still, he could not stop, as if she was his only nourishment, and to pull his ravenous mouth away from her sweet core would mean the loss of his life's quintessence.

Hermione came again with an orgasm that was breathtaking in its beauty, wonderful and frightening in its intensity. It did not seem possible to live through something this powerful. Her body arched and she shrieked her husband's name until it was impossible to speak, her voice changed to a mewling, wailing growl that had nothing to do with pleasure.

Severus was finally able to allow himself to cease his ministrations. He watched his young witch, shuddering and spasming, whimpering as her mind tried to cope with the intensity of the sensations he had produced. Severus was awestruck that he could cause something so incredible, and that he was, after all, the first to do so. He felt her quivering, pulsating around his fingers. Her clit thumped and spasmed against his thumb, and he rose from her thighs and took her in his arms.

Hermione tried to whisper his name, as her body's pain and pleasure receptors overloaded, claiming her consciousness and sanity...

She drifted back to herself slowly, feeling his arms around her, loosely holding her in his embrace. She looked up into the face of the man she knew almost as well as she knew herself, and he looked down at her with a smile that was full of wonder and awe.

"Back amongst the living, Mrs. Granger-Snape?" he rumbled, clearly pleased with himself, and was rewarded with a soft, passionate kiss. He deepened it, feeling his own desire overwhelm reason and consideration. He pressed her down against the pillow, plunging his tongue into her mouth, his lips fused with hers, drinking in her moans and mewls, and still she surged against his mouth, demanding more, as greedy and voracious as a little bird he must feed.

"Please," she whispered, between his suffocating, intoxicating kisses, "Please, Severus," she moaned, fighting to breathe, yet pulling him to her, reveling in his soft, demanding mouth, his long fingers threading through her hair. He caressed her cheek, slipping a finger wickedly into her mouth as he himself panted for lack of air.

"You beg, little girl," he moaned rapaciously, as she sucked his finger rapturously, her eyes closed; he'd reduced her to a creature only he could satisfy. The power of it made him burn for her. "You go right ahead and beg," he growled, and loomed over her. "I've waited long enough to bury myself into you, and I'm almost at the point of being unable to control myself. The more you beg, the more I'll make you scream. Let me, witch. *Let me.*"

Hermione was already spreading her thighs, pulling him down to her. "Yes, please, Severus, please." She, too, was babbling, so caught up in the frenzy of his lovemaking. "Make me a woman for you, please!"

Her words drove a spike of lust into his brain that caused a feral growl to rasp from his throat. Gone was the dulcet, honeyed tones of the seducer; he was suffused with pure arousal and desire, and it rang true in his raw, needy voice. "I fucking love hearing you beg." His teeth sank against her throat, causing her to cry out. "I'm going to love making you scream even more, Hermione."

In a mixture of grace and awkwardness, he pulled himself back, onto his knees, and looked down at his cock, jutting proudly. With his last vestiges of rational thought, he put his arms around Hermione's waist and pulled her into a sitting position, drawing her thighs around his slender waist.

He put his arms around her and felt her shaking, and he pulled back to read her face. It was beautiful. Flushed, glowing, pupils dilated, her lips almost purple from his punishing, commanding kisses, smiling at him with sensual innocence. His heart almost burst within his chest for love of her, and the dark, salacious lust in his intoxicated mind calmed a little.

He closed his eyes, and whispered, "Lass, I want to be gentle. I want to make love to you, but I'm almost too far gone to be tender with you."

Hermione covered his face with tiny kisses, whispering, "I don't care. I know you won't hurt me any more than you have to." She grasped his shoulders almost painfully. "Please, Severus, it hurts worse to want you this badly!"

He looked up in her face, and could sense the longing behind her eyes. Pulling her into his lap until her hot little netherlips parted then pursed around the base of his cock, Severus moaned, "Rock against me." He placed his large hands around her waist, and instructed her how to move against him. "Like this," he crooned, gasping with the unbelievable feeling of her against him. "Yes... just like this... oh, yes... good girl..."

Hermione's head fell back, and she rocked her hips against him, moaning helplessly, and he slipped his cock against her tiny opening. It was wet and maddeningly hot, and he could feel his balls tighten.

"Rock against me. There we go... that's it..." He gasped as his cock pushed against her tender, innocent pussy, and he moaned helplessly as she opened for him.

"Rock," he whispered, brokenly, settling in more and more, feeling her stretching, hearing her panting, relaxing, allowing him entrance. "Rock against me, Hermione," he moaned, feeling her accept him. Then he thrust.

He felt her membrane give. She cried out sharply, and he answered her raggedly, sheathed in the unbelievable silky, wet tightness of her. Strangely enough, the tears that fell were from his own eyes. He and Hermione shuddered as one, their arms clamped tightly around one another.

Her cunt pulsed and quivered around his shaft, and he whimpered, trying to hold onto his control. It was excruciating, begging his traitorous body not to obey instinct and

thrust hard, or climax.

Finally, when he could breathe, he opened his eyes. Hermione's eyes were still closed; a faint line between her brows, and even as his vision cleared, he could see it relaxing, and she opened her eyes to gaze into his. She smiled, and tenderly kissed the tears that had trailed from his eyes.

"Does it hurt so very much?" he asked, stupidly. She laughed, causing her sweet body to clench around his shaft. "Ah, you sweet little tormentor!"

She kissed him hungrily and surged against him, making them both moan. "Please, Severus! Please move. You said... you said if I begged, you'd make me scream!"

He withdrew slowly, and thrust again. He closed his eyes, as pleasure lanced through his body. "Oh fuck," he moaned, shuddering with the effort to hold on.

Hermione was shifting, lying back on the bed again, forcing him to move with her. She was pulling him to her, crying out, "More! God, Severus, I want more!"

Severus all but impaled her on his next thrust. He withdrew, and began to move inside her. Hard. Finally. Her body accepted his rhythm, and they moved together.

Severus was well-endowed, and Hermione felt as if she were being filled into her womb. It was glorious. She felt his pubic bone grind into hers as his hips churned his body to hers, and he reached between them and fondled her clit as he pounded into her.

She looked up into his face, pale and flushed and intense, his eyes wide and unfocused, blank with passion and pleasure, his mouth in an astonished O of bliss. Knowing that she had put this expression on his face filled Hermione with power, and she cried out his name. She put her feet flat on the bed to leverage her hips to meet his, her body instinctively knowing what to do. For a moment it felt as if her magic was pouring out of her, and being replaced with Severus'.

He, too, felt her magic begin to swirl, and the faster, the harder his thrusts, the more powerful and pleasurable was the feeling of her magic washing over him. It was not soft, gentle, female magic; he'd felt that before. Even a whore who climaxes can experience spontaneous magic. This was hard, powerful shards of magic, that penetrated him like drops of acid on his skin, burning him, burrowing under his flesh. It was the most exquisite pleasure he had ever experienced. It felt rich and potent; perhaps even more powerful magic than his own. And it was innocent magic, and it carved into him like a knife flaying him open to her, peeling the darkness away from him, exposing him to the light. It felt like oxygen and estrogen and smelled erotically clean.

He looked down at the young witch straining against him. She was looking into his eyes, pleading *more, Severus, more!* and he shook and slammed into her harder.

"My wife," he moaned, gasping, thinking that his heart would burst, that her magic would rush into him and he would explode from the inside out. He wanted it more than anything, anything...

And suddenly he was within her mind, sharing their link, seeing through her eyes. Looking up at his own face, he was stunned by the passion he saw in his own visage. *Is this how she sees me?* he thought, and he smiled down at himself, and Severus realised that he and Hermione were now within each other, body and soul. He felt his own body thrusting, nearing its arching, aching completion, and yet he could feel her body receiving his piston-like, driving cock ramming into her, and he knew she could feel it, too. His mind overloaded with sensation, and snapped back into his body just as he felt hers gather and shudder around his cock, pulsating around him.

Hermione came, screaming his name, thanking him, worshiping him, and at her climax her magic swooped down on both of them and Severus shouted her name as he burst apart. Pain and pleasure and forgiveness and hope blasted him into an ecstasy that was both beautiful and terrifying, and he knew he was going to die. He was going to die in the arms of this succubus, who had stolen his magic and then given it back, more powerful than before. He collapsed against her tender body, trying not to crush her, but unable to think or move...

When Hermione came back to herself, she opened her eyes to find the room was wrecked. Curtains were torn from the windows; furniture was overturned and clothes hung from sagging drawers. A heavy, shivering weight pinned her to the mattress, and she threw her arms around her husband's neck, frightened and panting still.

The man who only now slid from her still-clenching core slowly raised himself up on his arms and stared at her blankly. He was pale, and drenched in sweat, and looked at her for a moment as if he didn't recognise her.

They took a deep breath together, and he too, took in the state of the room with a bewildered glance. Gradually, they relaxed, and Severus gained enough of his senses to take his crushing weight from his wife's tender body, and carefully lifted himself from her.

"Don't go anywhere!" Hermione begged, trying to hold him in place. She looked around again. "Severus, what happened? What happened to us?"

He took her in his arms, soothed and gentled her. "Shhh, Lass. It's alright. It was the magic. I'm here. I'm going nowhere." He pressed his lips to her smooth, sweaty forehead. "What a good girl. My beautiful, precious little one."

Shivering, Hermione clung to him, and he stroked her skin, crooning to her. "My bride," he whispered, and as he felt her finally relax, and her breathing even out and slow, he smiled in tribute to her love and power. "My goddess."

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You know, a famous fanfic writer used to say, 'Reviews are love', so any love you'd like to give will be returned full fold, I promise :)

Summary - "Seven Bridges Road" by The Eagles

Chapter title and opening lines are from "I'll Be Thunder" by Tina Turner

## Nineteen: The Dimming Of The Day

Chapter 20 of 39

I see you on the street in company; why don't you come and ease your mind with me...

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

*Special thanks to the queen of the betas, stgulik, who has the great gift of knowing when Hermione needs to take charge and Severus just needs to shut up and start kissing.*

*Please note this chapter contains explicit sexual content.*

*I'm trying very hard to get all the chapters posted here - believe it or not, chapter 35 is almost ready for posting - Look for loads of chapter spamming in the next couple of days...*

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*This old house is falling down around my ears, I'm drowning in a river of my tears; when all my will is gone you hold me sway, I need you at the dimming of the day.*

*You pull me like the moon pulls on the tide, you know just where I keep my better side, what days have come to keep us far apart, a broken promise or a broken heart.*

*Now all the bonnie birds have wheeled away, I need you at the dimming of the day, come the night, you're only what I want, come the night, you could be my confidante...*

*I'm living for the night we steal away, I need you at the dimming of the day*

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Severus awoke, as usual, in the final darkness of the approaching dawn. He had disciplined his body to always know the time of day, and to come fully awake in an instant. It had come in handy as a youth, hiding from bullies and his own drunken father. It had been even handier as a spy; he could not be ambushed in the night.

He had taught himself to awaken without change to his breathing or movement; it had been invaluable in learning secrets from those who still thought him asleep and therefore unaware. It had saved someone's life once...

It was also completely unnecessary at this moment, in this bed, but habit and practice are hard masters to defy, and he was sure that the figure watching him carefully had no idea he was now awake, fully cognizant of her careful scrutiny.

It would have amused and dismayed Severus to know that Hermione did sense the second he awoke - not because of any external change, but because his thought patterns ramped up and burst into her mind. He heard her sigh, a sweet, contented, sleepy sound, and she burrowed back down against his shoulder with a satisfied little coo. Her warm, smooth body melted against his, and he felt his treacherous cock stir. What was more, she felt it, too, and a small, slender hand closed around his shaft and stroked him appreciatively.

Hermione felt the hot, rigid flesh of his rapidly inflating cock bloom in her hand, and she moved against it the way he had shown her a few short hours ago, before sleep had finally claimed them. He had been quietly instructive, showing her how he wanted her to slide her palm over the head, and twist her wrist as she stroked upward. When she had asked to learn how to suck him until he climaxed, he had smiled and kissed her, a look of stunned gratitude fleeting across his face. "Later," he promised, and something about the way he muttered that single word made her body hum.

Now, as Hermione lazily stroked and petted her husband, he groaned and stirred, and stretched like a long, slender cat, shuddering as his muscles reached their longest length and settled back to normal.

"Good morning," he rumbled.

Hermione looked up at his sleepy face and smiled. He looked disheveled and needed a shave. He was also completely sated and smug, and his lips were soft and warm against her forehead.

"Good morning, Severus. Are you hungry?" she said, a little abashed to be speaking to him so casually, while still playing with his cock. He must have shared similar thoughts, as a smirk played about his lips.

"Sustenance would be agreeable. However, wife," he said, slowly rolling her onto her back, "I find myself hungering for something more... readily accessible." He kissed a puckered nipple gently, almost gingerly. "Are you tender this morning?" he asked.

Hermione moved, wincing as several sore muscles and tender areas made themselves known. "A little, I'm afraid," she admitted.

Severus stroked her cheek, and sighed. "I had feared as much." Reaching for his wand, he commanded, *Accio Pain Potion!*

A small bottle of dark brown liquid flew into his hand. Severus uncorked it and, to Hermione's surprise, tipped it into his own mouth. Black eyes met amber, and Hermione heard his thoughts effortlessly. *Open up, little one.* She held herself very still as Severus pressed his lips to hers and forced the potion into her mouth.

As his tongue parted her lips, she swallowed, and the aches immediately changed into a rather pleasant warmth, deep in the tissues of her body. She gave a little hum of pleasure as Severus teased her tongue, his own slippery, velvety muscle sliding against hers, swiping against the roof of her mouth. His teeth gently nipped her bottom lip, sucking it into his mouth, arousing her with the talents he brought to bear.

Their bodies pressed against one another's, Severus sensuously lowering his mouth to her satiny throat, planting feather-light kisses against her skin. His long, clever fingers fondled her breasts, coaxing her nipples taut, in anticipation of his warm, wicked tongue. Hermione shivered as his mouth closed in, sucking as relentlessly as a baby, planting the sweetest of kisses on her pearly flesh. A satisfied moan of pleasure slipped from his throat. A fingernail gently scratched the tip of her nipple, and she gasped at the sensation.

Her husband smiled. In the most sinful tone of voice, he purred, "Delicious little witch. I'm going to devour you."

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Over the next two days they hardly strayed from one another's side. Hermione even followed him into the shower, fondling him as they bathed one another. It was strangely easy to get used to.

His wedding night had been a revelation to Severus, in more ways than one. He had always privately scoffed whenever Lucius expounded on the value that pureblood wizards always placed on virginity. Severus, coming from a lower class of people, knew from experience that girls in neighbourhoods like Spinner's End took to sex rather early in their lives. It was enjoyable, and for the most part free if they were careful; there were precious few pleasures afforded to them otherwise.

The knowledge that Hermione had come to his bed unbroken awoke something new in him, something elemental and proprietary. He had to reluctantly admit he could now appreciate the cachet of the virgin bride.

Having given Hermione her first taste of physical love, Severus was delighted by her self-proclaimed 'enthusiasm'. She was charmingly uninhibited, blessedly vocal, and completely dedicated to the pursuit of learning his body, applying the same level of intense scholarship to this subject as she had always given to all academic pursuits. In those first days, given lavish attention and orgasm after earth-shattering orgasm, she had almost become his slave.

When she realised how much Severus enjoyed simply watching her, Hermione took to walking around the house naked, sealing the house with warming charms to keep comfortable. Severus' gaze followed her everywhere; he reached out to caress her as she brushed past him. Sitting with her, fully dressed, while she lounged indolently on his lap, was the epitome of erotic self-indulgence to him, and her lovely, beautifully responsive body was a playground the likes of which he'd never even so much as allowed himself to fantasize about.

Let the Malfoys and their ilk sneer at those beneath them; in this private haven, Severus was a king, with a loving, willing bride as eager as he to explore their mutual sensuality.

The first time Hermione had knelt at his feet and freed his straining cock from his trousers, Severus had felt like the most decadent of men, especially when she looked up

into his face with sensuality and coy innocence, saying, "I will perform to the best of my ability, but I always welcome instruction, dear professor."

With more patience and teaching skill than he'd ever shown in the classroom, Severus had proceeded to instruct her in the fine art of fellating him. She had ever been a quick study, and if his shuddering, roaring climax was any indication, the tutelage had been well received. He was acutely embarrassed how quickly his orgasm had seared through him, leaving him gasping, panting, unable to speak as her clever mouth and hands had reduced him to a moaning wreck. "What how" he gasped, trying to make his blood-starved brain work, "How am I supposed to believe you've never done that before?"

With a wicked grin, Hermione grabbed her wand. "*Accio toy box!*" Into her hand flew the small box that she had taken from her parents' room. "I had these for reference."

After she solicitously buttoned his trousers and climbed into his lap, she enlarged the little box and opened it. Severus stared dumbfounded at the sheer number of books and other items within. He looked back at his wife, his eyebrow raised in question.

With a charming little blush, Hermione replied, "These were my mother's. She always said that sex was supposed to be wonderful and a thing to be enjoyed between couples. She told me there were three things I needed to do to be a good lover."

"Did she now?" Severus smirked, stroking her thighs, making his witch wriggle enticingly on his lap. "Pray enlighten me, Madame Granger-Snape."

Squealing a little, as his long fingers teased and stroked her silky skin, Hermione breathlessly replied, "She said that I needed to be fearless, be specific, and go with my instincts, because some things are just natural and don't need to be taught. Everything else can be learned or researched with books."

"She said that?"

Hermione ducked her head. "Well, not the last bit. I figured that out for myself." She turned in his lap until she was straddling him. "I do realise that not everything can be found in books, but it's a good starting point."

"Indeed, Miss Granger," he intoned, putting on his 'professor's' voice.

For the better part of the next hour, they read through several of the books together, pausing at a particularly athletic-looking variation, or stopping to allow Severus to nuzzle against her all but edible neck. As they looked at the illustrations, his fingers found the warm, wet haven between her thighs, and she closed her eyes. Silently, he murmured, "I must admit, these *are* quite informative, my pet."

The book slid, forgotten, to the floor. "But there is much to be said for hands-on instruction." Her hips began to move against his knowing, skilled fingers. His voice was light and honeyed. "I hope there are still some areas in which I may educate you. I do so enjoy this aspect of teaching." Hermione was rocking against him, her arms clasped behind his neck, giving into his clever ministrations. He could feel her body giving in. "Ah, yes, are you ready for your next lesson, Miss Granger?"

"Yes! Yes, Severus!" she cried out, her orgasm imminent, and he slipped his already rigid cock into her body just as her climax gripped her. They cried out together as the walls of her cunt milked and sucked his cock like an eager mouth.

"That's what I want, Lass," he growled, lust roughening the edges of his voice. "Ride my cock," he moaned, using his hands to guide her, until she found her rhythm against his lap. She gripped the back of the chair, and he laved and sucked her dusky, proud nipples as she moved over him, her hips snapping wildly as her second orgasm took them both over the edge.

Severus sat back, gasping, reveling in her delicious body, its responsiveness in her desire for him. It made him feel like a younger, less jaded man. And it was very gratifying that he was still able to teach her things her mother's books had not.

At times they would make love until their magic freed itself. It was impossible to predict when it would happen or how to prevent it. It seemed to be during those moments when they were at their most carnal, their most feral. They would be tearing at each other, their bodies pounding together, when their magic would snap from its moorings to pierce and saturate them. When it happened, it was frightening and exhilarating, and ultimately, it was healing.

On the third morning after their wedding, Severus rolled over to get out of bed, when he heard Hermione gasp behind him. "Severus! Your back!"

"What's wrong with it?" He replied sleepily, still dozy and busting for a wee.

Hermione scrambled off the bed, an expression of wonder and shock on her face. "You need to look at this, Severus."

Alarmed, Severus allowed her to lead him to the loo. He summoned a mirror and faced away from the full length mirror, holding the second mirror in his hands. Hermione approached him gently, and shook her head. "I don't believe it." She smiled. "Did we do that?"

Peering closely, Severus examined the roadmap of scars on his back. They had faded. Not vanished, but faded. The large, rosy scars inflicted by the Dark Lord's enchanted whip were now just thin, silvery threads running over his skin. Some of the smaller, less prominent ones were all but invisible now. His pale skin glowed with health.

He turned to his wife, and drew her into an embrace. "Love," he choked, unable to fully comprehend what had happened. "Love." Hermione kissed him and stroked his back, telling him how much she loved him.

On day four, Narcissa Malfoy came to visit them, her sister Bellatrix Lestrange in tow, and the honeymoon was over.

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The wards shimmered that evening, just as they had finished dinner and were starting dessert. Hermione dashed up the stairs to dress. From their bedroom, Hermione felt the wards drop enough to allow the guests to pass through. As the door opened, she heard the imperious, aloof voice of Narcissa Malfoy greet her husband, her tone stilted and formal.

Following quickly behind her was the harsher, coarser tones of Bellatrix Lestrange. "Where's your little slave, Severus? Shagged out? Lazy cow. No stamina, these little Mudblood whores."

"Bella, please!" Narcissa hissed, a pleading, desperate tone in her voice. "I'm sorry, Severus, I'm not here to display my sister's lack of manners."

Bellatrix scoffed, her scornful snort full of contempt. "Bad manners? She's the one keeping us waiting, Cissy!"

Hermione felt her spine stiffen. Bad manners? She'd show this pureblood bitch who had manners. Quickly she donned a simple set of midnight blue robes, and after murmuring Severus' hair calming spell, she squared her shoulders, ready to face the enemy.

Calmly walking down the stairs, Hermione crossed the room to stand by Severus, whom she saw was barely holding his temper in check. She smiled at him demurely. "Sir, I thought I heard voices. Hello, Madam Malfoy, Madam Lestrange."

Narcissa gave her a brief nod, and Bellatrix snorted again. Pretending not to notice, Hermione said, "I was just going to fetch my Master a glass of wine. May I bring you a glass as well, ladies?"

"Sure," Bella said, bored already.

"That is most kind, thank you," Narcissa replied formally, clearly wanting to speak to Severus alone.

Severus gave Hermione's arm a little squeeze, and she went into the kitchen and made a production of transfiguring three goblets from their ordinary water glasses. She searched through the kitchen drawers but, finding no corkscrew, removed the cork with a twist of her wand. She transfigured a decanter and poured the wine in it, thinking with a smirk how offended the Black sisters would be if they knew they were about to be offered a rather inferior plonk she and Severus had found in the clearance bin and bought simply because they both fancied the idea of drinking a wine called Old Git.

She found a battered tin tray and transfigured it to look a little more formal. Balancing the decanter and the glasses on it, Hermione walked gracefully into the front room, just as Bella was taunting Severus. "You don't have the juice, Severus! All you've ever done was pretend to be on the winning side, whichever side that was this week!"

"Bella, please hush!" said Narcissa. She turned beseeching eyes on Severus. "Please, Severus. For our old friendship." Her lovely blue eyes filled with tears. "Draco is my *life*. He isn't ready for this "

"He should get down on his knees and thank the Dark Lord for this glorious chance to prove his loyalty!" Bella cried. Hermione saw the psychosis in the woman's lidded eyes. In that moment, Hermione feared her more than the Dark Lord. Bella was, in the immortal words of Hermione's late father, as mad as a spoon.

"Enough, both of you!" Severus hissed. "Narcissa, you come to my home during my holiday, dragging Bella with you. You ask me to assist Draco, while Bella shouts to anyone who will listen how untrustworthy I am. Very bad manners, both of you."

Hermione unobtrusively sat the tray on a nearby table and handed around the wine glasses. For a moment, the three of them stood in a triangle, with Hermione on the periphery, waiting for one of them to speak. She was sure she'd missed something terribly important.

With a voice so buttery it slid over the skin of the three women like oil, Severus replied, "Of course, I will do whatever I can to assist Draco at his task. It is imperative that he not fail our Lord." With a haughty gesture, he drew Hermione to his side, pinching her earlobe possessively. "We are both committed to do whatever it takes to see to that end."

Hermione held the dark woman's gaze as Bella sauntered up to the couple. "Very lofty words, Severus. You always were a big talker." Bella stepped up close to Hermione, and reached out to stroke her cheek with a long, black-painted nail. "You and your little concubine are *so* committed." Hermione forced herself not to flinch or step back. Bella leaned in, her nail pressing into Hermione's cheek. She whispered, "I once scratched out the eyes of a little Mudblood. She wouldn't stop staring at me."

Hermione felt a cold anger slip over the surface of her skin, and leaned against Bellatrix's finger slightly, the beginnings of a sneer curling about her lips *if you want a catfight, Bella*, Hermione thought, *we'll have one*.

Narcissa watched the exchange uneasily, until Severus grasped Hermione's upper arm and pulled her away. "Enough, Bella," he growled, and Hermione allowed him to pull her back into his chest. "I have said we will assist Draco. Now if you don't mind, I'd like to assume my holiday, ladies."

Bella, her eyes still fixated on Hermione, suddenly looked up at Severus. "Fine, then. If you're both *sømmitted*, prove it." She smiled evilly. "Make the Unbreakable Vow."

Narcissa looked up at Severus expectantly. Hermione felt him stiffen, and she smiled. Turning to her husband, Hermione lowered herself onto her knees. "Master, I agree with Madam Lestrange." She looked up into his obsidian eyes. Within her Occluded mind, she heard his soft voice. *It is a moot point, my love, and we will now hold all the cards. The Dark Lord will never doubt me now either of us, and Bella will look like a fool in the end no matter what happens.*

Hermione could sense cautious triumph tinging his sober words. Bella had played right into their hands; it was the first piece of the puzzle they'd discussed and anticipated the day Hermione asked Severus to marry her. She wanted to shout with joy. Everyone was behaving exactly the way Severus had predicted.

Severus looked down his long nose at Bellatrix. He smiled, and his smile was horrible and beautiful. "Take out your wand, Bella. If you've got the juice."

---

When the deed was done, Severus became shuttered and distant, and finally the sisters left him and Hermione alone again.

He looked at his wife and sighed. "And so it begins." He looked out the window, staring unseeing at the decaying neighbourhood of his youth. "Don't you just love being right?" he asked, rhetorically.

Hermione joined him at the window, and they absently put their arms around each other. She leaned against his chest and sighed. "I knew this was inevitable, but now that it's done, I feel slightly sick."

Severus nodded, understanding her feelings completely. At last he had learned what Dumbledore had only hinted at obliquely. The Dark Lord, looking to revenge the Malfoys for Lucius' spectacular debacle at the Department of Mysteries, had charged Draco with the task of murdering Dumbledore. Voldemort obviously thought the boy incapable of carrying out the deed, just as Albus had. If Draco succeeded, the headmaster would be dead and the Malfoy reputation restored; if the boy failed, however, Draco would be killed as Lucius' punishment. As far as the Dark Lord was concerned, it was the ultimate win/win situation.

"How did Albus know this? Who told him?" Severus said, rubbing his cheek against his wife's hair. "That troubles me. How did the old man know?" He made a little snarling noise. "What else is the old fool not telling us?"

"Perhaps the curse is making him even more irrational than you originally thought," Hermione replied, equally puzzled. It made no sense whatsoever. "To tell the truth, I'm more worried about Bellatrix Lestrange. She scares the hell out of me."

Severus chuckled. "And that used to be my job." He slumped slightly, feeling drained and jumpy at once. "And it will be again, when school starts in September."

Hermione pressed closer, nuzzling against his shirt, enjoying the scent, the warmth of him. "I can't think about it right now," she said, rather petulantly. She looked up at her husband. "We've still got a little time left."

Severus looked down at her for a moment, then gently caressed her breast through her robes. She sighed and pushed against his hand contently. It still amused and moved Severus to see her so eager for his touch, so willing to give herself to him.

"And yet, you are still dressed, Madam Granger-Snape?" he drawled, a little half-smile playing at the corners of his mouth. Wordlessly, he spelled her clothing away, leaving her gasping in the cold. Severus took her hand and led her back into the front room, and lit a fire. "As much as I love to see these," he mused, his fingers brushing across her taut nipples, "goosebumps are not conducive to romance."

Hermione awarded him with a playful swat, and he sat down on the sofa. "Manners, my dear," he purred, and pulled her onto his thigh, forcing her to straddle one leg. She hissed, as her sensitive labia parted, and rough wool made contact with tender flesh. Severus smiled wolfishly. "Well, you're very warm *here*," he murmured, as she moved instinctively against the stimulation. His large hands encircled her waist, helping her to gain purchase against him.

Breathlessly, she laughed, "I'm going to ruin your trousers."

Severus, enthralled as this beautiful, delicious-smelling witch humped his leg with increasingly uninhibited abandon, sneered lecherously. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

Panting, feeling that lovely, building tension, Hermione nodded. "Uh huh." She gave him a wicked little grin, and his cock twitched and throbbled.

"Then why on earth would I care what you did to my trousers, you dirty little witch?" He could see she was barely listening. Pleasure glowed in her face, and she looked absolutely beautiful.

Just as the edge of her orgasm brimmed underneath her skin, Hermione stopped, to Severus' disappointment, and leaned down, nuzzling his neck, making him shiver and gasp with desire. "I'm going to go upstairs now." she whispered in her ear, her lips ghosting against his skin. "I want you to join me in about fifteen minutes. I'm going to lie down on the bed and wait for you."

"Will you, now?" he purred, trying to hold her against his chest, but she was already pulling away, rising from his lap. She winked at him, which made his skin burn pleasantly. No one had ever winked at him like that. "And what will you be doing in those precious fifteen minutes it will take for me to wind my way upstairs, Lass?"

Hermione grinned again, and leaned down to kiss his lips softly. "You'll just have to wait and see, won't you?" She looked pointedly down at his trouser leg and laughed breathlessly, "You *do* have the ability to make me want to do some rather shameless things."

Stirred and excited, Hermione walked up the stairs and into the loo. She wanted to be completely ready for him, and show him how much she wanted him. The evening had been a study in intensity; the Black sisters with their selfish, dark demands had left him edgy and upset, and Hermione felt the need to distract them both.

She smiled as she completed her ablutions. She wanted to surprise him, give him a reason to smile after what had happened. She wanted him to enjoy himself; she wanted to give him the pleasures he lavished so selflessly on her. The thought of what would happen when he came to her made her knees weak.

She lay down on their bed, feeling flushed and fevered and aching. He did that so easily to her now. One look; one kiss, and she was as helpless as a kitten in his large, skilled hands. Just the thought of his practiced, knowing fingers on her body made her tremble, and in response, her fingers drifted down her body. She smiled to herself as she imagined what he would do or say when he saw her...

Touching herself. It was the first thing Severus saw as he stood in the doorway of their bedroom. The sweet smell of sex reached his sensitive nose, and as he looked onto the bed, the waning light threw soft shadows across the planes of her body, bringing her lovely breasts in relief.

His breath caught. She had rouged her nipples.

*Luscious little succubus*, he marveled to himself. Lust and desire burst upon him like a wildfire, and his heartbeat thundered in his chest. For a moment, he held himself still, trying to master this dark, raging arousal. He simply stared at her, his sheer want for her making his chest ache.

Her head was turned to the side; she lay on his pillow, and the fingers of one hand gently plucked and teased her cherry-red nipples while her opposite hand danced over her glistening petals. Her eyes were closed, and the only sounds in the room were their harsh breathing, accompanied by the occasional soft whimper from the girl in his bed.

Silently, Severus removed his clothing and sat on the bed beside her. Hermione's eyes fluttered open; they were dark and glowing with passion. Severus stroked her soft face, and she nuzzled against his hand.

"Have you started without me, you wicked girl?" he said, his voice darkly sensuous. Hermione moaned softly, and nodded.

"I couldn't help myself. Everytime I think about you, I feel..." she whispered, and arched her back as his large hand palmed her rouged nipples. He hummed appreciatively.

"I see. And what have we here?" he purred, flicking the nipple with his finger. She made a little squeaking noise at the not-quite-painful sensation, and he hummed again. "Like little plump cherries."

His dark head swooped down and sucked hard on the little red nub, making Hermione cry out; a feral, raw sound of heat and need. He moaned deliriously as he mounted her. "Sweet. So sweet."

This time, he did not coax and tease her; they were too ready for each other, and his first long, slow push into her waiting body caused them both to hiss and thrash. Unable to stop himself, Severus withdrew almost completely from her body and plunged again, a growl of pleasure on his lips.

"Fuck, girl, you feel exquisite," he moaned, helpless to stop the words from bubbling to his lips. "You're the most marvelous witch I've ever had." Lewdly he rasped, "I love your little red tits, your tight, wet cunt. Utterly delicious." He thrust again, causing her to cry out as he nestled in deep, his wiry pubic hair teasing her clit. Hermione mewled softly, pulling at his shoulders, willing him to move.

"Can't you feel it, witch?" he growled, drunk with power. Another punishing thrust, another deep, nestling twist to bed himself deep within her as she hissed in pleasure. "Your pussy was made for me." His eyes fluttered closed. As he readied his body to drive her into the mattress, he moaned, "Nothing, no one has ever felt as good as this!"

"Even her?"

Shocked out of his debauched soliloquy, Severus' eyes flew open, and he looked down into the face of his witch, his wife. For a moment, Hermione thought he would be angry, but something in her eyes derailed it. It was uncertainty, lingering doubt, and the last vestiges of insecurity that softened his expression, and stilled his restless body. He rose on his elbows, and placed a gentle kiss on her lips.

"We never... it wasn't like that with her." Severus lowered his gaze and sighed. "She never felt this way for me, though I refused to accept it for years." He looked up at the trusting, loving gaze of his wife. "She never wanted me. Not like this." He pressed against her body. "Not like you."

Hermione placed her small hands on his face. "Then she was a fool," she whispered into his mouth. "She was never meant for this. She didn't deserve this." Her legs slithered around his waist. "I want you. I want this. You are MINE."

Severus felt his body flush. A feeling of acceptance and relief ran through him, under his skin. It sang in the blood in his veins. "Yes."

He thrust against his wife again, and she cried out, "You feel so good. I love your body. You are beautiful, Severus!"

"Yes, yes, yes," he moaned, his eyes closed, feeling Hermione's body accepting him, wanting him, needing him.

She pulled him closer and kissed him feverishly. "I'm addicted to you. I'm a slave for you. You are the most beautiful man, the most beautiful, and the bravest, and the cleverest, and I love you with all my heart..."

"Yes!" he cried, and made love to her with all the latent ferocity he'd kept locked away, secreted in his heart. "Yes!" he sobbed, and Hermione looked up at him.

His face was a mask of rapturous intensity, as he cried "Yes!" over and over, with each increasingly deep, hard thrust, branding her, marking her forever as his, affirming over and over that he was worthy of her love, and loving no other save her. He felt his orgasm rushing down on him, and he came with a stifled protest, knowing he had come too soon; she had not yet climaxed.

He pulled from her, his cock still jerking, spitting the evidence of his selfish eagerness, and moved down the bed until he buried his mouth in her hot, dripping folds, thrusting his fingers, frantically locating the place she so loved for him to touch, to fondle, to ride. Her body, still undulating against him, was hot and her cunt was tight with anticipation. He could taste his own issue in his mouth but he didn't care. Nothing mattered but her now.

Her keening wail was music to him, and he felt her body leap beneath his skilled mouth and fingers. "Severus... yes... oh! Fuck... I'm coming for you!" He held onto her as Hermione screamed her climax into the room. Ecstasy lanced through her body, overwhelming her in its painful intensity. She cried out his name over and over, as his fingers were gripped and clenched within her tight passage; her clit fluttered and spasmed beneath his grateful tongue.

"Yes," he called out, exultant. "Yes, my love." Breathless, they panted, and Severus collapsed against her vulnerable belly, kissing her silken skin, licking his lips and fingers and telling her over and over how beautiful, how fine she was.

"I love you," he sighed contentedly. Suddenly, he gave a short laugh, bouncing against her stomach. "What a fool I've been all these years, thinking those three words were the most frightening in the English language."

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Even the greatest of honeymoons must come to an end, and thus, two weeks before the summer holidays were over, they made plans to return to the school. During that time, Severus informed Dumbledore of the vow he had made to Narcissa, and together they agreed that Severus would try to draw Draco into his confidence and uncover his plan, not to mention the boy's true feelings on the matter.

Severus was afraid of Draco; it both touched and exasperated Hermione to find that her husband was rather fond of the little ferret. She still regarded Draco as the worst kind of arse, but Severus sensed hidden depths in the young Slytherin, and Hermione forced herself to give him the benefit of the doubt, in spite of his taunts about 'passing her around.'

"You should know by now he was only trying to antagonize you," Severus said, rolling his eyes. "He's putting away childish things now, Hermione. If anything, I need you to help me find out what's going on in his head. As a fellow prefect, you may see things I won't."

Hermione felt dismayed that she would have to return to Gryffindor tower to resume her pretense of a normal life. She had thought of a way for them to sleep together for part of the night, by allowing her access to his quarters through the common room Floo, but Severus was skeptical that this would interfere with her rest. Still, Hermione insisted; she had grown used to sleeping with her husband, and nights without him would be unbearable.

They had also invented a story that would explain her absence over the summer, and her parents' disappearance. It had been Severus' idea, and Hermione thought it would work.

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*Dear Harry and Ron,*

*I'm writing you together because I know you're both at the Burrow. It saves me having to write you twice!*

*It's been a full and rather difficult summer in many ways. Shortly after I left the infirmary, my parents' house was raided by You-Know-Who, and burned. They barely escaped with their lives, so Professor Dumbledore came up with a plan to keep them safe. He also kept it out of the newspaper, for their protection.*

*They have temporarily moved to Australia, under assumed names. I can't tell you what they are, of course, but the long and short of it is that I spent most of the summer helping them get settled in. They actually like it there, and since I'm just a Portkey away, I can visit as often as I like. The area they live in is really lovely; as much as I miss them, I'm beginning to think they might just decide to live there permanently. I made the decision to stay here, because I want to continue to help you, Harry. Never forget that. In spite of everything that has happened, I'm here for you, more than ever.*

*I've been staying at the school, since my parents' house isn't inhabitable, and I didn't want to impose on the Weasleys at the Burrow. It's quite nice actually; I can go to the Library anytime I like and stay for as long as I want!*

*Professor Dumbledore introduced me to the new Potions Master, Professor Horace Slughorn. He says he's already met you, Harry. Bit of a blowhard, if you asked me, but with Professor Snape now teaching DADA, I guess beggars can't be choosers. And before you both have a thrombo about Professor Snape, I actually think it may be a good idea. After all, who best to teach us Defense Against the Dark Arts than someone who has firsthand experience? And really, after Umbridge, anyone is an improvement.*

*I guess the next time I see you will be at the sorting ceremony (I got my books and supplies here in Hogsmeade, so no need to go to Diagon Alley). Take care of yourselves, and I'll see you soon!*

*Love, Hermione*

---

She signed with a flourish, which was a little difficult as her husband was kissing the nape of her neck. He stopped his delicious distraction long enough to read over the parchment as she finished addressing the envelope.

"After Umbridge, anyone is an improvement? You wound me, my dear," he drawled.

She smiled at him, sealed the parchment and told the owl, "The Burrow, Ottery-St.-Catchpole." The lovely owl gave her a rather imperious scowl, as if to remind her he knew perfectly well where the Burrow was.

As Hermione closed the window, she turned to find Severus staring moodily into the fireplace. A low flame burned in the grate; it really wasn't cold enough to be necessary, but Hermione enjoyed the relaxing nature of a fire, and in order to keep her healthy, happy and naked, Severus had been only too happy to oblige. Now, he looked anything but obliging.

"Severus?" When he didn't acknowledge her, Hermione sat down beside him. He sat forward, elbows on his knees, his chin propped in his hand. She touched his shoulder, tentatively. "Is something wrong?"

He looked at her solemnly. "In a few days time we return to Hogwarts, and it all begins." He turned back to the fire. "Here, I am Severus Granger-Snape, your husband, your lover. I'm not a Hogwarts teacher; I'm not a Death Eater; I'm not the Greasy Bat of the Dungeons."

"Severus "

"We've been able to shut out the world here." He smiled regretfully, and it was the saddest smile Hermione had ever seen. "It was fine, wasn't it, Lass?" He took her head in his hands and looked deeply into her eyes. "Tell me it was as sweet a dream to you as it was to me."

Hermione gasped, tears stinging her eyes. She knelt on the floor between his feet. "It's been beautiful, Severus! It has been the sweetest time of my life. But it's not over! It's not over forever!"

He pulled her into a fierce embrace, holding her tightly to him, as if to shield her. "I want to believe it, Hermione. But I've never had anything precious that wasn't destroyed." He took a deep, shaking breath. "I'm frightened, Lass. I'm frightened that we're nearing the end of everything."

She tried to hold him, to comfort him, alarmed at the bleak, brittle, lifeless tone of his voice. She touched him soothingly, but he would not be consoled. "It's alright to be afraid, Severus. I'm terrified, but you're not alone. You will *never* be alone."

For a moment, he was quiet, but Hermione could feel him shudder. Beneath his dark exterior, the clothing he wore like protective armour, he trembled. "I know, Lass. I know I should be grateful for the few, precious hours we had together."

The despair in his voice was devastating, and something in Hermione died at the sound of it. He looked down at the floor, as if praying to hell. "I'm a selfish, greedy man,

Hermione! I want this forever! Oh, Gods," he slumped, his passionate, painful outburst vanishing like the sun behind a cloud. "Sometimes I wish we could run away..." He looked at her with the bewildered look of a frightened child. He whispered, "I don't want to go back. I don't want to be the man I have to be there! I don't want to face them again."

"Oh Severus! My precious husband..." Hermione rocked him as he trembled, and as she held him, stroking his hair, she sang the song he taught her *Lay me low, lay me low, lay me low, where no one can see me, where no one can find me, where no one can hurt me...."*

He clung to her like a child in the dark. Deep within his soul, there was a numbing, grieving certainty that he would die during the battle, leaving behind his sweet girl. He had lost his first love to the darkness. He could not bear the thought of Hermione, alone without him, at the mercy of the Dark Lord. He couldn't bear the thought of her without him, full stop. He was jealous of the very air she breathed how could he stand the thought of others touching her?

*And let's be honest, Severus, he sneered inwardly. It's not her you're truly worried about, is it? You also can't stand the thought of being without her now. She's sewn herself underneath your skin, just as you wanted her to those months ago. You've gotten your wish, and now you can't live without her.*

As she sang and soothed him like a mother comforting a child, he made the darkest decision of his life. He made a vow to himself, a silent oath to her.

When the time came, if the Dark Lord killed her, Severus would follow her into the beyond. He could not be without her, even in death. And before he would allow the Death Eaters to defile and destroy her, he would take her life himself. He would not let her be given over to his 'brothers' for their grisly sport. He would kill her, and then he would turn his wand on himself.

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Opening lines are from "Dimming Of The Day" by Richard Thompson

## Twenty: The Valley of Pain

Chapter 21 of 39

I believe there's a reason for this trial; this too shall pass in a little while. Lord have mercy if I complain; I'm walking through the valley of the pain.

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

*And as always, special thanks to the queen of the betas, stgulik, the most patient, most clever, quickest thinking beta in the world. stgulik, you are my Hermione Granger.*

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*Don't let me grow bitter I pray, give me strength to carry on my way; I'm leaning on you like a wooden cane; don't let the darkness drive me insane; I'm walking through the valley of the pain*

*I believe there's a reason for this trial; this too shall pass in a little while. Lord have mercy if I complain; I'm walking through the valley of the pain.*

*Paint me in a river of my tears; whisper hope and truth - courage in my ears...*

*When I'm hurting I have a dangerous tongue; I lose it and use it like a gun. Oh won't you stop me if you see me taking aim? I'm walking through the valley of the pain...*

---

Hermione started her sixth year at Hogwarts feeling a bit like an imposter - or worse, an infiltrator. Spending the requisite time with her classmates in her House or in the library was by turns enjoyable and tedious. She felt less in touch with the puerile chatter of the Common Room with every passing day. She supposed it came from the weeks of challenging, stimulating and often heated conversation with Severus; she had spent most of her summer at his side, and she enjoyed him.

She also worried about him. She cast surreptitious glances up at the Head Table to make sure he was eating enough, and keeping his diet balanced. She had spent the last five years driving both Harry and Ron mad with her dietary suggestions; transferring her nagging to Severus seemed as natural as breathing.

He tended to go a little heavy on red meat for her tastes, and not enough on the green vegetables. He also showed a tendency toward white bread. She spent part of their evenings together sweetly imploring him to get a little more fibre in his diet, please; try some yoghurt with fruit for the cultures, trust me, Severus. Anything she could think of to regulate his rather delicate digestive system.

He always gave her sour looks when she brought up his diet. He was a spy, he reminded her; a life lived on high alert, bullshit with fear, went hand in glove with rumbling stomachs. He would eat whatever pleased him, thank you. Refusing to take offence, she merely changed tactics and began to coerce the house-elves into placing more broccoli and spinach on his plate and substituting whole wheat rolls.

She never realised just how much it pleased him to be fussed over in this way. That she nagged him for the sole reason she was concerned for him was quite honestly something no one had ever done. Severus' mother had been happy to just have food in the house most days. Many a morning meal in the Snape household had comprised of cold porridge oats with water and salt. Nutrition was a reserve of the middle classes.

He concluded that Hermione's parents had reared their precocious daughter to be as healthy as a horse, and she fully intended on bridling him with the same nosebag. Severus simply pretended to ignore her advice, and swallowed a few forkfuls of spinach when she wasn't looking.

During the Welcoming feast, where Severus was named as the Defense Against The Dark Arts teacher, Harry had been furious, making no secret of the fact that he thought Severus was starting to show his true colours - all of them Dark. Harry was still smarting from his altercation on the train with Draco. If Luna Lovegood hadn't found him, he would have been halfway to London now.

Hermione and her two friends now sat together, surrounded by the chatter of excited first years and the boisterous camaraderie of students coming together after the long summer. Hermione listened with pretended surprise as they told of their run-in with Draco in Diagon Alley, and how he'd been seen in Borgin & Burkes on some mysterious mission. It hadn't helped that Draco had overpowered Harry on the train to Hogwarts and left him there, making him late for the Sorting ceremony, and, of course, the victim of Severus' wrath.



Harry was also convinced that Draco had taken the Dark Mark over the summer. "I'll bet that greasy git put him up to it, too," Harry said, spearing a sprout with his fork. "And I've got detention with him tomorrow afternoon!" he added, still smarting from his run-in with Severus at the school gates. "Bloody git didn't say a word to Luna for being late, oh no. Just me!"

Hermione felt a queasy feeling of protectiveness for her husband, and frustration of not being able to defend him. It was a feeling she would come to know very well. She had to admit that Severus' view of Harry was still, at best, prejudiced, and at worst, obtuse. She also thought Harry deliberately pushed Severus' buttons whenever possible. Mistakes were made on both sides, and it troubled Hermione to be in the middle of them, even if only Severus knew it.

It also bothered her that Harry made no mention of the events of the previous spring, and their row just before school had ended. He was still mourning Sirius, but seemed to feel that the best course of action was just not to mention it. Hermione, never one to ignore a problem, found herself relieved that he had chosen not to challenge the matter further.

---

Hermione found sixth-year work every bit as grueling as she had imagined it. During the day, she behaved as she had always: attending classes, researching in the library, doing homework in the common room and listening to Harry and Ron discuss Quidditch, Malfoy and Professor Snape.

At night, she would wait until after curfew and Floo into Severus's bedroom. Because she had always gone to bed later and risen earlier than either Lavender or Pavarti, it was easy to convince them that she was spending the maximum amount of time studying, and as Prefect she made sure the Common Room was empty before leaving through the fireplace.

Many was the night she stumbled out of the fireplace, falling into his arms, exhausted from pretending. Severus always welcomed her, listened to her relive the events of the day, made suggestions on her Potions work, and made love to her as if it might be the last time.

At times, their lovemaking took on a desperate tang. It was the frightening realization that any minute he could be summoned; the balance of things could shift. Severus was, as always, a constant, gifted lover. He never took her in anger, although he was angry a great deal of the time, and he never left her wanting, even when his own passions were quick fire and too incendiary to wait. He always made sure she was satisfied. Oh, Merlin, could he satisfy her.

While DADA was the subject Severus had always loved and the position he had coveted from his first year at Hogwarts, he found no pleasure in it, knowing what was soon to happen. Dumbledore was growing frailer, more unpredictable with each day; it was heartbreaking to see the once fierce warrior wizard disintegrating practically before his eyes. The days felt too much like marking time.

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At breakfast in the Great Hall, Harry rolled the vial of Felix Felicis between his fingers around on the table. It had been his reward for making a perfect potion for their new Potions Master, Professor Slughorn, and Harry was rather pleased with himself. His eyes kept straying to his battered Potions textbook. Hermione, in spite of herself, was intrigued.

"Harry, where did you say you got this text again? It looks ancient," she said, reaching for it.

To her shock, Harry snatched the book out of her hands. "It was just a moldy old copy I found in the cupboard. All the nice ones were taken."

Hermione watched him carefully. He had never been so cagey about anything, especially a book.

From the first week of school, Harry had started 'private lessons' with the Headmaster, and the things he reported back to Ron and Hermione were cryptic and puzzling. He told them of the memories he'd witnessed in the Pensieve, and the reason the Headmaster was so adamant that Professor Slughorn return to teach Potions.

"And, in the memory, Tom Riddle asked Professor Slughorn if he knew anything about something called 'Horcruxes.' That's when the memory got dodgy, and Professor Dumbledore said that Slughorn had tried to tamper with it," Harry concluded.

"Horcrux? He actually used the word, 'Horcrux?'" Hermione said, and her heart started beating just a little more quickly. Hadn't Dumbledore mentioned that word before she and Severus had gotten married? He had promised her he would explain things when school started, but it looked as though Harry would be the one to explain it, not Dumbledore.

"Yeah. I asked him what it meant, but all he would say is that I needed to persuade Slughorn to give me the true memory of what happened when Tom Riddle asked him about it. It seemed more important that Tom knew what a Horcrux was than whether or not I knew." In spite of Harry's unshakable loyalty to Dumbledore, Hermione could sense a bit of frustration. Harry, more than anyone, hated to be kept in the dark, and he'd been led around in less than stellar light by Dumbledore practically all his life.

"What does it all mean?" Ron asked, looking at Hermione, his large eyes holding a particular meaning all their own.

It both amused and dismayed Hermione to realise that Ron was staring at her more often with that penetrating gaze that passes for 'meaningful' in teenaged boys. To Hermione, he looked like a sick cow. She decided not to mention it to Severus. He had already shown a bit of jealousy when Cormac McClaggen started sniffing around her in class. Severus had given him a detention for 'raising his wand too far to the left' during a jinxing spell, and poor Cormac had spent the evening mixing Thestral dung with Professor Sprout's special fertilizer for Hogwarts' rosebushes.

Voldemort had been strangely quiet, and Severus had not been summoned since the day he and Hermione were given a private audience with him. It troubled Severus, and he knew that, when the time came, it would not be a pleasant occurrence.

That summoning came on the first Hogsmeade weekend - the day Katie Bell almost died.

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Hermione entered his chambers slowly, feeling numb with shock. Severus was waiting for her. He was storing away his Death Eater robes and the hated mask. He looked tired, but otherwise unharmed. Hermione did the only thing she knew to draw away the taint of the Dark Lord from Severus' soul. She put her arms around him, and held him until the tension drained from his body.

"How is she?" Hermione asked without preamble. Everyone in school had heard of the terrible events. Katie Bell had been with the rest of them in Hogsmeade, when she was cursed by a necklace that was laced with Dark magic. Hagrid had carried the unconscious girl to the infirmary, but Severus had been the one to examine her.

He led Hermione to the sofa and drew her onto his lap. She felt cold; with a muttered spell, Severus quickly removed her clothing and wrapped her in his warmest, thickest dressing robe. She leaned against him gratefully.

"To be perfectly honest, Lass, Miss Bell is lucky to be alive. The curse was caught in time, but we could have had Hogwarts' first student fatality of the war today. She's in St. Mungo's now." He felt her shiver, and held her closer. "Hagrid told me the three of you saw what happened to her."

"It was truly horrible to watch," Hermione said, describing the awful event; Katie, thrown into the air, screaming in pain and terror. The entire incident was so nightmarish Hermione was sure it would haunt all of them for a long time.

"Miss Bell remembers nothing after going to the loo in the Three Broomsticks," Severus mused. "She must have been Imperused there."

Hermione bit her lip. "Harry is convinced it was the same necklace he saw Draco looking at in Borgin and Burkes a couple of years ago; ergo, Katie must have received the necklace from Draco."

"In the women's loo? I can't picture him there myself, but "

Hermione smirked, and Severus could feel her expression change, although he couldn't see it. "Well, you don't have to. Professor McGonagall had Draco in detention all afternoon."

"Hmm. Sit up a little straighter, Hermione, you're pinching my ah, yes, that's better." Severus shifted into a more comfortable position. "So he wasn't there. That doesn't necessarily preclude the fact that he could have planted it."

"You're starting to sound like Harry."

"Merlin forbid." He turned her in his arms until she was straddling him. "All I could think was that it could have been you. It could have been my witch, cursed." His dark eyes were bleak and resigned, and his voice became soft. "Remind me that I'm alive, Hermione. Remind me that you are whole and unharmed, and mine."

He pulled open her robe as he spoke, gazing raptly down at her body. He pulled her close. "Hide me away, Hermione, where no one can find us."

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Hermione lay against Severus' chest, listening to the comforting, steady beat of his heart. Their coupling had been frenzied and brief, and as they finished, panting, their mouths still fused together, Hermione could feel the heat from her man through his clothes. She unbuttoned his pristine white lawn shirt, revealing the smooth, pale flesh glistening beneath, and she blew on it to cool him.

He shivered, in spite of their combined heat, and Hermione sensed something was wrong. He had not volunteered any information regarding the summoning. As much as she dreaded it, Hermione knew she would have to pull it from him, as no explanation was forthcoming.

"Severus?" She looked into his liquid eyes, black as ink, and let her own ask the question. He tilted his head, and sighed.

"I know, Hermione. I haven't told you because I can't bring myself to." He looked down, toying with the sash of her robe. "I can hardly bear to remember it."

Alarmed, she whispered, "What happened?" The blood oath they shared would have told her if he himself were in harm's way. No, this had been something so horrible he had disrobed her, pulled her into his arms and initiated desperate sex with her so that he would not have to talk or think about it.

Hermione took his head in her hands. "You're going to have to tell me eventually, Severus."

He looked down and swallowed. "It was a Revel. A Dark Revel. I was excused from participating because of 'my concubine's delicate condition,' the Dark Lord explained." Severus' brow furrowed. "Everyone had great laugh at that."

"They had a Muggle girl there. She was about your age. They they brutalized her, they shared her and passed her around like a party favour." He still would not meet her eyes. "When it was over, they killed her. Bella did it. She did it while forcing the poor girl to " He stopped, and looked away. Hermione felt him shudder, and she knew exactly what he was thinking. It could have been her. She could have been Bella's Muggle plaything, to bat around and abuse before destroying.

She cupped his face with her hands and gently kissed his forehead, trying to comfort him *I'm here now*, she said, wordlessly. *You must forgive yourself. You could not have prevented it. There comes a time to act, but for now, Professor Dumbledore's Greater Good has to apply. It's the only way you can live with yourself.*

He shook his head, her words offering no consolation. "And I had to stand there, looking bored, looking as if I saw this every day. Hermione, Bellatrix knew about Katie Bell. She asked me if the Headmaster had received any tokens of affection lately. The necklace *must* have been meant for Albus."

For a long moment, she and Severus looked down at his hands, clasped protectively around hers. "Then we have to find out what Draco's planning," Hermione said thoughtfully.

Severus nodded. "And more to the point, what Dumbledore is planning."

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Several weeks into the school year, Hermione grimly considered the implications of getting what she wished for, as she mounted the steps up to the Headmaster's study.

"Ah, come in, Miss Granger or Madam Granger-Snape, I should say," he said cordially, as if their last, heated discussion had never taken place. "Thank you for answering my summons so promptly. Please join your husband, my dear."

Hermione moved to sit awkwardly beside Severus on a small sofa. Their eyes met briefly. *Give nothing away, Lass*, came his voice in her head. *Occlude your mind as if you were meeting the Dark Lord*. Hermione looked carefully ahead, and rather primly cleared her throat, their pre-arranged signal during situations like this.

For several moments, Professor Dumbledore regarded them carefully, as if trying to make up his mind about something. "And how are your classes, Madam Granger-Snape? Are you settling in well?"

Hermione felt a vague irritation at his clumsy attempt at small talk. "Very well, thank you, sir." She decided to cut to the chase. After glancing quickly at Severus, she continued, "The last time we spoke, you mentioned 'Horcruxes,' sir. I had hoped we might continue our discussion."

For the first time in months, Dumbledore's eyes twinkled, and he reminded her of the kindly, grandfatherly wizard Hermione remembered as a first year. But she was no longer eleven, and the stakes were too high to be taken in by his fatherly mien.

"To the point, as always, my dear. Very well." He looked at Severus pointedly.

In retrospect, Hermione almost wished he had beat around the bush a little more.

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An hour later, Hermione sat across from Severus on his bed. He was propped up against one of the large end posts; she was leaning against the more comfortable headboard. He took a long drink of Ogdens'. Hermione had been too upset to even consider drinking anything stronger than pumpkin juice.

Finally, Severus spoke. "Merlin, I feel sick." With the swift, angry movement of a man who must do something or jump out of his skin, he leapt to his feet and began to pace the room. "He knew! That old poof *knew!* All this time he's played me for the worst fool, and I've let him!"

He strode about the room. "He's not going to tell Potter, you know that, don't you?" He mimicked Dumbledore. "'When the time comes, I will give Harry all of the knowledge he will need to fulfill his destiny.' What utter bullshit! We can't even tell the boy the truth!"

"You weren't to know "

"I should have guessed!" Severus ran a distracted hand through his hair. "I should have known that Potter's scar meant *something*, but at the time all I could think about was " He stopped, knowing his words would, at best, sound incredibly insensitive, and at worst, hurt the one person on earth he had no desire to hurt. He sat down on the bed beside her, numb with the shock of it. His hand reached out and stroked her foot, but it was an automatic gesture; he was barely aware he was doing it.

"I've spent the last sixteen years insuring that Lily's son survived. And now I'm told I've helped keep him alive so that he can sacrifice himself in the end. I've sat by and watched James Potter's son flaunt every school rule, risk his life stupidly and taunt me with his insolence, but I've endured it for the end game." He scrubbed his face with his hands. "I could have let Quirrell knock him off his broom during his first year and it would have made no more difference."

"It would have made all the difference in the world to you - here, where it counts," Hermione replied, placing her hand over his heart. She knew he could rail about Harry for Britain. But Severus was a man of honour, even though he thought of himself as anything but. If she did nothing else before she left this earth, Hermione was determined to convince him that he was merely a man who'd made the wrong choices in life and had done his penance. Severus had always thought himself an unredeemable man given a mission; Hermione knew him to be a loyal man with an unshakable sense of duty.

His shoulders slumped, and that gesture of defeat made Hermione's heart ache for her husband - this fine man, who had lost so much and was being asked to sacrifice so much more. "After all you've done for him - after all you promised you would do? He knew your soul would be torn the moment you -" She couldn't bring herself to finish the sentence. *The moment you took his life, to cement your alliance with the Dark Lord and play out this grisly plan. But why Harry? Why does Harry have to die to win?*

Hermione tried to put all the pieces together, but all she could see were the two hideous facts bookending her mind: Severus would forfeit his soul when he killed Dumbledore, and Harry would have to die anyway. Severus would be permanently damaged and in the end it would be for nothing. She would lose them both.

Pain and anger swept over Hermione like wildfire. She looked up at her husband. Severus Snape was a good man, and she loved him with all her heart. He was not perfect, he was not pretty. But he was beautiful, and his soul was like a kaleidoscope of intellect, passion and duty that awed and soothed her, that excited and challenged her. It was a precious soul in its pain and acceptance, and Hermione felt privileged to be a part of this complex, multi-faceted man's life. He was too valuable to throw away, yet Dumbledore was preparing to toss him aside like a used Muggle prophylactic.

No, she thought. *I won't let it happen!* She put her arms around him. "Please don't give up now, Severus," she whispered, knowing it was too late. "I'll help Harry find the other Horcruxes. Maybe we can find them before Draco tries -"

"It won't matter," he replied, his lovely voice flat and emotionless, devoid of its beauty. "In the end, Albus will die, and by my hand. Apparently Draco isn't too far gone for his chance at redemption, whereas I?" Severus shrugged. "It doesn't matter, Lass. We've agreed to this end; we have to play our parts, and that means you as well."

He turned and dragged her into his arms. "Every moment is precious to me now, Hermione." His onyx eyes burned into hers. "I don't care how you come to me, witch, but I need you every moment of the day. If you cannot get away, I'll come and get you. But I cannot entertain a hope for survival without you."

On her way back to the Common Room that evening, Harry caught her and Ron and rushed them into a corner, casting the *Muffliato* spell. He was terribly excited, his green eyes sparkling.

"I found out. I got him to tell me today! It was easy!" Harry was babbling, and both Ron and Hermione tried to calm him.

"Found out what, mate? No offence, but you're not making much sense," Ron said, and Harry nodded and took a deep breath.

"Sorry, sorry. I'm just so excited! I decided to take the Felix Felicis, to see if I could get lucky enough to get Slughorn to talk to me, and it worked!" he cried, smiling at his friends. "I know what a Horcrux is! Two of them have been destroyed, and I know how to go about finding the others!"

"Well, tell us!" Hermione exclaimed, silently thanking the powers that be for all those acting lessons. Her heart was aching so badly it was all she could do to prevent herself from throwing her arms around him and bursting into tears.

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The autumn months passed quickly; the weather grew cold, the air grew pungent with falling leaves and woodsmoke. Hermione was often tired, but she kept her promise to Severus in every way she could, and stayed with him every moment she could spare. They were careful, and with the help of friendly ghosts, suits of armour, and a surprisingly cooperative Mr. Filch, they were able to be together more than they'd ever hoped.

She found that Severus, while enjoying her body with abandon and talented skill, was still as content as he had been in the early part of their relationship to merely hold her. He could and did kiss her contentedly for hours, until she was so breathless and aroused that she would end up dragging him to their bed. She finally came to the realisation that he needed that reaction; he needed to be wanted.

When he initiated sex, it was very dominant and amazingly exciting to Hermione. He would be fully in charge, aggressive, dirty, a little rough, and she reveled in it. When she approached him, he was a tender, passionate lover, worshipping every inch of her body, shivering with delight at her reciprocation.

At night she stroked and fondled and petted him, trying to fill him with all the love she was capable of giving. His scars, growing dimmer with every passing day, seemed to melt beneath her touch, and he could literally lie still for a solid hour, groaning with pleasure as her gentle hands soothed the aches of his body and mind away.

DADA was a demanding class to teach, both magically and physically, and called for him to be at his physical peak. Severus had always prided himself in keeping as fit as possible; he could not have survived his association with the Dark Lord otherwise. Teaching Potions had its own physical challenges; after all, ingredients were often found in remote places, facilitating jaunts across terrain that was hilly and often treacherous. Cauldrons were heavy, and had to be moved from place to place, discarded when useless, acquired when needed. He could have used magic to transport them, but he chose to do it himself as a means of keeping his muscles conditioned. Patrolling a large castle several times a week had ensured stamina.

Severus knew, however, the aches of his spirit, the degenerative entropy of hope and happiness, could not be strengthened by mere physical means. It was for this spiritual wasting that Hermione was able to use her magic to heal and strengthen him. Severus privately felt he was being selfish and indulgent to lie here night after night, purring like a cat beneath her gentle hands and healing kisses; he tried not to feel like the most self-centred bastard on the planet as she crooned and petted him, and he consoled himself that she did it simply because she loved him, and he could and did return her ministrations equally.

Even as he slept, he was aware in the deepest part of his subconscious of her hands, whispering lightly over his skin; he could feel her healing magic seeping into him through his pores, like water filling the cracked ground of a barren land, nourishing him, making him feel more alive than he honestly knew he had a right to feel.

No one had ever touched him this way. His mother was too broken and cowed to show her unusual son more than just the most oblique affection. Other women of his youth had stroked him, had given him callow, dirty kisses, had sucked his impressive cock with the indifference of their profession, and fucked him because he had been sufficiently and conveniently hard enough for them.

He had been raped by women, bugged by men; forced to do any amount of degrading, soul-destroying things in the name of serving the Dark Lord. Those things, those people, had been purged from him along with the scars he had borne. Hermione had swept them away from him, to the point where he barely remembered his jaded self when they were sequestered in their bedroom.

His skin was almost flawless now; only the Dark Mark remained, and even it looked smudged, redundant. Severus looked at it sometimes as if he truly didn't know what it was anymore. Only Hermione mattered now, Hermione and this mission Dumbledore was determined to fulfill. To Dumbledore, the only thing that mattered was Potter, and Severus even wondered about that.

He saw the way Dumbledore followed the boy with his eyes; Severus still remembered the look on Albus' face when he and Potter came in late the first night of school. Potter, always flaunting his notoriety, had been last off the train and swaggered into the Great Hall with Severus following grimly behind. The relief and joy on the Headmaster's face had looked like, well, like Severus' when Hermione appeared in their chambers at the end of a long day. Yes, he wondered about that.

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Hermione found Defense Against The Dark Arts a rigorous subject in the most peaceable of times. Except for the mind-numbing so-called tutelage of Dolores Umbridge, Hermione had always had to work hard to excel in it. The DA had helped. In the bosom of her friends, she had relaxed and found her natural rhythm. Her reflexes had sharpened, and she had gradually honed her skills to a sharp edge.

It was not a subject that came naturally or easily to her, and try as she might, it galled her to admit to her own husband that she would struggle in his class during the term.

With typical Severus Snape snarkiness, he merely gave her a pointed look and said, "Why, Madam Granger-Snape, does this mean that you may actually have to study to get passable grades? There goes our quality time."

But she was not the only one with strong opinions on the subject. "I hate the way Snape talks about the Dark Arts," Harry spat, one evening, as they sat in the Gryffindor Common Room, revising for a practical exam. "He makes it sound so " Harry made a face. "I don't know, seductive."

Hermione rolled her eyes and counted to three. "It's *Professor* Snape, Harry, and he's proving a point! The Dark Arts *are* seductive, and you have to be vigilant to not be seduced by them."

Harry scowled. It would have irritated both him and Severus to know that, at that moment, Hermione thought they looked absurdly alike. "Well, he doesn't have to sound like he enjoys talking about them so much," he grumbled.

"Harry! What he teaches us might save our lives soon!" Hermione shot back, rising from her chair. "I, for one, wouldn't care if he stood on the table and sang their praises to the tune of 'I Do Like To Be Beside The Seaside,' as long as he's showing me how to defend myself against the Death Eaters!"

"You're just saying that because he gave you a passing mark for dueling today!" Ron called after her, as Hermione stalked away toward the library. She tried not to let Ron's parting shot irritate her. She'd bloody well earned that passing grade. Well, she should have. They practiced dueling almost every night before they collapsed in bed for a few precious hours together.

Hermione suppressed a grin. It had been a memorable lesson today for a number of reasons.

Class that day had covered blocking during defensive dueling, a professed weak spot for Hermione. Severus had paired her off with Lavender Brown, and Hermione had held her own for several minutes, blocking spells and moving with reflexes honed by hours with Severus, who never pulled his punches. She was feeling very pleased with herself when Lavender got lucky and derailed her with a well-timed Jelly-Legs Jinx, and Hermione had wobbled all over the place to the hilarity of her classmates. Even Harry and Ron were amused.

Severus had allowed the jinx to last just long enough for the Slytherins to have a good long laugh, before cancelling the spell. "It seems a pity to give you a passing grade for your less than stellar performance today, Miss Granger. However, you did manage to block the prerequisite number of spells from Miss Brown. Pity she was able to bring you down in such an undignified manner. I can see your indolent summer holidays thoroughly prepared you for more advanced work," he'd sneered, and the insecure part of Hermione's ego wanted to slap the smug look off his long face.

"Yes, sir," she'd replied. "Hopefully I will find more room for improvement."

"If it rests between the pages of a book, I'm sure you will, Miss Granger," he drawled languidly, and Hermione's eyes narrowed. He gave her a sidelong glance, his eyes sliding under long lashes, and in spite of the derisory laughter of the Slytherins, Hermione felt moisture pooling in her knickers. His expression grew haughty, and she felt his mind touch hers, feeling the desire growing within her.

Severus turned on his heel and walked toward his desk. "See me after class, Miss Granger. Perhaps you can find that room for improvement in detention."

Rolling her eyes, Hermione saw Harry shoot Severus a hard, hated look. She shook her head at Harry. "I'll be fine," she said, quietly. As she turned to retrieve her books, she accidentally bumped into Draco Malfoy. "Sorry," she said, automatically, then cursed herself for apologizing.

Draco mumbled something she didn't understand, and Hermione looked up at the blond boy's face. It was pinched and drawn, his eyes enormous and shadowed. For a moment, their eyes met, and Hermione sensed his thoughts, and what she saw there was pure, abject terror. She made a promise to herself that soon, she would manufacture an opportunity to speak with him. He looked like someone who needed to pour his heart out to a sympathetic ear.

The chime sounded, ending the class, and they all filed out, with Hermione lagging behind. "You two go on," she said, feigning frustration at being told to stay behind for class. "I'll see you later at dinner."

Hermione looked over at her husband, and in spite of the embarrassing events of the past hour, felt as if he didn't touch her soon, she would go mad. Something about being in class with him today of all days; she didn't know why, but she knew she wasn't leaving this room until he shagged her rotten. She turned and closed the door behind the last of the students.

"Lock it, Miss Granger," he purred, and she closed her eyes, feeling her face grow hot. She quickly obeyed him and turned to face him as he finished warding the room. He looked up at her and she saw the spark flash in his eyes. He stood and walked over to the front of his desk and favoured her with a sneer.

"Come here, Miss Granger," he intoned, his voice imperious and cold. Hermione felt her body flush as hot as her face; how was it possible to want the man any more?

Obediently she approached him, and met eyes that were impenetrable as night. "Yes, sir?" she said, unable to keep a tiny smile from quirking at the corners of her mouth.

"Do you think this amusing, Miss Granger? I, for one, do not." he hissed, and she ducked her head, waiting for his next move. She could feel her core growing hotter and pulsing with that sweet, shivery ache only he knew how to soothe.

"I'm sorry, sir."

"Apologies aren't enough, girl," he drawled, his voice so alluring it seemed to glide over her skin, pebbling her nipples and tickling her belly. He towered over her, tipping her chin until her eyes met his. Not so indifferent, then, she thought, as they blazed with lust so dark it felt wicked, unlawful to share.

She tried a different tack. "I could do extra credit, sir. To show I'm sincere."

"Not good enough, either." He brushed his thumb across her plump bottom lip. As his thumb slid over her mouth, he pushed it between her lips, and gasped quietly as she sucked it into her warm, wet mouth. His cock strained as she rolled her tongue around his thumb, suckling it, her eyes burning into his.

"Dirty little witch," he sneered, and Hermione shivered and felt heat radiating from her core. "Dirty little girl, trying to seduce her professor."

Her response was to suck his finger harder. She closed her eyes, giving in to the dark, aching need in her belly, knowing that soon, he would give her what she wanted; what was her right to take.

To her disappointment, he removed his thumb from her mouth, and smeared the wet pad over her lips, making them glisten. He purred, 'Do you know what happens to bad little witches who try to seduce their teachers?' He smiled. "They get what they deserve."

His kiss was like an attack, and Hermione cried out as he roughly yanked her into his arms, forcing her mouth open, forcing her to open to him, his tongue punishing hers. He grasped the back of her head, and pressed her to him, his lips and tongue battling with hers, moaning deep within his chest, not allowing her to breathe or to pull away from him.

Hermione held onto him, grinding her pelvis against his, feeling his erection pulsing against her belly. She was moaning helplessly now, pushing her thoughts into his mind: *Touch me ... take me ... hurt me if you need to, but do it! I need it ... I need you ...*

And suddenly he was spinning her around, muttering an incantation. The legs of his large desk lowered until it was the perfect height for her to lie over. Hermione gasped and placed her hands on the top to keep her knees from buckling.

"Extra credit, Miss Granger?" His seductive, rich voice made her shiver with longing. "Show me. Show me what you have in mind."

Hermione smiled, and in the ultimate gesture of trust, she bent over the desk. With this signal, she was telling him she was ready ready to put that ugly encounter with Sirius Black in Grimmauld Place away forever.

Hermione felt Severus' large hand on her neck, gently pushing her, forcing her down onto the desk. He lifted her hips until she was dangling from the surface, and his large hands were reaching for her knickers even as he spelled her robes from her body.

"Bad little girls get fucked on their professor's desk, Miss Granger," he crooned, freeing his aching cock from its confines and rubbing the head between her swollen, drenched labia. "So wet. Such a dirty little witch," he ground out, and plunged into her, burying himself to the hilt with a soft, growling sound. Hermione's answering cry of passion almost took him over the edge.

His lust was hot and dark, and he fucked her hard, ruthlessly trying to pound her into the desk. He was babbling, but he didn't seem to notice or care.

"I've wanted to do this for too long, Miss Granger," he panted, and she mewled helplessly, "Sweet, silky little cunt, perfect for me, made for me alone ..."

Hermione held onto the desk, crying out, wondrously filled and completely caught up in his fantasy. "God, don't stop! Please!"

He spanked her bottom hard enough to leave a red imprint of his hand, and she made a sharp, growling sound that made his groin feel as if it were filled with liquid magma. "That's right, little succubus, beg! Beg me for favours, delicious little vixen, tempting me, teasing me with your sweetness, your perfect innocence."

He was driving hard into her now, with long, slow, deep thrusts, and it was hard to concentrate. He panted, "I've wanted you longer than you should have been wanted, witch." He looked down at her round, heart-shaped bottom, his handprint still visible.

He slowed, but still moved within her. "Barely old enough to bleed, and you enticed me like a siren! I wanted your brilliant mind, and your strong heart, and your love. They belong to me now!"

"Yes! All of it is yours!" she cried out deliriously. His confession was visceral and carnal, and something within Hermione broke, and her orgasm rushed down on her, and her wail of ecstasy echoed off the walls of the room.

Feeling her tight cunt throbbing and undulating around his cock, Severus felt his own lust blazing out of control and he grasped her slender waist and pulled her to him with a feral snarl of pleasure. He slammed into her, hard, fast, the way she wanted it, and he cried out, "Mine, now! You're mine you belong to me!" The sizzling wire running through him burst into flames and he felt his own release crashing down, melting his nervous system into a mess of thrusting, pumping heat. "Hermione! Gods ... oh, love, I'm coming for you ..."

He roared his completion as he pounded into her, spilling his seed, filling her with his body, his love, his entire being. Over and over he cried out into the room, head back, knees trembling, his body and hair damp with arousal and exertion.

He looked down at his beautiful wife, shuddering, holding onto the edge of the desk. Her little mewling cries were endearing and sweet, and he hastily withdrew and gently gathered her up in his arms. He was almost afraid he'd gone too far. Why was it that even the slightest brush with the darkness filled him with this unholy lust?

As he turned her to face him, murmuring to her, she flung her arms around his neck, kissing his cheeks, his nose, everywhere her mouth could reach. "Gods, Severus," she groaned, still shivering. "Gods, you're like an addiction. I can't get enough of you."

She looked up into his face, and she shook her head. "Severus, *swear* your face is different. I think you look younger!" His onyx eyes widened at her statement. She nodded. "I'm serious!" She grabbed his hand and dragged him to the large mirror that stood in the classroom for wand practice. Together they looked. Severus stared at himself, shocked.

He was, he freely admitted, not a handsome man. No matter how much he was loved, it did not change the fact that he was whip-cord thin, pale and lanky. Hermione could not change his overly large nose, or his crooked teeth or messy, stringy hair. But she was right. He did look younger. He had not seen this man looking back at him for at least six years.

The precocious little witch standing on tiptoe beside him smiled at his reflection, and slipped her arms around his slender waist and squeezed until he grunted in mock pain.

She grinned up at her husband. "Gorgeous."

He scoffed. "Hardly, Lass. Love is truly blind."

Hermione sobered. "You really don't understand, do you, Severus?" She stroked his pale skin, and he closed his eyes at her gentle, loving touch. Each stroke of her hand whispered love. "You are beautiful to me. And I don't care if you live to be two hundred, you will always be beautiful."

He held her close. "And you, my love, are perfection." He kissed her wild, untamable hair. "And you are also running late for dinner. Go, and we will work on blocking that Jelly-Legs Jinx tonight in 'detention.'"

She grinned mischievously. "You know, I've always wondered about detentions with Professor Snape. Perhaps you'll have to give me a spanking."

He gasped, shocked. "Hermione! I have never " Her sly expression stopped his words. He shook his head. "Well, for you I may be forced to make an exception." He spelled her clothing back where they belonged, regarded her for a moment more, then huffed. "Incorrigible witch. Off with you." He gave her backside a playful swat, and was rewarded with a tantalising grin as she all but skipped to the door.

She turned. "I'll see you tonight, Professor Snape." She tipped him a wink, and he crossed his arms, watching her delectable bum as she sauntered off.

He allowed himself a laugh, and readjusted his hopeful but disappointed erection. Whatever he had done to deserve this insufferable little know-it-all, he only wished to continue doing it.

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When Hermione and Severus rose that morning, there was no nagging feeling of impending disaster, no blip in the magical radar to give any hint that something was amiss. It was like every day they rose together.

Hermione felt Severus' arm on her shoulder, and she jumped out of bed in her typical fashion. While she enjoyed a lie-in as much as anyone, especially lie-ins with Severus, school days were sacrosanct, and even Severus found it impressive watching someone zoom out of the starting gate that easily.

With a kiss and a hug, and another kiss because Severus was greedy, she would literally dress as she talked, cleaned her teeth, ran a brush through her impossible hair and told him her plans for the day. By the time she had showered, dressed and flown out the door, Severus had more or less managed to stand up.

Classes went pretty much as per usual; no one killed anyone, and Katie Bell had returned to class, much to Severus' relief. He was late for dinner, and was walking down the corridor toward the Great Hall when the scream rent the air like a siren.

"Murder! Murder in the bathroom! Murder!"

Severus rolled his eyes. He despised Moaning Myrtle and her histrionics on a good day, but just as he was about to stop her and ask her to explain, he felt a sharp pinch in the palm of his hand, and a sudden, hasty thought lanced into his mind. *Come quickly, Severus! It's Draco!*

Running, Severus flew into Myrtle's hideout, to be met with a sight that would haunt him the rest of his days. Draco Malfoy was lying on the wet floor, even more pale than usual. Blood was streaming from dozens of different gashes all over his body. Standing against the sinks was Harry Potter, looking stunned and horrified, holding his wand as if he was afraid of it.

On her knees beside Draco, staring unseeing in shock, her shaking hands red with blood, her neck and abdomen slashed and bleeding profusely, was his Hermione.

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Chapter title and song lyrics: Valley of Pain - Written by Allen Shamblin and Rob Mathes, from the Bonnie Raitt album, Silver Lining

## Twenty One: Heaven From One

Chapter 22 of 39

Sectumsempra and its aftermath...

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

*And as always, special thanks to the queen of the betas, stgulik, the most patient, most clever, quickest thinking beta in the world. stgulik, you are my Hermione Granger.*

---

*I bless the day I found you, I want to stay around you, and so I beg you, let it be me*

*Don't take this heaven from one if you must cling to someone; now and forever, let it be me*

*Each time we meet love, I find complete love, without your sweet love, what would life be*

*So never leave me lonely, tell me you love me only, and that you'll always let it be me*

---

Hermione was always able to remember every minute detail of the day Harry nearly killed her and Draco Malfoy. To the end of her life, her memories would be as crystal clear as the day it happened.

After Severus' hasty kiss goodbye that morning and her mad dash to the Gryffindor common room, Hermione had spent the day attending classes, grabbing lunch and helping a couple of clueless second years learn the proper swish-and-flick technique that still seemed to baffle some younger students.

Her DADA class had been focused on blocking. She and Lavender had paired up again, this time to better results. Severus had not acknowledged it as such, but he'd also kept his insults to a minimum, which, for Severus, was akin to blatant, gushing praise. Hermione thought so, anyway, and if that was as close as he was going to get in the classroom, she'd take it as such.

As class ended, she'd deliberately been the last one out of the door, and as she left, she dropped her quill, bending forward from the waist to pick it up. Hearing a quiet grunt from the far end of the room, she had turned to see Severus shaking his head, a sneer etched on his lips, eyes narrowed. In her mind, she heard, *You'll pay for that, witch.* Hermione gave him a little crooked, coy smile, and he pressed his lips together sternly and lifted his head toward the door. *Enough of that, minx. I've still got a class to teach.* Hermione left, but not before blowing her DADA professor a kiss. The scowl on his face was almost audible.

She had spent a fruitless hour before dinner looking surreptitiously in the Library for any information on Horcruxes, but without further access to the more extremely Restricted tomes she felt no closer to solving the mystery of their whereabouts than she had the first day Dumbledore had explained them. She had submitted a request to Dumbledore for a pass into the extremely Restricted area of the Library, but none had been forthcoming.

Glancing at the clock, Hermione realised she was already late for dinner, and so took a detour by one of the boys' toilets. As she passed, she heard the unmistakable sound of someone crying within. Hermione looked around; the corridor was deserted with everyone at dinner, so she took a deep breath and pushed the door open. She could always use her position as Prefect to explain venturing into one of the boys' loos.

Hermione wrinkled her nose at the inevitable smell of piss and testosterone, and wondered, not for the first time, why the boys' toilets always stank so badly. Suppressing the urge to hold her nose, she peeked around the corner and saw Draco Malfoy, standing at one of the sinks, weeping.

Her heart began to beat a little faster. Quietly, she approached him. "Draco, are you alright?"

The blond spun around, wand out, a mask of fury on his tear-stained face. "Piss off, Granger," he hissed, turning away from her. "This is a gent's, you know! Get your filthy carcass out of my sight." While his words were textbook Malfoy vitriol, there was no real bite or power behind them. Hermione wondered if she just might have stumbled upon the opportunity she'd been looking for.

As gently as she would have approached a hippogriff, Hermione set down her book bag and then held up her hands in supplication. "Draco, I don't know what is happening, but I want you to know I'm -" she hesitated. *Think, Hermione!* She chastised herself. *Think what would Severus say to him?*

"Draco," she began again, casting her fate to the winds, "you know about... Professor Snape and me, yes?"

He lifted his gaze to hers in the mirror, misery dulling his eyes. Slowly he nodded and inelegantly wiped his nose with the back of his hand. Of course, he had heard of her marriage, and possibly even a rumour of her 'pregnancy,' from his mother, as Narcissa had been present the night she and Severus had conducted their dangerous meeting with Lord Voldemort.

"Well then, you know that... all is not what it seems." When he did not respond, Hermione pressed on. "I don't know what you are planning, but I can help. I know that, in your eyes, I'm just a Mudblood, but I want to help you."

Draco began breathing harshly. "Nobody can help me," he finally whispered. "My Aunt Bella... she..." he suddenly turned to Hermione. "I have to do this. I've been working on... something." He looked desperate and whey-faced with fear. "You don't understand, Granger! He'll kill my family."

"I know he could," Hermione said soothingly, and stepped toward him. "He killed - m-my family is gone, Draco. I know how frightened you are! I understand why, but -" She flailed helplessly for a moment. "We Severus and I we can help you in your task. We can work together. Perhaps we can all protect your parents -"

Draco's eyes turned flat and cold. Contemptuously, he snapped, "And who's going to protect *you*, Mudblood? Your dearest husband? He couldn't even protect -"

The door flew open, and Draco and Hermione whirled about as Harry stepped into the bathroom. "Hermione? What's going on here?" he demanded, looking from one to the other. He drew his wand, his emerald eyes narrowing in suspicion.

Hermione glanced at Draco, then looked back at her friend. Harry's eyes widened at the sight of Draco's tear-stained face. "What the f -"

Hermione, trying to step between Harry and Draco, said calmly, "Draco and I were just having-"

Draco gave Harry a look of pure hatred and snarled, "I was just telling your little Mudblood whore to stop following me into the gents' unless she wants to get fucked up the arse, Potter. Not that it's any business of yours."

Harry's face contorted with anger. "How fucking dare you "

But Draco's blood was up, his fear gone. Arrogantly, he sneered, "Stick around, Potty. Maybe you'll get lucky with Crabbe. He's got a thing for whiny little Gryffindors. You'd be right up his street."

Hermione didn't have time to react before Harry's first hex screamed past her toward the young Slytherin. It was so close she could actually feel the heat of it. She instinctively ducked as Draco's returning jinx blasted over her head.

"Harry, stop! Stop it, both of you!" she shouted, dodging a jinx that shattered a sink behind her. Water began to flood the bathroom, and Moaning Myrtle flew out of the U-bend, shrieking as her ghostly abode was being destroyed by the two young wizards.

"*Levicorpus!*" Harry bellowed, barely missing Draco, who leveled a Leg-Locker Curse at Harry's feet and missed. A vicious hex demolished a huge piece of the floor. Tile chips flew around the room. Hermione's pleas and warnings went unnoticed; both wizards were blind, deaf and dumb to everything but the long years of pent-up animosity toward one another, and the freedom to finally act upon it. But Harry and Draco were too evenly matched; neither could get a spell under the other's shields, and Hermione could not risk disarming one without the other taking advantage.

As she shouted for Moaning Myrtle to go and get help, she aimed her wand at the mirror, desperately hoping to cast a spell that would ricochet and hit both boys at the same time. "*Petrificus*"

"*Sectumsempra!*" Harry roared. The spell tore past Hermione, spinning her around one hundred and eighty degrees with its force. It sliced into her torso, even as it blazed past and razored into its intended victim. Both she and Draco screamed as they were knocked off their feet by the force of the curse.

Hermione could feel dozens of tiny yet deep cuts opening on her skin. She hissed in pain. Seeing blood oozing from her body startled and frightened her, making her heart race and her blood flow faster. With her arms clamped tight around her middle, she rolled herself up onto her knees and looked down at Draco in horror. He was lying on the wet floor, shivering, with long, thin slashes covering his body. Blood was running from him in rivulets, inking the standing water on the floor with blossoms of crimson. Draco's face stood deathly white in stark contrast to his blood-saturated shirt. Blood tipped the ends of his hair, like quills dipped in red ink. Hermione placed a shaking hand on his shoulder. His lips were turning blue; he was going into shock.

Hermione forced her panic down and closed her eyes. Severus. Severus would already know something was wrong. If she was this injured, his palm must be screaming pain by now under the weight of the Blood Oath. But it was Draco's life she feared for most...

*Come quickly, Severus! It's Draco!* He did not respond, yet she could almost feel the surge of adrenaline pumping into her husband's bloodstream, and she leaned over the blond Slytherin, relieved that help was on the way. "It's alright, Draco. It's alright," she said, trying to keep her voice calm. "Professor Snape will be here soon."

Still on her knees, she turned to look back at Harry, who was staring, wild-eyed and speechless. He was still in fighting stance, frozen in horror at the scene before him. "What have you done?" she shouted. "Go and get help NOW!" But Harry stood rooted to the spot. He looked from her to Draco, and for a dreadful moment, Hermione thought he would faint.

The vision of Severus Snape flying through the door was possibly the sweetest sight Hermione had ever witnessed. He took in the tableau of the three of them in one swift movement, then their eyes met.

*Hermione, gods!*

*I'm not that bad, Severus, but Draco is -*

Severus skidded to a halt in front of the bleeding Draco and knelt at his side. Severus took a deep breath and murmured an incantation as he drew his wand over the deep cuts. His low voice throbbed with emotion, making the charmed words almost musical. Hermione watched her husband closely; his concentration, fierce at the calmest of times, was sterling, almost holy in its pure, distilled intensity.

Soon, the shallower wounds were almost healed, while the deeper gashes were closing and the blood was wicking from Draco's shirt into his body again. Hermione marveled at the purity of the spell; not only was it healing the wound, but it was cleansing the blood so that the body would receive it back into his body.

Then he turned to her. As Severus chanted the incantation and healed the worst of the cuts, Hermione could feel his magic washing over her in soothing waves. He was focusing on her with the same pristine concentration he'd given to healing Draco, and the spell felt like a cooling balm over her wounds. She slumped in relief as the pain eased away with each softly spoken word. Though she had not been the intended target for the spell, and had only received a cursory glance, she had been hit first; her cuts, though quite a bit fewer in number, were deeper than Draco's.

The lacerations on her abdomen were particularly painful, almost reminding Hermione of menstrual cramps. She was struck with a sudden thought, and looked up at Severus. *Ask me to come with you to the infirmary, Severus. Just go along with what I do, please!*

He did not react to her thoughts as he assisted her to her feet, and Hermione suddenly doubled over with a grunt of pain. With a look of panic, she whispered, "Professor, I -"

"That will do, Miss Granger. Apparently you'll need to come with us as well." He sounded sharply irritated, as if he thought her to be overreacting. Draco was still unsteady on his feet, and Severus transfigured one of Draco's notebooks into a stretcher and assisted the young wizard onto the litter, which magically moved at Severus' silent command.

Severus held onto Hermione's arm as they left the toilets with Draco in tow. As they neared the door, Severus turned back to Harry. Hermione could feel Severus' fury; she was surprised Harry could not physically see the palpable rage emanating from her husband.

"Do. Not. Move," Severus growled. Harry nodded slowly.

Severus could barely think for the anger surging through his veins. *Bloody fucking Potter - again!* He thought. *How could he possibly know that particular spell? The stupid, thoughtless arrogant prick*

Hermione grasped her abdomen again and cried out. Draco, who was still shaky, but stable, looked from her to Severus.

"What's wrong with her?" he whined petulantly, rising weakly from the stretcher. "I'm the one that got cursed, not her "

"She probably saved your life, Draco," Severus said, through clenched teeth. "I want Madam Pomfrey to have-" He stopped as Hermione froze, an expression of agony on her lovely face.

"Oh, no," she whispered, and suddenly clutched Severus' arm. She looked up at him with pain-filled eyes. "Something's wrong," she whimpered, and sagged against Severus' hip. To his shock, he could see a trickle of dark blood running down the inside of her thigh. She followed his gaze and cried out.

"Merlin, Granger," Draco said, looking at her with revulsion.

"Quiet, Draco!" Severus hissed, understanding. To add to the drama, he scooped Hermione into his arms and began to hurry toward the infirmary, with Draco's litter moving smoothly beside them. Hermione clutched her abdomen, and cried out.

Within his mind he heard her voice, swift and strong. *It's all an act, you know that, don't you?*

*I'm finally getting around to it. Are you taking advantage of the situation or did you deliberately step in front of Draco?*

He could almost hear her huff inwardly. *I'm not that noble! Harry used a spell I've never heard of. It was horrible like Dark magic* Severus turned his face away from hers.

A few unspoken words later, and Severus burst into the infirmary, calling for Madam Pomfrey. He was still reeling at the sheer audacity of his wife. Part of him wanted to shout to the gods how sodding clever she was; part of him was irritated he had not thought of it himself.

She had single-handedly solved the problem of her 'pregnancy' and cemented her cover for hating Harry Potter in one master stroke and Potter himself had sealed the deal. Hermione's supposed defection would be even more plausible to the Dark Lord if revenge was a factor.

Severus could plant the seed that Potter was isolated and vulnerable, and the Dark Lord would be placated for awhile longer, giving Severus and Dumbledore time to plan. All they needed was a little fake blood and Draco's curiosity and penchant for eavesdropping.

Propriety dictated that he would force Poppy to attend Draco's wounds first, which were all but healed, thanks to Severus' quick thinking and powerful magic. A few drops of Dittany later, and no one would ever guess that Draco had been covered in deep lacerations moments before. From behind a curtain in the next bed, they could hear Hermione's sobs and gasps of pain.

"Madam Pomfrey, a private word, I think," Severus had said archly, hoping the blond Slytherin would be listening. She gave him a terse nod, and they moved from Hermione's bed into the office.

As Hermione lay there, she heard a soft rustle of the curtain, and a gasp. Hermione kept her eyes closed, knowing what Draco had seen, and thankful that Severus was, even now, explaining the elaborate ruse to Madam Pomfrey. How else would she explain lying in bed, covered in dark blood, holding her abdomen and weeping in pain?

Five minutes later, and they returned. Madam Pomfrey looked grave, concerned, while Severus' face was a mask of tightly-controlled anger. He barely acknowledged Draco as he and the mediwitch walked into Hermione's partition. From behind the curtain that separated Draco's bed from Hermione's, Madam Pomfrey's voice could be heard, speaking quietly as to not be heard, but not so quietly that their eavesdropper would miss anything.

"First of all, take this potion, Miss Gran Madam Snape. Then we'll get you cleaned up, my dear. I know, I know. I'm afraid it could not be helped, my dear," she said, sounding efficiently sympathetic. "The trauma, you see "

Hermione gave a convincing sob, pitiful to hear.

Madam Pomfrey continued, soothingly, "There, there, child. Both of you are young and healthy. There will be other opportunities."

Out of the corner of his eye, Severus could see Draco's face as he listened intently to the conversation, and he smiled grimly to himself. Poppy was almost as good an actress as Hermione. She needed to be, as the next few moments of this deadly little shadow play were crucial to their plans. He hated to be reliant on so many in this ruse, but Poppy had ever been sympathetic to him, and understood more than most just how high a price serving the Dark Lord exacted.

Madam Pomfrey excused herself and stepped away for one last potion, leaving Severus and Hermione alone. Weeping, Hermione whispered loudly, "Severus, I'm sorry "

"Don't be foolish, Lass. I've no doubt you saved Draco's life when you stepped between him and that imbecile "

"Professor, please!" Madam Pomfrey interjected, walking back into the room. "I think, considering the circumstances, this is a conversation for another time and place."

There was a rustle as the curtain was pulled back. Severus and Hermione heard Poppy's brisk tone as she addressed Draco. "Mr. Malfoy, you can return to your dormitory now. I see no reason to keep you in the infirmary. Take this Essence of Dittany with you, and check back with me tomorrow. Don't worry, my boy, those marks won't even leave a scar. By this time tomorrow, you won't even remember them. For now, some chocolate, I think, and Professor Snape will make sure you get dinner."

Severus waited until Poppy left them to check on another part of the ward, then, just as they could hear Draco preparing to leave, Severus turned back to Hermione. "I'm sure *he* will forgive you, considering you saved Draco. Hermione, you are young and strong, as Madam Pomfrey says. Another child, once The Dark Lord has won -" He put a note of heaviness in his voice.

From his vantage point, he saw Draco's head turn, and he slowed his exit from the room. It was quite apparent they'd gotten his attention.

Hermione nodded, then added quietly. "What if... he's angry with me? You're not angry with me, are you?"

*No, but I might indulge myself in a little Potter maiming later.* "I cannot say. As for me, my only anger is with that fool, Potter! Besides, Madam Pomfrey said you would make a full recovery." *I seriously doubt Draco is going to pay that much attention to how quickly you 'recover,' but you may want to take tomorrow as a sick day. I'll make sure Poppy signs the correct parchments.*

The full impact of what had happened was now seeping into Severus' bones. He overcame the fanciful and thankfully transient urge to sweep up Hermione in his arms and lock her in a box until everything was over. The image of her, bleeding and frightened, flashed over and over in his mind, and he knew he would have to use every ounce of his will not to hex Potter into oblivion.

Hermione was sobbing. "I have to face him, pretend to be his friend, knowing he did this to me! I hate him! Severus, he killed our child! I'll never forgive him! The Dark " she gulped as she remembered herself. "He will be displeased with us!" Her voice was so full of pain Severus almost believed her. It would have been faintly amusing, had the stakes not been so perilously high.

"All the more reason to make sure he is isolated in the end, pet. He won't even know he's been betrayed until the betrayal is done! Thank the gods Draco will recover. If I



had been delayed a few more minutes, I cannot say what would have happened."

Severus sighed. Enough. He didn't want to give Draco anything else to talk about. It was enough that he was convinced that Hermione had miscarried, and that she was plotting against Potter. Severus cleared his throat. "For now, take the Potions or Madam Pomfrey will have both our guts for garters. You need rest. I will try to find a way to come to you this evening. Right now, I have to deal with Potter," he said, grimly, true anger returning to his voice.

As he stepped from behind the curtain, he allowed himself a smirk as Draco's form slipped through the door of the infirmary. Good! He had seen and heard what they had intended him to see and hear, and no doubt, would report to his mother, who would, in turn ensure that the Dark Lord heard the news that Harry Potter had murdered Severus' unborn child. It would convince Narcissa all the more that Severus was willing to keep Draco safe for the horrific mission he'd been given.

They were playing a desperate game of Let's Pretend, and it grew more tenuous and fragile with each passing day. How long before all the trembling strands of the web tangled and broke, and it all came crashing down on their heads?

Severus strode back to the boys' toilets. Students passed him, but Severus barely took notice as they sprang out of his way. He thundered down the hall, wanting to be finished with this hateful farce. As he neared the door, renewed anger filled him. His little shadowplay with Hermione may well have been for Draco's benefit, but the fact remained that Potter had used Sectumsempra one of Severus' own created spells.

It could have been no other spell he recognised the magical signature of it the moment he saw Hermione injuries. Of all people, it would be James Potter's son who would use his own spell to hurt Severus' wife. Where on earth would Potter learned the spell? How did he know about it?

Severus could not erase from his mind the image of Hermione kneeling on the floor, slashed and bleeding. Anger roiled in his gut, churning his stomach until he could taste bile in his mouth. He wanted to tear Potter's head off. For a moment, it felt to Severus that Potter *had* destroyed something precious to him. He had taken his own spell, that which Severus had laboured over and honed to razor sharp destruction, and stolen it. Everything that Severus had ever held dear seemed fated to be defiled by James Potter and his progeny.

The implications made him stop in his tracks at the door. What if Hermione had really been carrying his child? How would he react if that precious life had been snuffed out by his own created spell, cast from the wand of his old enemy's son? He felt the nausea rise again, and swallowed it down with a twisted grimace.

He blew into the boys' toilets like an avenging angel, and noted with contempt that Potter was still there. Typical bloody Gryffindor! Anyone else would have taken to the hills.

Potter seemed to have turned into stone while Severus was in the infirmary with Hermione and Draco. He was pale, and his hand shook. "How is Hermione?" he asked, with an air of defiant fear.

Severus held onto his temper. In a quiet tone reminiscent of chipped ice, he hissed, "You injured two students, Mr. Potter. Miss Grange and Mister Malfoy. Have you no concern for his welfare as well?"

"He was arguing with Hermione "

"He and Miss Granger have both corroborated the fact that they were merely talking, though why Miss Granger was in the boys' toilets I have yet to ascertain," he drawled, rolling his eyes. "They both agree that nothing untoward was happening until you barged in and started throwing curses."

Harry looked at Severus uncertainly, and Severus took his chance. *Legilimens!*

He tore through Potter's mind, batting his defenses away easily (*how in Merlin's name are we to have any hope if this fool can't close off his mind any better than this*) and saw familiar handwriting, on the pages of a book... it triggered a memory, but when he tried to push the boy further, Potter summoned enough power to push Severus from his mind.

Seething, Severus said quietly, "Congratulations, Mister Potter, you may have finally pulled your finger out and managed to Occlude your mind." He gave the boy a feral smile. "Now bring me your bookbag and all of your textbooks."

It was much later, after Harry had managed to safely stash away his coveted Potions book and receive his weekly detentions for the rest of the term that he really sat down and gave the incident some thought. Once the panic settled, and he was assured that Hermione was going to be alright, Harry was able to give some real contemplation to what had happened. Instead of Hermione or even Draco, Harry's thoughts were continually drawn back to the look on Snape's face as he burst through the door and rushed to Draco's aid.

Snape had been obviously furious and concerned; that much was clear. His eyes had been justifiably full of accusation and fear. But there was something else, Harry was sure of it. It could have certainly been worry, but to Harry it looked like something far more baffling in Snape's expression like anguish, or longing maybe even love.

But Snape had not been looking at Malfoy at the time.

He'd been looking at Hermione.

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"Hermione, I don't know how many times I need to say it! I'm sorry!" Harry looked at Hermione with remorse written all over his face. "I thought Malfoy was hurting you."

Seething, Hermione shot back, "Now do you see why that book is dangerous? If you don't turn it in to the Headmaster, Harry, I will!"

Harry gulped. He had brought along Ron as ballast for facing her wrath in the Infirmary, and Harry was beginning to think that dealing with Snape had been the lesser of the two evils. Hermione was sitting up in bed, a little pale, but mostly livid that Harry had cast an unknown curse so blindly, without any thought of its consequences.

He tried to lighten the mood with a smile. "But isn't that what your precious Professor Snape is always saying is wrong with Gryffindors? We're too worried about the consequences, when we should be prepared to hex first and ask questions later!"

Hermione's breath left her lungs in a huff. Her eyes narrowed and her brows rushed together, and both Harry and Ron visibly paled. She looked as if she was the one preparing to hex first and ask questions later. Her amber eyes snapped fire. Ron made a little squeaking noise. He'd seen that look before. "Now, steady on, Hermione "

"Of all the pea-brained, foolish, numb-nutted bollocks I've ever heard, that takes the cake, Harry James Potter!" Her hair stood on end, as if electrically charged, and magic flowed from her in waves. She closed her eyes and mastered her anger. In a voice that reminded Harry eerily of Snape's, she said, "I want you to leave now, but you *will* apologise to Draco, you *will* turn in that book and you *will never cast an unknown spell from a magical book in my presence EVER AGAIN! DO YOU HEAR ME?*"

"All right! All right!" Harry replied, leaping to his feet. He, too, was growing angry. "Look, I didn't mean to hurt you, and I didn't go there planning to pick a fight. I'm sorry you got caught in the middle of this, but we're playing for keeps here, Hermione! Draco is up to something, and it's got Voldemort written all over it, and I need to find out what is going on before someone gets killed."

He faced her, unafraid. His voice turned quiet but trembled with emotion. "I know I'm being kept in the dark about things. Dumbledore is so afraid to tell me anything, in case Voldemort becomes aware through our link. I'm flying blind without a beater, Hermione, and I'm scared. That potions book has been the first thing that has given me anything I can use in a long time, and if it means I can stop Draco from accomplishing whatever mission Voldemort's given him, I'll curse anyone in my path, including Draco, including Snape- "

"Including me?" Hermione said, her lip quivering.

Harry froze, and looked at his friend. His self-righteous bluster and bravado vanished. It was as if the implications of what had happened had finally, truly hit home, and Hermione saw the anger bleed from his expression. She could see Harry's anguish, and for a moment, it was as if they were two scared first years again, trying to fight against forces they didn't understand and no one would explain. Her tears ran freely, and suddenly Harry was sitting on the bed with her and they were in each other's arms.

"I was so scared!" she cried.

Harry sobbed into her hair, "I'm so sorry, Hermione! I'm so sorry!"

"I'll do whatever it takes to help you defeat Voldemort! I'll help you find the Horcruxes! I promise!" Hermione wept. Severus may be her husband, but Harry had been her friend for too long not to forgive him and help him.

Harry clutched at her like a lifeline. "I know! I know you will." He buried his head in her shoulder and wept. "Oh, Hermione, I'm sorry I didn't believe you about Sirius! I should have known you wouldn't that you didn't -"

"It's okay! There's nothing to forgive."

As they held each other and wept, Ron watched them, feeling alternately relieved and left out. He knew something was different between himself and Hermione this year, and watching his best friend holding the girl he secretly thought of as 'his,' Ron thought he might finally understand the reason. Harry and Hermione were so wrapped up in comforting one another, they did not see Ron quietly turn and leave the room.

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That night, as Hermione approached the dungeons, she was shocked to find him at the entrance, already waiting for her. Their eyes met, and Hermione's knees almost buckled at the expression of raw need and hunger in his eyes. Without a word, he grabbed her hand, and together they almost ran his room.

Before she could speak, he gathered her in his arms and kissed her with all the pent-up passion and relief the day had created. It was a breathtaking, sense-stealing kiss, and Hermione returned it completely, her arms pulling him as close as she could, opening her mouth to his powerful, demanding, all-encompassing kisses.

He finally broke away, scooped her up into his arms and carried her to their bed. Wordlessly, he vanished their clothing, and they lay naked, entwined in one another's arms until they could get no closer. He kissed and fondled and touched her, building her desire to a fevered peak, until she was gasping, pleading, "Severus, please! Make love to me now... I can't wait..."

He obeyed, shifting his body to cover hers before entering her slowly, making her aware of every inch of his rigid cock, his burning gaze, his divine concentration, his entire being. He made love to her the same way he had healed her - with his voice, his mind, his magic, and Hermione was mesmerized by the power and adoration in this beautiful act.

When she begged him to give her more, he granted it with the fervent zeal of an acolyte. As their passion rose to its inevitable, beautiful conclusion, he held back, urging her on, coaxing her body to do his bidding, until she shattered around him with a wild cry of completion. He held on, denying himself, playing her expertly, calling on all his talents and his experience to pleasure his wife, wrenching the orgasms from her as if each one was a talisman created by them against the darkness.

And finally, when he could no longer hold back his own passions, he eased her into the last climax with him, soothing her with his knowing fingers, his deft, precise thrusts, until his control and his discipline deserted him and he looked into her eyes with a mixture of love and wildfire that scorched Hermione to cinders and allowed her to ride that final crest with him, and it felt like the sweet pleasure that comes before death. He reared above her like a phoenix, rising from her as if she were the flame, crying out her name as if it were a song, and when he collapsed against his witch, he shouted his relief and his love, his anger and his pride.

They lay spent and sweat-drenched, their mouths fused together, so that each breath she took was drawn from his mouth, their tangled limbs so close that they could not tell where one ended and the other began. He covered every inch of her body in his kisses and caresses, as if to imbue her with magic and medicine from his own pores. Her love felt like a benediction and a blessing; it felt like forgiveness.

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Opening song Let It Be Me, by the Everly Brothers

## Twenty Two: How To Out-Slytherin A Slytherin

Chapter 23 of 39

Is betrayal easier to take from an enemy - or a friend?

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

*And as always, special thanks to the queen of the betas, stgulik, the most patient, most clever, quickest thinking beta in the world. stgulik, you are my Hermione Granger.*

---

*Tell me you'll think of me always.*

*When it feels like the cold winter wind in the springtime, you'll know it's me.*

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Much later, Severus and Hermione fell into a deep, short sleep, bodies pressed together like clay fetishes, joined and damp, instilled with magic only death could pull apart; holding onto one another, as if this was the only way they would survive the night.

It dismayed Hermione that Severus was silent; even his thoughts were closed to her. It felt strange, after all these months, to not be able to sense him. It was as if he'd withdrawn into a shell which she was unable to penetrate. It was not that he didn't want her company - she tried to move away from him and he only shook his head and pulled her closer. His eyes looked haunted and immeasurably sad, like large, ink-black pools impenetrable even to her.

In the end, she gave in to him and allowed him to hold her almost painfully close. She relaxed in his vice-like grip, and he, in turn, gradually loosened his clutching hands, and they relaxed from clinging to one another, to holding one another, to comforting one another. Finally, he slid down her body until he was pillowed at her breast, and when she stroked his tangled hair and softly ghosted her fingers over his back, he released his punishing hold.

It occurred to her that, beneath the surface of the brilliant, courageous, loyal man she'd married still lurked the frightened, lost boy who could see the possibility of losing everything dear to him yet again. Hermione imagined how he must have been as a young child, full of innocence and hope, coming to Hogwarts and hoping for a better life away from the squalour of Spinner's End, only to have his heart and his burgeoning self-confidence dashed to pieces over and over against the unyielding stone walls of the castle.

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It was in the early morning hours before he was ready to speak of the incident. "I had to see to Draco first. I didn't want to."

Hermione smiled in his hair. "Draco was the one in danger. I've never seen someone lose so much blood so fast."

"I have," Severus replied, his voice soft and full of tenderness, and Hermione felt his long fingers tracing the curse-scar that Dolohov had given her in the Department of Mysteries. "Any other student," he said tightly, his anger and fear returning, "Any other student, and they'd be on the train home. Not Potter," he concluded, spitting the name like it was the foulest of epithets.

Hermione sighed and kissed his damp head. "I know, I know. I really read him the riot act last night." She scowled to herself. "That bloody book -"

Confused, Severus raised up on his elbow and looked down at his wife. "What book?"

Hermione made a dismissive gesture. "Harry found this decrepit old book in Potions at the beginning of the year, and he's been getting perfect grades in Potions ever since. He refuses to let me even touch it."

She stopped and looked at Severus carefully. He was frowning, but there was a dawning realization and consternation in his eyes. "Severus, is this book important?" When he didn't reply, she added, "Is this something I should pursue with Harry?"

Severus grimaced. Now he remembered where he'd seen the writing in Potter's mind. His old Potions text. He had not thought about that book in ages in fact, he hadn't even bothered to look for it for years now. He felt another surge of anger. Of all people to have *his* book Potter!

"Hermione, did he ever tell you who previously owned the book?"

"No, he won't let anyone near it. He's worse than Ginny was about Tom Riddle's diary." She looked at her husband carefully. The pieces fell into place so quickly and so obviously that, for a moment, Hermione felt as thick as a first year. "Was it *your* book, Severus?" Dawning horror showed clearly on her face. That was why he was so upset about the spell! "You created that spell what was it? S-Sectumsempra?"

Severus was still for a moment, then nodded. He rose from the soft pillow of Hermione's breast and sat on the edge of the bed. He put his head in his hands, and Hermione stroked his back placatingly. She could feel him becoming more agitated by the second. Any moment now-

"I was so bloody tired of Potter and Black bullying me!" He closed his eyes to master his emotions. "I put so much hate and dark power into creating that spell, and it worked perfectly. Too bloody perfect." He sighed, the irony in his voice unmistakable. His face became a mask of shame. "I can count on one hand the number of times I've used it, when I've been desperate enough to cast it. It was the closest I could come to an Unforgivable and stay out of Azkaban."

He turned to her, his lovely dark eyes tired and haunted. His face was pinched and white in the dim candlelight. "And Potter almost kills my wife with it! I tell you, Lass, I saw you on that floor and my heart almost stopped beating." He lay back and looked at the ceiling, giving voice to a desolate sigh.

"I knew right then I would be lost if anything happened to you. Duty, honour, promises they all seem completely pointless. It matters not whether it's The Dark Lord or the Headmaster," he fumed. "Both have twisted me to their own end, and they twist a little harder each time it suits or amuses them. It never stops, does it? Between Lily, the Dark Lord, and Dumbledore, and that bloody Potter, it never stops."

Hermione could hear the exhaustion in his voice. Quietly she rose and sat beside him. She took his hand in hers and kissed it gently. He closed his eyes again, his face contorting in a grimace of pain. "How long can I be bent this way, until I break?"

With his agonised words, he pulled her hard into his arms, encircling her as if to protect himself from the world. She covered his torso in kisses, and stroked his pale chest in an attempt to soothe him. Fiercely, she vowed, "Somehow we will survive this. We have to. I will not let you lose hope." She closed her eyes. "I can't let you lose hope. Or I will, too."

Severus closed his eyes and allowed her hands to ease him, but they could not pacify his warring heart. He wanted to hope, but he was too realistic to believe it would do much good. Never had he felt so close to happiness; never had he felt so close to losing it. Potter the father and the son. Always trying to take away what belonged to him. One had succeeded; the other would not, if it was the last act Severus performed on this earth. Harry Potter would not take Hermione Granger away from him. He would not save the boy only to lose his world!

Hermione was saying, "I think Draco will open up to me; he was so close when Harry showed up."

Severus grunted skeptically. "Mr. Potter has detention with me for the rest of the term." *Let's see how long that famous arrogance lasts when Quidditch season ends and Gryffindor is in last place.*

Hermione smiled against his skin. "I know. He told me. He also told me he thinks you and Draco are planning something together." She skimmed her fingers over his soft skin. "I have tried to tell him to be patient, but Harry is stubborn."

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The end of November heralded cold, biting rains and chilly weather which made the frigid halls of the school feel like tunnels of ice. Snow began to fall on the first of December, and Hermione felt the harsh weather bearing down on her like depression. With every passing day, they expected something to happen; after several days of silence, it did.

Severus received the summons three days after the incident between Harry and Draco. It happened during Saturday evening's meal; both he and Hermione dropped their forks almost at the same time and winced. *It's the Dark Lord. I am being summoned.* Hermione heard within her mind. She calmly retrieved her fork and tried to ignore her burning hand.

*May the gods bring you back unharmed, Severus.* She watched covertly as he calmly dabbed his mouth with his linen napkin, leaned forward and whispered a few words into the Headmaster's ear, and left via the door behind the Head Table. Dumbledore turned back to his meal, and Hermione followed suit, but her food had lost its appeal.

As he walked to the Apparation point, he saw a large blond man, obviously waiting for him. His Death Eater robe looked new, and the man sneered at him with the arrogance that only seemed to come from the privilege of pure blood. Severus had seen it many times; it never failed to make him want to hex it right off their smug faces. In their eyes, he would always be beneath them, no matter how high he rose in the ranks of the Dark Lord's minions.

The newly-indoctrinated Death Eater took his arm. "I'm to take you to our Lord, Snape." He sounded so full of his own self-importance Severus was tempted to take him down a peg or two; just to show the blond cunt exactly how dirty a half-blood Manc piece of trash could fight.

Instead, Severus favoured the escort with a flat, sullen stare, and a shrug that was as insolent as a slap in the face. The blond dropped his eyes from Severus' steady gaze, and they turned together, Apparating to a location he'd never seen before.

It was a large, sprawling manse somewhere in what appeared to be Wales. Bellatrix LeStrange was waiting in the ante-chamber of the receiving room where Lord Voldemort now held court. The manor house, Bellatrix explained, had belonged to a certain Pureblood who had not fully appreciated the Dark Lord's vision of the new Wizarding world, and had, as a consequence, parted from this life rather abruptly. Having no surviving relatives (how hellishly Bellatrix tittered when she said that!), the estate passed rather conveniently into the hands of Dark Lord for his pleasure.

She and Narcissa had been charged with preparing the house for the Dark Lord to take up residency, and according to Bellatrix he had only just arrived himself. No other Death Eaters were present, as yet. Severus snorted inwardly. The vile creature hadn't summoned Severus so much for information as to show off his newly acquired home.

The rooms were gloomy, a little threadbare, and cold. *This is the great manner in which the Dark Lord accustoms himself*, thought Severus. Even to his less-than-aristocratic eye, the place was little more than a stately pile, gently but persistently falling into disrepair and ruin. It seemed to Severus to represent all the Dark Lord stood for. Ashes and bones, faded glory and genteel shabbiness. And this was Wizarding Britain's future! It was welcome to it.

*When this is over, I'll take Hermione to someplace warm and sunny. We'll loll together on silk cushions, and she will feed me grapes and dates, and I will shower her with rose petals, and make love to her under a canopy of stars. We will be decadent and mysterious, and no one will know us, my love, no one will find us...*

Severus approached the Dark Lord with the same calm bearing as he had many times before, and knelt at Voldemort's feet, kissing his robe. He kept his head bowed, expecting displeasure and hoping to avoid the Dark Lord's Legilimency for as long as possible.

"Rise, my dear Severus," the Dark Lord hissed, and stroked Severus' cheek as he stood. "So good of you to come, considering the distressing news I have learned of earlier this week."

Glancing around, Severus could see Bellatrix and Narcissa standing in the shadows. He bowed his head. "Yes, My Lord. *What should I mention first? Draco or Hermione?* In the end, he let the Dark Lord decide.

"And how is your lovely lady wife, Severus? Has she recovered from her ordeal? Is she pining for your child, lost to Harry Potter?"

Severus looked into the eyes of the Dark Lord, and allowed him entrance into his mind. Years of practice had taught Severus how to suppress his emotion and revulsion at this mental molestation. Training with Hermione had reinforced his mental shields, and allowed him to enclose his weariness and frustration at Dumbledore and Draco, and above all, contain his towering fear. He buried it deep within, where no one could find it. At this moment, Severus himself was no longer aware of it.

The hardest part was the effort needed to select only what he wished the Dark Lord to see, but now, after all this time, it was automatic; almost like muscle memory. He pushed everything away, and narrowed the tunnel in his mind down to the moment in the toilets, running in and seeing his wife bleeding over Draco's inert form.

He next offered the vision of the blood-soaked bed, and Hermione crying. *I have to face him, pretend to be his friend, knowing he did this to me! Severus, he killed our child! I'll never forgive him! And the Dark Lord - He will be displeased with us!*

The sickening pull away from the Dark Lord's invasion of his mind disoriented Severus for a second, and he dropped his gaze, lacing his expression with anger and grief.

"Such a pity, Severus. I am displeased," the Dark Lord said, his voice low and dangerous. "I am displeased that Draco allowed himself to be goaded into such a petty little duel. As his Head of House, Severus, it is your duty to teach the boy better self-control, especially where Potter is concerned. I had expected better leadership from his mentor and godfather." Severus nodded, and bowed his head, waiting for the Cruciatus to tear into his system. *Hermione...*

Fortunately, Bellatrix, no doubt fearful that her family honour was at stake, unwittingly saved Severus from being punished by mumbling something under her breath. Lord Voldemort turned to her, momentarily distracted by her insolence. "An opinion should always be shared with the room, dear Bellatrix. What are your thoughts on the matter?"

Unafraid, Bellatrix sneered. "If he were my son I'd punish him for being stupid enough to get hexed by Potter! Next to Draco, Potter's nothing! A weakling, a coward -"

"An imperfect weapon can still wreak havoc in the wrong hands, dear sister," replied Narcissa coolly. "And if that hand is Dumbledore "

"Soon *he* will no longer be a problem, Cissy!" In her zeal, Bellatrix turned from her sister and faced the Dark Lord fearlessly. "Soon, My Lord, I will give you Dumbledore's head on a golden platter!"

Narcissa spun on her sister, and for the first time since Severus arrived, he could see tension and emotion in her face. Her pale eyes narrowed as she spat at Bella, *You will give it? It is my son who will do it!*

The Dark Lord fixed his blood-red eyes on Bellatrix. Peevishly, he retorted, "Draco has a task to do. It is a man's task; a wizard's task. It is a task he cannot perform if he continues to act like a child and do childish things. Narcissa?"

"Yes, My Lord?" Narcissa's voice was a cool as her sister's was fevered, and Severus noted that she looked serene and noble, as if her world wasn't crashing down around her. He felt a grudging admiration for the woman whose husband languished in Azkaban and whose son had almost been killed by his arch enemy. She looked as if those things had passed over her without leaving a trace of their anxiety on her flesh. Severus wondered how she'd been sleeping at night.

"My dear Narcissa, it would not please me for our plans to be set back yet again. Your son will be reminded that his task is almost upon him; I will not tolerate another outburst of this kind, an outburst that almost ruined everything! It cost the life of Severus' unborn child. A child," The Dark Lord paused and touched Severus' shoulder. "I had a purpose for."

Bellatrix was undaunted. "Other children, My Lord! Other, better made, Pureblood children will bow to you! An army of Pureblood children, lifting their hands to you!" She was standing beside Narcissa, eyes blazing, a mad high priestess ready to sacrifice innocents to the altar of her Dark Lord.

She glanced at Severus with withering contempt. "What could a child of a half-breed and a Mudblood give you, My Lord, which a Pureblood like Draco could not give, with greater strength and courage?"

Severus felt a sick wave of loathing that matched, perhaps even surpassed his disgust for the Dark Lord. In a voice laced with scorn, he growled, "May I remind you, Bellatrix, that this 'Mudblood' saved your precious nephew's life three days ago. Do you hold his life so cheap that you cannot appreciate her sacrifice?"

Severus turned back to the Dark Lord. He steamrolled along before it occurred to anyone that Potter wouldn't have picked a fight with Draco had he not followed Hermione into the toilets.

"Had she not stepped between them, I cannot say that Draco would have survived Potter's hex. Even before thinking of my child, she thought of protecting Draco so that his purpose would be fulfilled." Severus felt faintly nauseous. *Calm yourself, fool! You have to not feel, not care for the sake of your wife!*

Narcissa smiled as she caught his eye. "I owe both you and your wife my gratitude, Severus. I have instructed Draco to convey to Mrs. Snape my thanks, and my condolence as well."

"Ah yes. The niceties must be adhered to, must they not, Severus? After all, we are not savages here." The Dark Lord sat back in his throne, looking strangely petulant.

Severus bowed at the Dark Lord, then turned and nodded to Narcissa. "I'm sure Mrs. Snape will cherish the sentiments." He turned smoothly back to the throne. "My Lord, if I may," he began, casting the full battery of his liquid eyes on the Dark Lord, "I can tell you that with this incident, Potter grows more and more isolated with each passing day. My wife has abandoned him, the blood traitor Weasley has found distraction in the arms of a young Pureblood witch, and has no time for him, either. Potter is alone now, and will remain so."

"And Dumbledore? Does Albus make time for young Mr. Potter?"

Severus shook his head slightly. "The Headmaster is so busy trying to bring a sense of normality to Hogwarts that he scarce pays attention to what is happening." That was so close to truth that Severus didn't have to lie. So wrapped up in his own search for Horcruxes and his growing dementia, Dumbledore was deteriorating daily. When Severus had informed him of the incident in the toilets, he had shrugged and sent Severus on his way with a caution to 'be ready.'

The Dark Lord made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "No matter, no matter. Albus is getting old. He will soon be of little consequence. But contrary to dear Bella's notions," he cast a baleful eye over to the dark woman, "Dumbledore is not a wizard one discounts easily. The sooner Draco steps up to his responsibilities, the sooner this waste of time and effort will be over."

Bellatrix fell to her knees before her Master. "He will not fail you, My Lord, I swear it! We have a wonderful Christmas surprise for you please believe me!"

Voldemort watched his lieutenant carefully, then turned away. Severus smirked as Bella's face fell, and he could see her old jealousy flare back into life as the Dark Lord turned his attention to Severus again. "You must take care of your wife," he hissed, his smile hellish. "I have important plans for you in the near future, Severus, and her presence will be... a comfort to you."

"As always, you do me too much honour, My Lord," Severus had whispered, bowing low, wondering at the back of his mind what new horrors awaited him. "She is all the more committed to Potter's demise because of what he did to Draco... and her unborn child." Severus had no need for pretence. His loathing was all too clear. "It will be my pleasure to see him receive what he so richly deserves at your hand, My Lord." He bowed again and calmly took his leave; his bowels cramped with relief, as they always did when he removed himself from the Dark Lord's presence.

As he reached the foyer, he heard a tentative, "Severus?"

Turning around, he saw Narcissa walking toward him, closing the door to the audience room behind her. "Thank you for taking care of Draco. He told me what happened, and how Mrs. Snape tried to protect him." A cloud passed over her calm expression for a moment. "I am sorry about your wife. Truly."

For a moment, Severus saw the unflappable demeanor crack, and the fear in Narcissa's eyes was almost as overwhelming as his own. She shook her head. "To lose one's child; I cannot imagine how she must be -" She stopped abruptly at the sound of her sister's approaching footsteps, and arranged her features into their characteristic cool lines.

"One less half-blood in the world, so what? They breed like rats anyway," Bellatrix Lestrange taunted sullenly, as she came abreast of her sister. She regarded Severus with a lecherous sneer. "So what's it like, Sev, fucking a Mudblood, eh?" She pointedly gave his crotch a lewd little glance. "Does it squeal like a little pig in the mud when you stick it in?"

"Bella!" Narcissa's admonishing tone only made her sister laugh harder.

Severus forced his face into a mask of boredom. "A gentleman never kisses and tells, Bellatrix."

He turned to leave and forced himself not to react to her heckling. "A gentleman might not, but what *you* do, Severus? What do *you* do?" Her laughter sounded like the scurrying of rats along the floor, and grated on Severus' already overwrought nerves.

*If it is the last thing I do, Bella,* he thought, as he strode purposefully toward the Apparition point, *I'm going to dance on your grave with my Hermione.*

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He found her dozing in his chair when he entered his chambers. The moment he stepped into the door, she was awake and running toward him. Hermione flung her arms around her husband, and covered his mouth with fierce kisses that tasted of cherry tart and tea and relief. "It's alright, Lass," he said, soothingly, twining her wild hair in his hands, so damn grateful to see her he felt unsteady on his feet. "I'm here now."

She dragged him into his bed chamber, pulling frantically at his clothing, until she had undressed him enough to fall on her knees before him. As she pushed his shirt away, he felt the unbearable tension that had roiled in his chest loosen, and the relief of returning to Hermione gave rise to a rush of arousal that matched her own, and he was suddenly impatiently, needfully ready for her.

In some part of his mind, the Death Eater part, he welcomed this sweet feeling of power, and smiled at the anticipation of his wife's talented lips and mouth on his cock. His hard member sprang from his trousers, and she looked up at him with such fire in her amber eyes he felt dizzy. She mewled in frustration while she worked to free his blazing erection from the tangle of his clothing, and then he was hot and hard in her small, soft hand. She kissed the tip of his cock reverently, relief and love and passion plainly written in her hungry expression. By then they were both panting with desire.

"Oh, *fuck*. Put your mouth on me, girl," he hissed, his pleading tone sounding angry and eager. With a helpless little whimper, she desperately engulfed his cock in her mouth, and he felt a dark, warped passion flood his mind and his groin and tear a feral growl from his throat. It was a bitter, twisted sort of lust that only she could assuage. He needed to feed it to her as surely as he fed her his cock, pulling her close, unmindful of his hands gripping at her hair, heedless of any discomfort he might cause.

He closed his eyes and felt her moaning in her throat, her passion vibrating around his throbbing member, coiling the delicious tension within, until it no longer felt as if he were trapped in some nightmare of his own design. Her mouth was hot and wet and tight, like her little pink cunt; when she slid two strong, slender fingers into his rectum and swirled her velvety tongue over the head of his straining prick, he almost swooned. A guttural sound roared from his lips, and he rocked against her with increasing power and lust; slipping the lead of his self-control until he was fucking her mouth with abandon, grunting with each thrust.

"Ah, gods, witch... suck it hard... oh, don't stop... so c-close..." he moaned, feeling a crippling, melting, molten wave of pleasure wash over him. His nipples were drawn tight and aching; he could feel them scratching against his shirt. Pinned as he was between Hermione's voracious, wondrous mouth and her pumping fingers, Severus felt his balls sizzle with that welcoming, blessed fire. His impending climax raced into his aching cock and burst from him like an explosion, and he howled as his orgasm shattered his senses. His magic blasted from his core in a palpable wave, sputtering out candles and scattering papers onto the floor.

He held her head to his cock as it spurted his relief into her waiting, eager mouth. "Take it, drink it," he demanded brokenly, his voice hoarse and demonic with lust. "Drink it all down," he growled, feeling the darkness drain from him with each pulse, filling him with light and relief and reason again.

Trembling, he glanced down at his wife as she slowly pulled away from his spent and blameless cock, panting, licking her rosy, swollen lips. He pulled her to her feet and kissed her with all the gratitude he was capable of feeling.

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Draco had virtually ceased to be visible in the week following the attack. Every time Hermione tried to catch him alone, he seemed to vanish into thin air. She was tempted to ask Harry if she could borrow the Marauder's Map, but in the end, she couldn't think of a plausible excuse that wouldn't wind up with Harry standing over her shoulder while she looked for Draco.

Hermione was also frustrated that Harry had still not told Dumbledore about the Potions textbook. To make matters worse, Harry had apparently hidden it, so Hermione could do nothing about it either. Nothing was going according to plan, and Severus seemed more tense and less certain with every passing day. More than once Hermione had awakened during the night to find him sitting in his chair, brooding, or looking through research they'd already combed through twice before.

Dumbledore grew less lucid as the days progressed. One evening after dinner, at their request, he met with her and Severus. Their pleas for him to talk to Harry about the true nature of the Horcruxes fell on deaf ears. Each time they listed another reason Harry should be made aware of what was facing him, The Headmaster waved them away almost indifferently. "Harry will have the tools he requires when the need arises," he said, placidly, fishing around in a candy dish for a particular cockroach cluster.

"But sir," Hermione began, "perhaps if I spoke to him "

"If you say one word to Harry, Madam Snape, I will be forced to reveal your marriage and have you expelled from the school."

She and Severus gasped and looked at one another. "For what?" Severus marveled.

Dumbledore studied his blackened hand. "Oh, I'm sure I could find some precedence of rule violation."

It was all Hermione could do not to stamp her foot in irritation. "Why are you doing this, Headmaster? Harry is in grave danger! He needs to know!"

"Severus," Dumbledore brushed past Hermione as if she were not in the room, "now is the time to discuss the future of the school. Once the deed is done, Hogwarts will need a new Headmaster."

Severus stared at the old man in disbelief. Forcing his anger in check, he drawled, "I see. So would you like for me to kill Minerva before or after I send you to your death?"

"You will have to protect the children. You must be Headmaster."

Severus threw back his head and laughed. Hermione looked at him warily. This was the last reaction she expected. She had anticipated anger, but for some reason, his wild laughter frightened her. "Of course, Albus!" he jeered. "And what next? Will Hermione and I perform human sacrifices to the gods each Friday? Teach sex education the Monty Python way?"

The laughter in his voice took on an edge of malice. "Oh, and while we're at it, do we put Minerva in a cattery while I take over? Because that's what it will take to keep her from cursing me into powder!"

"Minerva is completely capable of running this school, that is true," Albus replied pleasantly. "In peacetime, I would not hesitate to name her Headmistress. But she will not be able to control things when Tom takes over. And he will, Severus," the Headmaster added, fixing the younger wizard with a steely gaze. "You know as well as I that when I fall, the Ministry will fall, and the school will be overrun by Death Eaters. Muggleborns will be persecuted, and the students here will retaliate. It will become a Children's Crusade, and lives will be lost. As long as Tom believes you to belong to him, you will be able to protect the children. *If* you become Headmaster."

"Until when, Albus? Until the Aurors come in and ship what's left of me off to Azkaban? Until the students mutiny and hang me from the ceiling as the Great Bat of the Dungeons?" Severus felt outside himself with sick, hopeless fury. "Am I preserving this school for the Dark Lord's vision of Hogwarts, or yours? Exactly how am I supposed to protect the Muggleborns? How am I supposed to keep a revolt from happening? I'll be remembered as the Headmaster who turned the school into a slaughterhouse!"

He felt a howling rage in him which roared like a fever in his head, and he cried, "Isn't it enough that I will be vilified as your murderer, but you want me to be remembered as the most hated Headmaster in history?" Tears spilled unnoticed from his eyes. "You ask too much, old man!" He turned from Dumbledore and Hermione, because he could not bear for her to see him weep in frustration. "You're crushing me under your demands!"

"You must do it, Severus. You are the only one who can truly protect the students," Dumbledore said calmly. His mild, almost vacant expression never changed. "In the end, they will know the truth."

"After I'm dead, you mean!" Severus shook with anguish. "Give me one good reason to do this, Albus, and spare me your bullshit about "

"Duty."

"Bollocks to duty!" Severus spat, a fleck of foam at the corner of his mouth. He looked slightly deranged. "This isn't duty, Albus! This is martyrdom, and I've already told you I won't - "

"Remember Regulus Black, Severus?"

Severus grew still. The raging storm that had blown through him dropped as if he'd arrived in the eye of the hurricane. He closed his eyes. In a quiet, sorrowful voice, he said, "May your soul be damned to all eternity for that, Albus. You cannot lay that at my door as an excuse. First Lily, then Hermione, then Reg"

"He took the Mark with you. He was your best friend, your fellow Death Eater -"

"Enough!" The two wizards turned toward the young woman they'd all but forgotten. Hermione was pale and shaking as she turned on Dumbledore. "Headmaster, you don't know what you are asking of Severus. He's going to be on the run for his life if he "

"*When*, Madam Snape. *When* he helps me to the other side," Dumbledore said, as if speaking of Severus helping him cross a busy intersection. "I know this, but so did Severus when he made his vow. The Greater Good "

"Fuck your Greater Good!" she shouted. Severus reached for her, but in her anger, she shook his arm off hers. She turned on the Headmaster, her face contorted with anger. "You just keep pushing, don't you? You're not satisfied until you've broken him in every way you can break him, and you console yourself it's for your Greater Good!"

She advanced on him, her eyes narrowing. "We had a deal, Headmaster. I would help him try to determine what Draco's plans were, and help Harry, and you would be satisfied. He would make sure Draco's precious soul was safe. Fine.

"Now you want him to come back to Hogwarts, and turn it into a concentration camp under his command! Don't you see? When Harry wins, all Severus will be remembered for is this, and killing you! He will be put *under* Azkaban!" She burst into angry tears, furious with herself that she was showing such weakness. "Why won't you give Severus a chance to have a future? Perhaps he might survive the scandal of the school, but that *and* killing you?"

She was in Severus' arms and he was trying to reassure her, but she refused to be comforted. "This is some sort of vengeance, Severus! Why is he doing this to us?" She sobbed wildly, holding on to her husband. "It's not fair," she cried, over and over, knowing how childish she sounded and helpless to stop it. "It's not fair."

"My dear, life is often unfair," Dumbledore began, and Severus turned on the old man.

"Enough, Albus! Spare us your fucking platitudes. Leave us some dignity." Severus turned to Hermione and led her to the Fireplace. "Come, Lass, you've worked yourself into a right state. There's nothing left for us here."

As they approached the fireplace, Severus turned to Dumbledore. "You know, old man, if part of your plan was to make me hate you enough to cast the Killing Curse, it's working too bloody well."

# Twenty Three: Revenge Is A Dish Best Served

Chapter 24 of 39

All the little birds are coming home to roost...

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

*This was a very difficult chapter to write, and may, at times, be harsh reading, but I hope you will stay with me, because, dear reader, I feel I'm just getting started. This is the beginning of the end.*

*And as always, special thanks to the queen of the betas, stgulik, the most patient, most clever, quickest thinking beta in the world. Thank you, stgulik, for casting the Killing Curse on all my mistakes.*

---

*There is no pain, you are receding; a distant ship, smoke on the horizon.*

*You are only coming through in waves. Your lips move but I can't hear what you're saying.*

*When I was a child I had a fever; my hands felt just like two balloons.*

*Now I've got that feeling once again, I can't explain; you would not understand.*

*This is not how I am.*

*When I was a child, I caught a fleeting glimpse out of the corner of my eye;*

*I turned to look but it was gone; I cannot put my finger on it now.*

*The child is grown, the dream is gone.*

*I have become comfortably numb.*

---

Together, Severus and Hermione Floo'd from Dumbledore's study into Severus' quarters. He turned to her, dismayed to see the misery in her face. As Hermione blew her nose and took a shaky breath, Severus poured them both a large tumbler of whiskey. When she balked, he patiently held the back of her head and tipped half of the glass' contents down her throat.

As she choked and spluttered, Severus said, "I know you don't drink, but I'm going to and I don't feel like drinking alone anymore. Besides, you're so upset you've made yourself ill." He downed his own glass in one gulp and poured another. "Drink the rest of your whiskey." His voice was indulgent, like a parent urging a child to finish their milk.

They sat down on the sofa together, staring into the fire as if hoping to divine the answers they sought in the dying flames. Finally, Hermione turned to her husband. Seeing the concern and resignation in his careworn face, she smiled weakly. "I'm sorry I went mental in there. My outburst was childish and useless."

"It was that," he agreed mildly, frowning into his glass. "It also served a purpose. Albus knows he can't keep Potter in the dark forever. You didn't call his bluff, so he still thinks he has the upper hand."

"Bluff?"

Severus gave her a faintly chiding look. "That shite about exposing our marriage and having you expelled. We haven't broken any school rules. He can't expel you, really, especially if he still expects me to do this heinous little hit job for him. He was just trying to cow you."

Hermione huffed. To her surprise, Severus laughed. "He knew any talk of you being denied your schooling would intimidate you. Don't feel bad," he added, at her crestfallen expression. "I bought it, too, until I realised what he was on about. Not that it matters, in the long run."

He turned away from Hermione, his eyes hooded. "When I... I kill Albus, I'll have to flee." His tone was apologetic. "Would you - " He stopped suddenly, and took a large gulp of his drink, grimacing as he swallowed the fiery liquor.

Hermione looked at him, puzzled. "Would I what, Severus?" Her strength left her, making her feel shaken and hollow. The whiskey turned sour in her stomach.

He looked away, his shoulders hunched as if preparing for a blow. "Would you prefer to remain behind?"

Astonished, Hermione replied, "Why on earth would I want to do that?"

Severus looked uncomfortable. "I will be on the run. If, or when, I am commanded to return here, I don't know what will be waiting for me. It could be very dangerous for you."

Hermione straightened her shoulders. Suddenly, her previous upset was replaced by anger. "We swore to protect *me*, Severus. You stood in the burned-out shell of my parents' home and said your back would be to mine. Do you think I would abandon my post at a time when you need me more than ever?"

He scowled at her anger, and grew defensive, sullen. "People say things they don't mean when they are distraught." He shrugged, and tried to look unconcerned. "In the cold light of day -"

Shocked, Hermione recoiled from him. She felt as if her stomach had been punched. "Are you saying you've changed your mind?"

Severus' eyes grew wide and he shook his head. "No! I meant every word of it! How could you ask such a thing of me?" He looked for a moment as if he might cry. Defeat seemed to etch a jagged outline around him. "I meant that is, I wondered if you... it's so much to ask -"

Hermione slumped, understanding. She slid to the floor and knelt before him. She took his icy hands in hers and kissed them. Looking up, she saw a pale, slender man looking at her with despair and love in his eyes. In the dim light, they were huge and painful in their hope. His hair, oily after a day of sweating through classes, fell forward to hide his face; his curtain and shield to ward off the blows the world had thrown at him since childhood.

Most of the Wizarding world, Hermione knew, saw Severus Snape as a dark wizard, full of churlish, angry bitterness. A man who hated the world. A man without a redeeming feature. An unpleasant, unhandsome, uncaring, unhappy, *unlovable* man. Hermione thought of all the things he'd told her about his life, revealing things to her he'd never told another living soul. He had been afraid, angry, suspicious, and still he'd told her. She thought of his bravery, his passion, his love and dedication to her, and her heart broke for him.

"Severus, look at me," she whispered, and took his face in her hands. His dark, haunted eyes met hers, and she Legilimised into his mind with the gentleness of a babe reaching out to grasp its mother's fingers for the first time. She stepped into his solid, strong, and inflexible mind; the imposing walls he'd raised inside were of blackened, brushed steel. Nothing would get through unless he allowed it. Even the Dark Lord could not navigate through this labyrinth without Severus' permission.

With all her discipline and strength, Hermione opened herself, opened her mind until she encompassed him, and she breathed life into the long corridors and hallways. She flooded him with her love, her strength, her passion. She felt their minds merge, with an intensity they'd never achieved before, even when making love. Empowered with this intensity, she poured light and laughter and hope into him, as much as he could take, as much as he needed. She opened herself to him until she felt him feed back to her. He was being nourished, and having been fed of this light, could now nourish her in return.

She felt his devotion for her, his deep, abiding pride in her intelligence and resourcefulness. She felt the sexual arousal her touch gave him. Most of all, she felt his painful hope, trembling, fearful, ready to burst. Quietly they held one another. *How?* his voice whispered in her mind, beautiful and tender with longing. His breath rasped harshly against her ear. He shook his head, as if unable to believe the love he was receiving truly belong to him, or that he was deserving of it.

He looked down at her, his dark eyes full of wonder. With a voice like golden honey, sweet and rich and priceless, he said, "Why do you love me so much, little girl?"

She pulled him closer and wound her arms around his slender frame. "How could I not love you?" she replied. "You will never have an unguarded back while I'm alive, Severus. I'm not about to let you go through this alone. If I do nothing else before I leave this earth, I will somehow convince you that you are worthy to be loved this much. In the end, whatever happens, I will stand by you. And when this is over and we are free-"

The fear returned, and he reluctantly pulled away. He stood, pulling her to her feet. When he spoke, his beautiful voice was dark with sorrow. "I know it's asking too much. You will be vilified. You may be imprisoned." He looked down at her and the bleak hopelessness in his eyes almost made Hermione lose her own hope. He pressed his lips against her forehead. "May the gods forgive me for drawing you into this life with me. I feel I have damned you, yet I cannot bear the thought of being without you. I'm a selfish, grasping fool. But I need you. I cannot help it."

She spoke as his hands braided through her hair and drew her close. "We will end this as we began it. Together." She looked up at his frightened face, and the fear, the strength, the duty she saw in his eyes strengthened her. "You promised to be mine, and I promised to be yours. Tonight, I will hide you away. They will never find you." She stepped back, and he looked down at her, puzzled by her words. She smiled. "You and I have to start planning for this, instead of sitting here like lambs waiting for the slaughter. We have to prepare to meet the future, instead of waiting for it to come for us."

Severus looked down at his little lioness, and felt a wave of her magic, smooth and powerful, wash over him like a protective shield. She smiled grimly. "We need to be ready."

He looked at her for a long time, then smiled, then chuckled. Soothed with the love she'd poured into his soul, he laughed wistfully. He placed a hard kiss on her forehead. "Before we do, Lass, we must do something about that Devil's Snare you call hair. It's all over the place. It started crackling in the Headmaster's office!"

Hermione's eyes grew wide, and before she could raise her hands to her mad hair, Severus withdrew his wand and murmured, *Teresdec Orocuros*. "The lovely sensation of her hair smoothing and untangling never failed to delight Hermione, and she put her arms around his waist as the unruly tresses slithered and burnished at Severus' command, wrapping around his back and arms. Several curls wound flirtatiously around his wand like tendrils of a vine, until she had all but bound him to her with the strands of her hair.

Severus smirked. "Why does this particular spell always work with everyone else but you?" He rolled his eyes as another curl insinuated itself around his neck, like a cheeky little rope. "Every time I'm sure I've got the inflection and wand motion right, I still end up held for ransom by your hair."

Hermione laughed, and the curls trembled with her laughter, tickling Severus' neck pleasantly. "I told you, my hair is as much in love with you as I am." With a quick flick of her wand, the masses of curls obediently unwound from Severus and settled in place. He looked down at her, and in that winsome moment, Hermione could have sworn he looked a little bereft for the loss of his hirsute vines.

As he watched his little witch shake her marginally tamed locks back in place, sorrow welled up within him so strong it took his breath away. He didn't deserve this. Neither did she. In a soft voice, weighed with immeasurable longing, he said, "Sometimes, Hermione, I wake up in the middle of the night, and look at you, asleep by my side, and for a moment, I pretend there is no war, no Dark Lord, no Dumbledore, no Potter. We owe nothing to the past, we have nothing to fear from the future. I imagine that the only conflict in our lives is whether to holiday in Skegness or Llandudno."

He took her head in his hands and looked down at her with such love Hermione's heart ached, and she reached up and clasped his wrists in her hands to hold him in place. He closed his eyes and his silken, hypnotic voice washed over her like a spell. "I pretend you and I are going to wake up, and after we make love we'll rise, and take a walk on the beach, or through a garden, and no one knows who we are, or what we are. We're just two people who want to live our lives in peace." He swallowed. "I'd give my soul to make that real, Lass." He opened his eyes. "It is just a dream I have." He gave her such a sad smile Hermione felt tears prick her eyes.

With more courage in her voice than she had in her heart, Hermione replied, "I'm going to hold you to that dream, Severus Snape. Only, in my version, we'll have a little black-eyed boy walking between us, holding our hands, and a little wild-haired girl on my hip." Her tears betrayed her, but she shook them away, with a fierce, brittle smile. "That is our future. I've decided it."

As she had hoped, Severus smirked, and gave her one of his silent laughs. "Ever the bossy one." He released her head, and caught her hands as they slid away from his wrists. "So mote it be, little one. That is our future."

They sat down, and began to plan, and Severus felt the sheer formality of study and research act like a balm to his jaded spirit. For so long, they had sat, frightened, burying their heads in the sand, whistling in the dark, begging to hide one another away safely. It was as if the fog of fear that had paralysed them all this time was lifted at last, and for the first time, Severus thought they were ready to be proactive, not reactive. If they were to hide away, they would have to build the hiding place first.

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The following morning, Hermione trudged up the frigid hall toward the Gryffindor Common Room. Dawn was freezing, and as she only had her school robes for cover, walking up from the dungeons was a miserable exercise. Frost limned the windows and the icy wind crept in through the stones. She was shivering by the time she reached the Fat Lady's portrait; all she wanted to do was get into the room and stand by the welcoming fire.

As she hurried through the door and into the room, she saw Harry sitting there, obviously waiting for her.

"Harry! You're up early," she said, with a brightness in her voice she was far from feeling. He was looking at her, unsmiling, and Hermione felt a sudden sliver of icy fear that had nothing to do with the temperature.

"So are you. Up early, I mean," Harry answered tightly, watching her closely.

"Oh, I've been up for ages! I've been in the library checking on a book I thought might help -"



"I've just come from there. It's not open. Madam Pince isn't well today. The door was locked."

Hermione cursed inwardly for having been caught so blatantly in a lie. For a moment, she merely looked at Harry, trying to decide how she should react. Taking a leaf from Severus' book, she merely waited until Harry spoke. Perhaps his next words would give her a clue as to how to respond.

"I wanted to talk to you about something last night, but I couldn't find you. And by the time I finished speaking with Dumbledore, it was after bedtime, so I thought I'd wait until the morning."

Hermione nodded. "Okay." She noticed that Harry was positively shaking, and she realised he was angry; angry and upset and confused. "I had rounds to do -"

His voice was low and deadly quiet. "Justin told me you'd switched nights with him. You didn't have rounds last night."

Hermione blinked, but Harry pressed on, as if the words were all strung together in a prepared speech, and he didn't want to lose his place. "I went all over the school, looking for you. I went to the library, and the Great Hall, the Infirmary and the Prefect's bath. Finally, I was going to be late for curfew, so I thought, 'What's the best way to find out where Hermione is?'" He looked deeply into her eyes, as if demanding she answer his question.

Hermione felt her heart slam in her chest, and the adrenaline pumping in her bloodstream made the room suddenly seem uncomfortably warm and stuffy. She was amazed how level and pleasant her voice sounded. "The Marauder's Map?"

Harry nodded. "The map, yes. So I looked at it. And then I had to do homework, but I checked it afterwards. And right before I went to bed, I checked it again. Then I got up this morning and looked at it one more time." He stood and walked toward her, and Hermione forced herself not to take a step back. He approached her until he was standing close, and Hermione had to look up at him. She forced herself to meet his gaze.

In a quiet voice, trembling to maintain control, Harry said, "And now I'd like you to tell me, Hermione. I'd like you to tell me why you spent all afternoon, all evening, and all *night* in Severus Snape's quarters?"

Hot. It was so close and hot. Hermione sniffed. "Professor Snape's quarters?" She scoffed. "There must've been a mistake. I don't -"

Harry's voice was low and insistent. "The map doesn't lie, Hermione. You know that." For a beat, they simply stood looking at one another. Harry's green eyes were flashing fire, and she could see betrayal in them.

For the first time in ages, Hermione had no idea what to do or say.

"What's going on?" The two of them turned to see Ron shuffling into the Common Room, yawning and stretching. He eyed them suspiciously. "You two are up early."

Hermione smiled. "No rest for the wicked. I'm getting in a little early study time." Before Harry could reply, Hermione turned to him. "We'll talk about this tonight, okay, Harry?" She looked deeply into his mistrusting eyes and mutely willed him to agree.

Finally, he nodded curtly. "Sure, Hermione. Tonight, after dinner." He looked at her for a moment, his jaw working tensely. "If you're not here, I'll come find you." His eyes were bitterly accusatory. "I know where you'll be."

Hermione forced herself to remain calm. She returned his nod and went to her room. Once there, she closed her eyes and reached out to Severus, telling him what happened.

*Perhaps it's for the best.* His voice in her mind sounded resigned.

*I was thinking the same thing. Perhaps now is the time to tell him the truth. If Dumbledore won't -*

*We'll find time to discuss this. In the meantime, you have to prevent him from telling everyone in Gryffindor that you spent the night with me.*

Hermione shook her head, forgetting that it was pointless to do so, as he couldn't see her. *He won't tell anyone.*

*Are you so sure, Lass? What makes you think he won't go babbling to Minerva?*

*He WON'T. You have to believe me on this. When it comes down to it, Harry can be as tight-lipped as you.*

She smiled ruefully as she felt the disgust laced in his thought patterns. *Kindly do NOT compare Potter with me, Hermione. You are putting me off my breakfast.*

---

The day passed so slowly Hermione was tempted to believe that time had been magically slowed down just for her benefit. It was perhaps fortunate that Gryffindors did not have DADA class, sparing Hermione the apprehension of the possibility of another confrontation between Harry and Severus. Still, Hermione would have liked to have spoken with her husband, if only for his solid, comforting presence. The only time she saw him was at lunch, and there they took every precaution at their respective tables to studiously ignore one another, opting to communicate silently instead.

*What on earth are you eating, Hermione? It looks like potions ingredients.*

*Broccoli salad and asparagus. It's quite lovely, actually. You should try some. You are having something green for lunch today, aren't you, Severus?*

She could almost hear him sigh. *Spinach in some sort of cream sauce. Happy?*

She tried to stifle a smirk. *Very. Even if it is the longest day in history. Merlin, I wish the day would be over and we could get on with this meeting with Harry!*

*It will be here soon enough. After all, I can't imagine you are in that much of a hurry to tell Potter he has to die.*

Startled, Hermione choked on her broccoli salad. A firm but friendly hand began to pound her on the back. Coughing and spluttering, she turned to see Harry, a concerned expression on his face. "Alright, Hermione?"

Hermione cleared her throat and took a large sip of pumpkin juice. "Sorry, yes, I'm fine." She coughed again. "W-Went down the w-wrong h-hole."

Harry smiled tightly. "As long as you're okay, yeah?" Hermione looked into his emerald eyes, and in spite of his earlier suspicion and anger, she saw his genuine love and care for her. The knowledge of what she and Severus must tell Harry hit her like a bludge.

*Merlin, I've got to tell this nice, sweet, lonely boy that he's a Horcrux, and the only way to defeat Voldemort is for him to die. Oh, gods, Harry!*

She covered her tears by coughing again. She put her hand on his arm. "Thank you, Harry. I'm fine. Really." She gave his arm a loving squeeze. "Thank you."

This time, his smile was genuine. "Sure. Be careful, okay?" He gave a brief laugh. "Don't go keeling over on me, alright?"

Hermione managed a smile in return, and pushed her plate away. "I'll take that as a sign that I've had enough. Those books aren't going to study themselves." She looked at her old friend and covered his hand with hers. "We'll get together later - right after dinner, okay?" He smiled and nodded, then turned back to his lunch.

Hermione rose from the table and left the Great Hall without a backward glance. She could feel Severus' eyes on hers, and she hastily told him she had an errand to run. She barely made it to the girls' toilets, where she locked herself in the far stall, and cried as if her heart would break, and each tear was shed for Harry and Severus and for herself. Severus had been right. Too much was being asked of them all.

When she could function without bursting into fresh tears, Hermione left the stall and went to the sink, splashing water on her face. She looked into the mirror and grimaced. She was a mess - bright red nose, swollen, red-rimmed eyes, puffy lips, flushed face. A blind person could tell she'd been crying. A minor glamour covered up the worst of the ravages. In the soft light, she could probably pass for normal. She silently explained to her disconcerted husband that she'd needed some time alone. She did not want him to know she'd been crying; it would add another burden to the heavy load he already carried.

Then, as she cast her freshening charms, she had the beginnings of an idea. Once she left the toilets she dashed back to her dormitory. She was usually not one to skip class, but Professor Binns would hardly notice her missing from History of Magic, and this was far more important.

---

The never-ending school day finally concluded, and shortly after dinner, Hermione finished her homework and went looking for Harry. She and Severus had decided that she would initially speak with Harry alone, then together they would join Severus and he would fill in the blanks concerning everything; from his relationship with Harry's mother, to the prophecy, to the horrible matter of the Horcrux.

Rather worryingly, Hermione couldn't find Harry anywhere. Now it was her turn to long for the Marauder's Map, as she checked high and low for her friend. No one, even Ron, was sure where he was.

As Hermione rounded the corner near the Headmaster's Study, she saw Harry running toward her. From the distance, he looked strained, rushed. "There you are!" she said, smiling, and walked toward him to close the distance. "Where've you be-"

"Your *precious* Snape killed my parents!" He bellowed, bearing down on her and grabbing her by the arms. He was shaking with rage. ~~He's~~ He's the one who told Voldemort about the prophecy! Stunned, Hermione tried to push him away, but Harry's hold was too strong. "He has betrayed and killed EVERYONE who has meant anything to me, and you're fucking him!"

"Harry! Keep your voice down!" Hermione hissed, freeing herself from his grasp. "Who what-" She floundered, pressing her palm against her forehead in confusion. "What is going on? You and I were supposed to meet thirty minutes ago!"

Harry was panting with rage. "I got a message from Dumbledore. He wants me to go somewhere with him tonight. I think it has to do with a Horcrux." He took a deep breath, but he was still too agitated.

Hermione shook her head. "But but what does that have to do-"

"I ran into Trelawney while I was trying to find you. She told me that while she was stashing her sherry bottles in the Room of Requirement, she heard Malfoy in there he was celebrating!" Harry's eyes were blazing. "Think, Hermione! Why would Malfoy be happy?"

Before she could form a reply, he continued. "Because he's finished whatever it was Voldemort charged him with doing! He and Snape are going to do something horrible to Dumbledore and this school- for Voldemort!"

"Harry, stop! You're not making any sense!" Hermione almost growled with frustration. "If you'd just let me explain-"

Harry turned on her, and for a terrified moment Hermione thought he might actually hit her. "And while Trelawney's waffling on about trying to find somewhere to hide her sherry, she tells me that, all those years ago, while she was being interviewed by Dumbledore for her job, Snape was discovered on the other side of the door, eavesdropping! Don't you see, Hermione? Snape heard the prophecy and ran straight to Voldemort!" He panted, near tears. "Because of him, my mother and father are dead!"

"Harry, it's not like that! If you'll just let us explain-"

"The only explanation I want to hear is how you ended up fucking my enemy, Hermione!" Harry roared, apoplectic with fury. "You might as well be in bed with Voldemort!"

She slapped him then; a genuine, Hermione-style, round-house slap that rocked Harry back on his heels and spun his head sideways. The sound reverberated in the empty hall like a gunshot, and Hermione's hand stung with the force of it.

*Hermione? What is happening? Talk to me!*

Ignoring Severus' command, Hermione stepped closer to Harry. Her voice was low and intense with anger. "You don't know what the hell you are talking about, Harry. Now, for Merlin's sweet sucking sake, listen to me and keep your mouth shut and you'll hear the truth! Do you honestly believe the word of an airy-fairy old sot like Trelawney over your friend?"

Harry looked at her, then silently shook his head. He continued to shake his head for several seconds, as if being asked a question with a very emphatic 'no' answer. Hermione could see the bright red print of her hand against his white face, and she felt like a monster.

Finally, he said quietly, "You're not my friend. My friend wouldn't betray me. My friend wouldn't lie to me. My friend wouldn't cover for a murderer. My friend wouldn't sleep with the enemy." He looked at her pityingly. "You know, I really hope Snape has Confunded you, because if you're doing this on your own, I will never forgive you."

"Even if you knew the entire truth? Even if I gave it all to you and you could absorb it all and see the entire picture from the very beginning?"

*Lass, you are worrying me. What is wrong?*

Harry only shook his head and turned toward the entrance to Dumbledore's office. Hermione, feeling sick and more desperate than she could ever remember, said, "Please, Harry, just listen to me. You don't know the entire story. I'll tell you everything. If you'll just give me that one chance, I'll give you all the information you need. You know I would never do anything to hurt you!"

He stopped at the entrance, but didn't turn around. "I don't even know who you are, Hermione." He turned his head to the side. "I'm going to tell Dumbledore about you and Snape and Malfoy. If I were you, I'd rather face Voldemort than Dumbledore, once he finds out."

"He knows, Harry!" Hermione cried, and Harry froze. He turned around then.

"He knows what?"

Hermione took a deep breath. "He knows about Severus and me. He knows about Draco. He knows a lot of things he won't tell you, things that Severus and I wanted you to know."

He sneered, "Oh, it's 'Severus' now, is it? Is that what you call him when he fucks you?"

"Don't be stupid, Harry!" Hermione snapped, her patience gone. "You're ranting about things you know nothing about and that don't matter, instead of the things that will defeat Voldemort and save your life! Didn't you say yourself that Dumbledore was keeping you in the dark? Have you ever asked him why or do you just blindly trust everything he says, like you did Sirius?"

Harry flinched. "Dumbledore would never do anything to hurt me!"

Hermione almost sobbed, "Neither would I!"

Harry retorted, "He'd never lie to me, either!"

*This isn't amusing, Hermione. I'm coming to find you.*

"Probably not, but what about the things he *hasn't* told you, like why he withheld the whole truth about what Sirius did to me, or the true meaning of the Horcruxes, or the truth about Severus and what happened the night your parents were killed?"

Harry rushed at her again. "Don't you DARE mention my parents!" he hissed, and Hermione recoiled. He no longer looked like her friend. He looked he looked like the Dark Lord.

"What is going on here? Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, kindly explain the meaning of this disturbance!" Hermione turned to see Professor McGonagall walking toward them. She looked perturbed at seeing her star Gryffindors practically at one another's throats. "Arguing in the halls? This is most unseemly, not mention uncharacteristic! Why aren't you in your Common Room?"

The wild, unwholesome darkness faded from Harry's eyes, and he was himself again. Sullenly, Harry replied, "I have an appointment with the Headmaster, Professor."

As he spoke, they heard footsteps descending from the Headmaster's study, and Hermione's heart began to pound as she recognised the familiar cut of Severus' trousers as he came into view. She grasped Harry's arm in warning, just as Severus stepped out of the stairwell.

Professor McGonagall was saying, "Oh, yes, I do recall him mentioning you both would be away this evening." She turned to Hermione. "That unfortunately doesn't excuse you, Miss Granger. Kindly return to your dormitory and allow Mr. Potter to go about his business. I'm sure whatever disagreement you are having will be resolved by tomorrow."

Harry gave Severus a murderous look. Hermione pleaded silently with Harry, but he merely shook his arm free of her grasp, gave the password to the gargoyle, and headed up the stairs. Hermione watched him go, feeling like she'd been punched in the stomach.

"Miss Granger?" McGonagall's voice was marginally patient, and reluctantly, Hermione turned her attention back to her Head of House. Thankfully, Severus stepped forward, pretending disdain.

"Although I had not planned on walking in that general direction, Professor, I suppose I can ensure Miss Granger returns to her dormitory, seeing as she appears rather uncertain how to proceed on her own," Severus said coldly, sounding every inch the passive - aggressive, surly Potions master.

McGonagall smiled tightly. "Thank you, Professor. That is most kind. Off you go, Miss Granger."

Severus scowled in her general direction, and Hermione meekly followed him down the hall.

As they turned the corner, they looked at one another, and then her knees buckled and he caught her in his arms. Hermione was shaking so badly he entwined his hand with hers and gently put his other arm around her waist to steady her. She allowed him to lead her like a stricken animal. They saw no one as they walked down toward the dungeons. Hermione realised that, even if they had, it would have made no difference. They were incapable of letting go of one another.

---

As Hermione was wandering toward the Headmaster's office, looking for Harry, Severus was already there, having been summoned by Dumbledore shortly after dinner.

The Headmaster's instincts had, once more, been uncanny. "I believe I've found one of the Horcruxes, Severus," he'd said, gazing out the window. "It's a two-man job, though. I can't destroy it alone."

"Fine. When would you like to depart?" Severus had asked, turning to go. "I'll tell Hermione-

"You will need to stay here, Severus. Wicked things are afoot tonight. I'm taking Harry with me."

Severus looked at Dumbledore in disbelief. "Potter? You're taking the boy? That's dangerous-

"I believe tonight may be a foul night, Severus. I will feel more at ease knowing you are here, helping to protect Hogwarts from our enemies."

Something about The Headmaster's tone made Severus' stomach lurch. "Albus? What are you saying? What do you know?"

Deep within his mind, Severus felt a sharp ache, and he instantly recognised it as Hermione. She was in distress. He called out to her: *Hermione? What is happening? Talk to me!*

Dumbledore gave the younger man a smile. For a moment, he looked like the powerful wizard of old. "Know? Not much. Suspect? Well, rumour has it that Mr. Malfoy has been working on a project that has now come to fruition. If he has, tonight may be the very night we see the fruits of his labours."

Severus looked at the Headmaster in shock. "Then why are you leaving the school if you suspect trouble? Shouldn't you be here, with us, making sure-

"I trust no one more than you, Severus, to hold the enemy at bay until I return. But this Horcrux is very important. The others may be found, but this one would hide forever, and as I say, it's a two-man job. I have to at least try to retrieve it before I'm killed."

Hearing Dumbledore say those words so calmly made Severus' gut clench. "Then-" he began, and had to clear his throat. He fought his emotions; fought his fear and sudden anger. He swallowed. "Then, you believe it is to be tonight?"

"Severus," Dumbledore began, and Severus gasped at the emotion he heard in the old wizard's tone. "Death Eaters will enter Hogwarts tonight. Where I am going, there's a chance I could die before we return. This Horcrux does not want to be liberated." He paused for effect. "Regulus Black was given the task of hiding it."

His words hit Severus like a hammer to his chest. Anger and resentment bled from him, to be replaced with horror. "Oh, Merlin, no!" Severus cried, and sank to his knees beside his Headmaster. "The potion. Oh, gods, Albus," he moaned brokenly, looking at his old friend helplessly. He shook his head, sick with guilt. "I've not thought of that potion in years. I never -"

He looked at Dumbledore pleadingly, as if begging to be believed. "I never knew why The Dark Lord commanded me to create it. Reg never told me what he was doing-" Severus could not finish the sentence. Oh, this hurt. He swallowed. "You won't survive it, Albus."

Dumbledore's bright blue eyes were soft with understanding. "Nor do I wish to, my boy. From what I remember, it was a nasty bit of potioneering." He looked away for a moment. "Poor Regulus."

Severus lowered his head. "Oh, Albus! I'm so sorry." He felt the old man's hand gentle upon his head, felt the love he'd once cherished as a son for a father, and felt as if he were dying a little, as well.

"No, no tears for me, Severus," Dumbledore said gently, and drew the younger wizard up into his arms. Fervently, he said, "You see why I have to go? Someone must

drink the potion to retrieve the Horcrux. I'm the perfect candidate. I'm already dying, my boy, you hear me? I killed myself the moment I put Marvolo's ring on my finger."

Severus voice was clogged with tears. "The pain will be unspeakable, Albus. Potter will be unable to help you."

The older man nodded and took a step back. "No doubt it will be unpleasant. But listen, Severus. I must return to the castle, to get Harry back here to safety. If the Death Eaters come before we return, you will have the opportunity to repel them without having to worry about Harry. I know you will keep the students safe, Severus."

The sharp buzzing in Severus' head grew, making the pain behind his eyes worse. *Lass, you are worrying me. What is wrong?*

Dumbledore took a deep breath, and in that moment, all of his vitality left him, and he looked frail, pensive. He gazed upon the younger wizard. "I'm not afraid to die, Severus. But I am sorry. For so many things."

He sighed. "I'm sorry to make you do this. I'm sorry that I've been so harsh with your wife; I know how much you love her. Most of all, I'm sorry that your chance at finding happiness has been..." The old man turned away. "I lost my chance long ago. I don't wish that loss on anyone; especially you, my dear boy."

Severus felt oddly numb, and was grateful that his senses were deadened. He doubted he would be able to survive otherwise. He sniffed and tossed his hair from his eyes. "I will leave you then, Albus. Preparations must be made. I need to speak with Hermione as soon as I can." He stood to go, and looked down at the old wizard. Grief flooded his heart. "Albus, you have, in your own way, been like a father to me."

Dumbledore looked up at Severus and smiled. "And I have loved you like a son, Severus. I'm sorry I've had to use you so harshly, and I have not treated you as well as you deserved, but that fault was mine. And this will unfortunately be only the beginning of the end, not the end of the beginning."

"Do this one last thing for me, my dear friend. Give an old man some peace, and forgive me. You will be doing me a kindness, remember that." He looked into Severus' dark eyes and smiled. "Do this because you love me, not because I've given you so much cause to hate me."

Severus nodded, even as Hermione's anger and fear washed over him again, and he gasped aloud. *This isn't amusing, Hermione. I'm coming to find you.*

Faced with the roiling emotions from both Hermione and his own pounding heart, Severus fought every instinct within not to weep. He looked at Dumbledore one final time as a friend. "The next time we meet, I will have only two words to say to you, Albus. So I'll say my good-byes now."

The two wizards faced one another. For a brief moment, Dumbledore looked afraid, then he, too, found his strength. "Farewell, Severus. Until we meet again, my dear friend." He looked at Severus fondly, and in that moment Severus was so unnerved he could not decide whether he hated Dumbledore, or loved him. No one had ever used Severus with more precision, or more genuine affection.

Severus turned and descended the stairs to find Hermione.

---

The Dark Mark seared the sky like an Angel of Death. Filius Flitwick came dashing down to his chamber. "Severus! Severus! Death Eaters at Hogwarts! We have to send up the alarm!"

The stunning spell knocked Filius out so quickly and quietly Severus was able to catch the diminutive wizard before he hit the ground. Gently lowering Filius onto his sofa, Severus ran out of his rooms, just as Hermione and the Lovegood girl came racing down the steps to the dungeons. She had been in her dormitory when he called her, entreating her to meet him in his study.

"Miss Granger, Miss Lovegood! Professor Flitwick has collapsed in my chamber. The strain," he said, hearing the unmistakable sounds of panic and chaos in the upper levels of the school. "Stay with him until help arrives. Do not leave him."

As he turned to go, he looked into his wife's eyes. She looked reproachful; as if angry to be shunted off down in the dungeon while the brunt of the fighting was elsewhere. *Stay here with Filius. When the deed is done, I will return to collect you. Have everything ready. We must act fast.*

*It's too dangerous for you to come back down here. I'll leave Luna with Professor Flitwick. You're just doing this because you think I can't take care of myself!*

*Merlin's sake, witch! For once, do as I say! I don't want you to see it, Lass! I don't want you to watch me do this! Please!*

He was dashing up the stairs, running on adrenaline, when the words, *Don't you dare leave me behind, Severus Snape!* almost made him falter, and he laughed, a sharp bark of a laugh that made several students look at him with unease.

*Just stay put! Foolish girl, be waiting of course I'm coming back for you!*

He ran up the stairs of the Astronomy Tower. In that mind-bending race up the innumerable steps, he said aloud, "How am I suppose to survive otherwise?"

---

He burst onto the ramparts, wand in hand, breathing hard, and took in the scene in one swift moment. He saw the despicable, inbred Carrows, leering off to one side, alongside Fenrir Greyback. The werewolf's stench had assaulted Severus' nostrils before he even saw him. Severus recognised the remaining Death Eater as the blond wizard who'd escorted him to his last meeting with the Dark Lord. Severus gave him no more than a passing glance.

Draco stood to one side, shaking as if palsied, his wand trembling like a branch of a tree. He and the Death Eaters he'd secreted into Hogwarts were all facing a huddled figure leaning against the parapet. Severus followed their gaze and saw Albus Dumbledore, wandless, ghastly pale, sagging against the wall. He was panting like an animal in pain, and his face was grey with exhaustion and the poison he'd ingested.

"Ah, Snape," Amycus Carrow said, his voice a grating whine in Severus' ears. "We have a problem. The boy doesn't seem capable..."

Severus' gaze was locked upon Dumbledore. He looked hideous; his body trembled with the effort to stay marginally upright. He looked like he'd aged a hundred years in the last few hours.

"Severus," Albus, said, his voice raspy and frightened. "Please."

*Like a sleepwalker, Severus raised his wand and leveled it at his friend's heart... his mentor, his gaoler... he felt his magic rise within him... he thought of Dumbledore's cruelty... his lack of regard for Hermione... she stepped between you and Dolohov!...his wand arm was steady... Albus and his Greater Good... to cast an Unforgivable you have to mean it...*

"Severus?" Albus gasped, and looked at him with beseeching, rheumy eyes. "Severus, Please!"

*Severus was stone... his wand was stone... he was fire... he was blood... he saw Dumbledore, telling him his mother was dead... Regulus Black was dead... Lily was dead... Hermione's parents are dead, they were all dead, dead, dead... say the words... say them... you have to mean it... say them...*

"Get on with it, Snape, or I will! Hey!" Severus heard shuffling behind him, but his cut-glass concentration was focused completely on Dumbledore.

*His wand was an extension of himself, a pointing, accusatory finger... Dumbledore, defending the Marauders... boys will be boys... that brat is just like his father... Sirius*

*Black escaped... Potter would not be punished for hurting his wife... his wife... I prefer not to put all my eggs in one basket, especially one that dangles on the arm of Lord Voldemort... his wand wavered minutely... he felt the magic swirling, like the magic that had healed him...*

"Avada Kadavra!"

The bright green light flashed through the night, lighting up the tower. Severus watched numbly as Dumbledore's body flew from the parapet like a bird, soaring downward. The Death Eaters were strangely silent for having just seen their sworn enemy struck down.

Severus lowered his wand and turned in time to see the green light fade from the tip of Hermione's wand. "No, Lass. No," he whispered, as he looked into the terror-stricken eyes of Dumbledore's murderer.

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Opening words Comfortably Numb Roger Waters

Words in bold are a direct quote from Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, by JK Rowling

This chapter is also dedicated with apologies to LaurieLove, who used a similar plot device in Out of The Depths, when another character was looking for Hermione.

## Twenty Four: Among These Dark Satanic Mills

Chapter 25 of 39

I will not cease from mental fight, nor shall my sword sleep in my hand...

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

*And as always, special thanks to the queen of the betas, stgulik, the most patient, most clever, quickest thinking beta in the world. stgulik, you are my Hermione Granger.*

---

*And did those feet in ancient time*

*Walk upon England's mountains green?*

*And was the holy Lamb of God,*

*On England's pleasant pastures seen?*

*And did the countenance divine*

*Shine forth upon our clouded hills?*

*And was Jerusalem builded here*

*Among these dark satanic mills?*

*Bring me my bow of burning gold!*

*Bring me my arrows of desire!*

*Bring me my Spear! O clouds unfold!*

*Bring me my chariot of fire!*

*I will not cease from mental fight,*

*Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,*

*Till we have built Jerusalem*

*In England's green and pleasant land.*

- William Blake, 1804

---

Hermione was only dimly aware of Severus grabbing her arm and pulling her down the stairs like a wayward animal. Her head was filled with a buzzing, chattering sound that made her want to run from it and scream at it to go away, but she was afraid if she opened her mouth and started screaming, she might never stop.

She saw Draco's white, pinched face staring at her in dumbfounded horror, as if he'd never truly seen her before. She saw fear in him as well, and a tiny, receding voice within said, *That's right, Draco. Be afraid. Show them all what Pureblood breeding means against Mudblood courage..*

Severus gave her a hard little shake, and she realised her thoughts were bleeding through to him. "Focus!" he hissed at her, and she allowed him to drag her down the stairs. His grip on her arm was tight, and it should have hurt. Her body felt as if it was encased in a layer of ice. She felt so numb she idly wondered if she'd never feel anything ever again...

*Hermione had made sure Professor Flitwick was unharmed, and remained a moment with Luna, but she was so restless even Luna seemed affected by it. As she watched*

*Hermione pace, her usual, placid expression turned to puzzlement, but she didn't say anything.*

Just stay here. Severus told you to. I'm supposed to stay here until...*Hermione chewed on her nails, a habit she'd broken herself of years ago, but she was gnawing away now as if waiting on her exams.*

*As a little girl, she had loved reading her mother's large coffee-table book on religious art. The Crucifixion, in particular, was fascinating to her. She often studied it, wondering how the man on the cross could bear to have those spikes hammered into his palms. Now, the pain hit her like a nail being driven through the middle, and she cried aloud and clutched her hand.*

"Hermione?" Luna said, obviously concerned. "Do you need to go to the Infirmary?"

"Yes," Hermione had rasped, nearly weeping with the pain driving into her palm. Now she knew.

He couldn't bear it.

*She called out to Severus, but all she could hear were echoes of words, voices, jumbled in his mind. It was as if he had dropped all Occlusions, and she was hearing the fear that he always so rigidly controlled. The sounds and thoughts had rough corners and razor-sharp edges that cut and scraped against her mind. The idea that something, anything, could affect Severus this badly filled Hermione with panic.*

*She made a decision. He might later harangue her for it, but she was damned if she was going to sit here and do nothing while her husband was in distress. She grabbed her beaded bag, shrunk it down to the size of a small potions vial, and darted into the chaotic hall. She ran almost headlong into Ginny Weasley, who was rallying the D.A. while trying to round up the younger students. "Have you seen Harry?" she asked, grabbing a first year and steering her back toward Gryffindor Tower.*

"I haven't seen him. Keep the young ones out of the hall!" Hermione shouted, already moving, her feet taking her where they would.

*Although she could hear noises all around her, Hermione saw no one once she reached the tower side of the castle. She flew up the steps of the Astronomy tower, letting her link with Severus guide her, intuitively following the direction of his anguish.*

*When she came upon the landing, she was faced with the most terrifying sight she'd ever seen. Draco and several Death Eaters were standing almost casually, facing a terribly weakened Dumbledore. They were looking between him and Severus, who had his back to her. For all his movement, he could have been a statue. He was ramrod straight, his wand arm steadily pointed at Dumbledore like judge, jury and executioner. It was like a tableau out of hell.*

*From within Severus' mind, all Hermione could hear was buzzing voices, and they grew in number and volume until she felt engulfed by them. Severus was on transmit, and every thought flying through his head was battering at her mind until she could no longer think straight: ... mentor... gaoler...Hermione... magic rising... Dumbledore's cruelty... lack of regard for Hermione... she stepped between you and Dolohov...my wife... Albus and his Greater Good... to cast an Unforgivable you have to mean it...Hermione... fire... blood... Dumbledore...your mother is dead...this is what you deserve... Regulus Black is dead... Lily is dead... Hermione's parents are dead... my fault, dead, dead, dead... say the words... we had a bargain...say them...mean it... say them... the Marauders... Severus will be the martyr...boys will be boys... Hermione... that brat is just like his father... she healed me... Sirius Black escaped... forgive me... his wife... my wife...*

*The words assaulted Hermione and she tried to think past them. Her head roared, and pain split through her from head to hand and back again, as one of the Death Eaters, a little fat-faced man who reminded her of Dolores Umbridge, was yelling, "Get on with it, Snape, or I will!" He spotted Hermione, who raised her wand in a perfect imitation of Severus' stance. "Hey!"*

*Hermione looked past her husband to Dumbledore, who glanced at her. She heard his voice cut through all of Severus' white noise, injected into her brain with the precision of a needle into a vein: We had a bargain, Madam Snape. Insurance, you will recall. If you truly wish for him to have a chance outside of a life in Azkaban, you'll keep your side of the agreement we made the day you took Severus as your husband... I am begging this of you...*

*Hermione felt the anger and shame she'd experienced every time she'd spoken to Dumbledore since. Severus was weakening; she could see his wand waver. Hermione began to tremble. Could she honestly summon the hatred needed to take a life?*

*And then Dumbledore sealed his fate. He looked up at Severus, and smiled, and in that smile, Hermione saw him mouth the word toward. Hermione looked at her husband, whom she loved more than anyone on earth, and everything she needed was within her and roiling from her wand like water.*

*The curse burst from her, hard and hot and sweet and almost sexual in its ferocity, and the words flew from her lips like a love song. The moment Albus Dumbledore flew from the tower, dead from the curse she'd shouted into the night sky, was almost as fulfilling as the moment Severus burst through her maidenhead and made her his own. The moment was transcendental; it spun away from her like an orgasm, like a wave of anger and hatred and bitterness and resentment for everything that had ever been said against her or Severus in her hearing. Mudblood, know-it-all, Muggleborn trash, poor, stuck-up, pretentious... greasy bat... bitch... Snivellus... slag ... half-blood... little slut... coward...*

It all shimmered away from her like leaves picked up and scattered by the indifferent wind, and the more it spun away from her the less she felt. Her entire being shut down, and a blissful numbness crept into her, starting at her wand hand; soon she was covered in a blanket of nothingness.

Her emotions were rolling away with the last vestiges of the curse, following the dead man as he silently fell like a stone from the tower to the ground, leaving her empty and broken. Dimly, she heard the beautiful voice of the man she loved, the man she'd killed for, whisper, "No, Lass. No." Hermione looked into his eyes, and she saw the horror and revulsion in his face. *He hates me*, she thought, and fleetingly wondered why she could not care.

And then they were running. Draco was ahead on her right side; she could see the moonlight shining on his gleaming cap of silver-blond hair. Her hand was in Severus' as he ran, ruthlessly pulling her along so fast her feet hardly touched the ground.

They were nearly at Hagrid's hut, sprinting toward the gates and the Apparition point, when a stunner kicked Hermione's feet out from under her and sent her sprawling face first onto the frosty ground. "MURDERER! YOU MURDERING BITCH!"

Breathless and dizzy, covered in mud and rotting leaves, Hermione tried to draw herself onto legs that were shaking and unsteady, as Severus hissed, "Draco! Help Hermione to the Apparition point. I'll take care of Potter."

Hermione turned around and saw Harry racing after them, throwing every spell he could think of, but Severus batted away each one as if it were of no more consequence than a fly.

"Expelliarmus!" Blocked.

"Stupefy!" Blocked again.

"Sectumsem-" Severus blasted the spell away with a retaliating blocking shield so powerful it literally knocked Harry off his feet.

He stood over Harry, rage emanating from every pore. "When will you learn that until you keep that big gob shut you will be blocked and blocked over and over especially if you're stupid enough to use my own spells against me, Potter!" He was raging, almost mad with fury.

Harry looked up at Severus, comprehending at last. He rasped, "Your spells -"

"I am the Half-Blood Prince, you pathetic little shit!" Severus' loathing for Harry was unfettered, and he unleashed his hatred with sweet abandon. He taunted, "You're so in love with the sound of your own voice you're going to make the Dark Lord feel cheated of a good fight!"

"You BASTARD!" Harry screamed, and raised his wand again, "Cru-"

"NO!" Hermione tore herself out of Draco's grasp. "Harry, leave him alone!"

Harry turned on her and bellowed, "How can you defend him? How can you live with yourself after what you've done?" He turned back to Severus. "You Imperused her, or Confunded her or something! You made her do your dirty work because you were too much of a coward." He raised his wand again.

"Harry-"

Severus battered Harry down with another blocking spell. "Don't!" Severus shouted, his eyes turning huge and demonic, "don't CALL ME A COWARD!"

"Crucio!" The blond Death Eater's curse sliced through the air and hit Harry squarely in the chest. He fell to the ground, writhing, screaming in pain. Hermione hadn't even noticed the Death Eater following them.

"No! Leave him for the Dark Lord!" Severus' voice thundered into the night. Hermione heard the Death Eater sullenly cancel the curse. Thwarted, the blond turned away, snarling in frustration; he sent a spell Hermione didn't recognise into Hagrid's hut, causing it to burst into flames.

She turned back to Harry just as he slumped to the ground, dazed and howling in pain from the aftereffects of the curse. With a silent spell, his wand skittered out of reach. Hermione could not tell who cast it. She could hear Hagrid bellowing in anger and fear, something about Fang being trapped inside the hut.

Severus stood over Harry, fury and hatred distorting his expression in the hellish fires of Hagrid's hut. "Now, listen to me, Potter, because you're only worth me saying this once. If you so much as raise your wand against my wife again, there won't be enough of you left for the Dark Lord to destroy."

Harry gasped, his face pinched with grief and shock. "Wife? You mean she -"

"She what? Touches me? Fucks me? I'll bet the thought of it just eats you alive, doesn't it, Potter?" Severus' eyes were wild, his voice harsh and rasping. "And she's all mine - do you hear me, James? Mine! Hermione belongs to me!"

Hermione put her hand on his shoulder. "Severus!"

Something in her voice - perhaps it was the last vestiges of emotion - was enough to pull him from his blind, unhinged rage. He turned and looked at Hermione as awaking from a nightmare. She shook her head. "This isn't James."

Severus looked at the boy, then closed his eyes. Draco, who did not hear the altercation, ran back to Severus, plucking at his robe. "For fuck's sake, let's go!"

As Severus watched, Hermione ran to Harry, falling to her knees by his side. "Harry, listen to me-"

"Traitor!"

"Listen to me!" she cried, grabbing hold of his hands. He looked up at her in shock and tried to wrestle away from her, but he was too weak, and Hermione grimly held on.

"Why?" He asked, crying openly. "He was helpless! You killed a helpless, suffering old man in cold blood! Why?" He looked past her to Severus' darkened face. "Because of him? Do you actually believe that you love that bastard?"

Loudly, Hermione said, "I have done what I have done of my own free will. I'm doing this *on my own*. Please, Harry..." She reached down and kissed his cheek, holding his hands.

Harry looked up at her as if he still did not comprehend her. His eyes bored into hers. "You Judas!" he hissed, tears streaming down his face. "I will never forgive you for this! You'll be hunted until the day you die! You and your fucking husband!"

An almighty screech rent the air, and Draco screamed in fright as Buckbeak, the Hippogriff, bore down on him and Severus, slashing at them with his razor-sharp talons.

"Hermione, come now!" She felt Severus' strong arms pulling her to her feet, tearing her hands from Harry's grip, and once again they were dashing toward the School gates, ducking to keep out of the grip of Buckbeak's deadly claws. Behind her, she could hear screaming and cries of grief and pain, and the world seemed to be on fire. Hermione thought she might be sick; she shook her head to clear it. She couldn't show weakness now, not in front of the Death Eaters...

Severus grabbed her arms and the world spun away, and Hermione was torn away from the last hallmark of her innocence forever...

---

Narcissa Malfoy was waiting to greet them when Severus, Hermione, Draco and the other Death Eaters arrived at Malfoy Manor. Draco had been adamant: they were to return to his home before meeting with the Dark Lord. Once there, the other Death Eaters were quickly dispatched to report to Voldemort. Severus assured them he and Hermione would follow shortly.

All that mattered to Narcissa was Draco. He had flown into the arms of his mother, who welcomed him like a conquering hero. "My beautiful boy!" she said, crying tears of joy, holding him fervently to her breast. She kissed his face over and over, and held onto him as if afraid he'd be torn from her arms at any moment. "At last, it's over!" She looked from Severus to Draco to Hermione. "The deed is done, is it not?"

"It is done," Severus said archly, his voice flat and cold. Hermione stood a little apart from him, swaying. She could clearly hear what was being said, but it simply did not matter to her. Something was wrong with her; she felt decidedly strange. She was in some sort of fugue state, where nothing mattered, nothing was. She tried to summon a feeling, *any* feeling, but all she could feel was... nothing.

Severus announced, "The Dark Lord will wish to meet with us shortly. Before then, Narcissa, you and I have a small matter to discuss." He fixed his eye on Draco. "A matter of an Unbreakable Vow."

Narcissa, ecstatic that her only child was safe and the Dark Lord's task completed, nodded. "Of course, Severus. I will renounce the vow anytime you like-"

"You will do it now, Narcissa. Hermione, as witness to the making of the vow, you will act as our unbinder." When she did not respond, Severus barked, "Hermione!"

Startled out of her trance-like state by his forceful voice, she nodded dumbly. Taking out her wand, Hermione waited while her husband and Narcissa knelt. When he curtly nodded up at her, Hermione touched the tip of her wand to their joined hands.

Severus began, his sonorous voice rolling through the room. "I, Severus Tobias Granger-Snape, watched over your son Draco as he attempted to fulfill the Dark Lord's

wishes, according to my vow."

Narcissa nodded. "I, Narcissa Black Malfoy, do acknowledge this and release you from this vow."

A thin, shining flame unloosened itself from their clasped hands, dissipating as it fell away. Severus continued, "I, Severus Tobias Granger-Snape, protected him from harm to the best of my ability, according to my vow." Hermione had a sudden vision of Draco lying in a pool of bloody water in a school toilet.

"I, Narcissa Black Malfoy, do acknowledge this and release you from this vow."

A second, fiery line dropped from their hands, and Severus seemed to breathe a little easier. "And when it proved necessary that Draco was unable to carry out the deed the Dark Lord ordered him to perform, I, Severus Tobias Granger-Snape, ensured that it was done, according to my vow."

"I, Narcissa Black Malfoy, do acknowledge this and release you from this vow."

As the last shining wire fell from their clasped hands, Severus stood. Narcissa, clearly overcome with relief and joy, said, "If there is anything I can do to repay you, Severus, anything you need, please say the word -"

"The word will be said," Severus interrupted smoothly. He looked down at Narcissa with thinly-veiled contempt. "Now go to your son. Dry his tears, pet and soothe him, and remind him, when the night looks as if it will never end, that Hermione Granger-Snape, a *Mudblood*, had the courage to do his dirty work for him."

Narcissa looked up at Severus in astonishment. "Your wife? What does your wife have to do -"

"She killed Dumbledore."

The three people in the room turned and looked at the pale, gaunt features of Draco Malfoy. He was staring at Hermione with disgust. "She walked up to him and killed him without even batting an eye. Then she kissed Potter." He shook his head. "Gods, you're coldblooded, Granger."

"Enough!" Severus growled, his eyes dark and dangerous. "She was good enough to save your worthless hide, Malfoy! More than once, if you'll recall."

Draco turned on his professor with contempt. "And what about you, Severus?" he sneered, throwing the name down like a gauntlet. "You stood there like a fool while Dumbledore begged you for mercy, and in the end, you didn't have the juice to do it!"

Severus looked from Draco to the shocked, white face of his mother, then sneered in Hermione's direction. "I didn't need to, did I? Not while little Miss Gryffindor does my bidding." He turned to Hermione and grabbed her by the arm. "Come, pet," he drawled, his smooth voice dripping with disdain. "We have a triumph to celebrate. With the Dark Lord."

Hermione managed to keep her feet moving as they walked from the Manor, and once outside the wards, Severus spun her away.

---

They landed in Spinner's End and entered the house, the silence stretching between them. Hermione looked around dully. She should have found comfort at the grey normality of Severus' boyhood home, but she could feel nothing. She was shaking and having a hard time staying on her feet; she swayed dangerously and would have fallen, had Severus not caught her. Without preamble, he commanded, "Go upstairs to bed. Strip. Get rid of all your clothes."

Propelled by his terse command, Hermione meekly walked toward the stairs. She was only a step away when her legs collapsed under her. She was fine one moment, and then... she lay at the bottom of the stairs, like a toy tossed on the floor by a petulant child. Turning her head, she looked up at the man she'd spent every night with since the summer. It was like looking into the eyes of a stranger. No. It was like looking into Professor Snape's eyes the summer before Black started pawing her in Grimmauld Place. Like a man who didn't know her and didn't care to.

He set his lips in a thin, grim line, as if he suspected her of faking her fall. "Do you need assistance?" His voice was aloof and formal. Hermione mutely nodded. For some reason, she felt completely disengaged from him, as if their minds were no longer linked. Now that she could give it some thought, she realised it had been that way since she killed Dumbledore. She had killed a man. She stumbled upon the thought, like a shoe she'd forgotten and only now had located by tripping over it.

Severus wearily pulled her to her feet and helped her up the stairs, as patiently and impersonally as if they'd only just met. When they reached the landing, he opened the bedroom door for her, and when she leaned against him, he pulled away, flinching.

*I've lost him*, she thought numbly, trying to process the emotion that should go with it. She felt nothing. Where was the sick, twisted feeling in her gut that should have accompanied the terrible reality of the night's events? I thought I was saving him, but I've killed his love for me along with Dumbledore. Why can't I feel anything?

Severus wordlessly helped her undress; his hands felt as if they belonged to a stranger. He pulled her sodden jumper over her head, and removed her trainers and socks. She handed him her mud-caked jeans and underclothes, and he took the entire bundle and threw them into the disused fireplace and Incendio'd the entire lot. She didn't have the energy to ask why. He waited until she climbed into bed, then he tucked the covers around her as efficiently and impersonally as a Mediwitch. He left the room, and Hermione could hear him moving in the loo across the hall. Moments later, he returned with a small vial.

"Drink this. It's a Calming Draught. I want you to sleep." As she obeyed him, he hissed and clutched at his arm. "Shit!" he muttered under his breath. He glanced up at Hermione, who looked back at him with flat, unfeeling calm. "Did you not feel it?" he rasped, remembering how her blood oath would pain her when he was summoned.

She lowered her eyes and shook her head. "I don't feel anything," she replied tonelessly.

Severus sighed, low and long, not understanding. He swallowed. "I have to go to make a report. The house is heavily warded; don't let anyone in. I'll be back very shortly." He took the empty bottle from her and sat it on the table. "Try to sleep," he added, not unkindly. "We'll talk when I return."

He rose and walked toward the door. He was almost out of the room when Hermione found her voice. "Severus?"

He spun around and looked at her, his eyes flat and unreadable. "Yes?"

It took Hermione three deep breaths before she could make herself say the words, "Do you hate me now?" He paused for a moment, and in that moment Hermione almost felt her emotions stirring to life, like cold fingers of death creeping around her throat. "Do you?" she asked again.

He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. Finally, he said quietly, "We'll talk when I return. Please try to sleep, Hermione."

With that, he left the room, and Hermione lay on the bed and stared numbly at the ceiling, her dreams and hopes teetering on the edge of oblivion.

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Severus knelt at the feet of the Dark Lord and kissed his robe, trying to summon the threadbare remnants of his energy. The day had been more hellish than any he could remember, and his inner shields felt weak and vulnerable. He prayed to those non-existent gods that the Dark Lord might spare him Legilimency this time; he was sure he would not be able to withstand it.

He needn't have worried. The Dark Lord was almost wild with joy at the news of Dumbledore's demise, and at the hand of Snape's tame little witch, no less. Severus glanced over at the Death Eaters present, including Narcissa and Draco.

Bellatrix was there too, of course, with her own particular brand of psychotic malice. Regarding Severus with undisguised loathing, she sneered mockingly, "Oh, look,



Cissy. It's the hero of the hour! And where's Mrs. Hero? Too good for us, now that she's made her bones and stolen Draco's moment of glory?"

Draco looked away, shame etched on his profile. Severus merely stared at her, not trusting his voice. The Dark Lord looked down on Severus with gleaming, jolly malevolence. "Yes, Severus, where is your wife, that I may thank her personally for her dedication and accomplishment?"

Severus rose to his feet, the picture of serene smugness. "My wife, alas, my Lord, was not as sufficiently recovered from the loss of our child as I had originally estimated, and her... activities of the evening have proven too much for her. She was so weak, I reluctantly had to send her to bed. She begged for your indulgence, as do I, and she prays you will forgive her this moment of weakness." He looked over at Bellatrix. "It was, as you may recall, Bella, not the first time she's had to come to Draco's rescue in the not-too-distant past."

Narrow-eyed, Bella spat, "You had him! The Carrows and Draco swore it! You stood there and did nothing, like a coward! Why didn't you just do the old fool yourself, Severus?"

He felt impotent bile rise in his throat. "Don't let's be casting aspersions, Bellatrix! When I arrived, Draco was green around the gills and shaking like an aspen. He couldn't have killed an ant crawling on the floor at that point."

"Yes, I'm rather curious about that," The Dark Lord interjected, clearly enjoying the bickering between Severus and Bellatrix. "Why didn't you simply kill Dumbledore, Severus? You of all people had reason and desire to do so." Bella turned from the Dark Lord and gave Severus a gloating look of defiance.

*He must be ecstatic*, thought Severus. Normally he reigns her in before now. Severus turned to his Master *Hermione*, *please forgive me*. "Because, my Lord, I had agreed to take control of the situation until my wife arrived. She had begged me for the privilege of killing the Headmaster."

Voldemort looked genuinely intrigued. "Did she? And why was that, Severus?"

Severus deftly fell to his knees. It was a graceful, supplicating gesture that he knew would both surprise and please the Dark Lord, who felt Severus' pride was ever his weakness. "So that you would know the depths of our commitment to you, my Lord. As brilliant and as strong a witch as she is, she wanted you to be in no doubt that I, through her, serve you first, last, and forever."

Severus stole a glance at the Dark Lord as he spoke. Voldemort was happy; happier than Severus could remember. It sickened him to think that he had contributed to this happiness at the expense of a fine woman like Hermione Granger. *Hermione Granger-Snape*.

The Dark Lord was saying, "I think you can ease your little concubine's worries, Severus. Of course I am in no doubt of your loyalties. After tonight, there could be no doubt. The two of you are the Adam and Eve of my brave new world." He smiled hellishly. "Now that Dumbledore is no longer such a disruptive influence, I am sure that the Ministry will come to understand my new vision of the Utopia that will be the Wizarding world, under my protection. There will be all the time in the world to reward you lovely little murderers."

Severus felt sick, hearing that word used to describe Hermione. The desire to be at her side was suddenly overwhelming. She needed him, desperately, while he stood here, preening and fawning. "Your pleasure is reward enough, my Lord."

Voldemort smiled. "Now the boy is truly alone," he gloated. "Once the Ministry is under our control, we begin the immense task of setting the world to rights. We'll start with Hogwarts, of course. The youth of today are the beacons of tomorrow, and must be taught well."

Severus felt a little worm of acid burrowing into his stomach. "As always, we are committed to bringing your vision to reality, my Lord. *Ah gods, Dumbledore. What vile cauldron of shit have you dropped us into?*

Voldemort nodded. "Quite. And now, to the events of the evening. I have spoken to Draco at length." He gave Draco a withering glare. "A thrilling tale, even seen through the eyes of a coward."

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Severus Apparated several blocks away from Spinner's End. He needed to gather his thoughts, and a walk in the freezing night air eased his aching head. He would feel almost himself by the time he arrived at his house. He mentally corrected himself. *Theirs*. It was their house; his and Hermione's. Merlin knows, he needed to give her as much of himself now as he could.

He passed through the dank empty streets on the wrong end of this dreary town that had raised him. He glanced toward the long-dead stacks rising from the barren mills that had given this sorry little village its name, and gave them a two-fingered salute. *And was Jerusalem builded here, among these dark, Satanic mills?* he thought.

The devils were definitely driving tonight; the Ministry was being infiltrated even as he walked home. Azkaban had fallen, and the Dementors had been let loose for a bit of blood sport as a reward for their defection to the Dark Lord. By tomorrow, the suicide rate amongst Muggles would be remarked upon in their news reports.

The Death Eaters incarcerated for the Department of Mysteries debacle were already speeding home; Severus had left the manor before he was forced to witness the touching return of Malfoy Senior to the bosom of his loving family. Narcissa would no doubt plan a welcome home celebration soon; Severus could imagine *that* would be a revel like no other.

As he briskly walked through the freezing night air, he knew what he must do next, and it troubled him. He should have helped Hermione the moment they arrived at Spinner's End, but of course the Dark Lord would want to hear the tale of Dumbledore's death as soon as possible. *You can excuse this anyway you want, but for the first time since this madness started again, you were almost glad to be summoned*. It disgusted him that he fled from Hermione, preferring to face the Dark Lord, instead of his own suffering wife's helplessness. Filled with shame, Severus stuffed his hands in his pockets and quickened his pace.

He had sacrificed Hermione on the altar of his ego tonight. He had told the Dark Lord she had killed Dumbledore to show that she would do anything to prove her loyalty to Lord Voldemort and ....

*It's you you're talking about, lad. Your wife will do anything to prove her love to you; to save you from Azkaban, from the Dark Lord. From yourself. And tonight she did. She stepped up and did the deed because you couldn't. You couldn't, because, in the end, Dumbledore didn't want you to. He wanted Hermione to do it; to save your worthless Slytherin skin, because let's face it, your spying is worth less than nothing to the Dark Lord now, with Potter's seventeenth birthday mere months away. It was only a matter of time before The Dark Lord tired of the poison Bella poured in his ear, and you'd just be another casualty of war a forgotten, unmourned casualty at that.*

*But Hermione wouldn't let that happen, oh no. She's stepped between you and death more than once, and loves you with a passionate loyalty that makes Bellatrix's devotion to the Dark Lord look like nothing more than a fourth-year Hufflepuff fancy at a school dance. No Bellatrix ranting, no Malfoy posturing; just taking a curse meant for me. Participating in a blood oath to keep me sane. Pledging her heart to me in the shell of her dead parent's home. Killing a man so that I wouldn't be branded a murderer. How many times will she throw herself under the wheels of the Knight Bus before you accept the fact that she believes you're worthy?*

A sudden wave of self-loathing descended on Severus. He had been prepared to do commit that final, heinous act, had been preparing since the summer day Albus had called him to his side and informed Severus that it must be done. Then, hours before his death, Dumbledore summoned him to make amends, and forgive him in advance for the potion he, Dumbledore, would be forced to ingest in order to retrieve the bloody Horcrux.

Did Albus merely wish to give his final goodbye that afternoon? Or did he deliberately try to weaken his resolve again with his talk of love and forgiveness, so that Hermione would be forced to step in and do the deed to save her husband's face?

As they all stood on the Tower, Severus heard Dumbledore's taunting, Legilimised thoughts: *We had a bargain, Madam Snape. Insurance, you will recall. If you truly wish for him to have a chance outside life in Azkaban, you'll keep your side of the agreement we made the day you took Severus as your husband... I am begging this of you...* Dumbledore had not bothered to cover up his directed thoughts to Hermione; he had surely wanted Severus to overhear them. The man did nothing without calculation.

So his precious girl had taken his place, so that Severus could appear to be the master manipulator, the one who made her do it, and the Dark Lord's faith in him would be assured - until the next time he found he had no use for Severus.

And Severus had spent so much time cursing the dead man, he'd left his living, loving wife to deal with the after-effects on her own, with no instruction or explanation. *And you, you selfish, stupid git, left her suffering at Spinner's End, with the words, 'do you hate me' hanging between us, like a rancid sinew stretched over a rotting limb, because you were too selfish and upset to offer her one word, one gesture of comfort.*

Severus entered their house silently, checking the wards until he was sure no one could find them. He was so exhausted he felt ill. He was positively desperate for a drink, but alcohol was the last thing he needed now. Instead, he made himself go to his library. The walls, lined with his most cherished, beloved books, never failed to soothe him, and even after tonight's indescribable events, he felt a measure of calm steal into his heart. At least here he could think and plan.

## Twenty Five: The Space Between

Chapter 26 of 39

Just because something's fixed doesn't mean you can't break it.

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

*And as always, special thanks to the queen of the betas, stgulik, the most patient, most clever, quickest thinking beta in the world. This chapter was a mess, a complete, unreadable mess, and would have remained so without stgulik. I love you to bits, girl; you are my Hermione Granger.*

*This chapter was inspired by Aurette's fic The Occluded Soul, Chapter 12: Picking Up The Pieces.*

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*Look at us spinning out in the madness of a roller coaster, you know you went off like the Devil in a church*

*In the middle of a crowded room - all we can do, my love is hope we don't take this ship down...*

*The space between the bullets in our firefight is where I'll be hiding, waiting for you*

*The rain that falls splash in your heart ran like sadness down the window into your room*

*The space between our wicked lies is where we hope to keep safe from pain*

*The space between what's wrong and right is where you'll find me hiding, waiting for you*

*The space between your heart and mine is the space we'll fill with time*

*Take my hand 'cause we're walking out of here....*

*So, so you think you can tell Heaven from Hell, blue skies from pain.*

*Can you tell a green field from a cold steel rail? A smile from a veil? Do you think you can tell?*

*And did they get you to trade your heroes for ghosts? Hot ashes for trees? Hot air for a cool breeze? Cold comfort for change?*

*And did you exchange a walk on part in the war for a lead role in a cage?*

*How I wish, how I wish you were here.*

*We're just two lost souls swimming in a fish bowl, year after year,*

*Running over the same old ground. What have you found? The same old fears. Wish you were here.*

---

Severus walked unerringly to a part of the bookcase which held his most obscure tomes. With a whispered spell of self-protection, he removed a slim, brittle text from the shelf. The book's cover always made his flesh crawl; it was made of cured human skin. The volume itself was brief, only about thirty pages or so, and it had cost him a small fortune on the black market years ago when he was only a little older than Hermione. He had bought the book out of insatiable curiosity; he had never used it.

The volume, called *Venecarmen Praelabor*, contained the brewing instructions of several highly questionable potions, along with the accompanying spells that worked in conjunction with them. They were neither dark nor light, neither good nor evil. They were, instead, transient. They could pull the soul from Between, or send it there. They served the purpose needed at the time; depending on the necessity, each spell could heal or harm, create or destroy, inflict pain or pleasure.

Severus gingerly turned the fragile pages until he found the potion instructions, along with the incantation he needed. It offered several alternatives to achieve the goal he sought. The idea of what he would have to do both exhilarated and frightened him.

He felt exhaustion pass through him like a wave of nausea. He needed sleep; creating the necessary potion was tricky and using it in tandem with this powerful spell would take every iota of his concentration.

He glanced up toward their bedroom and sighed. He should sleep. Their bed beckoned him enticingly, like a lover. He shook his head against his selfish thoughts. Time was precious. The longer he waited, the harder it would be to repair the damage to her soul. He stood, removed his outer robe, and rolled up his sleeves. His wife needed him; she had taken a life for him tonight. He owed it to Hermione to return her own life back.

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Hermione felt hands tenderly rouse her from sleep. She rolled over as Severus, dressed in a simple nightshirt, took her in his arms and kissed her. She could not make herself respond; it was as if all of her nerve endings were dead, and the numbness rubbed raw against her. She looked up into his exhausted, dark eyes and saw love and concern, and she wanted to feel grateful, but could not summon that emotion either. "What is wrong with me?" she mumbled, sounding drugged and slurry.

Severus kissed her forehead, and smoothed her hair from her eyes. "Hermione, I want you to listen to me carefully. I want you to be my good girl and obey me in everything I ask. Will you do that for me, lass?" He was looking at her with such uncharacteristically bland patience, she could only think of one thing.

"Do you hate me, Severus?"

She should have been surprised to see tears, if she could have felt surprise. He took her head in his hands and gently kissed her numb lips. "No, my precious girl. I never hated you. We have much to talk about, but first you need to be brought back. You are Between."

"Oh." How disinterested she sounded! She, Hermione Granger-Snape, knowledge-sponge extraordinaire, sounded no more interested in this new information than a Floberworm. It was horrible to hear her flat, uncaring voice. Her eyes were empty; it was as if she was buried so deeply within herself he would never be able to find her.

Swallowing his fear, Severus rose from the bed. "In your heart, you have murdered Albus Dumbledore. Your soul has been damaged by your anger, and your hatred of him, and your vengeance. It has been sent Between, and now ... you must decide what to do with it." He looked at her with so much guilt and sadness, Hermione knew she would not have been able to bear it, had her soul been intact.

"I've never heard of Between."

Severus shook his head. "You wouldn't have. Some believe it's merely an abstract concept. I believe it's very real, and a soul that has not been exposed to the Dark can find sanctuary there. Your soul is well-balanced enough, Hermione, but committing what you believe to be murder has taken you out of balance. I have been working on a solution, and I believe I can help you."

Hermione sat up and watched as he took something from the bedside cabinet. "Is that why I'm so numb? I can't feel anything. It's as if my emotions have been separated from my body."

Severus nodded. "They are locked away. Remember what we read in Albus' books about creating Horcruxes?" He took a deep breath, as if trying to summon his courage. "A Dark wizard uses Between to push away any feelings of doubt or remorse. It enables him to create the Horcrux without being burdened with his emotions.

"The belief is that, when the soul splits because of -" he hesitated, hating to say the words, "the actions such as you performed tonight, you enter a place called Between, where the soul is sectioned and awaits. You can choose to send that half of your soul, as the Dark Lord has done, into a Horcrux. Or you can find the remorse within you, forgive yourself and be forgiven, and the soul can be restored. It is a painful process, and will take all your strength." He grasped her hand. "You are strong enough to bring it back. And I will help you do it."

She looked at him blankly, uncomprehendingly, and the complete lack of keen intelligence in her eyes made his heart beat sickeningly hard. "There is a spell that can be used to either perform the Horcrux, or restore the soul. Making a Horcrux is a personal event, and needs no assistance. But to restore a soul requires the help of others. Because you can no longer ask Dumbledore's forgiveness or express your remorse, I can act as the receiver of it, and you can restore your balance through me.

"To restore the soul, the spell calls for what is called a 'Tria' the actor, the receiver and the sufferer. The text says that each role should be filled by a separate individual, but we have neither the time nor the persons available to help us. I will assume all the roles myself." In his heart, Severus knew this was risky, not only for Hermione, but for himself, but he pushed his doubts away. He owed her his life; he would gladly do whatever it took to heal her fractured soul.

He hesitated, then cleared his throat. "It will mean that I must enter the deepest recesses of your mind. I will be probing into parts of your soul you have shut off, even from yourself. You must allow me to go where I will, and not fight me or try to hinder me." He sat beside her on the bed, took her in his arms and held her tightly. "Will you be my good girl and do that? Allow me to go to places you've never allowed anyone before?"

Hermione nodded and closed her eyes. "Anything to feel again. Even if it's pain. I don't feel alive anymore." Her voice, so devoid of life, was unnerving, and it stiffened his resolve.

He held up the object he had retrieved from their nightstand. It was a vial of potion. "This is Patafamenserum." Hermione looked from the small, innocuous bottle, back to her husband.

Patafamenserum was like a combination of Veritaserum and the Imperio Curse. It was used to open a person's mind; it made them highly susceptible to suggestion. It was also highly dangerous, in that a person under its influence could be commanded to do anything against their will, and their moral barrier would be suppressed sufficiently to allow the breach in their conduct. Unscrupulous witches and wizards could use it to implant all sorts of suggestions in another person's mind, and that person would believe it was his idea all along.

A faint line creased the space between Hermione's delicate brows. "I've heard of it." She shook her head almost reproachfully. "It's illegal to brew it."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Once again, Horace has managed to dismiss the unusual by hinting at the improbable while explaining the impossible. Yes, brewing it for personal use is illegal, but it can be used quite effectively by trained Mediwitches to help those with memory loss or other psychological damage."

She raised her enormous empty eyes to his. "Is that what I am, Severus? Damaged?"

Severus felt this throat go dry. This was his payment, his penance for the death of Dumbledore. *Before this night is over. I will atone for this...*

"I don't want you to look at it that way, Hermione. We are going to repair the damage, you and I. The Patafamen will open your mind and allow us to be linked as before, and from there, we can make you whole again." He touched her face tenderly. "I can no longer feel you within my mind, lass, and I miss you." He kissed her unmoving lips. "I need you, Hermione. I need you back, love," he said, his voice soft and tender with longing.

"I can't feel you either," she said, nodding. Automatically, she took the vial from his fingers and waited, trustingly. He was instantly reminded of the little swot who had made his classes a nightmare in her childhood. His heart felt as if it would burst.

Gently he took it back from her. "I want this to be the first and last time we ever have to do this." Without hesitation, he uncorked the vial and poured the potion into his own mouth. It tasted absolutely vile, and he grimaced as he counted to thirty. Hermione watched him dispassionately; she obviously remembered what would happen next, and she accepted his kiss as he transferred the enhanced potion from his mouth to hers. She received it all and swallowed automatically, without the slightest indication of its foul taste.

He then instructed her to lie down with him. They faced one another, side by side. He stroked her face gently. Her eyes were dull, like scratched and cloudy marbles. "In a moment, you will want to fall asleep. Don't fight it, and don't fight me... that's right," he encouraged, making his voice soft and lush. Upon seeing her eyelids droop, he crooned, "Just allow yourself to drift... good girl... that's it..."

When her eyes closed and her breathing grew heavy and even, Severus gripped his wand, and with his fiercest concentration, he drew the complicated sigil in the air, softly

chanting the incantation, "*Investri Mensentia*."

As he muttered the spell, the room, the bed, the very air changed, and he found himself walking down a long hallway. Doors marched down either side of the hall in even intervals; all were closed and locked. He noted with relief that he had brought his wand with him. He approached the first door. It appeared no more or less than an average interior door at Hogwarts, and he pointed at it and intoned, "*Alohamora*!"

The door opened obligingly. Inside, he found Hermione, sitting by a window in a room he recognised as a dormitory room. The red and gold colours of Gryffindor were in evidence on the bed and in the curtains. She was about the same age as when he first met her as a hand-waving twelve year-old, and dressed in her first year robes. She turned to him with a sad smile.

"I told Mum and Dad I hoped I'd be in Ravenclaw, but I was sorted into Gryffindor." She turned back to the window. "Nobody likes me here." He could hear the muffled tears in her voice.

"What are you looking for?" he asked, walking into the room. When she did not answer, he crossed the floor and joined her at the window. Outside was dark; the wind swirled leaves and what looked like sparks from a bonfire down below their range of vision. "What do you hope to see here, Hermione?"

She turned to him with immense dignity. "A friend." A tear fell down her soft little cheek, and she brushed it away with fingers tipped with bitten and bloody nails. "Why don't people like me?" Almost to herself, she asked, "It is because I'm clever? I can't help it." She sighed and faced the window again. "I just wish I was someone that people liked."

Severus' heart ached. With a start, he realised that, at her age, he had felt the very same way. Even as Lily went leaping from the sorting stool to the Gryffindor table, leaving him to fend for himself with the elitist Slytherins, he remembered that aching, longing wish just to be liked and accepted. Once again, he was reminded just how much alike he and Hermione truly were.

He held out his hand. "I will be your friend, Hermione. And if you come with me, we'll find other friends for you."

The little girl looked up at him in absolute trust and placed her hand confidently in his. She smiled up at him with her large, rather protruding teeth. "Thank you," she said, and proceeded to pull him toward the door. Bossily she added, "Let's not dawdle about, Severus. We have things to do."

Surprised, he said, "You know me?"

The little swot rolled her eyes. "Oh, honestly, Severus; I'm married to you." She stopped, and looked uncertain. Looking up at him with large, worried eyes, she said, "I'm sorry I set fire to your robes. I thought you were trying to hurt Harry. I thought I was helping. Do you forgive me?"

He had forgotten just how precocious she was at this age. "Of course I do. I told you I did, remember?"

She smiled, and he could see relief in her eyes. "I remember. I just wanted to make sure you meant it." She tugged impatiently at his hand. "Come on, Severus, I miss you."

Severus allowed himself to be led out of the room. Once they were in the hall, the light changed, grew darker, and instinctively the little girl moved closer to him. "Something's coming," she whispered, holding onto his hand tighter. "I don't like this. I don't like this at all."

The next door had a reflective surface, like a mirror, and the two of them looked solemnly at themselves. Seeing his reflection, he found he was wearing a long, almost formal wizard robe. His feet were bare; he had not been aware of it until now. He looked like an Ancient - a Druid, perhaps, leading the faithful to the light. *Of course*, he thought. *I am the receiver of her remorse*. It was to him that she would ask for forgiveness. What was it the book had called them? *The receiver, the actor and the sufferer*. He would play all the roles as the recipient of her repentance.

As he and the young Hermione examined the mirrored door, they soon found the door could not be opened with a spell. As they tried to discover a way in, Severus saw something reflected over his shoulder. The two of them cried out as a huge snake reared behind them. Hermione screamed and Severus threw himself over the young girl to protect her from the blow - which never came. The reptile simply plunged through the door, over their heads, and disappeared into the reflection. Severus reached out and touched the door. It gave under his hand like the rippling surface of a vertical pool of water. He looked down at Hermione, who gave him a little nod of encouragement, and the two of them silently stepped through the door.

It felt to Severus as if he was stepping through a wall of icy water, and beside him he heard Hermione gasp with the same shock of cold. They walked through the freezing wall of water to the other side, but once there, they were completely dry.

They found themselves in a vast tunnel, with great stone viaducts on either side of them. Their footsteps echoed as they walked toward a figure at the far end. Here, an older Hermione stood with her back to them, holding a mirror in front of her face.

"Mudblood. Dirty blood. Filth. Trash." Her voice sounded angry, repulsed, and she spat the words from her mouth as if they disgusted her. She addressed Severus and her younger self through the mirror's reflection, refusing to turn around. "Inferior. No business being here. Unworthy. Mudblood. Dirty blood. Filth. Trash."

"You are none of those things, Hermione," Severus said firmly, and he felt the younger girl release his hand. She walked to the older version of herself.

"I don't have to be alone now," she declared, as if taking up a conversation with her older counterpart. "You don't have to be humiliated anymore."

"And what if I'm *not* good enough? What do I have to do to prove myself here?" The voice rose, defiant, shamed. She turned back to the mirror. "Mudblood. Dirty blood. Filth. Trash." Then, her eyes flicking to meet his in the mirror, she added softly, "Thief." She began to chant the words again, this time adding 'thief' to the chant.

"No!" Severus' voice rang through the cavernous chamber. "You know in your heart none of those names apply to you, or to any Muggle-born witch or wizard, Hermione. You have every right to be here." He cast about for something to reach the chanting girl. "I am prepared to forgive you for stealing Polyjuice ingredients from me."

She stopped chanting, and slowly lowered the mirror. For the first time, she turned and faced Severus and her younger incarnation. Severus recoiled at her grey, ashen face. It was the same ghastly pallour she'd had when petrified by the basilisk, lying still and frozen in the Hogwarts Infirmary.

Her younger self, however, had no qualms about the condition of Hermione's face. She simply said, "We have to go back with Severus. Say you're sorry and we can go on." She sounded so imperious and matter-of-fact Severus could not help but smile ruefully.

As the elder girl stood facing Severus, the grey, moldy cast of her face faded back to the peachy complexion of her normal self. She looked at Severus with the same look of pain and regret. "I'm sorry I stole from you. But I needed to know that we were safe from the Heir of Slytherin. I'm sorry you were disappointed in me."

Severus held out his hands to the two girls. "I know, Hermione. And I forgive you. You wouldn't have done it unless you had no other choice."

He saw a painful hope rise in her eyes, and as one, the two Hermiones took his hands. The three of them turned and walked back out of the Chamber of Secrets of Hermione's mind.

The next door was one he knew painfully well. He remembered so clearly standing outside this door four years before, waiting for the perfect time to dash in and get the drop on Sirius Black. It was the door to the bedroom of the Shrieking Shack.

Without hesitation, Severus kicked open this door and the three of them ran in as if they had planned it together. A third Hermione, about fourteen years old, stood in the

center of the room, training her wand on Severus. She looked terrified.

"I hexed a teacher. I hexed a teacher!" she exclaimed, breathing so hard she was on the verge of hyperventilating. She looked at Severus with barely concealed fear, her eyes rolling in panic.

"Please don't expel me, Sir. I was so frightened. It's been horrible," she wailed, and hugged herself, fighting tears. She pointed to a space on the floor. "Sirius and Remus were there and they explained everything. Sirius was innocent of betraying the Potters and I was confused and frustrated! You were so angry and I was afraid you'd hurt him and I panicked and I hexed you."

She looked up at Severus. "I haven't done anything right," she whispered, tears pouring down her cheeks. "I made you so angry... and still, you protected us from Professor Lupin." She looked away, as if too fearful of his wrath.

Severus hesitated. He had to be very careful here. "Hermione, listen to me. I was very angry at you for hexing me. I was angry with you for letting Black escape. You were very wrong to attack a teacher. But," Severus swallowed, hating to have to say the words, knowing another door would soon prove him wrong.

"Black was innocent. You prevented an innocent man from being sent back to Azkaban." *And he repaid you by trying to rape you two years later.* Severus thought grimly. *This is where things are going to get complicated.*

Hermione looked at him doubtfully, but she was at least listening. He ground out, "And you saved Buckbeak." *Who tried to kill me tonight. Gods, what a mess.*

He put that aside as irrelevant. He smiled at the witch he remembered so well, a girl growing into her beauty and power, yet still innocent enough to believe that she should campaign to free house-elves. "Hermione, you were a loyal friend, and so clever. Remember how you solved my puzzle? Remember how you figured out the Basilisk in the Chamber? Remember how you realised I was trying to reveal Lupin as a werewolf?"

The youngest Hermione beamed. Her fourteen-year-old counterpart looked uncertain, but took the little girl's hand. Before the four of them could leave, the eldest looked at him expectantly. He nodded.

"I forgive you, Hermione." The relief in the girl was palpable. He smiled down at the three witches, all Hermione, all trusting him to get them out of this prison of doors and memories and emotions. They held onto him like a life line. Together the four of them left the room.

The fourth door opened into the Great Hall, where the Yule Ball decorations hung quietly in the silent, empty room. In the middle of the dance floor, fifteen-year-old Hermione danced alone in her lovely peach dress. She moved slowly, as if in a dream, and her eyes were dark with barely-controlled fury.

The three younger Hermiones watched as Severus walked to their oldest incarnation. He took her hand, drew his other arm around her waist, and began to dance with her as if there were actual music playing. She would not look at him; instead, she focused her gaze on one of the black buttons on his chest. Muttering, she growled, "What does he see in her? Who does she think she is?" she hissed under her breath. "Bloody Rita Skeeter; the shit-stirring bitch!"

Her voice was spiteful. In an ugly, mimicking tone, she said, "Oh, I'm good enough for doing their homework and helping Harry figure out the Triwizard puzzles. Oh, Hermione's a walking Encyclopedia Magicka, but when it comes to taking someone to a dance, Hermione's not girly enough to be considered a suitable date."

"You were the prettiest girl there, Hermione," Severus said, meaning it.

As if she hadn't heard him, she continued in a voice seething with barely controlled rage, "Oh, sure, Victor Krum asked her out but she only went with him to make the Great Harry Potter jealous. She's fraternising with the enemy. She's the Mata Hari of the wizarding world, don't you know?"

Severus gave her a little shake, and she finally looked up at him, her eyes flashing with anger. He remembered seeing her that night. He himself had been angry and sick with fear, having had his pointless and hackle-raising conversation with Karkaroff about the Dark Lord's return. All during the previous month, he had felt his Dark Mark bubbling beneath his skin, not knowing that a few months later the damn thing would flare back to life while he was sitting in the stands of the Triwizard Tournament. It had taken all of Severus' strength not to run from the pitch, weeping in desolation. He had sat, still as stone, surrounded by cheering and laughter, wanting to die so badly he seriously considered throwing himself from the stands.

On the night of the Yule Ball, he had been cornered by Karkaroff, pissing himself with fear and calling a stupid amount of attention to himself. Severus had finally shaken the Bulgarian's clutching fingers from his robe and fled from the fool. As Severus passed Hermione sitting on the steps, her angry and indignant expression reflected his own feelings so closely he could not prevent himself from acknowledging it with a terse nod. She had returned an equally curt nod of her own.

For a moment, Severus had felt strangely vindicated, as if someone had understood him and his feelings. It had been short-lived, when he reminded himself of exactly who she was, after all: Hermione Granger, Potter's little hanger-on. He realised now just how much she truly had mirrored his thoughts throughout their association together.

She was now regarding him with a mixture of hope and anger. "Everything is coming apart. Harry says Voldemort has come back. I believe him, but no one else does." She glowered. "No one wants to accept the truth."

"You were right to believe Potter," Severus said, deftly leading her off the dance floor toward her other three selves. "You tried your best to protect him." He gave her hand into the grasp of the youngest, with a smile.

But the eyes of his companions were not fixed on him, but on a spot behind him. He turned and beheld his Hermione, standing before him. She looked exactly like the Hermione he had lain beside before he began this arduous journey inside her mind. She was dressed in a robe identical to his, and her feet were bare.

The room changed around them, growing narrow and dark, and he recognised it as Grimmauld Place. Hermione put her arms around herself protectively. She looked up at him with anger. "He touched me today. You were here. Remus was here. Nobody stopped him."

The reproach left her eyes. "I thought he was just being nice." Shame scorched her cheeks. "It excited me. I was-" She turned away from him and whispered, "aroused by it. But then he wouldn't stop when I asked him. Now he makes me want to vomit, but I have to be nice to him."

The room grew dark, and suddenly the other girls were gone. Severus frantically looked around for them. He looked back at Hermione's face, and he knew why they were now alone. Her innocence was gone. Everything she had been before had been absorbed in this sixteen year old, untouched witch. Sirius Black, in the course of one hot summer afternoon, had removed the scales from her eyes and made her see herself not as a young girl, but as a burgeoning woman. Severus ground his teeth in anger. He wished Sirius was here so he could hex him all over again...

Then it hit him, and the air left his lungs in a harsh gasp. "Oh gods. It was me." He looked down at her tired face, and shame flooded him, and for a moment, he forgot where he was, and why they were here; in that second, he changed them forever.

"All this time I've blamed Black, but it was me. I did it, Hermione."

She looked at him, puzzled. "I don't understand. Did what, Severus?"

Severus sank to his knees under the weight of sudden realization, too weary and heartsick to go any further. He clasped his hands before him, as if praying to the devil. "I was the one who corrupted you, not Black. I desired you so much I told the Dark Lord about you." He looked down at her.

She was watching him perplexedly, and he forced himself to continue. "I lied to you and Albus, you know. Remember the night in Grimmauld Place, when I'd been so badly

injured?" When she nodded, he said, "I always claimed that the Dark Lord saw you in my mind, and that I hastily made up a lie that you were in love with me in order to cover my tracks." He shuddered. "But in truth, Hermione, I volunteered the information. What he saw was my lust, my jealousy, my desire for you. I didn't have to manufacture it."

The shock in Hermione's face almost killed him. He knew he was deviating treacherously from the script he should follow, but he couldn't leave her here, thinking he was blameless for all of this. "I was being tortured, and I kept thinking about you, and how I wanted to keep you away from Black, and all I could think about was making the Dark Lord stop. I thought, 'Just for once, why can't I have what I want?'" He closed his eyes. "So I offered you up like a sweetmeat to him. He never saw you before I invited him to see you."

"But you protected me "

"I seduced you," he interrupted harshly. "Oh, I told myself I was protecting you, but I wanted you more than my own life! More than my Hogwarts letter, more than my wand, more than my first set of fine dress robes." Through clenched teeth, he added, "More than Lily." He laughed, a harsh, joyless laughter that echoed in the room. "You would still be innocent if not for my selfish desire. I promised to protect you."

Hermione edged closer to him, as if approaching a wounded animal. "Severus, you have protected me."

He shook his head. "From everyone but myself, lass. The only real difference between Black and me was that I enticed you to eat from the tree of knowledge willingly, instead of trying to force you." Impulsively, knowing he was stepping off the map, Severus moaned, "I'm sorry, Hermione." He looked up at her beseechingly. "Please forgive me," he entreated, and put his head in his hands. "I was the one who took your innocence. I didn't keep you safe. I didn't protect you from Black, or Dolohov's curse, or the death of your parents, or my own failure to kill Dumbledore. Forgive me."

For a few moments the room was silent but for his sobs. Finally, they spent themselves, and he gathered the courage to look at her. She was crying as well. She held her hands out to him, and helped him to his feet. He pulled her into his arms and held her to his chest, and she held him in return.

"I don't feel that you wronged me, Severus." She brushed the tears from his face. "I have had access to your heart, remember? I already know you love me more than your Hogwarts letter and your wand and your robes. Even more than Lily. Those are truths, aren't they?"

He nodded, and wiped his eyes. "It is the truest thing about me, Hermione."

"I know. I don't know what you all saw in me when I was younger that caused this, but I don't blame *you* for it."

"And you mustn't blame yourself either, Hermione. You were innocent." He felt the words, bitter as lemon, drop from his lips. "You were innocent until I took it away from you. You were too young."

Something like a smile touched the corners of her mouth. "I probably *was* too young, but we are at war, and I don't believe things like age are that important anymore. I lost my true innocence the moment the Dark Lord came back to life. We all did.

"But my emotions are real. As real then as they are now." She touched his face, and the gentleness and love in her touch caused him to make a soft sound of yearning. "Severus, look at me."

With a supreme effort, he looked down at her, and his heart cramped to see the confident love in her eyes. "I forgive you. I forgive you for needing to be wanted, for needing something to live for. You didn't take my innocence any more than you *took* my virginity. Those were always mine to do with as I saw fit.

"On our wedding night, I asked you to make me a woman, not to take away my girlhood, remember? It was mine to give, just as my innocence was mine to discard, because I needed to see the truth." She gently brushed his hair from his face, and wiped the tears that streamed from his eyes. "Sirius Black was a predator, and he tried to rape me. And the only reason he didn't was you, husband. Lover. Friend."

He sagged against her, suddenly feeling as old as Dumbledore. "My precious girl," he murmured into her hair. "Thank you," he said simply. No other words were needed. "Thank you." He could feel her lips against his throat, and numbly he thanked the gods for her once again.

He reluctantly pulled away from her with a groan. "I have been self-indulgent enough, Hermione. We must return to the path, and I must return to my proper place."

Hermione nodded, and when he took her hand, she threaded her fingers trustingly in his. In a voice laced with regret, she said, "All those things I did to you. I never allowed myself to think of them in any way except means to justify an end. I never told you I was sorry." She looked up at him. Sorrow dulled her tear-filled eyes, and her tone became bitter. "I hurt you. Physically and emotionally. And in my arrogance and my thirst to prove myself, I made no room to consider your feelings."

She brought his pale hand to her lips and kissed it reverently. "I am sorry, Severus. I could use up hundreds of excuses, but the fact was I thoughtlessly hurt you. I am sorry."

Severus considered. "Perhaps that is why you are struggling to feel remorse for Dumbledore. I have never thought of it that way, but you may have found the "

A bright light shot from Severus' wand, which had been pointing to the ground, and the light was followed by a metallic *clink*. He allowed himself a smile as he picked up the object that had fallen from his wand.

" key to the final step. Literally," he added, wryly. He handed Hermione the silver key. "It's almost the end. Can you feel it?" She nodded, and Severus led her out of Grimmauld Place.

The corridor seemed endless. From a distance, they could make out the most remote door in Hermione's mind, and Severus knew it would lead inexorably to the last event they would revisit. No matter how quickly they walked, the door never seemed to grow nearer.

Hermione opened her mouth twice, as if to say something. Finally, she confessed. "I made a pact with Dumbledore the night he asked you to kill him."

Severus pulled up short. As if her admission had been the last piece of the puzzle, they found themselves standing before the final door. Hermione's key fit securely in the lock, and when she tripped the tumblers, the door opened invitingly. Severus took Hermione's hand, and together they stepped through the door, onto a familiar landing. It was the base of the Astronomy Tower.

They both sighed and looked upward. It was a long way to the top, seemingly longer than the actual tower. For a moment, Severus didn't think he had the strength to ascend it one more time. He was so tired... he looked over at Hermione and he knew he must. She was depending on him, and no matter what, he would not fail her again. Holding hands, they started up the stone steps.

As they walked, Severus asked, "What sort of pact did you have with Dumbledore?"

After a moment, Hermione began. "The day Dumbledore charged you with killing him, you went back to your rooms and got drunk, remember? I found you and made you go to bed after you told me what had transpired." Severus nodded, too winded to answer, but it was apparently enough for Hermione.

"I marched right down to Dumbledore's office and confronted him. I was livid. I told him he had pushed too far, and that I would not allow him to use you this way. He told me you were bound by oath to help him, and I called his bluff.

"I made a deal with him; I told him that I would do it when the time was right, if you were unable to. But I made him promise that you wouldn't know. I didn't want to burden

you with it. He told me he would try to distance you from discussing it, but of course, he lied. He was supposed to keep you innocent of the proceedings, so that your name would be clear of any involvement with his death."

She shook her head, and paused. It was still a long way up, and Severus' legs were trembling from exhaustion and the many steps. "I don't know if he was simply delirious, or if there was another reason why he sent for you today before he left with Harry, but I think it was to weaken your resolve, so it would be too difficult for you to kill him."

Severus nodded sadly. "I had thought as much."

They resumed their endless climb. Severus was now supporting his weight against the wall as they continued. Hermione was also struggling, breathing hard as they doggedly pushed upward. "I was so angry when I realised you were there, facing the Carrows and Dumbledore alone. By the time I arrived, the Death Eaters were egging you on, and Dumbledore was taunting me and calling you coward, and " She stopped, and swayed on the stairs. Severus grasped her hands to steady her.

She looked up at him with haunted eyes. "And I cast the curse. It felt good to do it. Just to shut him up!" she turned from Severus. "He was goading me, wasn't he?"

Severus held her and stroked her hair soothingly. "Yes, lass. He was already dying from a poison he'd ingested. He was in agony, and I was prolonging it because I couldn't kill him. I couldn't do it." Severus lowered his head. "I *am* a coward."

"That's not true!" she said fiercely, clutching the front of his robe. "You're the bravest man I know." Her eyes flashed. "If anyone was the coward, it was me; I should have told you about our agreement, but I couldn't."

"Why didn't you, lass? We tell one another everything."

She lowered her head. "I was afraid you would stop me. And Dumbledore was right. Soon the Dark Lord will take over the Ministry, and the school will become either a prison or a war zone, and I knew he would appoint you as the Headmaster." She looked up at Severus, and cupped his face in her hands, as if he were the one in need of comfort. "I was not about to let them call you a murderer."

Severus shook his head, and touched her soft cheek. "No, but you would be willing to shoulder the name yourself. All to save me." His lips pressed against her forehead. "No one has ever stepped between me and death except you, my love. And you've done it over and over."

He put his arms around her and held her as she cried. Her emotions, now rising to the surface with each step upward, were less controlled and harder to predict. When she felt she could, Severus helped her walk up the last steps to the top of the tower.

They stumbled out onto the landing, into the freezing night air. They saw ghostly, almost transparent shapes of the three Death Eaters, Draco and Severus. Instinctively, Severus knew the shadow-figures were waiting, like mannequins, for Hermione and him to assume their positions for this final scene. He could even see smoky plumes of breath blooming from their mouths into the cold air. Dumbledore, however, was as still and unmoving as a statue.

"Why isn't his breath showing in the cold?" Hermione asked.

"Because he was already dying, lass," Severus explained. He put his arms around her and held her. "Listen to me carefully, Hermione. Dumbledore wanted you to cast the curse. Remember the first Horcrux the ring? That was already killing him. When he and Potter went to retrieve the Horcrux, Albus had to ingest a poison to get to it. He volunteered to do it because he was already dying. By the time he returned, he was in unspeakable pain. He forgave you before you uttered the Killing Curse because he wanted you to do it. You were doing nothing more or less than putting a suffering animal out of its misery."

"No! He treated us so wretchedly before that!" she cried, but he could hear her weakening, her righteous anger shriveling, growing uncertain.

More confident, Severus gave her a little shake to gain her attention. "Hermione, everything he did was to goad us! Taunting me about Lily. Forcing us to withhold information from Potter. Threatening to expel you. He said and did those things to burden our guilt so that we would take care of Potter and continue to perform the way he needed us to perform.

"You have to remember, Hermione, that Albus had gotten a good ten years' head start on me before you came along. He was terrified my feelings for you would make me lose sight of Potter and that damned prophecy. He had a lot of catching up to do to bring you in line with me."

Severus looked around at the ghostly figures frozen in time around them. With a gesture to them, he said, "But this was about me, Hermione. Albus knew the Dark Lord was losing faith in me. Oh, he wanted this. He was in pain. He was suffering horribly. In a few hours, he would have been screaming in agony. You saved him from that." He kissed her trembling hands. "And you saved me from losing my place at the Dark Lord's side."

"It's true, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said, weakly, and both Hermione and Severus jumped to hear his voice. He smiled at them. "You did me a kindness. You saved an old man from losing his faculties, his control over his body, and his mind. But you also saved Severus from the Dark Lord. He no longer felt that Severus was important as a spy."

Severus turned to Hermione. "Now, lass, save yourself." He glanced over at the Dumbledore figure. *He* forgave you before you stepped onto this tower. Forgive yourself, Hermione."

She looked at him, and nodded, tears streaming from her eyes. She stepped up to her place in the tableau. She turned to Severus. "I don't have a wand."

He nodded, and handed her his wand. It shook in her hand, and she took a deep breath, and when she spun away, it was the twelve-year-old Hermione who appeared and raised Severus' wand toward the old man on the tower.

"Nobody liked me!" Magic swirled from his wand, and Severus could feel the buildup of its power.

Hermione's shape changed, and the pale, petrified second-year gripped his wand and the power increased. "I am NOT a Mudblood!" she cried, and the magic began to hum, and the figures beyond Hermione shimmered, like a mirage on a hot pavement.

"I am the brightest witch of my age!" Fourteen-year-old Hermione shouted, spinning on the Tower, and Severus' eyes began to burn at the sheer intensity of the magical buildup. The air felt as if it was filled with metal, and so heavy that birds would drop, unable to fly.

"I'm not ugly! I'm not some whore to be pawed at! I'm not a child!" She was changing, growing older and more powerful with each spin, and the howling, rushing wind of magic was so strong that it caused Severus' eardrums to bow inward, and he felt light-headed.

Sobbing, Hermione cried, "I am Hermione Granger-Snape, and I will protect my husband from you, and ANYONE who would harm him." She was wailing, her grief an awful thing. She sobbed, "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry I had to do this! I didn't have a choice!"

She turned to him, her wild hair standing in all directions, her eyes blazing. Magic swirled around her; it was her acolyte, her slave, and she was holding it in check, waiting to unleash it. Severus thought of all those times their magic had manifested itself during their coupling, and wondered if this is how Hermione felt on those moments: trembling, in the moment, on the brink of this cataclysmic release of power.

Suddenly, Severus understood exactly what he needed to do. *The actor; the sufferer.* Without a word, he quietly approached Hermione, and took the wand from her hand. He could feel it shuddering with unleashed power.

Hermione was breathing like a sprinter, and tears were streaming down her face. Severus did not honestly know what would happen, but it did not matter. He had done all he could to bring her back together. It was enough. There were no more secrets, no more unspoken guilt between them. He closed his eyes, and said quietly, "Hermione,

please. I didn't give you a choice." He waited, feeling her magic pressing on him, testing him, trying to determine if he was worthy to bend it to his will.

Severus felt tears slip from his closed eyes. The wand burned his hand, like a throttle, and he held onto it until it commanded him. He opened his eyes and brought the wand around in a slashing arc toward Dumbledore's chest.

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

And just as suddenly, Severus was Dumbledore as well. *The actor; the sufferer.* Bright green light bathed him, and the magic swooped down on him, stealing his breath and his senses. It picked him up like a doll, and he felt pulled forward, then let go, sling-shot into space. As Severus felt himself blown like a leaf from the tower, he heard her pleading, "Forgive me! Oh, gods, forgive me..."

He closed his eyes and fell down, down, down...

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Severus opened his eyes with a start. Weak December sunlight filtered into the bedroom, showing that he and Hermione were hopelessly tangled in the bed clothes. He had a terrible kink in his neck, and he felt indescribably dirty. As quietly as possible, he shifted. Hermione, laying half across him, took a deep breath. She was wrapped protectively in his arms; his muscles were cramped from holding her so tightly. She, too, was clammy, and her hair was damp, as if she'd had a fever that had broken during the night. Tears streaked her dirty face, and her eyes were swollen.

Severus could smell them both; they were covered in a slick, almost greasy sweat, and the potion residue gave off a musty, metallic stink that made him grimace. He looked carefully into Hermione's sleeping face. She was slightly flushed, but her expression was peaceful, and he knew when she opened her lovely warm brown eyes, they would be full of sadness and sorrow. And beyond that, hope.

Silently, he rose and padded into the loo. As the battered tub filled with warm water and fragrant healing potions, he returned to their bedroom. Hermione had not moved, so he quietly levitated her into the loo, and once he'd seated himself in the old bath he lowered her between his legs, so that she reclined with her back against his chest. She stirred as he tenderly bathed her, but he shushed her back to sleep, whispering comfort and healing spells. His body yearned for her, and he knew that later she would wake and need him as well.

But for now, she needed to sleep, to know he was there, and that was enough. He would later insist she eat something nourishing. It would feel good, after all these months of her domestic carping, to turn the tables and be the one nagging her about eating well. He found that pleased him.

Perhaps their love had begun in extreme and questionable circumstances. It had become everything they needed. Severus would see to it that Hermione would know she was loved. She would know she was protected and cherished and desired. Tomorrow, they would have to think about the next, awful days. Tomorrow would have to take care of itself for now.

To her sleeping form, he whispered, "I'm sorry you were forced to do what I could not. I was so angry with myself," he said, hating to say the words but knowing he must. "I was ready to do it, but in the end "

"There is nothing to forgive that hasn't been forgiven," she whispered in return, and her voice sounded sure and serene, even half asleep as she was.

He smiled as Hermione tucked herself against him in the warm bath, trusting and relaxed. It made his heart swell to know that he had instilled this trust and respect and love. She was beautiful, and she was his. In spite of the sadness he felt, the grim, future that awaited them, he was not meeting it alone. He had brought her back from Between. She would never have to go there again. Severus Granger-Snape had unlearned how to be a coward. He had been the actor, the sufferer and the receiver. He would learn to be her hero.

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Opening words - The Space Between - David J Matthews, Glen Ballard

Wish You Were Here David Gilmour, Roger Waters

## Twenty Six: The Ballad of Regulus Black

*Chapter 27 of 39*

The other Prince's Tale.

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

*And as always, special thanks to the queen of the betas, stgulik, the most patient, most clever, quickest thinking beta in the world. stgulik, you are my Hermione Granger.*

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*You dream in colours I have never learned,*

*And you give yourself away like it don't hurt,*

*Love was meant for you...*

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Hermione woke alone to the unmistakable aroma of tomato soup and tuna and sweetcorn sandwiches and the sound of someone rattling around in the kitchen. For a brief moment, caught in that state between sleep and wakefulness, she imagined she was still a little girl, and it was Halloween.

Before escorting her only daughter out into the innocent night to stuff her little plastic cauldron with sweeties, Hermione's mother would make tomato soup and tuna and sweetcorn sandwiches. It was Hermione's comfort food, and still evoked memories of happiness, love, and security. She felt the familiar ache that always served as a reminder that her mother was dead, and that both Hermione and Halloween were no longer unsullied by the past. There was a moment of deep, mourning sadness, but it was now tinged with the comforting glow of nostalgia.



She gazed up at the ceiling, recalling the last twenty-four hours. The last lucid moments she remembered were not of trick-or-treating, but of death and redemption. Now, she was simply grateful to be able to feel any emotion at all, even sadness. She felt pity for Dumbledore, and her own regret for what she had done, but it was no longer gnawing like a cancer at her soul. Severus had helped her to return from the hideous Between. She fervently prayed neither of them would ever have to go there again.

On the heels of that thought came another question. If she and Severus had returned from Between, had their link returned as well? Tentatively, she reached out in her mind. *Severus?*

From downstairs sounded a clang, and a sharp hiss of profanity, like a whiff of petrol. *Merlin's ballbag, lass, was it necessary to shout? I nearly dropped your piggin' lunch tray!*

She jumped, startled. Instead of the usual faint, far-away voice she remembered in her head, Severus sounded as if he were speaking directly into her ear. Loudly. Their link had always been a tenuous thing, like a radio on very low volume. This was definitely something vastly different, and Hermione giggled in spite of herself at his somewhat inelegant reply.

A shadow darkened the door to the bedroom, and Severus, wearing black tracksuit bottoms and an old Led Zeppelin t-shirt that had seen better days, entered the room, levitating a tray with food upon it. A steaming pot of tea rounded out the meal, and he set the tray on a nearby table and sat beside her on the bed, rubbing his temples.

Without preamble, he said ruefully. "That has confirmed a theory I've had since I awoke." His voice was as warmly comforting as the food on the tray. Hermione held her arms out to him, and he folded her in an embrace that said as much as the tone of his voice. She relaxed in his arms, feeling easy tears threatening to rise to the surface again.

She took deep breaths to control herself. Turning within, she said as quietly as she could, *I can feel again and I can hear you much clearer and with much less effort than before. I missed you. I thought I had lost you.* The tears finally spilled down her cheeks, and she brushed them away, embarrassed. *I thought you... you hated me.*

His strong arms enclosed her with the quiet assurance of home. His lips tickled her ear as he tenderly held her. "Shh... it's alright. Of course I don't hate you. I love you. Now don't fret, there's a good lass. Shh, my good girl," he soothed, with a voice as soft as sable and dark as chocolate, and she rested against him gratefully. For a man known for his harsh, flinty, snarky personality, Severus Snape could croon comfort like no other.

*It will be well, my precious girl. I think there may be a lessening, when the residual potion runs its course, but must remember we've been on an incredible journey, and some of the changes you and I have experienced may be permanent.* When he felt her relax, he summoned the tray.

"And we will no doubt spend time discussing and experimenting on this new stage of our development, but now you are going to eat. You've been through hell, but I want to refrain from giving you any restorative potions at the moment. Ergo, comfort food it is, then."

To Hermione's surprise, he commenced to feeding her like a child, spooning soup into her mouth like a baby bird, feeding her squares of sandwiches one bite at a time. "I feel better, honestly," she protested. "I'm really hungry. I promise I'll eat. I don't want you to feel like you *have* to baby me."

He looked at her solemnly, and eased another spoonful into her mouth. His fingers closed over hers, and as he stroked the back of her hand, he replied, "Has it occurred to you that this might be beneficial to me as well?"

She couldn't resist a grin. He looked so plaintive. "Then far be it from me to withhold comfort from my husband. Especially if that comfort consists of making me feel so loved and pampered."

"Just so," he said, nodding sagely, and fed her another spoonful of soup.

When the soup was gone and the sandwiches consumed, the inevitable chocolate was presented, and she scooted over and made room for him on the bed, insisting they share it between them. They sat drinking their tea and eating some of Honeyduke's Finest Dark in comfortable silence, with the occasional directed thought sent back and forth between them. The link was strong and effortless, and they found they could project with none of the fierce, headache-inducing concentration they previously employed to maintain the most fragile of connections.

"I can only assume our link has strengthened because of the ritual we performed last night," he remarked "Whether it stays this way as the last of the potion dissipates from your system remains to be seen."

"I hope so. After that horrible silence, I'll take the internal shouting any day." She tapped her temple. "It was lonely in here without you." Hermione leaned against Severus gratefully and stroked his thigh. He shifted his mug from one hand to the other, and put an arm around her to pull her close.

For awhile, they were silent, and Severus welcomed the peace in her presence. The room, now freshened from its strange fug of the night before, felt cozy and warm. Taking a sip of his tea, Severus said, "It'll be Christmas soon. We'll dig out all those decorations you brought with you. I'll find you a decent tree, and we'll decorate it like a proper family." He had no idea if indeed proper families did this, but it sounded right.

"Thank you," she said, and pressed her lips against his jaw. "I think it would be wonderful. Our first Christmas together." The silence stretched between them, which she was loathe to break with her inevitable questions. Finally, she gave in to curiosity. "What has happened since I since last night?" she asked.

"It can wait."

"No, Severus, please," She gave him a brave little smile. "I need to know now. I'm in this with you."

He sighed. "This is true. There's no sense in trying to shield you from the dangers of this world anymore. In the eyes of the Wizarding world, *were* the dangers."

To his surprise, she gave a sharp, rueful laugh, which sounded... well, like his. "Go ahead. You'll have to eventually tell me; it might as well be now."

He took another fortifying gulp of tea, and followed it with a deep breath. "Azkaban was liberated last night. All of the Death Eaters involved in the Department of Mysteries fiasco are now safely tucked up in their beds at home, looking at a decent meal for the first time in months.

"The Ministry has declared a national day of mourning to... to honour Dumbledore." She nodded solemnly against his chest, and Severus went on. "Potter apparently took a harder blow to the head than I thought. According to the *Daily Prophet*, he claims he saw the whole thing, yet he's not sure who actually murdered Dumbledore."

That brought her up short. "Why on earth would he say that?"

"He's stalling, seeing which way the wind blows. When the time is right, I'm positive he'll blame me and try to leave you out of it."

For the first time since she'd awoken, Hermione's lovely eyes flashed with anger. "He knows the truth! I won't let him!"

Severus gently interrupted, "Lass, we're talking about Potter here. If that bloody hippogriff of his fell out of the sky with heart failure, Potter would blame me for it. He's blamed everything he could on me why should this be any different?"

"Because he knows the truth!" She brushed away angry tears. "Oh, sod it, I'm sorry to be such a crybaby. This is embarrassing. My emotions have been all over the place since I woke up."

Severus silently handed her a paper napkin. "That is the most normal thing about what is happening today, Hermione. You'll have this sort of backlash for awhile. You've come from a place that held your emotions for ransom. Now that you have them back, you'll be quite emotional for a few days." He gave her the smallest of smirks. "I've learned to live with your PMT; I'm sure I can manage this." His casual words belied his relief. He didn't mind if she cried or laughed or sang sea shanties as long as she was acting normal again.

Hermione blew her nose, took a deep breath, and puffed it out slowly. "And the Dark Lord?"

With the slightest of hesitations, Severus answered. "By the time I arrived, Draco had already told him the story. I think Draco was hoping to make you look like some opportunistic Muggle upstart trying to steal his thunder."

Hermione snorted. "Thunder? I wouldn't be caught dead trying to steal that little ferret's farts to get the Dark Lord's attention." Severus was startled into laughter, and Hermione joined him. "Well, honestly! Draco is dragon-hiding his arse to save face, while you and I accept the fallout. Let him feel cheated, the little pussy."

Severus responded with a quiet chuckle. "I think right now all Draco is feeling is relief. He's just dull enough to escape the Dark Lord's scrutiny, and bright enough to stay out of sight." Severus sobered. "Over the next few days all eyes will be on us. No one will spare us any envy, I'm afraid."

She stroked his arm. It felt like an apology. "Don't beat yourself up, Severus. As I told Harry, this was done freely. I am genuinely sorry one of us had to do it, but I'm not sorry I did it for you."

Severus entwined his hand with hers, and absently turned the wedding band on her finger. "In our own separate ways, we both did it. I created the potion that was slowly killing him last night." At her puzzled expression, he added, "It's a long story."

Hermione frowned. "Wait - if your actions killed him, why aren't you like me?" She blinked. "That didn't come out the way I meant it! I only mean," she continued with a frown, trying to put her thoughts into words. "Why didn't your soul split as well?"

Severus replied with great remorse, "I created the potion that hid a Horcrux in a remote cave. But Dumbledore chose to drink it, chose to retrieve the Horcrux. I am not blameless, but I did not force him. He knew he was dying anyway."

He lowered his head, hating himself for what he had to say. "Even though you chose to cast the curse, the reality was that Dumbledore truly gave you no choice in the matter. You were unable to commit the act with compassion at that moment, which is why your soul was split." He turned to her and pressed his lips against her forehead.

"I will never let you sacrifice yourself for me again. Losing any part of you, even a part I can retrieve, is not an option." He thought of his confession, and his desire, and it rose again as if summoned by his guilt.

Severus gently moved their teacups to the table, then leaned down and placed a gentle kiss of love and regard, tasting the tea on her lips. "I need you, Hermione," he confessed, his lovely voice husky and breathless. "I am aching for you; for your touch. I want to replace the pain with pleasure. I need to love you." She looked down at the hand covering hers, then returned her gaze up to him. Any fear and doubt he'd had over the previous night was banished by the look of acceptance and desire in her eyes, and he knew immediately that his arousal was requited, even welcome.

She turned to him, returning his kiss. It was sweet and tender at first, like a remembered purity recaptured once more. Light, sipping kisses, slow and giving. His hands slid into her curls and drew her closer; she whispered his name against his lips. Their sensuous kisses soon turned hungry and demanding, and when Severus removed their clothing with a quick wave of his wand, they fused together, their bodies rejoicing in anticipation, their emotions returned to their proper place. This time, her cries and pleas were for *more... harder... deeper... faster*, and he obeyed her, as she had so beautifully obeyed him the previous night.

Later, they lay entangled, their bodies sheened with the sweet, blameless scent of sex and their natural sweat.

Hermione's voice was soft and sated, but intent. "Severus, what did you do to bring me back?"

He rolled over on his back and drew her into his arms. She lay her head against his heart, loving the steady beat which set the tempo of his beautiful, musical voice.

"It is a spell from a book I've had for years. Reg Black told me about it, but it was banned and unavailable. I was able to get my hands on a black market copy, but by that time, Reg had died."

"I heard the Dark Lord killed Regulus Black."

Severus hesitated. "Indirectly, he did. I suppose in the end, you could call it induced suicide. And I was responsible for that as well, although I didn't know it at the time." He sighed. "I never told you the story about the potion, lass, because, to be perfectly honest, it was one of many hideous concoctions I was charged with creating for the Dark Lord during my early tenure as a Death Eater. Parts of it were buried in my memory because the Dark Lord Obliviated me whenever my work was finished. The parts I do remember don't make a happy story, I'm afraid."

Hermione stroked his chest softly, trying to comfort him with her touch. "And therefore it's a story you are not required to tell me, unless you wish to." She turned in his arms until she could look down at his careworn, troubled face. "I think we've been through enough in the past twenty-four hours to earn a reprieve from all this angst."

Severus kissed her forehead, and drew her back into his arms. "I don't wish to tell you, but since it has bearing on everything that happened last night, I feel I must."

She rose up again and kissed him deeply, passionately. Looking down at him, she said, "In your own time."

Severus cleared his throat, and with his beautiful voice, soft as sin, weaving through the night like incense, he related to his wife the tale of Regulus Black...

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Reg Black had been two years younger than Severus when they met, and from the moment he saw him, Severus had been prepared to hate him. Severus had already endured two school years of torment from Reg's brother, Sirius; two years of pent-up misery and loathing, stored up and just waiting for a scapegoat for Severus' indignation. Already he and Sirius held a deep, abiding mutual animosity that only served to fester into fathomless hatred as they grew older.

The Sorting Hat had barely hovered over Reg's curly black hair before crowing, "Another Slytherin from the Black family!" He had bounded over to the Slytherin table with the exuberance and confident ease of one used to entitlement and privilege, and Severus made up his mind there and then to treat Reg Black with the same sneering cruelty and withering contempt with which his older brother had treated Severus.

But Reg was not one to be pigeonholed into Severus' prejudices. He was as different from his brother Sirius as night was from day. Whereas Sirius was cocky, arrogant and cruel, Reg was charming, self-assured and approachable.

Sirius looked on everything and everyone with the haughty superior sneer of someone who used others as part of his birthright. He expected to get his way and was often abusive when he didn't. Reg had no need or desire to use cruelty to achieve his goals; he laughed and made friends easily, simply because he was easy going and personable. He instantly recognised Severus' fascination with the Dark Arts and pronounced it "cool." He never judged Severus because of his looks, his poverty, or his blood status.

As they grew older, Severus, who understood and appreciated beauty in all of its many forms, saw Reg as one of the most attractive men he'd ever seen, and enjoyed looking at him as much as witches did. While Sirius' attractiveness had the calculating look of narcissism, Reg's beauty was lit from within; a serene handsomeness that required no vanity to stroke.

In a way, Severus developed a bit of a crush on Reg, the kind that young boys will do with friends they secretly envy and strive to emulate. Severus did not want to *bo*

Reg Black; he wanted to *be* Reg Black - a good-looking, poised young man, irresistible to girls and safe and popular with his peers. How Severus wished he could be as assured and self-confident.

For whatever reason, Regulus Black sought out Severus' friendship, and when Severus' insecurity pushed Reg away, telling him he only hung around to throw his own beauty into sharper relief, Reg laughed. "Don't be a prat, Sev! You're a decent bloke when you don't try to be an arse." He softened his words by clapping the older boy on the back companionably. "Don't try so hard, mate. Just relax. Enjoy life a little."

When Sirius lured Severus to the Shrieking Shack, almost getting him killed in the process, Reg was the one who publically chastised his older brother for deliberately trying to hurt Severus. Sirius, furious at his younger brother's defection, retorted that 'Reg's boyfriend deserved what he got'.

On that foul day when a humiliated and despised Severus shouted the remark that drove Lily Evans away forever, it was Reg who comforted him, and in the lonely night when Severus wept in shame and remorse and jealousy, Reg commiserated with him. It was at that moment that Reg first sowed the seeds for Severus' ultimate decision to become a Death Eater.

As they sat, passing a joint between them, Reg started talking about Lord Voldemort. Like a charismatic evangelist on a mission, preaching to the vulnerable, Reg promised Severus that there was Someone who would never look down on him because he was poor or wore second-hand robes or wasn't pureblood. This One valued ability, strength and skill. This One would find a place for Severus, and elevate him to the highest order of power. Reg spun the tale so well that Severus could actually see the two of them, surrounded by a plethora of beautiful, adoring slaves, ruling alongside this new Dark Lord of their world.

Reg was a hard one to say no to. He was too beautiful, too kind, too accepting, too idealistic. It would be his undoing.

Overtures were made, introductions were given; tests were performed. Some of them were horrific, frightening and troubling to Severus, but he was determined to prove himself worthy. He created potions, he offered skills, he swore fealty. He was accepted, and he and Reg were initiated into the realm of power.

The Dark Lord, with typical megalomaniacal glee, called the initiation of Death Eaters a glorious rebirth. "The death of your old, impotent life, the birth of your new life as my acolyte and avenging angel," he intoned, searing the Dark Mark into their protesting flesh.

In 1978, he and Reg took their Dark Marks together on the same hot summer night. It was a nightmarish blend of ritual and torture of such magnitude that Severus woke the next morning and stared at the malignant tattoo he'd acquired the night before. It writhed under his skin like a living, sentient parasite, and as Severus took several Pain Potions to dull its undulating ache, he briefly wondered what on earth he'd gotten himself into.

The following night, he and Reg and several other newer recruits were subjected to their first revel, the likes of which Severus would thankfully never see again. Bellatrix Lestrange, Reg's older cousin, spliffed them up on a potent Wizarding cannabis called Salazar Green, and Severus remembered the weekend as one long episode of drug-hazed debauchery that would have not looked out of place depicted on an Hieronymus Bosch painting. He must have had sex with at least thirty different women, who kept pulling him into the various bedrooms of Malfoy manor. He recalled tripping out to Pink Floyd's Dark Side of the Moon, which Reg told him on good authority was a Wizarding band.

He remembered having two women in his bed at one point of the evening; one sucked him off while the other methodically licked the Dark Mark, making him come in her partner's mouth just by laving the newly-embedded tattoo. The whores the Malfoys had procured for the new recruits were skilled in many Dark sexual arts, and Severus learned more about sex in that one night than he had gleaned from any of his books before, or any singular encounter thereafter.

It was much later in life that he realised the true difference between sex and love, but at the time he was too flushed with success and hormones to care for the differences. Lily had rejected him; she had spurned him because she wanted some pretty Gryffindor boy to flatter her into his bed. Here, he told himself, he was accepted, desired, and had no problem enticing willing women into fucking him.

At some point, he and Reg stumbled out of separate rooms and met in the same loo, both high and drunk and fueled with sex and their own feeling of newly-acquired power. Flushed from another mind-blowing orgasm, Severus bellowed, "I feel like I can conquer the world!" He laughed at his own puerile bragging, all the while pissing like a racehorse.

Reg gave him a fond smile. He tilted his head in a way that Severus knew was his 'flirting' tilt. He could get most girls at school to want to drop on their knees and blow him in the Great Hall with that look. "You know something, Sev? You can!" He came close enough for Severus to smell the weed on his breath. "You and me, Sev! On either side of the Dark Lord!" His beautiful eyes blazed in a way that had nothing to do with all the drugs he'd ingested. "We'll be his knights, and you'll be the true brother I should have had."

Severus hugged Reg in that way that all British men in their cups will hug those they love. "I love you, man," he slurred, "You're the best mate anyone could ever have."

Reg just grinned and planted a fierce kiss on Severus' cheek. "I love you, too, brother." He grinned as he backed out of the room, looking pointedly at Severus' crotch. "You better put that trouser snake back where it belongs, Sev. All the girls are already fighting over you." With a cheeky wink, Reg turned and burst out of the loo. Severus could hear him beyond the door. "I haven't had nearly enough pussy yet! Which one of you girls is mine? Well, come along, don't be shy! Oi, you come too, little Peach! Two's company, three's a fucking party!"

Severus looked at his reflection in the mirror. His brother. It was a painful joke for all the right reasons. The beautiful Regulus and the beastly Severus; brothers in the Dark Lord. He snorted to himself. *Fighting over me? Fighting over who gets the short straw and has to fuck me, more like.*

He looked down at his Dark Mark. It glowed with power and was as beautifully iridescent as water on an oil slick. It seemed almost alive; when he ran his hand over it, he felt a thrill pass through his body that had nothing to do with his libido. It sang under his skin with dark knowledge. He, Severus Snape, would be laughed at no longer. He had power now.

He sneered at himself in the mirror. *Come and get me, girls. I am a fucking god.*

It was six months before Severus was called before the Dark Lord for a private audience. He was nervous. What would the most powerful wizard in the world want with ugly, gauche Severus Snape? He borrowed a set of good robes from Reg, who was now the same height as Severus, although a little broader about the shoulders.

"This is your chance, Sev!" Reg laughed, helping him to dress. "You look great!" He stepped back and inspected Severus carefully. He extended his hand. "Good luck, mate. You are stepping into the constellation now. I predict within a year they'll be calling you 'The Great and Mighty Severus Snape.'"

Severus rolled his eyes. "The Great Bat, more like. The Great Greasy Git." He brought his hand self-consciously up to his hair, which no amount of cleaning with any type of shampoo could prevent from looking like oily clots hanging from his head.

Reg did everything but tut at him. "You're not greasy! You just have fine, straight hair. I think you look very handsome."

Severus laughed. "I think you look like the next resident of the Janus Thickey Ward!" They wrestled playfully for a moment, before Severus remembered his purpose and straightened his wrinkled robe with a silent spell.

"Well, this is it. Wish me luck, mate." When Severus reached for his hand, Reg, grabbed it and pulled Severus into his arms.

"You *will* be great, Severus Snape," Reg whispered into his ear, and to Severus' shock, kissed his cheek. Severus pulled away uneasily. Unphased, Reg winked conspiratorially. "I want all the details when you get back."

Severus had been taught how to approach the Dark Lord, and he'd even practiced kneeling, but he had not been prepared for the sheer power that emanated from the

man. Back then, Tom Riddle was still human enough to be seen as a handsome man, but the Dark power he had learned to wield was altering him; now he was almost vulgarly handsome, as unsettling to the eye as a rich meal that turns the stomach due to too much seasoning. Although he did not recognise it at the time and wouldn't admit it even if he had, the overarching impression Severus gleaned from Lord Voldemort at that first private audience was that too much of a good thing could indeed be bad for you.

Even in those early days, Voldemort seemed to feed on adoration. He welcomed Severus like a favoured acolyte. After the preliminary adulation, Severus was poured an indifferent brandy and invited to sit opposite the Dark Lord, who opened the gambit by declaring, "I am told you are a formidable potioneer, Severus."

Severus lowered his head modestly. "I am fairly skilled, My Lord."

"And why are you not apprenticed?" He asked the question a little too knowingly.

Severus flushed with shame. "As you know, My Lord, the Potions guilds are fiercely elitist and decadent. Even a skilled and accomplished apprentice must bring something more to the table of a willing Potions master. Familial wealth, pedigree," he swallowed, and flushed darkly. "Beauty to warm the master's bed. I have none of those." Severus looked at the floor, willing himself not to let his bitterness show.

A soft, almost womanly hand caressed his chin, and raised Severus' head up to the Dark Lord's gaze. Lord Voldemort looked at him carefully. "Then they are all fools, Severus. Those things mean nothing next to power, to glory, to strength."

"I knew you would understand, My Lord."

"When I come into my kingdom, you will be with me, Severus, and together we will spit on the fools who cannot look past their own pricks to see what a gem you are."

Severus felt a lump in his throat. Never had he felt so... accepted, appreciated, simply for who he was and what he could do. He was suddenly overcome with the sheer emotion of feeling valued. Lightheaded, Severus knelt at Voldemort's feet. In a voice trembling with fevered zeal, he vowed, "I will be a fitting jewel for your crown, my Lord."

Voldemort smiled at him. Even as a young man, Severus' beautiful voice brought the Dark Lord pleasure. "No doubt, Severus, no doubt. Young Regulus tells me of your skills, your proficiencies, your commitment, your ardor. I have need of those things."

He stood and gestured to Severus. "Rise, my friend. When I am ready, I will send for you, and together we will make history." Severus left the presence of Lord Voldemort bristling with passion. It would not be the last time he sought out a whore at the conclusion of a meeting with the Dark Lord. At the time, it was to celebrate the Dark Lord's favour; in later years, it would be to celebrate leaving the Dark Lord's presence with mind and body unharmed.

Weeks, then months passed. Severus heard nothing. He grew paranoid. Others, like Lucius Malfoy and his sister-in-law, Bellatrix Lestrange, never missed an opportunity to mention their important meetings with the Dark Lord; they often implied that Voldemort confided in them that he found Severus no more useful than they did.

Severus grew frustrated at the silence, and the taunting Purebloods, but Reg dismissed the others with a wave of his hand. "When are you going to learn, Sev, that they treat you like that because they can see how much it bothers you? Don't you see? They're jealous they're *afraid*. You have powers they don't even know how to wield! Hell, I'll bet you know things even the Dark Lord doesn't know."

Severus, always proud of his ability to create his own spells and potions, privately agreed with Reg's assessment, but refused to voice it aloud. He became obsessed with the idea of gaining the Dark Lord's favour. He invented scenarios in his head; he spun fantasies of inventing a weapon so powerful he could lay it at the Dark Lord's feet and be proclaimed his right-hand man.

Then one afternoon, that fantasy came true. At the Three Broomsticks, while waiting for a job interview, he overheard something crucial outside the door of an upstairs room. Brimming with pride, Severus eagerly laid his weapon at the Dark Lord's feet. Only later would he discover that, through his actions, he had signed Lily Evans' death warrant, thus learning the damage and the destiny that one moment of eavesdropping would render.

He only knew that the Dark Lord regarded him differently now; he, Severus Tobias Snape, son of a Mancunian mill rat, was one of the Inner Circle at last. He was now privy to the same information as Lucius and Bella, and he never missed an opportunity to rub their Pureblood toffee noses in it. He could not help himself; he was too ill-bred, too Northern. He could no more miss a chance to insult and belittle the self-proclaimed aristocrats in the Dark Lord's presence than a child could resist a brightly-coloured toy.

Of course, he should have known. Power breeds contempt and enemies. He was too drunk on the heady brew of the nearly-realised power to fully appreciate just how much contempt and enmity his pride had gleaned.

By now, the Order of the Phoenix was in its infancy, but the might of the Dark Lord was swelling in the fear-soaked minds of the Wizarding world. Witches and wizards, long used to the complacent lives they'd leisurely built for themselves, were finding loved ones missing; destruction and unease filled the streets of Diagon and Knockturn Alley. Wizarding folk stopped smirking though this young upstart's rather pompous name, and started whispering fearfully, in case they were heard - still, they often paid for their indiscretion.

It was during the early days of the first war, shortly after Severus supplied him with the prophecy, that the Dark Lord commissioned him with creating something both wonderful and horrible. "I need a very special potion, my dear friend," The Dark Lord had begun. "It is a potion requiring a skilled and creative potioneer, but I am confident you will not disappoint me."

The words, however flowery, had a very clear message: failure was not an option.

Severus was told the Dark potion had to have four distinguishing traits: it must produce dangerous, psychologically damaging hallucinogenic visions; it must be physically excruciatingly painful to ingest; it must kill, but not immediately upon ingestion; and most difficult of all, it must never lose its potency.

In his hunger and lust to prove himself worthy, Severus set about making this potion. It didn't really seem that evil; he was, after all, merely utilising the skills he'd learned as a potioneer. He lied to himself that he was only showing off the finer subtleties of his abilities. He found that it took every ounce of his time and creativity to produce something so nefarious. That he was creating another weapon in the Dark Lord's arsenal didn't trouble Severus at all. This was wartime; there would be casualties. He was using his superior skills and talent to ensure his side won. Pure and simple.

He worked on the formula day and night. He sacrificed animals of all sizes and species to his research. He even enticed a derelict off the street, a Muggle he met staggering around in the city centre. The man had been dying of cancer anyway; Severus told himself he was actually doing a favour by putting the old geezer out of his misery.

Watching the man clawing at his own throat as he died, Severus felt a twinge of remorse. He quickly tamped it down by reminding himself that he had not forced the man into drinking it.

He had not even lied about its contents. *Served him right for knocking back something he didn't even know what it was* thought Severus. So enamored was he at the thought of being recognised at last, Severus found it easy to justify his actions.

When he presented the potion to the Dark Lord, Voldemort was delighted. "And are you assured it will never lose its potency, Severus?"

Severus bowed. "I have infused the potion with Acromantula venom, My Lord. This both purifies the distillation process and acts to make the potion's deadlier traits more prominent. This potion, as long as it is in a purified bowl, will never lose its potency."

"And what is the best type of vessel to use?" The Dark Lord queried, genuinely interested.

Severus preened at the undivided attention. Rather importantly, he replied, "I would say that Pensieve stone is the best. It isn't porous, yet will keep the liquid in magical stasis until it is ready to be used."

Two months passed, and the Dark Lord sent for Severus again. "I have created your bowl, Severus," the Dark Lord said smugly, revealing a bowl and pedestal hewn out of the biggest chunk of Pensieve stone Severus had ever seen. "This stone bowl has been charmed. Once the potion has been emptied of the amount in the bowl, it will magically refill after one hour. You must provide me enough potion to refill the bowl at least five times."

Severus was obedient, and worked like a man possessed to prove his worth. In a month's time, he gave the Dark Lord all he'd asked. During this time, Severus saw no one. He barely ate and slept. He lost weight; his clothes hung even looser upon his already too-thin frame. He caught sight of himself in the mirror while walking past the loo at Spinner's End and was shocked at the wild, unkempt man he'd become. His clothes were filthy; he'd not bathed in days. His hair, oily even at the best of times, looked as if he'd doused his head in a bucket of chip fat. He could smell himself, and his large nose wrinkled in distaste. He was, in the words of his late-but-not-lamented father, mingin' like a bastard.

After presenting his results to the Dark Lord, Severus thought no more about the potion. It had been uncannily easy to forget about it; in later years Severus realised it was because the Dark Lord wanted him to. Severus had not been privy to its intended purpose, and neither did he wish to be.

A couple of weeks later, he ran into Reg in Diagon Alley. But instead of his usual upbeat self, Reg looked tired, preoccupied. He cried off joining Severus for lunch at the Leaky. "I've got a bit of business to do for the Dark Lord," he said. By then, Lord Voldemort was a fearsome spectre on the Wizarding horizon, the scourge of the Order of the Phoenix.

Regular Wizarding folk did not speak his name, but Death Eaters like Severus and Reg still vaunted their Dark Marks, proud to show their affiliation with this new crusader for the Wizarding elite. In true megalomaniacal style, Voldemort had decided being called 'The Dark Lord' was even more robust, more befitting his station as the new ruler of Wizarding Britain.

Severus went on his way, after promising Reg he would meet up with him for drinks soon. It would be exactly two weeks later on the day. And when next they met it was Reg who came to him; Reg, who never came to Spinner's End, because Severus was too ashamed to have him there.

When the wards of Severus' dead parents' home sounded, he looked on in shock as Reg slunk in like a fugitive. His clothes were dirty and he looked and smelled as bad as Severus had while working on the Dark Lord's potion. Reg also looked... changed. That was the only word Severus could think of. Reg had changed, and Severus was shaken by it.

Severus poured him a glass of firewhisky, and the two old friends sat in uncomfortable silence. Reg's hand shook as he brought the glass to his lips. For some reason, Severus was forcibly reminded of the derelict Muggle who had willingly drunk his potion, believing it would make him better.

"I can't do it anymore, Sev," Reg said brokenly. He took a long pull of whisky, grimacing. Reg looked away as Severus put a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"Can't do what, Reg? Honestly, mate, you are really doing my head in. What's going on?"

Reg looked at his friend, and suddenly he was in Severus' arms, weeping. Stunned, Severus tried to comfort him as best he could. "Here now, what's all this? What's all this, ay?" He felt stupid, and what's more, he found himself sounding just like his father, when his mother had one of her 'episodes.'

Sobbing against Severus' shoulder, Reg brokenly told him the story. Voldemort had summoned him and told him that he had a task that required an elf. It was a great task, and would bring Reg honour within the ranks of the Death Eaters. Reg, thrilled at the prospect of gaining glory and favour with their Lord, immediately went home and enlisted the service of the Black Family's most faithful family retainer, Kreacher.

As Reg told the story, his expression changed from fearful to angry. He told how the Dark Lord had taken Kreacher to this island, and made the loyal house elf empty a stone basin full of poison by drinking it. Reg fumed as he described Kreacher being forced to drink this hideous potion, which filled him with unspeakable pain. It made him see and hear terrible things, and left him too weak to move, and so thirsty he clawed at his throat until it bled.

"And all the while he's begging Voldemort for something to drink, and asking for me and Mother, and Voldemort's just laughing at him! Oh, Severus, Kreacher was crying when he told me!" Reg wept as well, tears streaming down his handsome face.

Severus felt as if his body had turned inside out. Reg cried, "And then, do you know what he did? Voldemort dropped a necklace into the stone bowl! He tortured that sweet old elf so he could hide a trinket in that fucking bowl!"

"Kreacher was so thirsty, and this bowl is on this tiny island in a cave, fuck knows where. When Kreacher reached into the water to drink, the lagoon was full of Inferi, Severus! And they started dragging him down into the water, to kill him. Voldemort was just laughing at him, being dragged down into his death, and then he left him there. He abandoned Kreacher to the Inferi and left him alone to die!"

Severus listened quietly, trying not to let on he knew anything about the contents of the bowl, and tried to look sympathetic. He had never liked Kreacher; he was that type of house-elf who immediately adopted all his family's prejudices and superior airs, considering himself superior by association. On the rare occasion when Severus visited the Black residence, he had to suffer not only Reg's mother's distain of his half-blood status, but the ignominy of having Kreacher turn up his nose at Severus as well.

"What how do you know all this? Where's Kreacher now?" Severus had never lived with house-elves, and at that point did not understand the familial bond of a house-elf to its family.

By sheer luck, Reg had instructed the elf to do everything the Dark Lord asked of him, and return home when his task was done. Kreacher, bound by his magic to obey his family, escaped and return home. Had Reg not given him such explicit instructions to come back, Kreacher, acting on the orders of Reg to obey and do everything the Dark Lord asked, would have willingly allowed himself to die a hideous death, in order to properly serve the noble House of Black.

"I was the one who ordered him there, Sev don't you see? If I hadn't told Kreacher to come home when the Dark Lord was finished with him, he would have died, because he's duty-bound to obey me. Do you have any idea how horrible it feels, knowing I almost caused his death by telling him to obey that madman?"

Severus had never felt so conflicted. How could he tell Reg he was the creator of this terrible elixir?

Reg had worked himself up into a state. "He can't do that, Sev! Can't you see? That's not power it's- it's pure evil! If he thinks so little of his followers that he'll just use our house-elves for something like this, what will he do to us if we displease him? What else will he do if we blindly give him dominion over our lives?"

Placatingly, Severus said, "Are you sure that Kreacher wasn't delirious? I mean, we've been on some bad trips with potions before "

"His mouth and throat were like raw meat, Sev! Whatever that was, it was meant to kill, and do such an awful job of it that no wizard would ever survive it. Gods, who would create " Reg froze, and looked at Severus with awful, dawning certainty. He backed away from Severus as if afraid of him. "Oh no. Dear Merlin, no, Sev, no!"

Severus felt his heart drop to his chest as he took a placating step toward Reg, only to be repulsed by a shielding charm. "You created that potion, didn't you?" Reg shook his head, and continued backing away from his friend. "Oh, Sev, tell me you didn't make it! Tell me," he pleaded, his eyes tortured and heartsick.

Soothingly, Severus walked up to his friend and said the words that sealed his fate. He blurted, "Reg, please calm down! I mean, it's not like the Dark Lord made you drink it!"

The moment the words were out of his mouth, Severus knew it was the worst thing he could have said. Bad enough, he realised, to ruin a friendship he'd cherished like few

others in his life. It was the equivalent of calling Lily a Mudblood, and later Severus would think about Reg and Lily, and the power of words, and curse himself for being a fool with a runaway tongue.

Reg looked at Severus as if he'd been struck. For almost ten seconds, his mouth worked fruitlessly. Finally he said, "Either you are the biggest twat on the planet, or the most cold-blooded bastard I've ever met." His dark eyes flashed fire and Severus actually winced to see the hatred in Reg's face. "Did you not understand what I just said? He made my house-elf drink your thrice-damned poison, and left him to die and be eaten alive by Inferi! He's an evil madman, don't you understand?"

"Reg, please, mate, I didn't think-" Reg turned on Severus so vehemently the older man actually recoiled away from him.

"No, you fucking well didn't, *mate*. And to tell the truth, I'm not sure I care to be your *mate* anymore." He turned and walked toward the door.

"Reg, please don't leave. I'm sorry!" Before Severus could finish the sentence, Reg spun away and was gone with a loud "CRACK" of Apparation, leaving Severus on his own. Sick with loss, Severus downed his glass of whisky, then drank the rest of Reg's, then proceeded to get insensibly drunk. It would not be the last time he drank himself into a stupor over the loss of a friend.

It was over a month later that Reg reappeared on his doorstep. Severus was shaken at his friend's appearance. He looked as if he'd aged ten years. He rushed into the house as if the hounds of hell were after him. His eyes darted around the room; he jumped at the slightest noise.

He turned down Severus' offer of whisky, but accepted a cup of tea. His hands shook like Tobias Snape's during a bout of DTs. Severus was unnerved by the sight. It was obvious that Reg was exhausted, and painfully frightened. His eyes had a bright, almost feverish cast, and his voice trembled as he spoke.

"I'm going to be going away for awhile, Sev," Reg began with a faint ghost of his usual smile, and when Severus asked where and why, Reg looked at him longingly, regret etched in the lines of his once smooth, flawless face.

"Reg, you are seriously scaring me." When his friend remained silent, he continued. "Can I do anything for you? Do you need anything?"

Reg shook his head. "I just have to lay low for awhile, but I know what I'm doing."

Severus shrugged, unconvinced. "If you say so, Reg."

Suddenly, with terrifying swiftness, Reg rose and threw his arms around Severus. He pressed his body against Severus', planting frenzied and desperate kisses on his face, moaning helplessly. Severus was frozen with surprise, and for a brief moment was still with shock, until Reg forced his mouth against Severus' and frantically forced his tongue between his lips.

Horrified, Severus pushed him away, wiping at his mouth. "What the fuck are you on about, Reg?" he growled, half embarrassed, half ashamed. "Why are you doing this?"

"Come with me, Sev," Reg blurted, his eyes wild and out of focus. His smile had turned into a rictus of pain, haunted and desperate. "You once told me you loved me "

"Like a brother, Reg! Not like " Severus turned away, his face flushed a humiliated shade of scarlet. "I'm not-" he spluttered. "I don't think of men that way. I don't I can't think of you that way."

Reg looked at Severus with such pain in his eyes it nearly broke his heart. His voice was anguished as he pleaded, "I could take care of you. I'd be like a wife. You know I care for you. I could protect you." He began to sob. "Please, Sev, come with me."

Severus, stunned and worried for his friend, closed his eyes and took a deep breath, praying for calm. In a quiet voice, he said, "Reg, look, why don't you let me take you to St. Mungo's? I think you need some help."

In an instant, Reg turned on him. "Help? Of course I need help! Help me, Severus help me!" Severus, looking at the younger man's blazing eyes and tear-stained face, was at a loss.

"Reg, I don't know what's going on, but you need to just calm down. You don't know what you're doing. Now don't do that," he said, as Reg shook his head and started for the door. Severus caught him by the arm and stopped him from leaving. "At least tell me what's gotten you so freaked out."

Reg turned back to his friend, and embraced him. His touch was no longer wild and out of control; he was calm, rational, sweet-natured Reg again. Just infinitely sadder. Feeling Severus lean away, he shook his head. "I'm sorry, Sev. I didn't mean to upset you. Not you, of all people." He looked up into Severus' face with such pain Severus felt his throat tighten. In a hoarse voice, he said, "I can't stay, Sev. I have to do this. I have to try to stop him."

"Stop who?" Severus asked, baffled. "Reg, for Merlin's sake, man, talk sense!"

"I am! I am! Don't you see? He has to be stopped. You know who. Him." At Severus' wide-eyed shock, Reg said, "He can't be allowed to do these things, Sev. We'll be the next ones to be made to drink from his poisoned chalice. I can't bear the thought of that happening to you, Sev, but mark my words. You'll be next." He turned to go.

"Reg, wait!" Severus frantically tried to think of something, anything to stop him from leaving. "Just stay the night. We'll think of something."

Reg shook his head, and his tears began to flow again. "I have to go now, while I have the courage. If I stay, I'll just want you, and you'll turn me down again." He graced Severus with the saddest smile he'd ever seen. "I don't think I could bear that."

"Reg, I never-"

"I know. Neither did I." His tone was wistful, and laced with regret. "I'm sorry, Sev. Don't tell anyone I was here, okay? Not even my family. Swear it." He made Severus take a wand oath that he wouldn't reveal Reg's visit. It was the only thing Severus did or said that seemed to ease the younger man's mind.

As he left, he turned back, and two final tears, bright as quicksilver, slid from his soft eyes. "I forgive you, you know. For the potion. You didn't know what he was going to do with it. But please, Sev. Get out. One day, 'I didn't know' won't be a good enough excuse. You're made for better than this better than him. We all are. He's mad, and he's wrong. I just wish it hadn't taken me so long to figure that out."

He walked out the door, and Severus let him. It was the last time he ever saw Reg. Years later, he would curse himself for not trying to prevent him from leaving.

"He disappeared off the face of the earth," Severus said, and Hermione could see the grief etched like scrimshaw in her husband's dark eyes. "His parents were devastated. Even Sirius, who was *persona non grata* in the Black Family by then, cornered me in Knockturn Alley one day, accusing me of being responsible for his disappearance. He always blamed me for what happened to Reg."

Hermione sat by her husband's side, tears sliding from her face. "When will people learn that house elves can't be treated like dogs? Kreacher was horrible to me at Grimmauld, but look how he was treated by everyone. Even Reg, who cared for him, allowed the Dark Lord to torture him." She shook her head, thinking of the handsome, charismatic Regulus, forever young, forever lost. "Poor Reg! He loved you so."

"He did." Severus was solemn. "I've replayed that last conversation in my mind a hundred times. I've even looked at it in a Pensieve, trying to figure out what I should have done to stop him."

Hermione shook her head, and surreptitiously wiped away her tears. "You didn't know, love. You were too young."

Severus' voice was bitter. "I was old enough to betray everyone who ever meant anything to me."

Shaken by the vehemence in his voice, Hermione changed tack. "When did you realise he was dealing with a Horcrux?"

"Dumbledore told me the night he died. He told me that he was going to retrieve the Horcrux Reg had placed, and it all fell into place. That locket that Kreacher saw the Dark Lord place in the bowl must have been a Horcrux, Hermione. Reg must have learned what it was and went there to retrieve it himself, but the poison killed him before he could take it away."

Severus shook his head and looked upward, blinking hard. "He was a good friend. I miss him." He turned to his wife, whose eyes shone with care and concern. "I would like to think, given the chance, he would have put aside that foolish Pureblood dogma and grown into a fine man, a fine wizard." His face softened, and he stroked Hermione's cheek, his long fingers intimate and giving. "He would have appreciated you; that I do know." Something like a smile graced his lips. "He always had a weakness for strong witches. And you would have been enchanted. He was a real witch's wizard." He sounded wistful. "I often wonder what would have become of me had he lived."

Wryly, Hermione replied, "It sounded to me like Reg knew *exactly* what he wanted you to become."

Severus coloured slightly. "I think that was nine parts desperation and one part love. He was always affectionate, but that was just his way. He never made any other overtures toward me in that regard before then, and I certainly never felt that way toward him, although I cared for him very much." He gave her a wry smile. "I should think my sexual preferences would be quite clear to you, wife."

"Thank Merlin," she said with a smile, and kissed his jaw. For a moment they held one another, his large hands stroking her hair absently. Finally, she asked, "But how did Dumbledore know about Reg's involvement with the Horcrux?"

Severus turned to his wife. "When Lily and James Potter were killed, I was almost mad with grief and guilt. That's when I went back to Albus, and he told me that Reg had visited him the day before he disappeared, asking for asylum. That much I found out, but he must have kept his plans secret even from Albus."

Severus sighed, and it was a sad, lonesome sound. "In the space of two years I lost both Reg and Lily. My pride - I cost their lives with my pride. So I traded my soul to protect Lily's son. I honestly thought at the time that I could atone for Reg as well, if only I could watch out for Potter, even though I saw his sodding father sneering at me every time I looked at him."

"Twenty years on, I'm still committed to do it, even though I don't like the bugger." He put his arms around Hermione and pressed his lips against her forehead. "I've made such a mess out of everything, it seems. The only thing I've ever done right was you, and I don't think I had a lot of say in that, either."

In spite of all the pain around them and the fresh burden of the horrific events of the past forty-eight hours, Hermione smiled at her husband. "There isn't *you* anymore, Severus. Only *us*. You aren't alone. You never will be again." She kissed his mouth gently. "I'm not one to turn away when the road gets too narrow. It just makes me want to slog harder."

She felt the almost delicious rumble in his chest as he allowed himself a dark chuckle. "Stubborn Gryffindor. You're going to save me in spite of myself, aren't you, my little lioness?"

Hermione shivered, marveling that even now, he could fill her body and heart with an almost feral arousal for him. His inner antennae detected the change in her body, the way it relaxed against his, and he felt his own body instinctively mold to hers.

He captured her mouth in a searing kiss. There was no need for words, for the soft, insistent urges that inflamed them. Their minds joined together, melding their magic and their bodies into perfect vessels for one another. When at last they lay back, gasping and sated, the fever of their need was assuaged and their magic had healed them again. Severus glanced at his Dark Mark and was startled to see it had almost faded into nothing.

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The title is from the lyrics to *Love Was Made For You* by Christopher Branch, used with his kind and generous permission.

## Twenty Seven: The Cost of Living

*Chapter 28 of 39*

I ride on the back of the angels tonight....

*Please note that this chapter contains scenes of death and explicit sexual content.*

*Thank you to all who continue to read and enjoy this story. I can't tell you how much I appreciate your continued support and encouragement. Your reviews are the only payment I receive for writing this story, but they are generous and very much loved.*

*This fic is beta'd by the mighty stgulik, and she is my Hermione Granger. I cannot post fics without her incredible assistance, nor would I wish to. Thank you, Jules, for always being the best. Any mistakes you see are my piddles after she's returned it and are not her fault at all.*

*I'd like to dedicate this chapter to all of my LJ friends and readers here on TPP who constantly encourage and support me with your love and friendship.*

---

*There are those who know sorrow and those who must borrow and those whose lot in life is sweet.*

*Well I'm drunk on self-pity, scorned all that's been given me, I would drink from a bottle labeled Sure Defeat.*

*I'd ride on the backs of the angels tonight. I'd take to the sky with all my might.*

*No more drowning in my sorrow, no more drowning in my fright, I'd just ride on the backs of the angels tonight.*

---

Hermione was determined that Christmas would be special for them. After all, it was their first as a married couple the first of many, she fiercely told herself, over and over.

She owed it to her friends, who thought she was the enemy. She owed it to her parents, killed by this madman, and she owed it to her husband, whom she loved more with every passing day. Mostly, she thought, she owed it to herself to survive, and find a way to prove their actions were done toward the aim of defeating the Dark Lord. She only prayed that, when the time came, she could somehow make Harry and Ron understand. As much as she told herself she could do it, the actual idea of how to make them see the truth still eluded her.

At times, she would think over the past twelve months and shake her head, wondering how it was that two people could experience so much in one year's time and not snap under the strain. When she thought of how Severus had spent the last twenty years bending, testing the very breaking point of his sanity and nerve, she would make sure she held him extra close during the night, and make love to him all the more tenderly the next day.

Severus watched in bemusement as she decorated the modest tree, insisting on placing the lights and baubles herself, eschewing the use of any magical means of embellishment. She stepped back, and Severus cast the spell needed to make the fairy lights work in the non-electrical house. He placed her mother's lovely angel at the top-most branches. She baked cookies and they listened to carols. At night, he held her as they both gazed at the flickering lights and reflected prisms of light like two awestruck children. It felt bittersweet to Severus that they were alone; he wanted her to be surrounded by friends and family. Hermione vowed she would show no tears to Severus; she had to be strong for him, now.

He Apparated her to a part of Muggle Canterbury that she had often visited with her parents, and they spent a happy hour Christmas shopping, their eyes always darting around in case of recognition. They wrapped their modest presents, and drank their favourite Muggle wine, Old Git, and listened to Christmas carols on the Muggle radio. Hermione was afraid of what they might hear on the Wizarding wireless. They forced themselves to avoid bad news; they knew they would be inundated with it soon enough. Already there were attacks on Muggles, and signs of growing unrest and pointless raids by the more jaded Death Eaters. A professor from Hogwarts had disappeared shortly after her article condemning Muggle-bashing was printed in the *Daily Prophet*.

And so on Christmas Eve, they sat on the sagging sofa, sipping wine, staring at the tree and listening to Radio 4. They nibbled on 'Christmas food' all day; Hermione had made enough to feed an army. They sat, laid-back and stuffed, listening to choirs softly heralding the coming of the Christ child.

Hermione raised her glass. "To our first Christmas. Our first of many." Severus clinked his glass with hers, and they both drank quietly. For a moment, the only sounds were the music and the soft crackle of the fire in the small grate.

At length, he said, "I wanted more for you, you know."

Hermione turned to look at him. "What do you mean, love?" In the glow of the tree lights, Severus' angular profile looked softer, younger. Hermione's heart swelled; she did not think it possible to love her stern, dour husband more than she did at that moment.

He shifted, and kept his eyes on the tree. Finally, he spoke. "You should be in a lovely house, with a huge tree covered in lights and baubles. There should be mountains of presents just for you, and the sound of laughter and friendship throughout the house." He turned to her. "You were meant to be the hostess of a manor, gracious and lovely, welcoming dozens of friends to your home." He looked away. "I have never been able to give you what you truly deserve." His eyes gleamed in the light of the Christmas tree. "And even if we live through this thrice-damned war, I never will be."

Hermione, troubled, turned to him and pressed against his chest. "That's not true, Severus—"

He turned his dark eyes to hers, and his sadness made her chest ache. "I didn't even properly propose to you. You had to take the initiative. You have always taken the lead, and I have had to follow."

Hermione gasped. "Severus, I have never wanted you to feel as if I were just another set of orders you had to obey."

He looked at her blankly, then sighed, and drew her closer. "I didn't mean that! Damn my stupid runaway mouth." He kissed her hair, and pressed her to his chest. "I just meant that you have always been there, since that night at Grimmauld Place, caring for me, defending me, protecting me. I have never known anyone, anyone at all like you, wife." He said this with wonder, as if the thought had only occurred to him.

"Until you, Hermione, I truly felt that my life was pointless. Each wrong turn in the road; each stupid, badly informed decision I blamed it on fate, on destiny on Lily. I took no responsibility for them. Even when I first became aware of you and how Black was treating you, I told myself it was really none of my business that you were just a biological goad of my self-enforced celibacy, and that you meant nothing more to me."

His voice was bleak. "Then you found me wallowing in my own filth in Grimmauld; your greasy, obnoxious professor, the hated bat of the dungeons, reduced to a crawling worm on the floor." He paused and closed his eyes. When he spoke, his lovely voice trembled with emotion. "That night, you were an angel, and suddenly I wanted your kindness and your sweet generosity all for myself, like a selfish child clutching a coveted toy. Even as I tried to push you away or remind you of our real relationship, I wanted it all."

He looked down at her, and tipped her face up to his with a single long finger under her chin. He planted a soft, sensuous kiss on her little heart-shaped mouth. "You have been my hiding place, and my rock. One day, I'm going to do it all properly. I'm going to bend the knee, and place the engagement ring on your finger, and I'm going to dance with you at the ball, and I'm going to stand with you in front of your friends and declare you my precious wife, and the mother of my children."

To his surprise, his young bride flung her arms around him, and covered his face with kisses. She pulled back just enough to stroke his hair from his eyes. "You do know that it's enough just to know you *want* those things, don't you?"

He pulled her close, wanting the knot of fear to loosen, so that he could find some pleasure in her contentment. It seemed the least he should be able to do, but deep down, he felt the unmistakable certainty that those things would never happen for them.

Perhaps it *was* enough just to want those things.

Christmas morning was ushered in with a few presents, some nice wine and a light dusting of snow. They walked through the tired lanes of Spinner's End anonymously, holding hands and talking like lovers do. To any bystander or passing figure, they looked like a typical English couple in a depressed area; drab and simple, unremarkable and quiet. Only the most observant would note the closeness of their bodies, the way their hands clasped, as if afraid to be separated by the very air.

At times the young woman would laugh silently, as if thinking of a joke, and the lean, saturnine man would smile in response, but they never spoke. They walked, two quiet figures in the barren landscape of Industrial England, hiding away for as long as they were able.

On New Year's Eve, Severus felt a strange tingle, like an itching under his skin. To his amazement, he realised it was his Dark Mark. After twenty years of searing pain when it flared to life, the magic of his and Hermione's love had reduced the discomfort of the Mark down to the equivalent of the sensation one feels when a limb has gone to sleep.

As they remarked upon the change, a silvery-white peacock shimmered into the room, and Severus caught Hermione's eye when the strained voice of Lucius Malfoy issued from the proud bird's throat. "Severus, this is a very important meeting. It will be at Malfoy Manor. Please bring your..." Severus bristled as he could see the bird all but sneer. "...wife with you. I would caution you not to be late. There will be... entertainment to follow."

The Patronus faded, and Severus and Hermione glanced at one another uneasily. Whatever it was, it was serious enough to send Lucius Malfoy like a common minion to summon them.

As they walked into Malfoy Manor, Hermione could feel Severus' mind brush against hers, like a physical thing. *Give nothing away, Hermione. Occlude your mind, except for that which I place within it. If you show him too much, or not enough, he will become suspicious.*



*I'll try*, she promised, holding her head high. She was walking into the belly of the beast, and she was afraid for her life, but more than that, she was afraid of what she might unwittingly reveal. *I have faced him before*, she told herself. *I will face him again. This is just another night. You must be strong for your husband. Nothing that happens will be worth jeopardising this.*

The same blond Death Eater who had accompanied the Carrows the night they invaded Hogwarts met them at the gates of the Manor. "The Dark Lord is expecting you."

"Obviously. He summoned us. Ergo, he's expecting us," Severus replied, witheringly. The blond sneered at Severus with obvious dislike, but held his tongue. He eyed Hermione curiously as he followed them into the large dining room, where sat the assembled Death Eaters, camp followers and general hangers-on and Lord Voldemort.

"Ah, Severus, we were about to start without you," the Dark Lord said, almost cooly. "And Mrs. Snape. So kind of you to join our little meeting."

Hermione dropped to her knees and kissed his robe, with what sounded like a breathless, happy sigh. With humble dignity, she said quietly, "My Lord, thank you for the honour of inviting me."

Voldemort touched her face. Inwardly, Hermione wanted to vomit. His hand felt clammy and cold to the touch. Then she looked up into his slitted eyes, and she realised with a jolt that her experience Between had given her new eyes to see. She thought of her own soul, divided, and how traumatising it had been. How could he function, with so little of his soul left as to render him almost inhuman?

"I trust you are fully recovered from your recent ordeals?" the Dark Lord said, his eyes gleaming in the light. Hermione lowered her eyes, and glanced at Severus, who touched her elbow supportively.

"I am, My Lord. It is most kind of you to ask." She looked up at him, allowing him a flash of a memory of a wet bathroom floor, and the infirmary. She also briefly flashed the thought of Dumbledore, and the anger and loathing she had felt at the time, along with sexual arousal toward her husband. She could actually feel his Leglimency scoop up these images, like a prospector panning gold.

"That is excellent news. We shall need you fit and well for the continued school year."

Hermione and Severus merely bowed at this cryptic statement, and Hermione took the chair Severus offered and somehow felt a little safer once he'd assumed his seat beside her.

Once she and Severus had taken their places at the massive table, Hermione ventured a look around. All three Malfoys were present, as was Bellatrix Lestrange and her husband and his brother. Several men whom she didn't recognise were also there, and the Dark Lord himself presided with a smile of unholy glee.

"My friends, we are in the presence of the witch who overcame and destroyed the great Albus Dumbledore," the Dark Lord hissed, and Hermione kept her face impassive as everyone turned and looked at her. She smiled at Voldemort and bowed to him, keeping her attention on his face.

"Perhaps you could regale us with the fine tale, if time permits," he said, his reptilian eyes sweeping the room, finally resting on the Malfoys. "There are those who worship me with their promises or their fear, and those who worship me with their actions. Is this not true, Lucius?"

Hermione stole a glance at Lucius Malfoy. He was not the same man who had arrogantly stalked through the Department of Mysteries. A year in Azkaban had changed him terribly, and he made a little stiff bow at the table. "My family and I have always strived for your glory, My Lord."

The Dark Lord watched his former lieutenant carefully. "A safe answer, my friend."

"It is a true answer, my Lord," Lucius said, a note of unease creeping into his cultured tones. Upon closer inspection, Hermione noted that his fingers, resting lightly on the table, trembled slightly; the nails were broken. In the harsh light of the hall, he looked rather indifferently groomed. His hair looked dull, his face patchily shaved. Lucius was no longer the smug lord of the manor. He looked like a man terrified of losing his world. Hermione did not think it possible to feel pity for the man, but she knew she was close.

It certainly gave her no pleasure hearing the Dark Lord needle him so insidiously, while others scoffed and tittered.

As the meeting quieted down, the Dark Lord rose. "My friends, this is not an evening for self-congratulating and posturing. We have struck the weakening blow, but now we have a world to run. Our infiltration of the Ministry is almost complete, and once this has been done, the world must be made to understand that we are rulers now." He stretched out his arms in an obscene parody of blessing, his hideous smile reaching to the back of the room. "The gods have returned."

For the better part of two hours, there was discussion of the Ministry, and how it would be changed. Hermione was rather surprised at how mundane it all sounded, and wondered if similar conversations took place in the cabinets of newly-elected officials taking over from old regimes.

The talk turned, as she knew it inevitably would, to Harry. Severus began, "When we left Potter at Hogwarts, he was alone, isolated. Now that Dumbledore is... gone, he will be relying more and more on his so-called friends to help him, especially now, while he is still underage. My wife," he glanced at Hermione with a thin veneer of ownership in his voice, "was the true intellect behind all of Potter's escapades. He will be useless without her."

He turned back to the Dark Lord, praying he was not inadvertently speaking the truth. "My sources tell me that the blood traitor Weasley's family is planning a wedding during the latter part of the holidays, in late January. I know that Potter will be there. Might I suggest that we reconvene in a few days' time to discuss the best way to infiltrate this gathering? By then, the Ministry will be yours, and the wards for the secret-kept location of the wedding will fall." There were murmurs of ascent and rumbles from all corners.

After some further commonplace discussion, Hermione breathed a sigh when Voldemort agreed to meet later to plan an attack. Severus had been hoping they could buy time.

The Dark Lord held up his hand. "And when the dust settles, where do we begin? Quite simply, my friends, we begin with our future. Our dear, precious children." The last four words were spoken with such obscene benevolence Hermione felt her gorge rise, and it was all she could do to remain sitting there by her husband's side, hearing this monster talk so blithely of precious children, like they were courses on some hellish banquet.

"Hogwarts," he was saying, "must have strong leadership. I propose that our own dear Severus-" he turned toward him, "take over the position of Headmaster of our glorious school. Who better to herald the new dawn of our wizarding educational system?"

Hermione sat still as stone, and she could feel the waves of revulsion within Severus, who stood up with a smile. "You have given me honour beyond measure, my Lord. If this is your wish, I will gladly assume the post." He preened and looked around with a satisfied gleam in his eye, but Hermione heard him. *Oh, gods, lass, it's begun. Help me to be strong!*

She smiled at him, the very picture of the proud wife. *I am with you, Husband*, Hermione replied, and their voices were strong and sure within. *Say those things he needs to hear, and we can plan-*

"And to help you, *Headmaster* Snape," Voldemort said, with a smile, "I propose you add two new educators to the list. Our own Alecto and Amycus Carrow."

Severus felt his gut roil sickeningly. *I'll bet you didn't foresee that little double-cross, did you, Albus? Those two inbreds will turn the school into a slaughterhouse. They're sadistic and stupid and more than a little incestuous, and I'll spend more time trying to prevent them hurting students than trying to keep the real faculty from hexing me.*

"And what subjects will they be teaching, My Lord? I did not realise Alecto and Amycus were of an educational bent." There were several sniggers in the room, not least from the Carrows themselves. Amycus rose to his feet, puffed up with overblown self importance. His lumpy, unpleasant resemblance to Dolores Umbridge was only surpassed by that of his equally lumpy and unpleasant sister. They both looked untidy, a trifle dirty. And this was the Pureblood Master Race, thought Hermione with contempt. It took a silent reminder from Severus to keep her from sneering at them.

When Amycus spoke it was with a guttural South London accent. "I will be assuming your old position, Snape, as Defense Against the Dark Arts - or as they will be now called, Dark Arts Studies. I mean, what are we defending, ay? This is about teaching Pureblood power and might and how to use it!" He punched the air like a Quidditch fan, and several Death Eaters made similar noises, as if it were all a big joke to them.

Carrow's sister Alecto stood by her brother. They made an ugly, unpleasant team; to Hermione, they looked like two overgrown garden gnomes, all misshapen heads and arrogance. "And seeing as the position is going spare, I will be taking over as Professor of Muggle Studies." She said the word 'Muggle' with the same inflection as 'Mouseshit'. Amid the catcalls and hoots, Hermione felt her mouth go dry.

"I am assuming then, that Professor Burbage was asked to retire after last week's rather biased article in the *Daily Prophet*?" Severus asked, sounding anything but interested. Suddenly Hermione felt very exposed. She could see where this was leading. Charity Burbage had disappeared unexpectedly shortly after the article appeared in the *Prophet*, Hermione had the sickening sensation of being a very insignificant bug under a very large microscope. She kept her eyes cast slightly down, unwilling to call attention to herself.

"Yes, indeed," the Dark Lord hissed, smiling hellishly. "Mrs. Snape, both you and Draco have attended her classes in the past, yes?"

*Answer carefully, pet.*

Looking into the Dark Lord's eyes, Hermione made a little formal bow. "I have attended her classes, sir. I found her postulations to be refreshingly... naive."

"Really, Mrs. Snape? In what way?"

Hermione looked at the Dark Lord carefully. With a mixture of humility and contrition, she said, "I am well aware of what I am, My Lord. And while I understand my place, I often felt that her attitudes toward Muggle equality gave Muggle-borns a false sense of how they are fit into Wizarding society, and how they can best be of use to Wizarding Britain."

Bellatrix Lestrange hissed, "Fertiliser." Several Death Eaters laughed, and Hermione lowered her head. Severus remembered his thoughts on what seemed a lifetime ago, when she first insulted Hermione to his face. *You'll be the fertiliser, Bella, and Hermione and I will be dancing on your bones.*

Hermione said, "With all due respect to Mrs. Lestrange, Muggle-borns are the servants of the Dark Lord. We can be used to stabilise the country once you have come into your power, My Lord. We can be the bridge between the Wizarding and Muggle worlds."

"And why do we need that, little girl?" Bellatrix spat, her contempt for Hermione open and fearless. "We are the gods here. We have no need of Mudblood diplomacy!"

"If you wish to conquer the world, my dear Bella, you must be prepared to conquer all of it." Voldemort gazed upon Bellatrix, his eyes full of reproach. "And witches in glass houses shouldn't throw breaking hexes. Your own dear sister Andromeda married a Muggle, did she not? And her daughter, your niece Nymphadora, is now married to the werewolf. Your own closet has its fair share of skeletons, my dear."

A look of fear graced Bellatrix's face. Her eyes narrowed. "Not for long, my Lord. I swear it!"

As Bellatrix spoke, Hermione became aware of Draco glancing upward from time to time. She caught his eye and lifted an eyebrow, but his eyes grew large and he looked away. A drop of water fell just below Hermione's right eye, causing her to make a startled noise of surprise. She automatically brushed it away with her knuckle, and then looked at her hand in horror. It wasn't water; it was a bright red smear of fresh blood.

Hermione shot a glance up at the ceiling, but it was enshrouded in darkness. Another drop of blood landed on the polished surface of the table with a sickening *plating* sound. Frozen in fear, Hermione could only stare at it, as the Dark Lord spoke. "Wormtail, did I not tell you to make sure our entertainment for the evening remained a surprise? I'm afraid you've gone and spoiled it."

"I'm sorry, sir!" Wormtail, Peter Pettigrew, scuttled from an alcove behind Hermione and Severus, and offered Hermione a handkerchief.

"Thank you, I'm fine," she said, and cleared her throat. She sounded suddenly hoarse.

"Ah, well, no matter," Voldemort said, and looked at Hermione keenly. "We had all but wrapped up our little meeting anyway, and Nagini is hungry."

A movement overhead caught Hermione's eye, but before she could look up, something astonishing happened. She actually felt and saw Severus enter her mind. "Don't look at me, Hermione," he said, and it was as if he was there, behind her eyes, and they were both looking out of the window of her mind together. "Don't look up, and don't panic. You are going to see death tonight. You must not panic."

It was the most incredible feeling. It was as if she had taken Patafamenserum again. He was standing in her mind, and it was as if they were looking from the bridge of a ship out onto reality. Nonplussed, Hermione stammered, "How what -" From within, she could speak to him, while her body sat quietly looking on. "How are we doing this-"

Within Hermione's mind, Severus took her hand, and it was as real as if he'd reached across the table and took it. She risked a glance at him; he was sitting impassively at Voldemort's table as before, looking faintly bored. He returned her look with indifferent eyes, and yet within, she could feel him, his voice tinged with something this side of alarm. "It doesn't matter right now. We can talk about it later. What I need you to do now is remain calm. Don't panic," he instructed her again. "If you do, it could mean your death. Don't look. I am with you."

Within her mind, Hermione saw him calmly step in front of her, pulling her behind his body, as if shielding and protecting her. She realised that he was literally providing another level of Occlusion, so that the Dark Lord could not catch her out when whatever was happening above her played out to its hideous conclusion. In that moment, Hermione knew that the only thing stronger than her gut-clenching fear was Severus' desperate need for her to hide it.

A figure descended from the darkness overhead, slowly revolving around, held upside down by a spell that suspended it with invisible ropes. With a flick of Voldemort's wand, the figure regained consciousness and started to moan.

Hermione could not prevent herself from looking, and her gasp of horror was met with derisory laughter. Her body flushed with the shock of what she saw, and it was only Severus' urgent entreaty to remain still that prevented Hermione from jumping to her feet and bolting from the room.

Hermione found herself staring directly into the face of Charity Burbage, one of her favourite Hogwarts professors. She swung like an animal trussed and prepared for slaughter, and her face was beaten almost beyond recognition. Hermione fought the rising scream that felt lodged in her throat, unable to quell the sick feeling of adrenaline coursing painfully against the inside of her skin. Her heart was pounding so hard she was sure everyone could hear it; it actually hurt her chest, and for a moment she thought she might be sick.

Even as she tried to calm herself, Severus mentally wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly. "Do not address her, Hermione. I know it is against everything you feel led to do, but your reaction could mean our very meaningless deaths. Pretend you don't know her. Do this for me, my good little girl. Be my good, good girl," he soothed, but Hermione could hear the frantic desperation in his voice.

Severus hated himself at that moment more than he could ever remember. He was using his own ability to manipulate Hermione's feelings, but he knew he was right. If

she betrayed them here, they would die the same senseless, brutal death as Charity was facing. He could not let that happen. As much as it tore his heart out to abandon Charity in her hour of need, he knew he must. Anything; he must do anything, say anything to save his wife.

As she slowly revolved, Charity spotted him. "Severus? Oh, dear gods, Severus, is that you? Please, please help me!" Her voice was pitiful. *Nothing*, he said to himself, and by proxy to Hermione. *I feel nothing. I don't know her. I don't know you, Charity. Oh, gods, I'm sorry, but I don't know you!*

"Hermione Granger? What are you doing here? Oh, Hermione, tell them to stop! Tell them I'm no threat to anyone! If you have any compassion, please tell them to stop! Please tell them to stop hurting me!" Professor Burbage screamed, and Hermione merely looked at Severus, and kept her face stonily resolute. *I will mourn you, Professor. But I have to leave here alive, and I'm not going to make a foolish, impotent gesture now. I can't. Nothing will save you. I have to live. I'm sorry. I pray you will understand.*

And Professor Burbage kept crying and screaming. Her pleas for mercy slowly turning into recrimination. "How can you live with yourself, Severus?" She looked at Hermione. "You can't leave me here like this? What kind of person are you? How can you live with yourself?"

And then to condemnation. She looked at the grim, pitiless faces. "How can you let an innocent woman be tortured, damn you? How can you sit there? All of you? How can you face this monster - "

*"Avada Kedavra!"*

The body landed on the table with the crashing force of a fallen angel, frightening Draco so much he actually fell out of his chair with an undignified squawk. Hermione sat quietly, her eyes glued on the still body. The room was so still Hermione fancied she could actually hear Professor Burbage's soul rising out of her body. The unnatural quiet was finally broken, and several besides Hermione jumped, glad to be free of this strange spell of death.

"Nagini. Dinner." The Dark Lord's voice cut through the stillness. His voice was light and lilting, the same way Hermione called Crookshanks for his evening meal.

"You did wonderfully, my love." Severus moved out of her mind and back into his own. She could still hear him, but she was now free to move herself. She felt suddenly bereft, as if the floor had been dropped from her, and Severus sensed it. *I'm here. I'm here. Hermione...*

After this, there was the most cursory of discussions on how the Ministry would be infiltrated, and the best way to ambush the Weasley wedding, where Potter would be the most vulnerable, and when and if they should postpone the opening of Hogwarts. Hermione barely heard them. She made herself watch the hideous progression of Nagini, Voldemort's familiar, as it devoured her Professor of Muggle Studies.

Charity Burbage was a sweet, smiling woman who had always encouraged Hermione, had always tried to make her feel at home in the Wizarding world, had always greeted her with affection and kindness. And Hermione had looked through her as though she was a stranger, in order to live. She knew she had done the only thing that she could, but it hurt more than anything she had done; yes, even surpassing the beating her soul had taken for killing Dumbledore.

And so she watched the giant snake open its massive jaws and swallow Charity Burbage until she was nothing more than a huge bulge in the snake's swollen body. It was the penance, the payment required to be allowed to walk out of this hell and smell the sweet, free air of life again. Hermione knew she would take it gladly to be able to leave this room with Severus, so that she could one day avenge this innocent witch's horrible, humiliating death. But she would watch it again for a long time to come, she thought, in her dreams.

Finally, after an eternity, the meeting ended, with the promises of 'refreshment and entertainments to usher in the new year'. Severus, using Hermione's still recovering health as an excuse to eschew the revel to come, was allowed to escort her away from the manor before the more twisted of the evening's festivities had begun. Severus honestly thought he couldn't take much more, and he knew for a fact Hermione most certainly could not.

They walked quietly from the manor to the Apparation point, hand in hand. To the outsider, they were silent, still. In reality, Severus was pouring comfort into his wife through their link, and she was trying her best to find the strength to tamp down the hysteria that impatiently threatened her tight hold on her self-control.

*I'm so sorry, Hermione. You should never have to see these things.* She nodded. She could feel his thoughts without effort. He was sick with the horrible feeling of guilt; he was weak with the relief that it wasn't her, spinning like some twisted party game, to be worried and pummeled until it spilled its secrets on the mirror-shined surface of the dining table.

She thought about herself. She had just watched an innocent woman die, and stood there like a statue, hearing her kind, sweet-natured Muggle Studies professor beg her for a rescue she could not provide. Hermione knew this would haunt her for the rest of her life; knowing that Charity Burbage died thinking she was a cold-hearted bitch who didn't care.

"She didn't think that, lass."

Hermione looked up at him, but he merely tugged her hand and kept moving. "I was able to Legilimise into her mind. She knew what you were doing."

She felt something under her ribcage loosen. "Are you sure?"

He looked at her, willing her to believe him. "As sure as I am able to be, love. What you must not do is condemn yourself. You did what you had to do to survive. I know it is an abomination to even think these things. I know it goes against everything you know or believe. It is a hollow victory, but it is a victory. We have lived to walk away. We have lived to hold one another one more day."

She thought of what he said, and took a great lungful of air. The night was cold, but the aroma of woodsmoke and frost stung her nostrils and smelled unbearably sweet. She felt Severus' hand in hers, and she was suddenly, inexplicably filled with a relief so sharp and powerful it felt like she'd been punched in the chest. Her body was suffused with another sudden intense burst of adrenaline that almost buckled her knees. From panic and horror, it quickly morphed into arousal so acute it felt like a cramp in her womb, and she looked up at him, bewildered. When Severus put his arms around her to Apparate, she whimpered and rubbed shamelessly against him. He looked down at her with the same stark, bleak want in his dark eyes and nodded, pulling her close.

Guiltily, she moaned, "Severus, I need "

"I understand, my darling girl. It has happened to me before. I'll take you there, I promise."

The moment they entered Spinner's End, he put his fingers to her lips, as if silently entreating her not to speak. She replied by pressing her warm lips against his cool hand, her eyes locked on his, and it broke his control like a fever. Their mouths met, crashing hard against one another, and Severus tasted blood in his mouth. It only inflamed his passion, and soon they were tearing at one another's clothes, breathing hard.

He pushed her against the wall, knocking her head carelessly, his mouth plunging hungrily into hers with frenetic, driven, shame-filled kisses, even as she pulled him to her. She struggled to undress herself as he swooped down upon her neck, nipping at her skin as if trying to devour her, infuse his mouth with her taste. He thrust his leg between her thighs, and she moaned shamelessly as she humped him like an animal, frantic for any friction, any sensation that would remind them they were gloriously, thankfully alive.

Hermione was tearing the clothes from her body, her face flushed, overwhelmed and grief-stricken, as Severus gave up on his clothes and unfastened the buttons of his trousers, already needy and desperate. Hermione looked down at his hard cock and wrapped her fingers around it, pulling him to her. They made harsh, grunting sounds that both shamed and excited her, and she wanted him so badly she thought she might swoon from her sheer, helpless lust.

"Hurry, Severus," she moaned, pulling at her clothes, and she cried out as he tore her knickers away, snagging the band of lace against her thigh and burning her leg with

the friction. He pushed her legs apart and positioned himself, not waiting or needing to prepare her.

He drove into her, hard. She gave a startled, satisfied yelp of pleasure. "Ohfuck, Hermione," he swore harshly, finding her impossibly wet and ready and hungry for him. The plump little lips of her cunt pursed around him greedily, and the feel of her tight, slick pussy was perfect. At that brutal, savage moment, his need to have her almost surpassed his love for her.

They fucked one another frantically, trying to drive the terror of the past hour out of their hearts and bodies. Severus hooked his hands around the back of Hermione's shoulders and she wrapped her leg around his thigh, trying to find deeper purchase. He pounded up into her, moaning at the painful pleasure of being alive, the exhilaration of taking his wife like a whore against a wall.

"You had to do it to stay alive," he gasped, his mouth against her satiny neck. "You had to live. You have to live for me..."

His hips pumped against hers like lightning, and he could feel his control going too fast. He couldn't come yet... she hadn't climaxed... he couldn't leave her this way, shamed and panting and unfulfilled...

"Hermione, please," he whined, sobbing with the effort of trying to hold himself in check, but she was already crying out her climax, her little sweet cunt gripping and clutching him, and he came with a shout, as his legs buckled. They slid down the wall, his body still thrusting hard into his tender wife's, his semen gushing warm within her like an apology.

They clung to one another, shuddering. "I love you," Hermione whimpered. "I love you."

He nodded, unable to speak, but kissed her as gently as his tremours would allow. They rocked against one another, trying to calm their pounding hearts, their troubled spirits. The demons their coupling had exorcised had been appeased for now.

Severus took a shuddering breath, and, bracing himself against the wall, he pulled them both to their feet. Hermione leaned against him, heavily, and Severus bent and wrapped his arms around the tops of her legs, and lifted her against him like a child. Wordlessly he carried her up the stairs to their bed, accompanied by the distinct popping of Muggle fireworks, and the church bells in the village ringing in the New Year.

They undressed quietly; each instinctively knew it wasn't the time to speak of the horrific events of the night. Naked, they climbed into bed, and he pulled her against his chest and stroked her hair.

"Do you need a Calming Draught?" he asked, his voice sounding almost guiltily normal. He should sound contrite, repentant. Instead, he merely sounded like a concerned husband caring for his wife.

She looked up at him and smiled tiredly. "No, I'm fine, love. Can I get you anything? A cup of tea?"

He looked at her, and dropped his eyes. "I know it sounds awful, but I would love a sarnie right now."

She nodded as she rose, donning her dressing robe. "Why don't I make us something to eat? I think the food might dull the " she looked away. "I think the food might help us sleep."

"Thank you, lass." He looked up at her and brushed her gown with his fingertips. "You do take good care of me."

Hermione looked at him with soft eyes. "There's nothing that makes me happier." She swallowed, and left the room, and seconds later he heard her quiet tread on the stairs.

Later that night, as they slept, she turned up against her, and he spooned up against her, molding his long slender body against hers like a blanket. Severus dreamed.

In his dream, he was standing on a mountain, overlooking the most beautiful sunset he had ever witnessed. Colours swirled and merged, like an iridescent seashell: pinks and pearly white and deep coral and yellow, kissing the edge of the darker purples and blues of the oncoming twilight. He gaped at it, marveling at how perfect it was; his only discontent was that he was alone in witnessing the glory of it. He wanted to share this halcyon moment with someone.

The wind was warm, and he looked down at his skin, glowing golden in the sun's final glorious journey to night, and the breeze lifted his hair, and riding with it was the fragrance of jasmine and grass and gardenia, lush and aromatic and warm. He saw, to his delight, coming toward him was Hermione, dressed in a purple robe that fluttered around her like the wings of a mythical creature. It was gauzy and insubstantial, like a desert garment, and it was then he noticed that he too wore a light, almost sheer robe, in midnight blue.

It was a decadent garment, and wearing it, he did not feel like Snape, the flinty, hard-edged and bitter wizard he had always been. He felt like Severus, a quiet man of soft summer climes and siroccos. He felt like the man he'd been waiting his whole life to become. He felt beautiful and loved and cherished. It felt like making love with Hermione; light and beauty and magic and innocence. It was thrilling.

Hermione's welcoming smile reached him before she did. She was carrying a bowl full of fruit, and it too glowed in the sunset. Severus knew each piece would taste exquisitely ripe and tart and fresh on his tongue, as irresistible and satisfying as the young woman who carried them.

As Hermione rather ponderously placed the bowl at his feet, Severus realised she was heavily pregnant. Her belly, large and round, protruded proudly from her slender body, and with something akin to wonder, Severus placed his hands on the lush mound. It was hard and pulsed with life, and when he looked into her face, he was overwhelmed at her beauty. Her hair was like burnished gold in the fading sun, and her skin glowed with health and happiness. She was smiling at him with so much love in her eyes it threatened to bring him to his knees.

"This is mine," he said, marveling at the life that swam in the rich waters of her womb. "Mine," he breathed, splaying his possessive fingers over her body. She nodded, with the smile that belonged to him alone.

"This is yours," she said, caressing his face with her warm hands. "This is ours. This is our future."

"I'm dreaming, aren't I?" he said, his voice musical and lovely even to his own ears. "This is a perfect dream."

She smiled. "We're both having this dream, then. Because I'm dreaming it, too. Now we can share and protect one another in our dreams, Severus."

Severus knelt and pressed his lips against her warm, hard belly, full of his child. "You're so beautiful," he said, knowing he was mooning at her like a third-year, and unable to stop. "I love you." He closed his eyes, praying to those indifferent and unfavouring gods. "If I knew I could have this, I'd tear my heart from my chest and lay it at your feet," he said, caressing the beautiful round vessel, and laid his head against it, hearing the strong heartbeat of his son. "I know this is a dream, but I'll make this dream come true."

Hermione's fingers wove through his hair. "We. We will make this dream come true, husband."

Severus opened his eyes, and he was in his boyhood bed in Spinner's End, his sleeping wife warm and kitten-soft against his body. He was ragingly hard, aching for her. More than that, he knew she was wanting him as well. Gently, he slipped his middle finger against her velvety soft slit, and it came away slick and hot with her moisture. He knew her body now, knew how to please her; now that seemed like the most important thing in the world, like the one thing that would clean and heal them.

As quietly as he could, he shifted on the bed until he could slide his yearning cock slowly into her wet heat. He whimpered brokenly as she engulfed him, tight and slick and so hot he could almost feel his flesh sizzle. He rocked into her slowly, feeling her stir, feeling her move with him, helping him, urging him on with her sleepy little cries and

mewls of pleasure. She began to move against him with greater urgency.

"I want to put my seed in you," he whispered, his voice rough with sleep and passion. His large hand played over her taut, flat stomach. "I want that big belly, full of my boy. I want him to suck milk from your sweet little tit. I want to watch my son grow in you. I will be a good father. I promise."

"I know you will," she moaned, pushing back against him, her body growing tighter and insistent around his shaft. "I want those things, too, Severus. Give me those things." His movements grew more frantic, his thrusts deeper and faster, and she mewled her soft little cries that inflamed him so.

"Let me," he moaned, delirious with pleasure and desire and dream lust. He whispered against her ear, "Come on my cock, Hermione. Come for me..." She obeyed him instantly; her voice cried his name like a blessing.

Severus felt his orgasm rush through him like the warm wind of his dreams. Pleasure melted into his cock and balls, sweet and devastating. He choked out her name only a second before he spurted his seed into her waiting vessel, and the selfish, foolish man within the wizard wished with all his might that her body would accept his offering, and reward him with new life within her rich womb. In the moments after, he fought the urge to weep; later, he was never sure if it was because he wanted it so badly, or that he believed in his heart it couldn't possibly happen. For too long, he had believed that a man like him was not destined for such things.

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Severus was summoned daily between New Year's Day and the two weeks before they returned to the school. Most of it had to do with the infiltration of the Ministry, and preparing Severus for his role as Headmaster. He left each meeting feeling sick to his stomach after several hours of preening and affecting a smug surety for his new role as the leader of Hogwarts. Each night, he would open his heart up to his wife, who, like a sponge, accepted all his pain, his remorse and his guilt, allowing him to siphon the worst of it from his sanity.

Also during that time, Severus met with various sources, trying to appease one while throwing another off the scent. He played the dangerous game that most spies will play: deceiving with the truth, using the guilty to hide the innocent. It was a heavy, dark game that left him exhausted at the end of each day.

While he spent his time working with informants and grassers, Hermione scoured her reference books for any clues as to the locations of the Horcruxes. There was precious little to be found; mostly all they knew came from their conversations with Dumbledore, and even these were suspect as the old wizard grew weaker and more covert. All she could ascertain was that Voldemort had created them from objects he prized or coveted: Salazar's ring, the mysterious locket that Severus and Reg Black had unwittingly helped to hide, the strange diary that had nearly caused the deaths of both Ginny and Hermione, and all those affected by the basilisk.

They knew that two had been destroyed: the ring and the diary, and they knew that Dumbledore suspected there to be seven in all, including Harry and Nagini, the Dark Lord's familiar. They suspected, or hoped, that Harry had the locket. They knew a powerful magical item was the only way they could be destroyed. Other than that, they were starting to get an idea what the other two could be, but until they returned to Hogwarts they could only speculate. The prospect of returning to Hogwarts made them both feel ill; they avoided discussion of it.

The Ministry of Magic fell on Severus' birthday. They were having a quiet celebration at home. Hermione had knitted him a scarf and matching gloves, and he was just tugging the latter on his hands when the Dark Mark spluttered to life. Even as diminished as it had become, Severus still hated the feeling, and he cursed roundly - he'd already been summoned once that day. "Bloody maniac wants me there twenty-four hours a day," he fumed, drawing his cloak about his person. He dropped the gloves into her hands.

"As much as I appreciate them, they will be noticed."

"I know, love, I know," she said, frantically, helping him into his cloak. "Go! There must be something wrong." She looked at him worriedly, then made a shooing gesture. "Don't keep him waiting, Severus!"

He paused only to pull her into his arms for a hard kiss, then Apparated away. These summonings had become so commonplace they no longer fretted over them; to Severus it was like reporting for work. That thought dismayed him more than any other. If Potter, Merlin forbid, should fail, this would be their lives. *No*, Severus thought, thinking about his all-but vanished Dark Mark. *If this bastard wins, I'm taking Hermione and fleeing. I would leave now, if I thought Potter could win without us.* Severus cursed his own sense of loyalty and duty; ironic as it was, he was no more capable of walking away from this fight than Hermione, no matter how much he longed to do so.

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It takes a special type of saunter to walk briskly and look as if one has all the time in the world, but Severus had elevated the walk into an art form. All the years of stalking around the castle had given him powerful, strong legs and stamina; his long robes gave the appearance that he glided along. Watching him stroll up to the Manor, anyone would have suspected that the new Headmaster of Hogwarts to be as carefree as if taking an afternoon walk through a garden. No one even suspected that his heart, pounding hard and heavy in his chest, was gravid with dread.

He was the next to last to arrive; Yaxley trailed in soon after Severus was seated, looking smug and excited.

The Dark Lord waited until all eyes were on him alone. "Yaxley. Give me the news I wish to hear."

"It is done, my Lord!" Yaxley was grinning triumphantly. "Pius Thicknesse has been Imperiused; all the parties are in place, and await your orders."

The Dark Lord was pleased. "Excellent! Timing is now everything, Yaxley."

Swelling with importance, Yaxley preened and said, "We know that the Blood Traitor Weasley's family are hosting the wedding of his son, Bill in a week's time. Their location is currently protected by the Ministry's strongest repelling charms and wards, but once the Ministry's infrastructure shuts down, those will drop. We'll be there at the moment they do, and we will grab Potter before they know what hit them. You'll have him in your grasp before that day is out."

"Excellent, my friend!" the Dark Lord said, smiling his hellish smile. "I understand more of this prophecy now. He must die by my hand, you see," Voldemort said, rather petulantly. "I will stage a public execution, to show the world what happens to those who presume to possess the might of Lord Voldemort himself."

All of the Death Eaters cheered, and Bellatrix looked as if she were about to come in her seat. Severus cheered with the others, wondering who in the Order he could trust with this news, and more importantly, who would believe him. There was only one he truly thought might actually listen before trying to hex him into oblivion. As he smiled and applauded the Dark Lord's imminent triumph over Harry Potter, Severus sent his silent message to his wife: *I need to talk to Lupin.*

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Opening lines: "Poughkeepsie" by Linford Detweiler and Karin Bergquist

## Twenty Eight: Lonesome Valley

Nobody else can walk it for you, you must walk it by yourself.

*Please note this chapter contains explicit sexual content.*

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*You must walk that Lonesome Valley, you have to walk it by yourself.*

*Nobody else will walk it for you; you have to walk it by yourself.*

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The Floo burst into green-tinged life, startling Hermione. She looked up from her nervous knitting in time to see Severus fling himself into the room, his face suffused with anger and anxiety.

"It's happened," he growled as he began to pace the short length of the small front room. "I think they got away."

Hermione stared in painful hope. "Wha-what has happened, Severus?" She stood and intercepted his long stride, and laid a calming hand on his chest. "Start from the beginning, love."

His agitation was obvious, but he calmed somewhat at the measured tones of his wife. He rubbed his face with his hands, a scrubbing motion that Hermione had come to recognise as a delaying tactic he employed when he was uncomfortable or unwilling to proceed.

The Ministry had been fully infiltrated by a silent coup; few within the organisation actually realised that Voldemort had taken over. Once the Imperius Curse used on Pius Thickness was turned toward the inner workings of the seats of power, it was simply a matter of plucking the cards away from the fragile, quavering house that made up the upper echelon of the Ministry.

From there, the Dark Lord planned to use the Ministry's sanctioned wards and safehouse listings to locate Potter and the Order. Severus had hoped Harry would flee to safety before the actual takeover, and to that purpose he'd been working both ends against the middle; meeting with Remus Lupin through a third party, trying to discover the plans of the Order, then giving the Dark Lord just enough information to prove his network of espionage was accurate enough to trust, while not revealing any pertinent facts that would cast the odds in Voldemort's favour.

It was a deadly and dangerous balancing act - learning the Order's business, giving Voldemort enough crumbs to keep him occupied, then anonymously making the Order aware of the Dark Lord's intention to retaliate. Timing was now everything.

But to make it work, Severus had had to ride with the Death Eaters tonight, the night the Order was to smuggle Harry away from his childhood home. The sentiment within the Order would be clear; Severus and Hermione would no longer be on their side. It was to be the final coffin nail in their standing with the Order, and there would be no going back until...

Both Severus and Hermione were both too frightened to think about the 'until.'

Severus sighed, looking exhausted. "They did exactly what I told Mungdungus Fletcher to suggest they do," he said. "They Polyjuiced six of their number to look like Potter, then each 'Potter' was escorted to the Burrow by either an Auror or an Order member. The Death Eaters ambushed them the moment they took off past the perimeter wards of the Dursley house."

Hermione felt her heart thudding sickeningly in her chest. "Something terrible's happened, hasn't it?"

Severus closed his eyes. "We had no way of knowing which one of the Potters was real. Even Fletcher wasn't privy to that information," Severus sneered, his contempt for the dodgy wizard all too apparent. "Yaxley gave the order to bring them all to ground." Severus shook his head, and tried to stretch out his overwrought back muscles. The ability to fly without a broom was a marvelous and rare thing, even in the wizarding world, but it was not without cost to the body. In a strained tone, he moaned, "Merlin, I've never been in such a fight! The Order gave as good as they got, make no mistake. It was a battle."

He began to pace again, and Hermione nearly screamed for him to get on with it. His Occlumency walls were water-tight; he was so agitated he could not drop them. "Severus, please tell me what happened," she begged. He stopped and took a deep breath, and when he exhaled, he seemed to deflate. For that tiny moment, Hermione could see what Severus could look like if he grew old. *When he grows old!* she corrected herself fiercely.

"I- I hexed one of them," he said softly. At his wife's horrified expression, he continued, "The fool was right in my sights! Yaxley and Mulciber were flanking me; if I hadn't done *something*, it would have been noted." He stood in the center of the cramped little front room, swaying slightly, and Hermione took the opportunity to force him to sit on the shabby sofa. He held onto her hand as if it were a lifeline, while her other hand rubbed his back to relax the knotted muscles.

"I think I severely injured him, Hermione. I heard his scream, and saw him clutching at his head." Severus dropped his own head with an exasperated sigh. "Merlin, what a fuck-up! It was a Sectumsempra, and I threw it wide, but he just seemed to drive the broom right into it."

"Gods!" Hermione whispered, squeezing his hand. "Did you... do you think you-"

"Oh, he'll live," Severus replied, bitterly, shaking his head. "He'll be scarred for life, and he'll be weak from blood loss and curse my name for eternity, but he'll live. Merlin's balls, why couldn't the fool have stayed on course?" he hissed to himself.

Hermione stroked his hands, which felt cold and bloodless. For a moment, they sat side by side in uneasy and resigned silence. Finally, she could no longer hold her tongue. "Who was killed?"

"Moody. The Dark Lord himself killed him. The rest of them made it to safety, I think." Hermione's grip tightened on his hands, but he ignored it. "They disappeared into the wards of the Burrow. They cut it too bloody close for comfort, though. The Dark Lord was furious; another two minutes in the air and Potter would be dead."

"But he's safe! They're all safe, yes?"

"For now." Severus turned and looked at Hermione. "Mundungus Fletcher." He hissed the name like it was a foul thing, unworthy of his breath. "Worthless wretch! He lost his bottle and Apparated away, leaving Moody alone and unprotected. Fucking coward!"

Hermione listened sympathetically, but with some surprise. It was no secret that Mad-Eye Moody and Severus despised one another, yet here he was, bemoaning Moody's death. Sensing her thoughts, he put a reassuring hand on her knee. "I may not have carried any love in my heart for the one-eyed bastard, but I recognised his worth. He was a strong warrior, and his absence will be felt in this war." He dropped his head again and sighed harshly. He felt so tired...

Hermione bit her lip, lost in thought. "Do you think they can get away before the Ministry falls? Can you get any word to them?"

Severus looked at her almost pityingly. "Lass, do you honestly think they'll believe anything that comes from me now? I've injured one of their own. I led the 'ambush.' If I step one toe out of line, I'll be killed by the Order." Almost angrily, he barked, "We're the enemy now!"

"Severus, please!" she cried. "I know, *I know*. They won't believe us now."

She felt his unspoken apology as he drew her into his arms, as much for his own comfort as to soothe her. "Oh, Hermione," he moaned helplessly, as he cradled her head against his shoulder. "I never meant for you to have to endure this. If we should survive—"

"*When*, Severus!" She pulled away slightly and looked up into his eyes. The fact that she'd harboured such similar thoughts only moments before caused her voice to grow harsh with guilt. "*When* we survive! Don't start that again, please." She shook her head, breathing hard, feeling angry with herself. "I can't bear to hear you say those things I can't bear the thought of you not being in this world."

Taken aback, he tried to calm his distraught wife, but her overwrought nerves had failed her. As he sat there, smelling of cold, crisp air and failure, she reminded herself that he could just as easily have met Mad-Eye Moody's fate tonight. While the Order mourned the death of one of its own, her wizard was safely home, holding her. This, combined with the relief that Harry was still alive overwhelmed Hermione, and she held onto Severus, trembling uncontrollably.

"Please promise me you'll live," she begged, her teeth chattering with fear. "Please promise me—"

Alarmed, Severus shook her slightly. "Hermione, calm yourself! You are going to work yourself into a right state." He drew her onto his lap, where she held onto him tightly, shivering. "Breathe in through your nose," he intoned, his voice deep and sonorous; the professor's voice. "Breathe out through your mouth. In, nose. Out, mouth. In. Out..."

He soothed her as she obeyed his gentle but insistent commands, and gradually her shivering subsided, leaving her feeling weak and foolish. She sighed resignedly, both frustrated and angry with herself. This kind of outburst must stop. She was a bloody Gryffindor, for Merlin's sake! She would be of no use to Severus if she fell apart every time he gave her bad news.

*This won't happen again*, she said, her inner voice contrite and chagrined. *You need a partner, not a trembling weakling. I will be stronger.*

*I know, love*, he replied, warm and smooth inside her mind. His inner voice stroked across the jagged walls within her mind's eye. It trailed across the harsh places, soothing the way, taking charge. And in doing so, he calmed his own troubled spirit. He had been the harbinger of troubling news; he would be the one to bring peace to them both.

As his consciousness eased and soothed within, Severus continued to stroke and gentle her with his large, pale hands. His touch grew languorous, and his palms lifted from her skin, leaving his fingers behind to languidly stroke her arm, featherlight and capriciously. Almost subliminally, Hermione felt her body change from anxious to calm, then to a tension coiled with a different spring.

She felt a sudden shame that she had changed from worried sick to wantonly aroused in the matter of a few strokes of her husband's long, skillful fingers. It was the only thing they could control; the only destiny they could form and shape and mold to their whim. She looked up into Severus' eyes, and was relieved to see that same uncertain, edgy desire mirrored in his fathomless dark eyes. Her breath caught; when he was like this, there was only one conclusion, and she welcomed it. *I need what you need, my love*, she murmured, deep within.

Feeling her in his thrall, he smirked and turned her on his lap until she straddled his hips. He made a soft rumbling noise as his large hands cupped the globes of her bottom and pulled her close against his chest. He purred, "What I need is you, Hermione. I need to forget for a little while who I am. I need to bury myself in your warmth, and I need to feel you melt around me until I don't know anything beyond my cock in your cunt and your tit in my mouth and your name on my lips as I make you come." His voice grew hard along with his erection, and he rocked his hips against hers, knowing that the very coarseness of his language would excite her as much as it inflamed him.

His breath shuddered against the delicate shell of her ear, making her shiver. "I need you to suck my prick until I forget my name and I am blind with pleasure and deaf to everything but your cries." He hissed as her mouth slid against his throat. "I need the taste of your pussy in my mouth and I need to scream in ecstasy until my tongue stiffens, and I need to make you come until you beg for mercy, until you can't remember anything but my body, pressing yours against the mattress, and my soul pressing against your heart.

"I need to brand your skin with my mouth, and I need you to be selfish and greedy and use me until there is nothing left but a man who exists only to pleasure you. I need to hide you away so that I am the only star by which you can find North. That is what I need, witch," he moaned feverishly, as Hermione undressed him as quickly as her arousal would allow. His hands tore at her shirt, popping the buttons in his haste to touch her.

He urged her down onto the sofa, his mouth crashing against hers, and he pushed a desperate moan into her mouth. She wrapped her arms around his waist and pulled him to her, her mouth open to his plundering tongue, swallowing his grunts, his primal sounds of carnal helplessness. His skin was hot against her chest, and she looked up into black, black eyes that were wild and burning with scorching, possessive lust. A wordless spell later and the last of their clothing was sent to the floor beside them; they hissed in pleasure as skin met skin.

He began to worship her with his mouth; slow, deliberate suckling kisses engulfed her nipples, heavy with promise and love. She begged him to take her, but he only smiled. "Wait, love, wait." Her body burned for him. She could feel his cock, ramrod hard and hot, slide between her slick labia, and whispered a plea. Without removing his lips from her rosy areola, a long, slender hand slipped between them, and he found her distended clit and stroked it with the pad of his thumb.

He took her to the edge of her climax with his deft skill, building that slow fire until it raged like a conflagration within. She begged, he commanded patience. She demanded; he pleaded patience. She screamed; he laughed again for patience, until she was wild with need and breathless and on the edge and then he thrust into her with a cock that burned with its own fire. He watched in wonder as pleasure and need and bliss played across her expressive face, each emotion more precious to him than the last, knowing that, for now, he could at least give her this. For now, he could bury himself within her silken flesh and no one could find them.

Her cooing voice was soft and low and he began to move slowly in this dance they knew so well. All the world lay within them, and Severus felt like the man in his dream again; the dusky, mysterious man of the desert, loving and being loved by his strong, proud mother goddess.

He took her with a fierce concentration and adoration that sent her toward a climax of painful intensity, and together they moved against one another, their bodies locked in perfect rhythm, their gazes locked. His strokes increased in depth and strength, and each wrung a growl from his throat that matched his lover's.

She braided her fingers in his hair and he pulled himself closer to her. "I will be a warrior for you," she cried, and he saw in her eyes the same rapture he shared, and his body betrayed his silent pledge of tenderness. He gave into the sweet bliss of her warmth and wetness melting around him, encasing him in a velvet sheath, bending him, breaking his will until he was riding her, hard and desperate, his slim hips bruising her, each thrust a shaft of desire, launched from the bow of Eros into her core.

He cried aloud with each hard, battering thrust, feeling her gathering inward, like a wave towed under from the shore. Her body locked in a rictus of ecstasy; then she screamed her release as he drove her over that aching, blazing edge of her orgasm. The walls of her cunt pulsed and rippled around him, fluttering down the length of his cock. Her core clutched him like a vise, stealing his breath and milking him to the edge of his own release.

An impossible heat bloomed in his groin, and he was going, oh, he was going fast and sweet and— "Hermione... *ogods*... I love you so much... so much it... it hurts... mine, mine, oh, *fuuck*..." He howled as his climax wracked his body; each terrible, shuddering plunge so powerful it caused the sofa to shift across the floor. He helplessly collapsed over Hermione, moaning; he couldn't catch his breath.

Slowly, his senses crept back into place; he knew he should move, but it felt so marvelous, pressed against the tender flesh of his wife. Reluctantly, he pushed himself onto his forearms. Although Hermione was a fine surface on which to lie, the scratchy fabric of the old sofa was not. Chagrined and sweat-drenched, Severus slowly pulled himself up onto his hands and knees, allowing Hermione space to breathe.

For a moment, he allowed himself the indulgence of simply gazing down at his fine witch. She was flushed and sweaty, her hair damp, her eyes warm and mellow and sated, and when she smiled up at him, he felt like an angel, pure and clean, sweat-washed and shriven. They simply shone with magic, whole and forgiven and sane again.

Hermione regarded her husband as he rose from her. He was a beautiful mixture of light and dark, contrasts of every form and description. His beauty made the word 'handsome' seem insipid, tame, indifferent. As he smiled down at her, his black eyes full of wonder, her heart almost burst in her chest.

He was the world to her.

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The Ministry delayed commencement of the Spring term at Hogwarts, so Severus and Hermione spent the small respite trying to figure out a way to help Harry discover the remaining Horcruxes. To their disbelief, the Weasleys decided to proceed with the wedding of their son Bill to Fleur Delacour, which Hermione thought was the epitome of foolishness.

Severus was even less charitable on the subject. "Why on earth would this bunch of bungling morons decide that now would be the time to have this wedding? Do they honestly think this will be seen as a gesture of defiance against the Dark Lord, or are they just being willfully stupid?"

Hermione had no answer. Severus had tried to contact Arthur to tell him that the safe-keeping wards from the Ministry were compromised at best, but the Order had closed ranks. As far as they were concerned, Hermione and Severus Snape were the King and Queen of Death Eaters. Severus even risked trying to give Yaxley at the Ministry incorrect information regarding the date and time of the event, but the wheels were turning, and the pair of them could only look on and watch, praying that, when the time came, the Order would get Harry to safety.

They hadn't long to wait. During the wedding, Yaxley pulled the plug. Scrimgeour, the Minister, was dispatched with little ceremony. The Death Eaters and their collaborators, Imperused or otherwise, swiftly took over the Ministry, and within thirty minutes, the organisational wards and safeguards were vulnerable to the Death Eaters.

The Ministry had fallen.

Hermione remembered her grandmother talking about World War II, and how they all sat around the wireless, listening to death raining from the sky over London. On the day the Ministry fell, she thought it must have felt a lot like this: hearing about it from a distance, fearing the worse, not knowing who lived and who died, feeling helpless and angry and wanting it all to be over *now*.

In the afternoon, she and Severus were called to Malfoy Manor. The Dark Lord was so confident that Harry would be in his hands by nightfall, he called for a celebration that evening. As befitted his position as Headmaster of Hogwarts, Severus had not been included in the raid on the Burrow, and Hermione sat with him that long, long afternoon, under the watchful eye of Death Eaters of higher rank. She stared ahead, motionless, as Severus sat by her side, his hand placed possessively over hers. No one knew the whimpering, cowering fear that gnawed at the two of them. Deep within their Occluded minds, they held onto one another, their corporeal bodies calm and erect, but their subconscious forms clinging to one another, both terrified that this was the end, and they had failed and all hope was lost.

Slowly, the rooms filled with more Death Eaters. A few of their spouses joined them. No one looked particularly triumphant. There was a tense quiet in the room; no one seemed able to meet anyone's eye.

*He must have escaped,* Hermione said, her voice strong and hopeful within Severus' mind.

*Gods, let it be so,* Severus replied. *If he can just keep his bloody head down for a little while longer-*

Finally, Yaxley, Mulciber, Macnair, the Lestranges and the Carrows arrived, looking grim. The Dark Lord, ensconced on his throne, awaited their news with an unreadable expression.

"Well, my friends?" he hissed, leaning forward. He stroked the giant head of his familiar, who preened at his attentions. "I hope you made today's wedding a memorable one."

Mulciber had the stupidity to smile. "We did indeed, My Lord."

"Excellent. But, where is the guest of honor?" the Dark Lord queried, pretending to look around. "Do you have him hidden in your cloak?"

Mulciber's smile faded. He looked at his fellow Death Eaters uneasily. "Well, sir, the thing is-"

"The *thing*? THE THING?" the Dark Lord roared, and with a sweep of his wand, Mulciber was thrown across the room like a rag doll. "You dare come smiling to me, empty-handed? Had you no courage to tell me what your Lord already knows? That Potter has escaped you? That you have been outwitted by a sixteen-year-old wizard? Am I surrounded by fools?" He gestured, and the line of Death Eaters fell to the ground, screaming in agony as the Cruciatus Curse tore through their bodies.

Hermione and Severus watched with stony expressions. Within her, she felt Severus' brief, savage satisfaction. She knew that some of these men had tortured him in the past, but to feel his pleasure at their wretched state gave her no peace. At least Harry had escaped, and she could marginally relax, knowing that, for now, he was still in the fight.

For what seemed like hours, the screams echoed in the room. Hermione risked a glance at the Malfoys, who stood apart from her and Severus. The Malfoys, as hosts of the Dark Lord, were also not expected to participate in the ill-fated raid, but their faces told of their own anguish.

Lucius Malfoy was not the wizard she remembered from her childhood. Gone was the louche, haughty bearing. Azkaban and his own demons rode him hard now. His hair was now lank and dull, his face unshaven and a trifle dirty. His clothes looked as if he'd worn them for several days.

His wife, Narcissa, looked even worse, if that was humanly possible. Oh, she was still beautiful in that way that reminded Hermione of blue topaz—clear and cool and hard but her eyes were dilated with fear. She held Draco to her closely, as if afraid the Dark Lord would take out his displeasure on him as well. If Hermione had been a betting woman, she would have put her last Sickle on Narcissa forsaking everything, even Lucius, to keep Draco safe. Hermione idly thought that, as far as Narcissa was concerned, the Dark Lord could go fuck himself. Her family's lives came first, especially the life of her son.

Hermione wondered how she and Severus could use that information. She almost smirked, thinking that Severus' Slytherin wiles were starting to rub off on her. A whispered word within her mind told her that he thought so, as well.

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Two days after the ill-fated wedding party, the news they had waited for finally arrived. Harry, Ron and Neville had disappeared at the wedding and were on the run. Squads of dark and questionable wizards were recruited to be on the lookout for them; they roamed the length and breadth of the country in gangs called Snatchers. Wizarding Britain was now in the grip of Dark Forces, and the reward for the capture of the three Gryffindors was so exorbitant that the most frightened and disenfranchised of witches and wizards began to scour for the three missing boys alongside the Snatchers. The Gryffindors had almost been caught at Grimmauld Place, but again managed to escape.

The days passed in a blur as Severus and Hermione readied themselves to return to Hogwarts. They arrived at the castle a week before classes started. The wards let them in, and allowed them access to the headmaster's quarters. When Severus approached the gargoyle that stood sentinel at the bottom of the stairs leading to the headmaster's study, he found himself wishing that it would refuse him, tell him he wasn't worthy, to fuck off. To his dismay, it sprang aside and let him pass without comment.



The portraits watched him enter the headmaster's study with mistrusting eyes. "Traitor," one of them hissed, but when he looked up at the portraits challengingly, they all scarpereed for distant canvases. Severus was eventually left with the only occupied portrait. Dumbledore sat snoring peacefully. At that moment, Severus despised Albus Dumbledore more than the Dark Lord more than Sirius Black.

"Well, all your predictions came true, old man," Severus murmured. "I'm here as Headmaster, and Hermione is with me. Potter, Weasley and Longbottom are on the run, Merlin knows where, and I have two Death Eaters ensconced in the school, determined to make the students practice Unforgivables on one another."

The portrait twitched, but did not rise from its slumber. *And they called me a coward*, Severus thought bitterly. "I don't know if you and Potter found Reg's... gift, but since I don't know how to destroy it, it hardly matters, does it? As long as you keep me in the dark, I'm fighting with my wand hand tied behind my back."

He could have been singing a lullaby for all the response he received from the portrait. "It's almost comical, isn't it, Albus? You can't tell Potter how to destroy Horcruxes, because the Dark Lord might discover his knowledge, and you won't tell me, because you don't truly trust me, despite all your twaddle about my rehabilitation. You've only trusted me when it suited you, when you could use me to your best advantage. But never truly."

Again, the occupant of the portrait shifted slightly, but did not awaken. "You're going to have to wake up eventually, Albus. Sooner or later, this castle is going to become a battleground, and I will probably be its first casualty. I know you couldn't care less, but your darling Potter will return here like the fool he is, and when he does, this castle will be awash with blood. This time your hands will be stained as well."

The portrait did not stir. Severus slumped, already weary and heartsick. "Why won't you help me?" he whispered, and placed his head in his hands. "Even my precious wife split her beautiful soul to obey your orders. Why have you left us to face death alone?"

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Amidst all of the turmoil surrounding their return to Hogwarts, the Dark Lord began issuing instructions. Amongst the long and sometimes contradictory lists of demands was one that bothered both Severus and Hermione to the point of distraction.

"Why would he want this list of seemingly disparate items placed in Bellatrix LeStrange's vault at Gringotts?" Hermione puzzled, frowning. "The Great Hall Hogwarts Banner, The Sword of Gryffindor, The portrait of Salazar Slytherin and the Great Book of Names?"

They both looked hopefully up at the sleeping portrait of Dumbledore. "Cowardly bastard," Hermione muttered.

Severus shook his head. The line between his brow was furrowed in thought. "The only thing I notice about the list is that each item has an affiliation with the founders." He looked at his wife and stifled a laugh. Hermione's extensive knowledge of the history of Hogwarts was a point of secret pride with her; for him to know more than his little swot did not sit well with her.

"Go on," she said darkly, tucking her knees close to her chest as she sat in her chair. Severus allowed himself a chuckle this time.

"Well, legend has it that Rowena Ravenclaw wove the spells that enchanted the Great Book to recognise any magic-born child in England at the moment of their birth. It is also believed that Helga Hufflepuff herself wove the banner that hangs in the Great Hall, infusing it with enchantments and powers to protect the students there."

Severus pondered for a moment. "I can understand why he'd want the book. It shows every child born with magical abilities. It is the perfect way to discover Muggle-borns aspiring to come to Hogwarts." He spoke the final words with distaste. If the Dark Lord was privy to that information, not one Muggle-born child would survive, Severus was certain.

"But why the others?" he continued. "The Banner has protective charms, and the Sword of Gryffindor is a symbol of the house that fought against Salazar Slytherin in the campaign to allow all types of magicals to come to Hogwarts, but the Portrait? It holds no intrinsic value and it has no magical properties to speak of. It barely moves; it never speaks."

He glanced at Hermione, lost in thought. Again, he looked back to Dumbledore's portrait and wanted to blast it into eternity.

"Would anyone here like to offer any information?" Hermione pointedly asked the wall of sleeping former heads of Hogwarts. Either they didn't hear her, or pretended not to.

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Hermione stood beside her husband in the Great Hall, calm and stoic, as he addressed his former colleagues for the first time as their new headmaster. From his cold, sneering countenance, they could never have guessed that he had spent the previous evening vomiting from anxiety and fear. He had been unable to keep anything down but the thinnest broth, and to Hermione, his dear face looked drawn and pinched.

"Excuse me, *Headmaster*," said Professor McGonagall, spitting the honorific from her mouth distastefully. "It has always been the policy for each individual instructor to choose the severity and form of punishment for any student infractions." Her eyes snapped. "Why do all detentions and punishments now have to be assigned and approved by you? Professor Dumbledore-" Severus hissed, and McGonagall was visibly taken aback, but she pressed on. "Professor Dumbledore felt that his teachers were more than capable of determining how and when a student would serve detention."

"I am not Albus Dumbledore -"

"That is patently obvious, Headmaster, and more the pity," she growled in return. The two faced one another. The Carrows grinned, hoping for a confrontation. The other professors were looking from McGonagall to Severus; uneasy, but ready to defend their friend against the new, hated headmaster.

"And as such," Severus continued smoothly, as if she had not interrupted, "It is my decision that all students will be brought to me, and I alone will determine their punishment." He looked at the Heads of Houses. "If you do not wish for your students to be brought before the headmaster, I suggest that you urge them to be mindful of this fact and to avoid any reason for punishment. Are there any further questions?" He passed a gimlet eye over the resentful group. No one met his dark gaze.

Finally, Professor Slughorn cleared his throat. "Headmaster," he began, rather unctuously, "will Miss Granger be joining classes this year? I mean no disrespect," he added hastily, giving Hermione an almost apologetic smile, "but do you think it would be advisable for her to-"

"My wife-" Severus interrupted, giving the briefest of hesitations as a collective gasp sounded from the group. He began again. "My wife, as you all know, is one of the most intelligent witches this hallowed seat of learning has produced."

"For a Mudblood," Amycus Carrow muttered under his breath. His sister sniggered. Severus forced himself to ignore the Death Eaters. *That will cost you, Carrow*, he said to himself.

"-and therefore, she will take her N.E.W.T.s this spring. I expect you all to make time to tutor her privately. I will be contacting you for a schedule." He hesitated, then raised his chin slightly. "I will not insult your intelligence by pretending that nothing is different. I will not entertain nor will I encourage the discussion of recent events; it serves no purpose. I will tell you that, should you have any information regarding the whereabouts of Harry Potter, Ronald Weasley or Neville Longbottom, you are required by law to inform myself or another Ministry official. I will be more than happy to receive this information in strictest confidence."

He smiled wolfishly, imbedding in their minds his apparent desire to be the one to bring Harry to his Master. It was the final nail in the coffin, the final act that cemented his loyalty to the Dark Lord and his complete defection from the Order. He could see the last vestiges of respect and tolerance bleed from their faces. It was all he could do not to throw himself at their feet and plead for mercy for him and his wife. He knew there would be none, now.

"Aside from the obvious, I expect you to conduct your business here as you always have; the children here need to be taught, and you are their role models. I expect you to be good ones, and to remind them exactly why they are here."

Pomona Sprout ventured, "What about the Muggle-borns, Headmaster? Will they return?"

"Not if they want to keep their heads," Alecto Carrow cackled. She sneered at Hermione. "What do they say? The only good Mudblood is a de-

"Yes, we all know the phrase, Alecto," Severus drawled, sounding mildly disinterested. He crossed his arms in a bored gesture, but secretly, he was already reaching for his wand. These fools were spoiling for a fight, and if he wasn't careful, he'd spend every waking hour just preventing the Carrows and his professors from hexing one another to bits. "To answer your question, Professor Sprout, the Muggle-born Registration Commission is being organised at the Ministry even as we speak, to get a more accurate idea of the amount of Muggle-born witches and wizards in Britain. Until this committee has conducted a proper census, I would think that most Muggle-borns will stay at home, waiting to hear from the Ministry."

"Technically, information about the Muggle-born Registration Commission is classified, Headmaster," Amicus Carrow said pompously. *Tosser*, thought Hermione.

"My apologies, Amicus," Severus sneered, "I am sure you have far more knowledge of the inner workings of the Ministry than I. I was merely told that Muggle-borns would not be attending until they were approved by the Commission, and must be patient until they are subpoenaed by the Ministry. All will be eventually summoned."

He could see Pomona looking at him thoughtfully, and he breathed a little easier. She had somehow read between the lines, though she probably thought he hadn't wanted her to. If you know any Muggle-borns, tell them to go underground. Hide. When the Ministry calls, be elsewhere. *Please hear what I'm saying*, Severus was thinking. *Please listen with your ears instead of your hatred!*

"And your... wife, Headmaster? Is she subject to this Muggle-born Registration Commission's findings?" Professor Vector asked. She, of all of them, was the most obviously upset. Charity Burbage had been her lover for many years; Charity's disappearance and replacement by the hideous Alecto Carrow had been met with rage and confusion.

"No, as the wife of the Headmaster of Hogwarts, she is not," Severus replied, turning to dismiss the group. "Now, if there are no other questions-

"Oh, I see, then." Vector's face was blotched with anger, and her eyes began to snap with fire. "If you're a Death Eater camp follower, you can pretty much get away with anything in this 'new order'."

Her fellow teachers stared at Vector in shock. A quiet, helpful witch, she had never even raised her voice in a classroom, much less insulted someone so viciously. In a quiet voice, deadly with warning, Severus replied, "I am prepared to overlook your comment, Professor Vector, in light of recent events. Change is sometimes painful, but inevitable. It can also cause us to do or say things we regret. I will tell you, however, I am not prepared to endure insults aimed at my wife. Madame Granger-Snape is not a Death Eater, nor is she a camp follower."

"So just Death Eater's whore and a murderer, then?" Vector's voice was ugly with pent-up rage. The gasp of the other teachers felt as if it sucked all of the air from the room. Hermione felt her face grow red, and she glanced up at Severus, trying to look as proud and impassive as he. She felt she was failing miserably. He returned her gaze, and she knew she had to say something, or forever be branded.

She stood tall and faced one of her favourite professors, willing her voice to sound calm. "Professor, I am not a whore, nor am I any of those other names you suggested. I am a wife, and I am prepared to support my husband here in every way I can." She looked into the eyes of the angry witch, and continued, "I do not have to justify my reasons for what I have done to anyone here, but I will say that I represent the best interests of my husband, and our actions reflect the one who sent us here."

Those who met her gaze returned it with abhorrence. She met the familiar face of Madam Pomfrey, who glared briefly, then lowered her eyes. Of all the stony looks given Hermione, Poppy's hurt the worst.

Severus, watching his wife with pride and adoration, felt his heart swell. She had faced them and told them the truth, if they would but hear *Perhaps one day they will, little one*, he said. *Perhaps one day.*

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Severus sped quickly down the hall toward the infirmary, his fury lending speed to his long-legged stride. The first week of school had been nothing short of hellish, but this- His gut churned sourly, and a sudden passing weakness slowed his gait for a moment. *Damn them, damn them all!*

He burst into the infirmary like an avenging angel in black, his pale face suffused with anger. Poppy Pomfrey looked up, and something like relief flickered in her eyes before she bent back down to Hermione and murmured, "Your husband is here, Mrs. Snape."

Hermione looked up at Severus as he rushed to her side and knelt, his face on a level with hers. He took one look at her swollen, bruised face and neck, and Hermione heard his silent curse, *Gods damn them!*

"What happened?" he replied aloud, his voice clipped and dispassionate. He glanced up at the mediwitch, who had closed the privacy curtain with a wave of her wand.

Casting a Silencing Spell, Madam Pomfrey conjured two chairs, one for her and one for the headmaster. "Professor Slughorn found her. He heard a commotion and looked outside his classroom in time to see Mrs. Snape being hexed rather badly."

"By whom?" Severus' voice was flinty, chipped and picked like ice. "Who dared hex my wife?"

Hermione only shook her head. When she did not reply, he added through clenched teeth, "Not Slytherins, then? No, they wouldn't dare. Was it your precious Gryffindors?"

After the slightest of hesitations, Hermione replied, "I honestly don't know, Severus. It happened so fast, and my back was to them. I'm really not sure."

He closed his eyes. Damn them! It was bad enough that they do something this foolish, but to actually attack one of their own to attack his beloved wife and hurt her-

*But I'm no longer one of their own, Severus* she said, deep within the recesses of his mind. *I'm the enemy now.*

"It-it was my fault, Severus," she added shakily. "You told me to never walk the halls unaccompanied by you, but I thought I'd just pop down to see Professor Slughorn about some reading he'd recommended. I thought I'd be safe while classes were in session."

"It's actually not as bad as it looks, Headmaster," Poppy added in her usual no-nonsense, brisk manner. "Mrs. Snape was hit with a Stinging Hex and a mild Slicing Hex. Her reflexes protected her from the worst of it, but the Stinging Hex is the one that caused the swelling. It's gone down quite a bit from when Horace first brought her here."

Severus nodded, and rubbed his palm absently. He had known the moment it had happened, of course. The moment she was struck he had been in a lengthy discussion with Amicus Carrow about how to properly demonstrate Unforgivables, and why students could not be used in place of the test dummies. Some Gryffindors, led by the formidable Miss Weasley, had already incurred Amicus' wrath by 'accidentally' blasting him with a misfired *Reducto* spell. Severus had been trying to come up with a suitable punishment that would satisfy Amicus' bloodlust while keeping the hothead Gryffindors from any real harm, when he felt the blistering pain. Suddenly the Blood Oath had seared across the palm of his hand, and Hermione's inner cry shut off any bemusement he felt.

Still, Severus had to sit and pretend nothing was amiss until Amicus stopped bellowing long enough for Severus to interrupt and dismiss him. He feigned complete sympathy for the man, promising all manner of punishment for the foolish Gryffindors. Only when he was sure that Amicus had gone on his way was he able to rush to the infirmary.

Severus willed his pounding heart to calm. Now he would be faced with another balancing act; he could not let the assault on his wife go unpunished, and yet, what could

he do?

As if she sensed his thoughts, Madam Pomfrey sighed. "All this is rubbish, isn't it?"

"I beg your pardon, Madam?" Severus replied stiffly.

She huffed. "I don't buy this 'Death Eater' shite, Severus." She glanced down at Hermione. "I also don't buy this 'Dumbledore's murderer' business, either." She took Hermione's hand and looked keenly at Severus. "This, all this, was his idea, wasn't it?" Then she nodded, as if agreeing with her own reasoning. "You are no more Death Eater than I am, Severus Snape. I know you. I know what you've had to suffer because of You-Know-Who. Whatever happened, it's because Albus wanted it to happen, didn't he?"

Hermione was silent. Severus, ever cautious, took a moment to think. Poppy Pomfrey knew him better than anyone alive, even better than Hermione, in many ways. If he had been alone, it would have been different. He would have sneered at her and walked away, but he couldn't. Hermione was vulnerable; he had to protect her.

"The act of merely thinking those thoughts could have grave consequences, Madam Pomfrey," Severus said at last.

"You don't have to be a genius to know that, Severus," she scoffed. "I've already kept many of your secrets. I'm hurt you would imagine I couldn't keep this one. I'm prepared to take any oath, wand, Unbreakable Vow, whatever you deem necessary."

"No oaths," Severus interjected quickly. He reached for Hermione, who sat up and leaned against her husband's wool coat wearily. For a moment, he felt overwhelmed with exhaustion. "Poppy, I have to protect her. I have to protect these children from the Carrows. I have to keep this school safe until this madness is over." He looked at her bleakly, and cast their fate into the lap of the gods again. "I promised Albus I would."

"I'll help you," Poppy said, matter-of-factly. "From now on, Hermione will be continuing her Healer training with me during the day. If she needs something, I'll send a house-elf for it." Poppy stood, and Hermione and Severus followed suit. She looked from one to the other. "You two are all alone here. No one can know, especially those Carrow blighters."

Severus shook his head. The relief of knowing that one person was on their side left him feeling like a weak fool. "I thought Hermione would be safe here. Today has proven me wrong." He felt his control going, and Hermione suddenly turned in his arms and held him. "I do not care that I am despised and branded a traitor. But I cannot bear the thought of you being punished for it!" he cried, burying his face against her soft hair.

For a moment, they stood still, holding and comforting one another, with Severus apologising. "I am such a weakling! You have been hurt, and all I can think of is how I cannot survive without you!"

Madam Pomfrey watched them for a moment. "Severus, you must understand. As far as everyone here knows, Hermione is a murderess. I know something else must be going on, and if you wish to tell me, so be it, but whatever happens, she will always be known as the witch who killed Dumble-"

"Don't say it!" Severus cried, pulling Hermione in a crushing grip. Almost plaintively, he added, "She was protecting me."

"It's alright, Severus," Hermione soothed, pulling him closer, feeling his anguish, his pain. "It's alright. Poppy is right. I accept that. When this is over, I will be held accountable."

Severus felt his heart stutter in his chest. "Hermione-"

"But," she continued, "I also believe with all my heart that the truth will be known, and we will be allowed to live free." She smiled up at her husband, and the love in her face almost drove him to his knees. "You yourself said that in the end, we would wade in blood. I believe that now." Her tired eyes were resigned. "But we will not be alone. I also believe that now." She turned to the mediwitch. "You've always supported us, and I have to ask you to support us now." She smiled. "Do you have time to hear the entire story?"

Madam Pomfrey, Matron of Hogwarts Infirmary, staunch defender of the weak and the light, faced the Granger-Snapes with her chin raised high. "I will always have time for you. Both of you. And even if it's with my last breath, I'll defend you to anyone who asks."

Severus met her gaze, finding he was unable to speak. He nodded and turned away, feeling at once comforted and crushed by the thought of Hermione's vulnerability here. He had believed her safest here at Hogwarts with him. *No, be honest! You felt safe with her here with you. You're not protecting her so much as you are comforting yourself. You're the one who can't stand the thought of being away from her.*

Severus' vision had narrowed down to a dark recess that he was now walking with slow, halting, frightened steps. Once, he would have run to the darkness, ready to have it over with. The endgame was nigh, all the pieces set in motion, and there was nothing to do now but move across this giant chessboard Albus Dumbledore had created the night Severus knelt and promised his soul in exchange for redemption.

He would see it to its conclusion, but he no longer leapt to the next square with the same reckless, heedless impatience he had exhibited in his hopeless youth. Now he could think of nothing but Hermione; even as he dragged himself from nightmare after nightmare, his one thought was *Hermione. I have to stay alive for her.*

Why did it seem so impossible to believe he could?

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Lonesome Valley - Traditional Spiritual

## Twenty Nine: Tell Me No Secrets, And I'll Tell You No Lies

Chapter 30 of 39

Sharing the famous Hogwarts hospitality...

*It's been awhile, and I do need to periodically reiterate that I do not own any of the characters I am so wantonly playing with. They belong to JK Rowling and Warner Brothers. If they belonged to me, they would get lots more chocolate and lots less heartache.*

*Thank you to stgulik, my phenomenal beta. You just have no idea how necessary she is to this story. Many thanks to the LJ 'Teddypeeps' who constantly encourage me to keep writing, and to you, for staying with this story after over a year of working on it.*

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*I want you when you are close to me, I want you never to be far*

*I know you have laid a trap for me, yes, I know you, but not as who you are*

*Black on the ground, I am still as a stone, whatever changed my love to despair?*

*Light through the clouds trapped the scent of a soul, in a moment, my love, I am captured, captured*

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"Whore of Gryffindor. Whore, Whore of Gryffindor!"

Hermione walked faster.

"Whore, Whore of Gryffindor! Whore, Whore of Gryffindor!"

Other voices picked up the chant. Voices she recognised. Voices of students that used to call her a friend.

"Whore, Whore of Gryffindor! Whore, Whore of Gryffindor!"

She rounded a corner and headed toward the Infirmary, trying to walk quickly but not run. The voices grew louder and closer, the chant reverberating off the walls.

"Whore, Whore of Gryffindor! Whore, Whore of Gryffindor!"

She tried to keep her Occlumency walls high. She did not want Severus to hear this. She yelped as something hard struck her shoulder, and she looked around to raise a shield in her defense. She turned to see a group of third years streaming out of Muggle Studies, chanting and taunting her. Alecto Carrow was encouraging them.

Hermione sobbed and broke into a run, screaming, "Stop it! Stop it, please!"

"Whore, Whore of Gryffindor! Whore, Whore of Gryffindor!"

"WHAT IN THE NAME OF MERLIN'S BEARD IS GOING ON OUT HERE?"

Madam Pomfrey's voice thundered in the hallway, outside the Infirmary. Hermione stumbled past her and into the safety of the Infirmary just as Alecto Carrow mocked her in a sing-song voice. "Stop it! Stop it!"

Laughter surrounded her. Alecto turned a contemptuous eye toward Hermione and gestured with a sneer. "See? I told you, didn't I? Mud-" She caught herself as Poppy glared at her. The flat-faced Death Eater continued in a mockingly sweet, falsely contrite voice, "-I mean, Muggle-born - are very thin-skinned. Weak, whinging. No staying power. A drain on the Magical world, you see," she finished, a note of commiseration staining her coarse, guttural tone. "Poor Headmaster Snape. One has to pity him, saddled with that one. A lesson in the dangers of making foolish choices, boys and girls."

She brightened, never taking her eyes from Hermione. "Come along, class. Next I'll show you how to spot a Muggle-born on sight. Of course, soon they'll be all but extinct, but until that day..." She laughed raucously, earning a snigger from several Slytherins. Not a few students from other houses joined in as well.

As the group turned and headed down the hall, Poppy stood at the door of the Infirmary, seething. "Odious bitch!" she hissed under her breath. She turned to Hermione, who stood shaking in the corner. Poppy's face softened. "Oh, Hermione, what happened?" She put her arm around the trembling young woman and led her back into her domain. "Let's get you a cup of tea and a Calming Draught..."

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He knew she was holding something back from him. As they sat by the fire on one of the first uninterrupted evenings since returning to Hogwarts, Severus watched Hermione closely, as she looked through yet another book from the Headmaster's study. They had found two thus far that looked promising, and Hermione had spent the last two days meticulously translating one from its original Aramaic.

She had greeted him that evening with her usual warm, welcoming embrace, but there was something she was not telling him. He wanted to ask, but his own exhaustion and fear stilled the words on his lips. And so he sat, nursing a glass of wine, courtesy of the Malfoy cellars, and let his gaze rest on her. She chewed absently on the little scrap of her bottom lip, as she always did when lost in thought.

Just then, perhaps sensing his gaze, Hermione turned to her husband and gave him a smile of such warmth and acceptance it almost overwhelmed him. He looked down into his wineglass, and closed his eyes. *I wish you would tell me what is troubling you* he whispered within their link, afraid she would hear, afraid she would not.

He looked up from his contemplation and saw her standing by his side. Wordlessly he drew her down to sit beside him, and she curled up against his side. As he drew her into his arms, she lay her head against his shoulder, her fingers absently toying with the buttons of his frock coat. He could all but hear the sigh in her inner voice. *It's nothing important, and nothing worth mentioning, love. Truly. You must trust me on this.*

She could feel him, gently but insistently pressing against her mind. *Let me in*, he entreated, like a whisper of smoke willing to seep through any crack in her defenses. He was tempted with a sharp, sweet longing to coax her waiting soul, to seduce her confession during a bout of that wild elation only he knew how to produce. But try as he might, this part of her she had closed away from him, and even though it was just a tiny part, it hurt that she would not share it with him. It was early days yet; how was he supposed to survive like this, especially if Hermione, too, hid away from him?

Severus stared into the fire, and tried to stop the self-pity and despair creeping into him. Not for the first time, he felt tears prick his eyes, and he looked up at the ceiling to stem them. She was protecting him again, and it hurt like hell oh, yes, it hurt! She knew how the other professors shied away from him as he passed them in the halls. She had seen old colleagues stop talking as he approached, and quickly move away, as if afraid to be contaminated by his shadow falling upon them. She had seen the withering contempt in their faces, the accusatory glances, the hatred. It had hurt, but he could withstand it he could withstand anything, as long as Hermione was safe, and they could keep Hogwarts together until the final endgame arrived and Potter fulfilled his bloody destiny.

Not since he was a boy here had the taunts of others affected him so much. He told himself he was no longer a sniveling student, and the foul names and vindictive derision no longer had the power to cut him. But he knew it was a lie even as he walked away. The students watched the professors snigger and snipe and whisper as he walked past; if the adults could get away with it, how much farther could a student venture?

Even with Hermione by his side, this semester was more hellish than any he had experienced since his first year as a green, unwelcome professor. He had been shunned then as well. The professors, mistrustful of his Death Eater past, had all but blanked him. It had been so hard, knowing that he was reviled and for good reason, but he had taken it and pretended it was actually his preference. After all, how could he expect to be accepted when he was unable to accept or forgive or even like himself?

Severus looked back into the fire, and pulled her closer. Whatever it was, maybe she would tell him eventually. In spite of her reassurances, he felt the pain of her secrecy, and it was like grief. For her to be withholding things from him in this stage of the game was not only worrisome, but potentially fatal.

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"I said to you, Headmaster, I said that these blood traitors were an infestation in this school, didn't I? You both deserve nothing less than a hard session with Mr. Filch in the dungeons, and if I have my way, that's exactly what you'll get! I told you, didn't I, Headmaster? If I said it once I said it a thousand times!"

Severus stared at two defiant young girls as he arranged his face into cold, unreadable lines. Inwardly, he wanted to tell Amycus Carrow to shut the fuck up and let him think. The man was yammering on so that Severus could barely concentrate. The whining tones of his DADA professor curled around his head like a crown of thorns.

It had been after midnight when Severus had felt the wards in his study breached. It was a silent alarm of sorts, and he was dressed and out the door before Hermione could stir. He had arrived just in time to see Luna Lovegood and Ginevra Weasley lifting the Sword of Gryffindor from its place in a cabinet.

He had almost laughed at the outright audacity of these two clever little birds, their intent faces darting around almost constantly. He stepped out of the shadows and walked toward them, and Miss Lovegood, who had been more or less standing guard for Miss Weasley, casually tapped her on the shoulder and whispered, "I'm afraid we weren't quite fast enough. Headmaster Snape has just arrived."

She sounded as if she were announcing him at a party, but Miss Weasley, who was holding the sword by the hilt, spun around so quickly she crashed the blade through the glass cabinet, smashing it to smithereens and making enough noise to wake the entire castle.

Severus had merely stood, waiting for the cringing girls to explain themselves, when Carrow burst through door, screaming, "Alright, you lot! The jig is up! I know you're in there and when Headmaster Snape finds out he'll-" He skidded to a halt upon seeing the Headmaster, then secured his title of Moron of the Year by blurting out, "What chew doin' 'ere?"

Severus glanced back at the girls for a moment. Miss Weasley met his gaze with a snarling defiance that irritated him more for its transparency than for any real perceived insult on his person. How stupid to be so open, so easy to read! Had she not learned anything under his tutelage last fall?

On the other hand, the Lovegood girl merely returned his gaze in her own slightly serene, off-kilter way, with no more insolence in her expression than if she were examining a stained glass window. She actually smiled at him when he caught her eye, and Severus had the rather disarming feeling that she knew exactly what he was thinking.

*Fucking perfect*, thought Severus. *I've got Miss Hothead Gryffindor and Miss Away-With-The-Fairies to contend with, and will Carrow ever shut up?*

"Now do you see what I am talking about, Headmaster? These two girls are a disgrace to their bloodlines! I insist that they be severely punished for this blatant disregard for your authority! You must acknowledge they've gone beyond the pale this time. If I were you I'd-"

"Professor Carrow, as you are not me, I would appreciate you allowing me to deal with the situation accordingly." He allowed himself a grim smile. "Now, would you please retrieve the artifact from Miss Weasley? It is quite heavy and no doubt tiring to hold."

As Severus sat down at his desk, he watched with amusement as Carrow reached for the sword. Miss Weasley, although she must have known she had lost the battle, stood her ground for a moment, holding the hilt with both hands in a battle stance. She faced Carrow, her rebellious eyes flashing a dare, her hands steady. Severus could not be sure that she wouldn't actually start swinging.

Carrow began to splutter. "How dare you threaten me, you little bitch! I'll have you in irons down in the dungeons!" Carrow turned to Severus, and he could see the challenge in the Pureblood's mind. *If you don't do something about this, you greasy bastard, I will, and the Dark Lord will want to know why.*

Deciding to stop this farce before someone actually got hurt, Severus used his expressive voice to its fullest potential, remembering that Miss Weasley was not a young woman used to being ordered about. He stood quickly and bellowed, "Miss Weasley! Stop this nonsense at once and give Professor Carrow the sword! Turn it around and present the hilt to him, now!"

Her head snapped toward the sound of his voice, and in a flash, he saw images in her mind, of finding Potter and taking the sword to him. He sensed her fear and anger, and for a moment, he felt sorry for her. Like all Hogwarts children, she was being forced to fight a war that her parents should have won years before she was born, and he of all people knew the damning, impotent feeling of helplessness.

Carrow whined, "Aw, why are you pussy-footing around with these little tarts? Imperius the bitch, I say!"

"Well, I do *not* say, Professor," Severus said, his voice low and dangerous. He shifted his gaze to the young Ravenclaw. In a tone softly laced with sinister enchantment, he murmured, "Miss Lovegood, please take the sword from Miss Weasley, and give it to Professor Carrow."

The young Ravenclaw calmly placed her hands over her friend's. "We need to give it back, Ginny. Harry will get the sword some other way."

As if in a trance, she allowed Miss Lovegood to take the sword from her hands, but instead of giving it to Carrow, she turned back to Severus. "Sir, I think it would be wiser for me to return the sword to you." She gave Carrow a look that bordered on pity. "I don't think it would like him too much, and a goblin-made sword can turn on the bearer if it doesn't trust him." She reverently placed the sword in Severus' outstretched hands. "I know you'll make sure it goes where it belongs, sir," she said matter-of-factly.

Carrow laughed then, a high-pitched giggle that made Severus' head feel like a balloon seconds away from the point of a pin. "Oh, that's rich!" He laughed and pointed at Miss Weasley. "You stupid little bint! All that work, and for what? The real sword is in a vault at Gringotts!" He crossed the room and laughed in the Gryffindor's face, an ugly, coarse sound. "Now, that's what you call ironic, innit? Getting your arse whipped raw over a bloody great counterfeit sword!"

She looked from Carrow to Snape, clearly trying to keep her emotions in check. Horror and realisation flitted across her face. Carrow grinned, and grasped each girl around a slender arm. "Come on, you lot! I've already sent word to Mr. Filch to ready his best birch rod!"

"Professor Carrow, I believe we have discussed on more than one occasion that as Headmaster I decide what punishment the students will receive," Severus snapped. "And while I appreciate your advice, I see no reason for you to remain. As late as it is, I should think your sister will be wondering where you are." He cast a frigid glance over the heads of the two girls. "I will ensure Miss Weasley and Miss Lovegood receive the detentions they are due and are returned to their dormitories. Goodnight, Professor."

Carrow looked like a child who had been deprived of a favourite toy. "Now, see here, Snape!"

"Good night, Professor!" Severus thundered. The bloody fool was inches away from being cursed and the girls from being Obliviated afterward. It was two in the bloody morning and Severus no longer cared about the niceties. "We will discuss this tomorrow, Professor."

Carrow drew himself up to his full five-foot-four, and stared at Severus. "Oh, yes, we will," he said, quietly, and a new, ugly light flashed in his eyes. "We will be discussing this at length, Headmaster."

Severus favoured him with a flat, sullen stare, which he tried fruitlessly to front out. Finally, seeing that he was overruled, Carrow turned, muttering threats under his breath. The two girls jumped as the study door slammed shut with a hollow bang.

Severus closed his eyes and counted to five. When he opened them, the two girls were staring at him, waiting. He carefully placed the sword on his desk, where it gleamed dully against the polished wood, and he could see the inscription in the light of his lamp. He rubbed his left eyebrow to ease the ache behind it. "Miss Weasley, Miss Lovegood, will you kindly explain why you were in my office, attempting to steal one of the school's most valuable artifacts?"

Ginny looked at the sword, then back at him. "Why did he say it was fake? Is the true sword really at Gringotts?" She was looking at him with such hatred he could literally feel it radiating from her in waves.

Suddenly so weary he wanted to crawl into bed and never leave, Severus lowered his head, as he had so many times in class when he no longer could stand the sight of one more student. "A week's detention, Miss Weasley, Miss Lovegood. You will serve it with Hagrid in the Forbidden Forest. Report to him tomorrow evening." He looked up to find Ginny staring at him in confusion. "What?" he snapped. "Is a week's detention in the most dangerous place in Wizarding Britain too tame for you, Miss Weasley? Should I have indulged Professor Carrow and sent you to Filch to be beaten?"

He rose to his feet and walked toward the study door. In a voice that sounded much too tired even to his own ears, he said, "I'm not a monster, girl. But this will serve as your last warning. If you are caught in any other such infraction, I shall have no other choice but to take a more drastic stance." He turned to her as he opened the door. "Is this understood, ladies?"

Ginny could barely nod. She was breathing hard and on the verge of tears. On the other hand, Luna was gazing dreamily past his desk to the bookshelf behind. Before Severus could react, she moved behind his desk and plucked a small volume from the shelf.

She lovingly turned the pages. "This is lovely book, Headmaster. One of my favourites. You might want to read it with Hermione. She would probably like it, too." She carefully placed the book beside the sword on his desk. "Let's go back to our dorm rooms, Ginny. We have class tomorrow, and we've already wasted enough of the Headmaster's time."

Like a sleepwalker, Ginny allowed Luna to lead her out of the room. Severus watched their procession silently. As they passed, Luna looked up at him. Her tranquil, fey eyes were friendly. "Please tell Hermione I said hello, sir, and that I miss her this year. Hogwarts can be a lonely place without your friends, I find."

Severus closed the door behind the two girls and leaned on it heavily. After a moment, he made a sharp, barking sound. It started low, and to the listeners on the wall, it sounded like a sob. He repeated it again, and again, until the laughter bubbled out of him like hysteria. He turned and walked back to his desk, still chuckling at the lunacy of the moment. He performed a series of spells and wand movements to restore the glass display cabinet. Then he picked up the Sword of Gryffindor and put it respectfully back in its place. The door to the case closed with a resounding click, and Severus watched as light flashed across the name: Godric Gryffindor.

*"I thought the Dark Lord told you to take this to Gringotts," Amycus Carrow had said, after that first, dreadful faculty meeting. He sneered at Severus. "Are you defying our Lord, Snape?" he asked, his voice deceptively teasing. "I can imagine he'd be none too pleased to know it's still hanging about."*

*Severus had given him his most withering look. "Carrow, do you know how many faculty members are Gryffindors? How many are Ravenclaws? Hufflepuffs? Slytherins?"*

*"There's only one House that matters in this school now, Snape," Alecto Carrow replied insolently. "The only true House."*

*Severus clenched his teeth, despising the ugly Death Eaters with every fibre of his being. "Be that as it may, do you want to incite a riot by the sudden, unexplained disappearance of artifacts that are deemed precious by many of the individuals who live and teach here?" He leaned forward. "Do you want to explain to our Lord why you've disrupted the very fabric of the school?"*

*Amycus' eyes narrowed. "Are you threatenin' me, Snape?"*

*Severus turned his large, dark eyes on Carrow, the picture of Slytherin innocence. "Merlin forbid, Professor. I am merely thinking like a member of the only House that matters." Severus drew himself to his full height, towering over the little toad of a man. "If you give extra candy, you get sleepier children."*

*At Carrow's dull look of incomprehension, Severus rolled his eyes. "Bread and circuses? You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar?" He sighed contemptuously. "If you want the masses to stay dull-eyed and compliant, you don't make sudden changes that inflame their sense of moral outrage."*

*Both Carrows looked at him as if he were speaking Mermish. Exasperated, Severus huffed. "The real artifacts are in Gringotts, you fools." He flung open the door of the case in which the Sword of Gryffindor sat and pulled out the weapon with a flourish.*

*"Transfigured letter opener." With one hand, Severus casually flipped the sword in the air and caught it deftly. "Light as a feather. Could I do that with the real sword, Carrow?"*

*Slowly, understanding dawned, and the two Death Eaters looked at one another and winked. "Oh, see!" Alecto crowed.*

*And the Lumos is lit, Severus thought to himself.*

*"It's fake, but they don't know it! You keep it around and you keep 'em sweet! Very clever, Snape!" Alecto said, rather flirtatiously.*

*"Indeed. And when the faculty sees the Banner and the Sword and the Portrait and the Great Book where they have been for centuries, they see constancy, they see things as they have always been, and there is no reason for alarm, no reason for rebellion." Severus gave them both a look of smug complacency. "Saves so much time and energy, you see."*

Severus' arm had ached the next day from that foolish little display of swordplay. Even with his wandless lightening spell, a goblin-made sword was bloody heavy.

He looked at the fine scrollwork, the beautiful engraving. He thought of his transfigured letter opener, tucked safely away in Bellatrix Lestrange's vault in Gringotts.

As he prepared to leave, his gaze fell over the book Luna had left lying on his desk for Hermione, and after a moment's hesitation, he shrugged and retrieved it. It was an old book, left by some long-ago Headmaster or Headmistress, written in ancient runes: the Tales of Beedle the Bard.

Still shaking his head at the strangeness of the encounter, Severus left his study, book in hand.

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He was not laughing two days later when he was summoned before the Dark Lord. As Severus cleverly convinced him that to give the girls any sort of hope was not only more insidious but would placate the others and thus keep them in line, Carrow received a bout of *Crucio* for wasting the Dark Lord's time. This was the final wedge between Severus and Carrow; from then on, the gloves were off, and Carrow swore vengeance.

The next week, Luna Lovegood disappeared from the castle. Called home, explained Carrow with a smile of twisted pleasure. Her father was in need of her, he said, laughing, taunting Severus with his little act of retaliation.

Severus did not sleep at all that night. It was the first student he had actually lost to the Carrows.

It would not be the last.

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A week later, the pounding on the door to his chambers awoke Severus instantly. Hermione was wide awake seconds later as she felt his consciousness burst into wakefulness. *Oh, bloody wonderful*, Severus thought to himself. A glance at the clock showed it was one thirty in the morning. Was he destined never to get a real night's sleep, ever? Throwing on his old nightshirt and robe, he put a reassuring hand on her arm and murmured, "Wait here."

He opened the door to an apologetic-looking Argus Filch. The old Squib scuttled in, furtively looking behind him as he entered the room. "Headmaster, sir, there's three wizards at the gates. Well, two wizards draggin' a third. Call themselves Snatchers."

Severus felt an icy finger slide over his testicles. "What do they want?"

Filch looked uneasy. "They want to talk to you. They picked up some boy and want him identified." He glared at Severus as if willing the Headmaster to read between the lines. "They want Mrs. Snape to have a butcher's at him."

"Why?" Severus was pleased that his voice carried the proper amount of irritation and boredom. Inside, he was already planning how to get them into the castle unseen by the Carrows and how to Oblivate the Snatchers.

Filch swallowed. "Seems that some have already gotten in trouble with You-Know-Who for bringing in the wrong people, if you get my drift." His voice was low, and his lips barely moved, as if afraid of being overheard.

Severus made up his mind. He put a friendly hand on the man's shoulder, and realised with a start that Filch was trembling. Quietly, he muttered, "Bring them in, but by the dungeon entrance. Go through my old rooms; the Headmaster's study Floo is connected to my old study. Bring them in from there." He returned Filch's glare. "I don't want anyone else to see them, understood? No one."

Filch nodded. "Understood, Headmaster." He left quickly, and Severus stood still for a moment before going to rouse Hermione.

Ten minutes later, a fully-dressed Headmaster and his wife were waiting in his study as the Floo burst into life and two grubby men stumbled through, hanging on to a third. The Snatchers were shabbily dressed, stank of sweat and dirt and looked as if they'd not had a decent meal in weeks. They looked around awkwardly, a little awed, and gave a little uncomfortable, nodding bow to Severus and Hermione.

"Come in, gentlemen. To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?" Severus asked imperiously. If they were going to tug the forelock, Severus thought, he might as well act the lord of the manor.

The elder of the two bobbed a nod again. "Begging your pardon, Headmaster," he looked at Hermione with a queasy smile. "Ma'am. We apologise for the lateness of the hour, but needs must, and all that." Hermione looked up at the younger of the two Snatchers, and he returned her look uneasily, but swallowed pointedly when she brought her cup of tea to her lips.

A silent exchange later, Severus summoned a house-elf and ordered food. As Hermione had said, *if they're well-fed, perhaps they'll be more malleable*. Severus agreed. It would also give him time to decide exactly what to do with them.

They watched in silence as the Snatchers, whose names were Botchin and Orkhart, gobbled leftover Shepherd's pie and treacle tart, grunting like pigs. Severus rounded off the meal with a generous glass of his second-best firewhisky, and debated on whether to slip them a Befuddlement Potion while he was at it. He palmed a vial, just in case.

Standing off to one side, bound by magical ropes, no less smelly and dirty than his captors, was a tall male with a black sack pulled over his head. He had been Petrified, but the spell was either indifferently cast or wearing off. The figure strained against the bindings, but was strangely silent beneath the bag. Hermione felt adrenaline rush through her body so quickly it actually made her skin ache. She recognised the shape of the hands, the texture of the skin...

She forced herself not to look at her husband, though they silently conversed as the Snatchers finished their meal. By the time Botchin and Orkhart were belching their way through the last of the firewhisky, they were relaxed and full of bonhomie for the Headmaster and his wife's hospitality.

"Now that you've had a chance to refresh yourselves, would either of you kindly explain why you have awakened my wife and me in the middle of the night?" Severus could not have looked more disinterested.

Botchin, the elder of the two Snatchers, acted as spokesperson. "Well, sir," he began, gesturing to their captive, "we found this oik rambling around outside the Birmingham City Centre, and he looked rather suspicious." He continued, rather pompously, "We felt, of course, that anyone matching the descriptions of the three Most Wanted should be brought before the Dark Lord, but..."

Orkhart, the younger Snatcher, whose narrow head and protruding teeth sickeningly reminded Hermione of Wormtail, finished. "The last Snatchers who brought the wrong person to You-Know-Who, well..." He shifted uneasily. "Well, let's just say they ain't snatchin' no more."

"I see," Severus replied, full of haughty disdain. "And so you thought it would be far safer to waste our time instead of the Dark Lord's, is that it?"

"Exactly!" The younger wizard said, his face brightening. Botchin gave him a slap on the side of his head. He turned back to Severus with an unctuous little shrug.

"Look, Headmaster, times is hard. I got three kids and an expensive wife, if you get my drift," he said, giving Hermione a leering grin. "We are sorry to disturb you, make no mistake! If, however, you could just identify this one prop'ly, then we'll be out of your hair before you can say Gellert Grindelwald."

Severus crossed his arms. "Very well." He nodded toward their prisoner. "Take off the bag, then."

The Snatchers roughly dragged their prisoner onto his feet. With a flourish, the younger Snatcher yanked the black bag from the head of a very angry, very frightened Ronald Weasley.

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*Hermione, don't change your expression*, Severus warned. He was relieved to see Hermione looking at her former best friend as if she'd never seen him before in her life. She turned to Severus with a 'who-the-hell-is-this?' expression on her face that would have fooled even the Dark Lord, and he wanted to kiss her.

"Well?" The older Snatcher said. "Is it 'im?"

"I fail to understand the question," Severus drawled, rolling his eyes. "'im, who?"

Orkhart grabbed Weasley by the hair and yanked his head back to give them a good look. The boy's lips were moving, and he seemed to be shouting a string of epithets and curses, but no sounds emitted from him. Botchin followed their gaze, and realising their hosts' confusion, he grinned. "Oh, yeah," he explained, "we had to silence him on the way here. His yammering was doing my head in."

The two Snatchers stood slightly behind Weasley, so they did not see him calling Hermione and Snape every sort of foul thing he could articulate. The possibility that, once vocal, Weasley would give them all away, spurred Severus to action.

"Well, for fuck's sake," he replied, "don't cancel it. I have a splitting headache, and I have no desire to hear his whining voice." He addressed the bound man directly. "Frankly, Mr. Torrent, I had hoped after you graduated two years ago I would never have to see or hear you ever again. Alas, the fates had other plans."

The triumphant grins faded from the Snatcher's faces. Botchin asked, "Say again?"

Severus huffed, and repeated slowly, as if speaking to a dim-witted child, "I said, don't cancel the Silencing charm, because I have a splitting headache and-

"No, no that bit about Mr., er, Torrent, you say?"

Severus could have not looked more irritated if he had taken acting classes. He cocked a brow toward the redhead. "Dilbert Torrent, Hufflepuff, Class of ...'95?" Severus shook his head as he pointed to Weasley. "You've only gone and picked up one of the dimmest, dunderheaded students this hallowed seat of learning ever churned out." He fixed Weasley with a glare. "Two N.E.W.T.s, I believe, wasn't it, Mr. Torrent? One in remedial basket weaving, if I recall."

Weasley looked from Severus to Hermione, his eyes hard and confused. Finally, he nodded curtly.

"Are you sure?" the older Snatcher challenged. "He looked just like that Weasley bloke what were running round with Harry Potter."

Hermione scoffed. Imperiously she retorted, "I should think I would know Ronald Weasley if I saw him! I only had class with him every day for almost six years." She looked at her friend as if examining some inferior species of Flobberworm. Disdainfully, she added, "This person doesn't look anything like him."

Orkhart, dismayed, blurted, "But we checked the poster! He looks like-"

"That's because the Torrents and the Weasleys are what, third cousins, Mr. Torrent?"

Ron nodded again, and to Severus' surprise, his mouth twitched, and he held up two fingers, palm facing inward. "Second cousins, then," Severus amended.

When the Snatchers still eyed him skeptically, Hermione made a sound of exasperated impatience and walked over to Severus' desk. "For Merlin's sweet sucking sake, do we have to draw you a picture?" She pretended to look for a particular book, all the while casting a series of wandless, wordless spells. Finally choosing a book from the shelf, she quickly flipped through the pages.

Orkhart, stepping forward, curious. "Was' sat?"

He was impatiently pushed away by Botchin. "I'll handle this, son." He walked over to Hermione. "Here, now, was'sat?"

Without looking up from her search, Hermione announced in her most officious voice, "The Hogwarts book of graduating students, 1993 to the present day." She reached a page and cast the final spell. Turning the book toward the men, she said, "Here you are. Dilbert Jasperus Torrent, Hufflepuff, Class of 1995."

Both Snatchers and Weasley peered at the page. Even Severus looked. On the page was a listing, complete with a school biography, showing the name, statistics, Pureblood status and academic achievements of one Dilbert Torrent. To complete the illusion, a photo of Ron, waving and mugging at the camera, sat in the corner of the page. The Snatchers stared at it in growing dismay, as realisation dawned that they had indeed apprehended the wrong ginger.

As Hermione placed the book in his hands, Severus felt a huge, giddy pride in the magic she'd wrought; it was complex and slippery, and he felt a hearty regret that no one would ever know about it but him.

"Aww, for fuck's sake," Orkhart whined. "And here I thought we stood a good chance with this one."

"So," Severus concluded, shutting the book with a snap, "unless the Dark Lord has entrusted you to round up all the most moronic Purebloods in Wizarding Britain, I would have to say you have once again managed to bark up the wrong tree." He managed a feral smile. "Imagine the reward waiting for you had you actually presented Mr. Torrent for the Dark Lord's pleasure."

The two wizards paled at the thought. Finally, Botchin cleared his throat, "Right, then." He heaved a sigh. "Thank you, Headmaster. Saved us a bit of bother, did that." He released Weasley from the magical bonds holding him and grabbed his arm. "Come on, ginger. We'll take you home."

Severus saw the panic flare in Weasley's face again, and decided to get the Snatchers out of the way before they pooled their meagre brains and realised a Quidditch team could fly through the holes in their story. "Gentlemen, seeing as you probably would like to distance yourself from Mr. Torrent as quickly as possible to avoid further repercussions, he is welcome to stay here at Hogwarts for the evening, and make his way home tomorrow. It seems the least we can do for a member of one of our oldest Pureblood families after this minor misunderstanding. His family is among our Lord's staunchest supporters, after all."

The message came through loud and clear this time, at least to Botchin. "Can't win 'em all, son," he said, patting Orkhart's arm consolingly. "Let's be off and let young Mister Torrent go about his business." He turned to Severus. "Ah, well, thank you for your assistance, sir. My apologies to you and the missus for wasting your time, Headmaster." He sighed wearily. Severus made his decision.

"Allow me to offer you a Rejuvenating Draught, comrades. It will strengthen your resolve and renew your stamina." He watched as they eagerly downed the Befuddlement Potion. Very slowly and deliberately, Severus said, "By the time you reach the gates, all of this will seem like a distant dream. And I'm sure you're eager to be on your way to continue your hunt. After all," he added, smiling wolfishly, "one mustn't forget those three hopeful children. Not to mention your very expensive witch."

Botchin grimaced. "No, let's don't mention her." He looked genuinely fearful. "She was expecting an ermine-trimmed robe from this snatchin', and all. Looks like I'll be sleeping with the crups tonight." He pronounced the word 'er-MINE', and it was all Hermione could do not to laugh in the face of his henpecked misery.

Severus herded them toward the Floo. "Mr. Filch will be waiting to take you back to the castle gates." He leaned in a whispered conspiratorially. "Don't worry. Your secret is safe with us."

As the potion hit his system, Botchin brightened, and actually smiled at Severus. "Thank you sir, for your hospitality."

Severus waived a hand dismissively. "Think nothing of it, sir." There. If Carrow, Merlin forbid, should spot them and start sniffing around, they'll be lucky to remember why they were here, much less who they brought with them.

When the Snatchers had departed, he turned back to see Weasley still motionless in the middle of the room, and Hermione watching him as if she was unsure of what to say or do. Severus quickly moved to stand by his wife's side. Weasley was looking at both of them intently, but his expression was uncharacteristically unreadable.

Severus raised his wand and pointed it at the boy's head. He took a grim satisfaction in seeing his eyes widen in alarm. Coolly, Severus said, "Mr. Weasley, before I cancel the Silencing Charm, I would appreciate some reassurance from you that I will not regret it. My wife and I are very tired, classes begin in a few hours and I will be disinclined to show charity if you start hurling a string of empty threats and abuse at our heads. Agreed?"

Again, the wary nod, and with a quick glance at Hermione, Severus hissed, *Finite Incantatem!*

Weasley did not react immediately. He cleared his throat, then swallowed. Hermione was about to ask him if he wanted something to drink, when he drew himself up to his full height, and asked in a voice so quiet it seemed a spell in and of itself, "Would one of you tell me what the bloody hell is going on?"

Severus crossed his arms and stared down at Weasley imperiously. "The Dark Lord has promised great rewards to the ones who can bring him Harry Potter or his companions, Mr. Weasley." He sneered, trying to sound as sinister as possible. "Why should those two imbeciles reap the reward when my wife and I can clothe ourselves in his glory?"

Weasley's eyes widened, and he looked at Hermione for a long moment. A sudden, crooked grin spread over his freckled face. In the same quiet, confident tone, he retorted, "Nah. I'm not buying it, Snape. It sounds good, but you've forgotten one thing."

"And what is that, Mr. Weasley?" he asked, tightly.

The young fool had the audacity to look smug. "I'm a chess player. I've watched your moves tonight. They weren't for a short gambit. You were playing the long game." He looked from Severus to Hermione. "If you were planning on taking me yourself, you would have just Obliviated them and sent them on their way, instead of going through that elaborate farce about Dilbert flipping Torrent." He grinned, and gave Severus a wry look. "Two N.E.W.T.s? Hufflepuff? Cheers. I'll say this for you, Snape: you haven't lost your acid."

He turned to Hermione, and with a shy smile of pride, he said, "You never stop amazing me, Hermione. That book with all that Torrent bollocks?" He gave her a solemn



wink. "Tasty bit of spellwork, mate."

Hermione, who had been quietly standing by her husband, suddenly burst into tears of relief, and threw her arms around her old friend. "Oh, Ron, thank Merlin you're alright, you sodding moron!" Weasley looked at the sobbing witch in his arms, then back to her husband. "I could kill you myself for getting caught, you stupid, stupid boy!"

With a shrug, Severus said, "No argument there."

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Weasley had been just as hungry as the Snatchers. He wolfed down his food as he told them about his capture, and how he had been caught and brought to Hogwarts. He was understandably reluctant to talk about Harry and Neville; instead he explained how he'd been nicked almost the moment he left the wards the three boys had set up for themselves.

Finally, having eaten his fill, he polished off a jug of pumpkin juice and fixed Severus and Hermione with a steady gaze. "Hermione, tell me I'm mad. Tell me that you are a Death Eater, and you and Snape are here to help You-Know-Who wipe out Harry and the Order. Tell me, and I'll believe it."

Severus, frustrated that he'd been placed in this position, snapped, "It hardly matters what you believe, Mr. Weasley. The facts are irrefutable. The Dark Lord has graciously appointed me Headmaster, and-"

"I don't know what happened that night," Ron interrupted. "Harry won't talk about it. But he knows something Neville and I don't, and I think it's about you, Hermione." He dropped his eyes. "When you and I played chess, you used to play the long game as well. I've missed that. I missed you."

He looked at her with that fiercely loyal look in his eyes that always made Hermione feel at once proud and sorry for him. "I've missed you, too, Ron. Harry, too. I've been-" She looked at Severus and he sighed, accepting the inevitable. "*We've been* worried sick about you all."

Ron shrugged deprecatingly. "Ah, we're alright. Bit tired of Neville's cooking, but-" He stopped, and his jaw worked, as if fighting tears. He looked first at Severus, then back to Hermione. "It's been tough. It would've been easier with you there, I think. Even Harry misses you. He doesn't say it, but, well, you know Harry." He looked at the couple carefully. "You killed Dumbledore, didn't you, Hermione? You really did it."

"Ron, there are a lot of things you don't understand." She kept her gaze steady. "Yes, I did. But I had my reasons."

He nodded. "I figured as much. I also think Dumbledore had his reasons as well. Harry told me he was in horrific pain when they came back from retrieving the Horcrux. Harry also said he was pleading with you, Snape. Pleading with you to save him from Draco." As if talking to himself, Ron mused, "Well ... was he begging you to save him... or begging you to kill him? He was a master chess player as well, Dumbledore. Another long-game man. Absolutely barking, but brilliant." He looked at Severus pointedly. "Tell me the truth, Snape, what side of the board were you two playing that night?"

"Tell *me*, Weasley, do you make a habit of babbling aloud every inane thought that pops into the mush between your ears that passes for brains?" Severus barked, too shocked at Ron's comments to stay silent. The boy's eyes grew angry, and Severus welcomed it, allowed it to give him permission to vent the anger that had been building the moment the Snatchers stepped from the fireplace. "Do you realise to whom you are speaking?"

Defiantly, Ron stared at Severus for a moment. "I'm speaking to a friend and her husband," he replied, with a trace of irony. "I don't know what the fuck is going on, but let's just say that my perception of a lot of things has gone tits up in the past hour."

Severus found himself longing for a drink. He crossed to the chest that held the firewhisky and poured himself two fingers. "Drink, Weasley?"

The boy looked at him suspiciously, then shrugged. "Why not? This night can't get any more mental than it has already."

Hermione, who also accepted a small glass, said, "Ronald, what are you doing here? Why aren't you with Harry and Neville?"

For the first time since the Snatchers had left, Ron grew introspective. "Stupidity. Selfishness. Bloody-mindedness. Can I have that drink now, Snape? It's a long story, and I'm not exactly looking forward to telling it." For a moment, he looked angry, and gave a nod of thanks when Severus silently handed the boy his glass.

Hermione took a tiny sip, wincing at the welcome fire. *Severus, I am at a loss. My heart tells me to confide in Ron, but my head-*

*I know, Lass. It would be the easiest thing in the world to share ourselves, but the wisest? We are talking Weasley here!* In spite of his gibe, Severus was unsure. He had never been so conflicted. It was one thing to have Poppy's confidence, but could they take the chance with Ron? He truly thought the only way to solve their problem was a very carefully designed Obliviate, but Hermione balked at the idea.

Ron watched their faces intently. "It's like you two are talking to one another, you know. Do you have some sort of mental link?" He looked at Hermione skeptically. "I mean I knew you were brilliant, but-"

He caught Severus' baleful stare and cleared his throat. "Right. Why am I here." The uncomfortable trace of regret played across his face again. "Being on the run has been hard. For all of us. I'm not saying being here has probably been any picnic for you two," he added hastily, "but you don't have a Horcrux eating away at your magic day in and day out."

Severus and Hermione sat quietly as Ron told them of the dark days before Christmas, after Dumbledore's death. The locket Horcrux, which Dumbledore and Harry had risked their lives to retrieve, had turned out to be a fake.

"A fake? Are you sure?" Severus said, stunned.

Ron nodded. "We opened the locket and there was a note inside. It was addressed to You-Know-Who, and it was from someone with the initials R.A.B., telling him that the real Horcrux was now tucked away."

Hermione glanced at Severus, who sat watching Ron as if he were telling him the play-by-play of the latest Chudley Cannons match. His guts were churning. Reg had taken the Horcrux. But he couldn't have, could he?

Cautiously, Hermione ventured, "Do you have any idea who this R.A.B was?"

Triumphantly, Ron smiled. "Oh, yeah. I figured it out. It was taken by Regulus Black you know, Sirius' brother? The one that became a Death Eater?" When neither reacted, Ron shrugged. "That's how we got the real one back. Kreacher helped us."

Into the night, Ron awed and dismayed his audience with the tales of escape after narrow escape, and how the three boys had managed thus far with the help of an old tent his dad had borrowed for the Quidditch World Cup. "Harry had it with him, turns out. He's been dead resourceful. Always seems to have what we need." Ron frowned. "Except a way to destroy this Horcrux. We can't kill it. We've tried all sorts of things, but nothing works."

Severus sighed. His eyes were itching with fatigue and he ached all over as if from fever. "Can you think of nothing that would destroy it, Weasley? Surely the man who sussed out Regulus Black could put two and two together."

Ron gave Severus a sour look. "I said I figured it out, Snape. I didn't say I was Hermione." He looked at her searchingly. "Is he good to you, Hermione? He didn't force you into this or anything, did he?"

"You are asking my wife questions that are none of your concern, boy," Severus snarled. Gods, if he could just sit down and think for five minutes!

A gentle hand fell on his arm, and he looked down into his wife's face. "It's alright, Severus. I'm not ashamed of you, and I'm not ashamed of us. I'm proud to be your wife."

Her gentle voice seeped past the grinding fatigue in Severus' soul, and he lowered his head until it was pressed to hers. He gave up. It was too much, even for him. *am so tired, Hermione. I can't think. I can't make a decision about this. Help me, please.*

He straightened again and found Ron looking at him. There was a sadness in the boy's face. "No, you don't have to answer," said Ron, "I can see it. I may not be in Hermione's league when it comes to smarts, but I know love when I see it." He looked around the study. "You poor bastard." He swallowed. "Merlin, I thought we had it rough."

"Headmaster! Headmaster!"

The three of them looked over at the portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black. Hermione remembered him only because, being a distant relative of Sirius', he had a portrait over at Grimmauld Place. He had always been scathingly condescending to Hermione, and therefore his frequent absence from his Headmaster's portrait was one that was rarely remarked upon.

Severus approached the portrait warily. A few of the portraits had lately been giving him grudging assistance in letting him know when danger, usually in the form of one or both of the Carrows, was afoot. While Black had not been one of them, it appeared that at last, he might deign to help them.

Quietly, Severus answered, "Yes, Headmaster? Is there a problem in the castle?"

"No, you half-blooded fool! It's Potter and the Longbottom boy! They're in the Forest of Dean right now."

Hermione and Ron exchanged surprised glances. "How do you know that?" Ron asked, confused.

The painted face sneered at them. "What does it matter? I'm telling you so that you can get this whelp back where he belongs. They need him!"

As the three of them digested this information, a voice called from behind the desk. "Severus! Quickly! You must act now! Take the Sword of Gryffindor to Harry!"

All eyes turned to see the intense, urgent expression of Hogwarts' previous Headmaster staring at them from his painting. Albus Dumbledore, it seemed, was awake.

"Severus, there is no time to lose, please!" the portrait cried. "It must be retrieved under conditions of valour and need."

Severus stared dumbfounded at the portrait. He was barely aware of Dumbledore's fervent words, the first words the old man had uttered to them since their return to Hogwarts. Of course they must be about Potter. Nothing was important enough to rouse the old bastard, save bloody Potter.

"And don't forget he cannot see that it is you who brings it if Voldemort were to see that it was you-"

"I can do it!" Ron offered. "I'll help." He turned to Severus, his initial excitement fading. "Wait a minute. Why do we need to take the sword to-"

"The sword? Oh, bloody hell!" The two men turned to see Hermione, standing behind them, eyes blazing. "What an idiot I've been!" Her face was alight with excitement, and Severus felt his heart pounding. *I know exactly why Dumbledore wants you to take the sword to Harry!*

Moments later, Severus and Ron were preparing to leave the castle and head for the Forest of Dean. The Sword of Gryffindor was wrapped in Severus' traveling cloak, along with three spare wands. Each man understood what to do, what was needed. Ron had even offered to take a wand oath to keep his detour through Hogwarts to himself, but in the end, both Severus and Hermione felt it unnecessary.

"I still think I should go as well."

"Hermione, no. Please, do not fight me on this."

Her frustration soared. "But I could help you!"

Severus glanced at Ron and silently handed the younger man his cloak. Then he turned to Hermione and took her hands in his. His voice was quiet, and intense with emotion. "I cannot bear the idea of you, out there with us, shivering in the cold. We have a long night ahead of us." His eyes softened. "Only the thought of you here, safely tucked away and warm, is keeping me at my task."

He leaned closer. *Do this for me, lass. I promise you I will get Weasley back where he belongs, and the sword to Potter.*

"I know you will." Hermione felt his warm hands squeeze hers, then he released them and turned away.

Ron handed the traveling cloak back to its owner, and turned to Hermione. "Take care of yourself, yeah? And tell Ginny I love her, and that I'm fine."

The plaintive fearful courage in his voice was her undoing, and Hermione's strength failed her. "Ron, I'm sorry I couldn't tell you everything." Hermione's tears ran unchecked down her cheeks, and she thought her heart would break.

"It's alright, Hermione," Ron said, nodding sadly. He patted her shoulder awkwardly. "If I've learned one thing while we've been on the run, it's that you have to find a little love any way you can." He glanced at Severus. "If the great git makes you happy-"

"Weasley!"

"Ronald!" Hermione chastised, then laughed in spite of herself. "He's a good man. He's everything to me." She took a deep breath. "They Death Eaters killed my parents, Ron."

Ron looked at her in horror. Stricken, he cried, "Oh, no, Hermione! Oh, no, I'm so sorry-"

"If it hadn't been for Severus, they would have killed me too. You have no idea what he's been through to provide information for the Order, for Dumbledore." She gazed up at her husband with fierce pride. "Even for Harry. He's always done everything to keep Harry alive, Ron. I know Harry will never believe that, but the only reason we have a chance of defeating You-Know-Who is because of Severus and all he's done."

Hermione could see the tears in Ron's eyes. "And the only chance you have is to make everyone believe you're doing it for You-Know-Who. Gods," he said sadly, shaking his head. He met Severus' darkly defiant stare with stark sympathy in his eyes. "How are you two going to survive?"

"The only way we know how, Mr. Weasley," Severus said quietly, and grasped Hermione's hand like a lifeline. His eyes met hers, and Hermione's knees almost buckled at the stern, protective love she saw and felt. "The only way we can. Together."

Ron swallowed hard. He looked down at Hermione with eyes that were haggard with fear. "Merlin, Hermione, I don't know if I'll ever see you again."

Hermione released her husband's hand and embraced her friend. "You will! I know you will," she said, with a tremulous smile. "Promise me something, Ron."

His blue eyes looked into hers with the same sweet friendship she'd known for more than half her life. "Anything."

She closed her eyes. "If something ever happens to me, please make sure that the Ministry knows the truth about Severus."

"Hermione, please!"

She turned and faced Severus. She could feel the anguish in his heart. "No! It has to be done!" She turned back to Ron. "Promise me everyone will know the truth. Severus is a hero. Everything he's done has been for Dumbledore and the Order."

Ron looked from Hermione to his former professor and back. He nodded. "I believe you. I promise."

Agitated, Severus stepped forward. "Hermione, Weasley and I must go. We do not have all night," he hissed, his countenance harsh with urgency.

"Right," Ron said, and kissed Hermione's cheek. "Take care of yourself, yeah?"

Hermione sniffed. "Yeah. You, too." She turned to Severus. "Be careful." *I love you more than breath*

Severus nodded. *I will return shortly. Try to rest.* Then, with a sweep of his cloak, Hermione was left alone.

She watched them from the Headmaster's study window, breathing a quiet prayer to the gods watching over them that they would accomplish their mission, and that her husband would safely return before daylight.

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They stood on the perimeter of Harry and Neville's impressive wards, and Severus again wondered why he had blindly obeyed Dumbledore and allowed Ron to guide him to the heart of the Forest of Dean. Weeks without the first word of support or help, then suddenly the fucking poofster was barking orders and once again Severus was blindly following them. He would save his hatred for later; tonight his exhaustion was catching up with him, and there were miles to go before he could sleep. He would surely get no more on this night.

"Merlin," Severus said, irritably. He indicated that they should proceed. "Let's get this over with, Weasley. There's only so much psycho-drama I can take in one evening."

"For the tenth time, Snape, yes, I know what to do! I'm not an idiot!"

"This, coming from the man who was caught by those two geniuses while bumbling around Birmingham City Centre!" Severus bit back.

He had navigated them to the edge of the Forest of Dean, when Ron had taken out something that resembled an oversized cigarette lighter. Severus watched, fascinated, as Ron flicked it open, and soft, glowing lights flew from its confines and into the trees, providing them with a clear direction to take.

"It was deeded to me by Dumbledore in his will," Ron had explained, as they followed each light like little individual stars. "It took me forever to figure out what the hell a Deluminator was and why the barmy old coot left it to me in his will. I finally realised that, for every light I took with it, it gave one back. And each light will lead me to where I'm supposed to go." He dropped his head sheepishly. "I was concentrating so hard on following the lights that I didn't see the Snatchers until they had me."

"You wouldn't be the first man who got distracted following the light, Weasley. You won't be the last," Severus quipped, but the boy shot him a keen look of understanding.

"No, I don't suppose I am, Snape. But distraction's a luxury we none of us can afford anymore, is it?"

Ron watched as Severus sank the sword into the icy water of a pond a few yards away from the camp where Harry and Neville stood guard. The sword stood silently as the ice slowly encased the weapon. When it was immobilised in its bed of ice, Severus turned to Ron.

"Try not to fuck this up, boy. The only reason I'm not Obliviating you is because my wife begged me not to."

To his surprise, Ron laughed. "Yeah, Hermione's good at bossing. But I suspect you know that." He sobered. "When Harry told me you two were married, gods, I hated you. I thought you'd stolen my girl away."

Severus felt his throat tighten. "You are speaking about my wife, Weasley."

The redhead rolled his eyes. "I know that. And I know Hermione. Just, do right by her, Snape. If she loves you, really loves you, she'll do anything to protect you. I know that. Keep her alive."

Severus looked at the boy carefully. The die was cast. Quietly he responded, "That is precisely what I am trying to do, Mr. Weasley. Keeping your trap shut will ensure that. You have your part to play as well." He fixed him with a baleful stare. "*You* keep her alive, Weasley. Forget you ever saw me."

Ron's face hardened. "Yeah, sure, Snape."

As Ron turned to leave, Severus said, "Weasley." He cleared his throat. "Ronald."

The tone of Severus' voice was so soft and entreating it unnerved Ron for a moment. "Yeah?" he answered, warily.

Severus looked at the ground. "If- if things should turn against us, I would-" he stopped and took a shuddering breath. "Please protect Hermione." He dared to look up and Ron was stunned at the raw emotion he saw in Snape's face. "If I can't protect her, please, don't let them... don't let her..." his voice faltered, and he looked away, shamed at his weakness.

"I won't, Snape. I promise," Ron said, and to Severus' surprise, held out his hand. Feeling like a dopey Hufflepuff, Severus took it.

He watched as the boy walked away without so much as a backward glance.

Severus thought of his precious wife, and cast his Patronus.

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Neither Hermione, Severus, nor Ron saw the toad-like faces of Amycus and Alecko Carrow as the two Death Eaters followed the Headmaster and his charge toward the Apparition point. The Snatchers had been picked up moments after leaving Hogwarts, and the strongest Veritaserum created had been forced down their gullets. They had spilled their guts - while they still had them - and their remains were tossed outside with the other refuse later that morning.

Brother and sister smiled at one another. Their time was nigh.

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Lyrics Bic Runga - Captured

# Thirty: Love Has No Pride

Chapter 31 of 39

If you want me to beg, I'd fall down on my knees...

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*A special thank you to my beta, stgulik, whose incredible skills were never so much called into play as in this chapter. Thank you, Jules, for holding my hand.*

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*I've had bad dreams too many times to think that they don't mean much anymore*

*And fine times have gone and left my sad home and the friends who once cared just walk out my door*

*But love has no pride when I call out your name and love has no pride when there's no one to blame,*

*But I'd give anything to see you again*

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Every night was the same. Severus would fall into what little sleep he could find, thinking of Poppy's warning that Hermione would have to atone for Albus' manipulations. Every night, he would fantasise of returning to that moment on the Astronomy Tower, only it was he who uttered the fateful curse.

He knew how sweet the words would taste in his mouth as he sent the old queer off the tower.

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At the beginning of the term, Severus had arranged for Hermione to take private lessons with each professor, but it had taken several weeks to arrange. She had looked forward to it; it served as a slender reminder of the life she had once led, before Voldemort had torn everything apart, and Albus Dumbledore had incinerated the disparate pieces.

It had been agreed that an unused classroom would be set aside for this purpose. Although it troubled Hermione to be singled out so blatantly, she came to agree with Severus this would be the safest solution. She decided to make the best of it. She would work doubly hard to prove to her teachers that she expected no special concession; she was there to learn from them, and to excel despite these less-than-ideal circumstances.

It started with Arithmancy, the first class of the day. She sat down at her desk, book open, quill to parchment, ready for instruction. Professor Vector walked into the room, sat at the desk and stared mutely out the window. After five minutes, Hermione asked, "Professor? Is anything wrong?" She was met with stony, disdainful silence. No entreaty, no respectfully-worded query was acknowledged. It was as if the teacher were in the room alone, with nothing to do but while away her hour staring out at the Quidditch pitch.

Hermione felt her face burn with mortification. The spectre of Charity Burbage loomed large between them. She told herself that it would be alright, but an hour seemed to last so long beneath the withering, blatant refusal to even look her way.

When the chime sounded, Vector got up and left as wordlessly as she had come. Moments later, Professor Sinistra arrived. And again, Hermione endured an hour's silence - a silence as deep as a well and as unyielding as a wall.

By the time Hermione had spent four long hours with Vector, Sinistra, Slughorn, and - to her complete humiliation - Professor McGonagall, Hermione felt sick with shame. When the lunch bell chimed, she raced to the Headmaster's quarters.

Strangely, Severus did not ask her how her classes went. When she told him that it had been decided that the timing was bad and she would start her classes a little later in the month, he did not comment. He knew. He knew, and he could or would - do nothing about it. She took to eating in their quarters. She studied in the library after hours.

The days were growing longer, and with them the mounting tensions at Hogwarts. The Gryffindors had resurrected Dumbledore's Army, and were like guerilla fighters, striking out in any way they could, causing mayhem and chaos. They kept the Carrows on the warpath constantly, and the two Death Eaters retaliated by punishing children behind Severus' back. Because he often didn't find out until it was too late, it was assumed that he'd sanctioned the Crucios and the beatings, allowing the Carrows to hold sway. He became an even greater monster in the students' eyes.

This alone seemed to be killing Severus by inches. To Hermione, he looked like a shadow, growing thinner and less substantial, as he grimly held on to the crumbling discipline of the school, and the deepening hostilities of his students and faculty alike.

As Severus spent more and more time trying to maintain a semblance of order in the disintegrating school, he and Hermione no longer had time for research, planning, or even companionship. He was awake through most of the nights, stalking the halls like a wraith, sending students back to their dormitories, breaking up fights, interrupting secret meetings of his staff, heading off the Carrows.

They were suffering, not just as individuals, but as a couple. He spoke to her less and less; there were even times when Hermione reached out to him through their link, and he was untouchable. At night, she reached for him, and more often than not, found his side of the bed empty. Even when he was there, he often pulled away from her touch, mumbling that she should go to sleep. The deep, loving intimacy they had shared and relied on for so long was crumbling, and she didn't know what to do about it didn't even know if she had the right to do anything at all.

Hermione's isolation was complete. She felt like she was standing on an ice floe, stranded in the middle of a stormy sea; the waves were getting higher, and the ice was growing thinner.

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The bedroom was cold, so cold that Severus fancied he could see his breath in the air. He tucked the duvet closer around her body, and shivered. He stood by their bed, watching her sleep. Gazing down into her sweet face afforded him the only peace he could find nowadays. But her sleep was clearly no more restful than his; she was losing weight, her lovely eyes growing larger and bleaker in her heart-shaped face.

He could see the hard edge of everything around them chiseling away at her. He had done this to her. He had pulled her into this hell, and she was paying dearly. He was used to isolation and aversion; she was not. She needed the support of the friends who now shunned her in the halls. He was a sinking ship, going down slow, and she was being pulled in the undertow with him.

He knew now that this was his punishment. Lily's death might have been retribution for his youthful folly, but this, this degeneration of Hermione's well-being and spirit, went deeper, down right to the black pit of his selfish soul, and he would pay dearly for allowing her into his life. He had claimed her, only to watch her be destroyed in a thousand hideous little ways.

She stirred in her sleep, and he left the bedroom before she awakened. He could no longer bear to see her brave, intelligent face, could no longer stand the thought of her defending him. He no longer opened their psychic link anymore; he didn't want her to feel his crushing regret, couldn't stand for her to see his inability to save her from this

downward spiral. And, coward that he was, he couldn't bear seeing her loss of esteem for him.

He knew he was the cause of her destruction; he replayed that fateful night over and over again, the night he stumbled into Grimmauld Place, hurt and bleeding, wallowing in his own filth. If he had gone anywhere else that night, if he had avoided that thrice-cursed house completely, she would never have latched onto him, thinking herself his champion. She would not be with him right now, rotting away from the inside out from his own particular brand of poison. Albus had always said Severus knew better than most how to hurt those he loved.

No, she wouldn't be here, wasting away before his eyes, her love for him dying with every passing day. She would probably be with Potter and Weasley and Longbottom right now. They would be on the run, but at least she would be with those who cared for her. She'd be surrounded by love and support, not by animosity and rejection.

He poured himself a generous firewhisky and sat on the sofa, staring into the fireplace. The dying embers were almost spent; what little heat they managed to give off was inadequate in the large, drafty room. *Now, there's a metaphor for my life*, he thought ruefully. He had burned for Hermione when they had first come together; he had been as irresistible to her as leaping, licking flames were to wood. But now that she was cold, now that she needed his warmth and his attention more than ever, he had nothing left to give. They could no longer hide in the refuge of one another, where no one could find them or hurt them. There was no place left to hide.

And Merlin knew she deserved better than this. Between the Dark Lord, the Carrows, the rebellious students and staff, and the school, he was fading, and what was left wasn't worthy of her. He was such a failure.

---

Hermione woke in the empty bed and sighed. She rose silently, drew a warm robe over her floor-length nightgown, and padded barefoot into their sitting room, where she saw her husband, glass in hand, staring into the dying fire. He looked as if the weight of the world had sat on his shoulders for so long he was permanently stooped; as if his tall, proud figure would never truly stand upright again.

"Severus?"

He turned and looked at her blankly, then a mask came down over his features. "It's very late, Hermione. You should be asleep."

"So should you," she replied. "It's hard to sleep without you." Numb exhaustion seeped into her. "Please come to bed."

He turned back to the fireplace. "I'll be there soon. Go lie down. I will join you later."

Hermione closed her eyes. "Why don't you join me now?"

"I said I'll be there shortly." There was an edge to his deep voice, like it had been drawn across a whetstone of impatience.

Hermione felt a small, red spark flash, burning a tiny hole in the icy numbness that had seemed such a part of her for so many days. "Am I that repulsive?"

He turned and looked at her. The mask seemed to slip a little. "What?"

She felt the welcome red spark flare a little brighter, fanned by her frustration. "You won't link with me. I can't feel you because you're deliberately blocking me. We haven't made love in weeks. You won't touch me; you can barely stand to be in the same room with me. You can hardly make yourself *talk* to me, for Merlin's sake. What else am I supposed to believe?"

Severus stood, glass in hand, and walked toward her. There was a nasty look in his eye she hadn't seen since her younger days as his student. "Well, I'm very sorry your tender sensibilities are offended. Perhaps it hasn't occurred to you lately, but we're in the middle of a rather delicate situation here."

Hermione's anger leapt up with a vengeance, grateful to be finally let loose from the cage it had prowled in for days now. "I am well aware of what we're in the middle of, Severus, but I'm talking about the two of us. What has happened to us? What has happened to *you*?" She reached for him, and to her horror he backed away. "We used to face things together, but you've shut me out. You never hold me, I can't reach you. It's as if you don't want me anywhere near you."

"Oh, of course, it's all about you," he replied, his voice turning mean. "In case you haven't noticed, we're at war, girl! We're talking about lives at stake here, and all you can think about is the fact that you haven't had a decent shag in awhile? I'm sorry to burst your bubble, Hermione, but there's more to life than making sure you get your daily seeing to."

Hermione's breath left her lungs in a huff. "I do not believe we are actually having this conversation." She tried to keep her voice steady. "And yes, I am fully aware of what is important here. I also happen to think that you and I are important as well."

"Then your priorities are questionable at best." His voice took on the condescending tone that used to infuriate her in class. "I'm doing everything I can to keep this place from falling apart. I can't watch the students day and night, and keep the Carrows in line. *and* babysit you"

She gasped. "How dare you? I don't need a babysitter, I need my husband!" She felt her anger morph into fear. "Look, I know how difficult it is for you, Severus, But I'm here to help you."

He stared over her head, his jaw working in anger. "I don't need your help."

"Well I need yours!" she cried, growing certain that nothing she said would work, yet unable to stop herself from trying. "Has it occurred *to you* that I'm scared, and I need your strength and your love?"

He spun away from her. "What you need is to grow up, Hermione! I don't have time for this childish outburst especially in the middle of the night. I have enough on my plate without having to worry about upsetting you! If you want to help, I suggest you grow a thicker hide and stop hiding behind my robes!"

His words slapped her in the face and she felt as if she were falling down a well. "How do you think I feel, knowing that the moment I step foot out of this room or the Infirmary, I'll get attacked by the people who used to be my friends? I *am* trying to keep my emotions under control, but I can't do it right now, and I'm fucking sick of you ignoring me!"

"Ignoring you?" Severus roared, his temper finally unleashed as well. His voice took on a biting tone. "Oh, do forgive me, Madam, for trying to keep you safe and alive. I'll remind you of this moment when the Death Eaters are punching through this school like a battering ram, torturing you and your little friends right down to the point where you won't be able to remember how to tie your shoes." He sneered and his voice sketched a vicious parody of a posh, Home Counties accent. "Oh, My Lord, I'm Arf'ly sorry, but would you mind not attacking the school today? It's all frightfully upsetting, and I feel a headache coming on! Do refer to my husband, will you? He takes care of all the unpleasant things." His voice seemed as sharp as a knife, cutting and slashing with no regard for which vital organs it pierced.

"How dare you mock me?" Hermione screamed, too angry to hold back her fear and resentment. "I've done everything I could to keep us alive! I've even k-"

"Do not even think of throwing Albus Dumbledore in my face!" he bellowed, his expression murderous. The glass of firewhisky exploded against the fireplace with a crash. "I've been walking on broken glass between him and the Dark Lord since before you could wipe your own arse!" He rushed at her, pulling his sleeve up with a jerk to reveal the Dark Mark. "So don't come the great 'I am' to me, witch. In case it has escaped your notice, I'm a fucking Death Eater! And you're just a "

"-whore," she cut in, her voice suddenly cold. "Go ahead and say it! That's my name now. Whore of Gryffindor."

The words rang between them like a bell. They faced one another, breathing hard, both near tears, and the temper that blew between them dropped like the aftermath of a

tornado. He turned around to leave.

"Don't you dare walk out that door, Severus Snape!" Hermione cried shrilly. "I am not letting you leave in the middle of this argument."

He laughed, a cruel sound that didn't even sound like him. "And how are you going to stop me, witch?"

"I-I won't be here when you get back."

He paused for a moment with his back toward her, but the anger still held sway. "Then I'll send a house-elf to help you to move your things," he replied.

Hermione gasped and started toward him. "No, Severus, please! Don't leave. Don't -"

But he was gone, and the door was closed behind him. Hermione crumpled to the floor, sobbing.

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Severus raced through the dark halls, his blood singing hot and hard through his body. He was too furious, too frightened to think straight. He was sure he had destroyed everything, but he'd been unable to stop the hateful words. They had spewed like poison from his lips, and he'd hated himself, cursed himself even as they flew toward the air, hitting their target with lethal precision.

He closed his eyes, his breathing harsh, threatening to pull into a sob. He had to get hold of his emotions or he'd be truly lost. Merlin forbid if he ran into anyone. He'd ruin everything, and then he might as well turn his wand on himself. He swayed in the hall, feeling dizzy and ill.

Suddenly, he heard a sound, and his wand was instantly in his hand. *Lumos!* he hissed, and the blossoming glow threw a beam of light onto the ghostly visage of Minerva McGonagall at the door of her chambers.

"Good evening, Headmaster," she said, primly. "Are you suffering from insomnia as well?"

"Minerva?" he rasped, his voice hoarse. "What in Merlin's name are you doing up at this time of night?"

She held up two steaming mugs, as if she'd been waiting for him to show up. "A cup of hot cocoa is the best thing in the world for a sleepless night, I find."

---

Hermione was trying to compose herself when she heard footsteps outside the room. Thinking it was Severus, she rushed to the door, ready to go down on her knees if she had to; anything to try to keep him from tossing her out of his life.

She threw open the door. "Thank heavens you've

Standing there were Draco Malfoy and the Carrows. Draco was tense and pale; he swallowed convulsively, as if he was close to being ill. Behind him stood the Carrows, gurning in that nauseating way they always did when pleased about something or torturing a student. Instantly, Hermione felt her stomach shrivel and fold in on itself. Death had come calling in the guise of this Slytherin pretty boy and the two gargoyles who accompanied him. For a moment, Hermione thought she might vomit.

"Where's the Headmaster?" Draco whispered. He was staring at her, as if willing her to do something, anything. He looked terrified, and Hermione felt oddly sorry for him, being trailed around by the Carrows.

"He he's making rounds within the castle," she said. At the same time, she reached out through her link to her husband *Severus, please, I need you here, now...*

"Don't matter," Amycus Carrow grunted. "*She's* the one they want."

Hermione glanced at the odious Death Eater, then back to Draco. "They who? Want for what?" she asked warily.

Draco blinked. "You need to come with me," he blurted.

"Come where?" she asked, hardening her voice. *Severus, hear me, oh gods!*

"You are required at Malfoy Manor, Madam Snape," Alecto Carrow replied, her falsely simpering tone accompanied by a shark-like grin.

"Right now? Why?" she asked, stalling, frantically casting around a reason to stay here at Hogwarts. "Surely it can wait until morning-"

"Some... toerags were picked up by some Snatchers and they're being brought to Malfoy Manor. The Dark Lord wants you to identify them," Amycus Carrow explained, his grin a sickening thing. "Now."

"I need to wait for the Headmaster to return-"

"I shall inform the Headmaster of your whereabouts, Madam Snape. But we wouldn't want to keep our Lord waiting, would we?" Alecto said, her tone insolent and insinuating. "I'm sure I can keep Headmaster Snape suitably entertained until your return."

Hermione prayed her face gave away none of the anxiety she felt. With a haughty toss of her head, she replied airily, "And why do you need me? Draco can identify any of the criminals as surely as I."

Amycus Carrow leaned in, his smile gone. His breath was rank and sour. "Pack it up, witch. You know exactly why. And I've made sure The Dark Lord knows you've been told to go with Boy Malfoy here." He sneered at her. "This isn't a request, girl. This is a command. You're not going to disobey a direct order from the Dark Lord, are you?" Amycus snorted. "I figure you and the Headmaster know exactly what they look like. That's why you let that ginger go, wadnit?" He tilted his head with false innocence. "I mean, if it had been Weasley, you woulda turned him in, instead of making Snape escort him home, wouldn't ya?"

With a sinking heart, Hermione knew exactly why her presence was requested. The Carrows knew the truth; they must have spotted Severus sneaking Ron off the grounds. And now, if Snatchers had caught the real Harry, Ron and Neville, the Carrows were betting she would not be able to hide her reaction. Her true loyalties would be revealed in front of Voldemort, in front of them all. *Severus, please, please PLEASE come!* But there was no reply.

Carrow's eyes were slick with triumph and power, and Hermione knew she had lost. She thought of Ron, being brave, and of Harry, who had never understood what was going on and now would never know. But mostly, she thought of her husband, and how she wished she could have held him one last time, and told him she loved him.

"Give me a moment to get dressed," she said, and was glad her voice was steady, that her eyes and mind gave nothing away.

A hard hand closed around her arm, and she looked up into the leering face of Amycus Carrow. "Why bother? You won't be needin' clothes where you're going, Madam Snape."

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Severus took the mug of cocoa from Minerva and sank down into her chamber's only comfortable chair. The moment the hot liquid hit his stomach, he became aware it had something foreign in it. It was not poisonous, but he instinctively reached for the bezoar that lived in his pocket at all times. Several seconds passed, and he looked at Minerva keenly. Anything fatal would already be manifesting itself.

She smiled at him encouragingly. "That should help you feel a little better soon. It's my own recipe. Guanacaste chocolate, with two grains each of asphodel, hellebore, valerian root, and a drop of re'em blood."

Severus looked at her, his eyes wide with alarm. "And that enhances the beverage how, Professor?"

She continued to smile. "It helps to relax the mind for sleep, but it also opens it to the realm of dreams. The re'em blood counteracts the 'dreamless sleep' part, and enhances one's ability to both legitimize and occlude." She had the temerity to look smug. "You're not the only dab hand with Potions, you know."

When Severus silently handed her the empty mug, she looked at him with sympathetic eyes. With a quick glance around the chamber, Minerva cast a Silencing Charm so strong it made his ears pop. "I've been talking to Poppy, Severus," she confided.

A chill ran down Severus' spine. "I'm sure you and Madam Pomfrey converse often. She is a compassionate and formidable witch."

Minerva's face grew hard. "Oh, cut the shite, Severus. I know what's going on. Bloody Albus and his secrets!" She began to pace. "You could have told me, you know. I could have helped you."

Severus slumped. He knew he should freeze her out, as he'd been doing for the past two months now, but he was too tired, too defeated. "I couldn't tell anyone, Minerva. If you'd been interrogated."

"I think I can hold my own against a few jump-up Death Eaters like the Carrows, Severus Snape," she replied tartly, "and I'll thank you to remember that I was fighting this sort of darkness since before you were a gleam in your da's treads!"

Severus' mouth twitched helplessly. "I thought it was 'a gleam in your mother's eye.'"

"You gleam your way, and I'll gleam in mine," she laughed. When he chuckled with her, she relaxed a little.

"How did you figure it out?" he finally asked. "What dropped the shoe?"

"Why, Hermione, of course. I've known that girl since she was a cub. She would never, never betray those she loves. And I saw you and her in the infirmary, after her parents were killed. And I've known you since you were a child as well."

He found himself unable to meet her eyes. "I never laid a... I didn't..." he shook his head. "I married a good woman, Minerva. A pure woman. Do you understand?"

He looked up at her, and to his surprise she looked sorrowful. "The students have called her horrible things, Severus. To her face and all."

Severus felt sick. "I know, Minerva. She wouldn't tell me, but I knew something was going on."

Minerva continued as if she hadn't heard him. "But I'm sorry to say I still believed the worst about her, until last week, her first day of class." Minerva explained how she and the professors had made a pact not only to refuse to teach her, but to damn her with their silence. Severus grew grim, but Minerva faced his cold anger stoically.

"She hid the truth well in public, Severus. You should be proud. When the catcalls happened, and the Carrows egged on the students, she just held her head high, like none of it mattered. Like she was privileged to be the Headmaster's wife, and they couldn't touch her."

"But in the classroom, alone, it was a different story," Minerva said, and to Severus' astonishment, tears filled his colleague's eyes. "Sitting in there, enduring our silence and condemnation, she was devastated, Severus. It was killing her to be ostracised by those she respected and cared for. That's when I knew."

"She can be as tough as nails around the Carrows, but around me, no. If she was a true Death Eater, she wouldn't have given a damn how we treated her. Hell, she could have hexed us, and what could we have done about it? She's the Headmaster's wife. Instead, she took it, like it was punishment she deserved." Minerva wiped her eyes. "That's when I knew. She's not a Death Eater. She's a fine, brave, caring girl."

Severus closed his eyes, replaying the twisted, warped conversation they'd had. "I know, Minerva, and things..." He sighed. "Things have not been going well. It's all my fault, of course. She can't help it."

---

Hermione pushed Amicus Carrow away from her disgustedly. He leered at her, but allowed her to move away from his embrace. He had side-along Apparated them to Malfoy Manor. His sister Aleo had done likewise with Draco, which was probably more for his own safety than for her own nefarious, vicarious pleasures. Draco was shaking so badly he ran the risk of splinching himself.

Hermione kept her mind calm as she walked up the steps. The last time she'd been here, it had been with Severus. It had taken every ounce of courage they had to stroll away from Charity Burbage's murder as calmly as if they'd been leaving a boring garden party.

In spite of the late hour, the house was ablaze with lights, and when Hermione entered the foyer she heard several voices she didn't recognise. The shrill, imperious voice of Bellatrix Lestrange cut through the deeper male voices, and Hermione's throat tightened. In many ways, she was more afraid of Draco's aunt than the Dark Lord himself.

As she, Draco and Carrow entered the room, Amicus held out his hand. "Gimme your wand."

Hermione stared at him, aghast. She looked down her nose at him in a credible imitation of Severus at his most disdainful. "I've never had to relinquish my wand for the Dark Lord before."

Carrow scoffed. "You fly awfully high, Madam Snape. Pity you have such a long way to fall. *Accio wand!*"

She watched in horror as her wand flew from her sleeve into his hand. "Damn you!" she snapped as she lunged for it. He slapped her, making her see stars.

"That's for your husband making a fool of me in front of the Dark Lord," he hissed, grabbing her arm and pushing her ahead as he walked. "If I were you, I'd be saving my strength. You're gonna need it soon."

Wordlessly, Hermione struggled against him, but Carrow's arm was like a vise around hers, and without a wand, she was no match for him physically. They came to a halt in the middle of the large drawing room. It was a sumptuous space, full of elegant, antique furniture. The walls were draped with a pale, icy-blue silk. A priceless Aubusson rug graced the floor beneath her feet. The room looked exactly like what it was: a place to show off the pale beauty of the Malfoys, with its blue walls, exactly the colour of Narcissa's silk robes, and its dove-grey carpet perfectly matching Lucius Malfoy's eyes. A Waterford vase of creamy roses sat on a nearby table. Their scent almost, but not quite, masked the stink of fear in the room, and Hermione felt overwhelmed by both odours.

The Malfoys, their hosts, were standing side by side. Narcissa imperiously beckoned her son to her, and Hermione watched as Draco passed her and joined his parents. Their pale, porcelain features were tense; like Dresden dolls badly fired from the kiln. Malfoy Senior, in particular, looked simply awful, as if he no longer cared about anything but surviving. His eyes were haunted, his handsome face unkempt, as if he had not shaved in a couple of days. His clothes were rumpled and he looked exhausted. Only Narcissa seemed the same calm, cool woman Hermione remembered.

Draco looked down at the floor as another commotion burst from the front door. Hermione turned to see Fenrir Greyback and another equally odious wizard stride into the room, holding three young men by their collars.

Hermione could not prevent a gasp. It was Neville and Ron, and between them, a very swollen, very distorted-looking Harry Potter. Neville and Ron glanced at her, their

faces stamped with impotent fury, then looked away. Harry's face looked as if it had been pumped up to three times its normal size. His skin was flushed and shiny, like a balloon distended and ready to burst. Only his bright green eyes were the same, bulging as they were behind the stretching skin of his eyelids. He looked at her steadily, but Hermione could not fathom what he was thinking.

"W-what happened to him?" she said, pointing a shaking hand at Harry.

Greyback and the other wizard began to laugh like they had heard the funniest joke. He jerked a grubby thumb towards Neville. "That berk tried to play hero and hex us. But instead of hitting us, he hexed his own mate! What a moron!"

Hermione looked at Neville, who refused to meet her eyes. Harry's face was so puffed and bloated it was starting to split at the nostrils. She would have been hard-pressed to identify him in a room full of strangers, and therefore didn't think Neville had missed at all. He had deliberately hexed Harry to make him all but unrecognisable. She felt an absurd sense of pride in him.

"You're that Longbottom boy," Bellatrix purred, stalking toward Neville. "The one who was going to give me such a damn good seeing-to at the Ministry." She sidled up to him and leaned in provocatively. When he looked away, she slapped him, like a cat will strike at something it has cornered. "Not so eager to have a go now, eh, boy?"

"It's that blood traitor Weasley, too," Greyback said, pointing to Ron. "Both of 'em are supposed to be travelling with Potter."

"See 'is scar?" said the other wizard. "It's 'im, I tell ya, it's Potter! We got gold coming to us for him-"

"Enough, Scabior," Greyback snarled, looking from the three fugitives to Bellatrix. "If this is Harry Potter, we got more than gold coming to us. I'll be wanting to talk to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named myself."

"And if it isn't? Do you want to talk to him then?" Bellatrix retorted sneeringly. "Do you remember what our Lord did to that pair of Snatchers who brought him two Muggles, claiming they were Potter and this Weasley blood traitor?"

Greyback growled in his throat, but didn't reply. "Yeah, thought not," Bellatrix smirked.

As they bickered and postured, Hermione looked around, desperately trying to think. It was at that moment she felt Bellatrix's gimlet eyes swivel her way. She looked down at Hermione, menace pouring off her in waves, and pointed to Harry.

"Well? Is it him? You know him, girl! Is it Harry Potter?"

Hermione looked at her, then back to Harry. She shook her head. "I-I can't tell-"

Bellatrix hissed, "Fuck's sake! Useless fucking Mudblood!" She grabbed her nephew by the collar and dragged him to face Harry. "Draco! Is it him? Is it Harry Potter?" Her wild eyes seemed to frighten even her nephew. When he didn't reply, she jerked him hard.

"Bella! That is enough!" Narcissa Malfoy's voice rang cold in the room.

"No!" Lucius Malfoy strode to stand by his son's side. His voice was mildly pleading. The hand he placed on his son's shoulder shook slightly. "Draco, look carefully. If we are the ones who present Potter to the Dark Lord, our family name will be exonerated-"

"Oi, Malfoy," Greyback growled, his eyes narrowing to slits. He took a step toward Lucius, and a chill descended onto the room. "Let's not be forgetting who brought him in, shall we? While you've been sitting on your gold chairs and sipping brandy in your stately pile, we've been slogging around the countryside. If anyone is going to cast Potter at the Dark Lord's feet, it ain't gonna be you or your sister in-law!"

"Enough! All of you!" The room stilled as Narcissa Malfoy's voice rang out, imperious and cold. "You come into my home with these cretins, you threaten my husband, my son, and these nobodies." She gestured to Draco and Hermione. "These two know Harry Potter better than anyone alive. Let them speak." There was a deliberate emphasis on the last word. She turned to Hermione, her eyes shuttered. "Well, Madam Snape? Can you honestly say this is or isn't Harry Potter?"

Hermione looked in Narcissa's eyes. She saw the same pleading look she knew she must be wearing. "I I honestly cannot say, Madam Malfoy. He's so... distorted. I really, really don't know."

Bellatrix snorted. "Useless." She raised the sleeve of her gown, showing her Dark Mark, which slithered under her skin like a living thing. She smiled maliciously at Hermione. "I think the Dark Lord would be delighted to welcome such an array of guests, don't you?"

"Bella, no! What if he isn't Potter?"

Bellatrix sneered at Lucius' almost frightened, desperate tone. "Then he'll at least enjoy a little sport, brother in-law. Or have you lost your taste for our Lord's whims?"

Lucius faltered, but raised his own sleeve. "I haven't lost anything, Bellatrix, including my ownership of this house. If the Dark Lord is to be called, it will be by me!"

While the two argued over the petty notion of who would activate the Dark Mark, Hermione spared a glance at Ron. He looked repentant and worried, but he kept quiet. Likewise, Neville watched the scene carefully, as if he, too, were trying to find a way to escape. Hermione's heart went out to them. There could be no escape - at least, none they would survive.

Hermione tried once again to reach out to Severus, but in her mind's eye, all she could see was a black wall. It was impossible to scale, tunnel under or run around. It was exhausting her to even try to open the link. She thought she felt a touch of him, but he was cloaked behind that black wall of emotions she could not penetrate. A sudden thought zoomed in from nowhere. *Someone is going to die here tonight.* She wondered if it would be her.

Just then, there was a commotion in the back of the room, in the shadows. From the back corner, the snivelling little wizard whined, "Oi, that's mine! I found it!" They all looked to see Amycus Carrow wrestling something out of Scabior's hand. It was the Sword of Gryffindor. Hermione's heart sank.

"Wait!" Bellatrix Lestrange stopped Lucius' argument with a chopping motion of her hand. She looked as if she'd been struck by lightning. "Where did you get this?"

"It's mine," Harry said, his mouth so swollen and distorted he was barely understandable.

"Liar!" Bellatrix shouted. She withdrew a knife. "Tell me how you came by this, or by Merlin, I'll gut you like a fish and drop the leavings at the Dark Lord's feet! Tell me!"

She grabbed Harry by the hair, just as Ron screamed, "It's a fake! It's not the real sword, it's a fake, I tell you!" He turned to Hermione in horror. "It's not the real one," he insisted.

From behind him came a low sound, a deep, coarse laughter that instantly grated on Hermione's nerves. "Well, isn't that a coincidence, traitor," said Amycus Carrow. "I'd say that is a true coincidence indeed." Carrow turned to Hermione with a nasty smile. "You see, I just so happened to have seen this very sword in the Headmaster's office not a month ago. But it disappeared shortly after, when Snape left the grounds with someone in the middle of the night." He looked at Ron. "And what do you know? That someone was you, traitor."

Bellatrix turned to Hermione with a look that seemed to say Christmas had come early. With a beatific smile, she said, "Put these three in the dungeon with the others. Madam Snape and I are going to have a little chat. About loyalty." Greyback nodded, and just before he grabbed his charges, Bellatrix barked, "Show the sword to the Goblin. He'll know if it's authentic or not."



The three boys struggled as Greyback and Scabior manhandled them down into the vaults. Hermione could hear them shouting, fighting the werewolf and his partner, and her heart went out to them. Whoever was already down there, she only hoped they could comfort the boys. She knew she herself was past comfort. She made one last desperate attempt to contact Severus through their link, but it was like trying to push her breath through that black wall.

And Bellatrix never stopped staring at her, or smiling. "Leave us," she ordered, and the three Malfoys slunk from the room. Hermione caught Draco's eye, and wished she hadn't. Draco looked as if he were going to cry. It made it very difficult for Hermione not to cry as well. The only one who remained was Carrow, who crossed his arms and leaned back on a delicate Louis XIV writing desk, picking his teeth. He seemed quite gleeful about what was about to happen.

The room seemed preternaturally silent, and Hermione remained still as Bellatrix circled her like a vulture. "You know, you're in a very precarious position, Madam Snape." she said conversationally. "There is a sword in my vault. It's supposed to be the true Sword of Gryffindor. The Dark Lord himself ordered it put there, as you know.

"Now, if the goblin pronounces this sword to be the true sword, you and your husband will have to explain to the Dark Lord why you put a fake in my vault. But if it is indeed a fake, you will then have to explain why you gave it to your friend, a known fugitive and enemy of my Lord's."

Hermione fumed at the dark-haired woman, her frayed nerves juicing her with a shot of anger. "Do you think I would be foolish enough to lie? Here, in front of you?"

Bellatrix turned her full attention on Hermione, and slowly walked toward her. "I think, Mudblood, you'd do anything to save your worthless hide. I mean," she looked around, her eyes innocently wide, "you're not exactly among friends here. I'd say you're about as alone as a Mudblood can get. Where is your husband now? Shouldn't he be here, supporting his wife?"

Her eyes narrowed into something almost sexual in their ferocity. "Or did he decide you were too much of a liability? Severus always did know when to cut his losses and run."

Hermione tried to hold her gaze, but the last sentence hit her like a sledgehammer. Had she been asked yesterday if Severus would ever abandon her, she would have answered no, without hesitation. But hadn't that been exactly what he'd done tonight? Had he know what was coming, and deliberately picked a fight?

Bellatrix started laughing. "Yeah, he was already tired of you the last time he was here, Mudblood. I never did understand his fascination with you, except you were another piece of Gryffindor pussy."

Hermione wanted to scream, "You're wrong! We are loyal!" but her voice seemed stuck in her throat. The only sound she made was a sick little whimper that made her feel weak and stupid.

Bellatrix' smile made Hermione think of tombstones. She withdrew a wand as bent and twisted as her own blackened soul and pointed it at Hermione. "Alecto is quite taken with him, you know." She turned to Carrow. "I'm sure you're both rather taken with him, actually. I understand Severus' proclivities run toward the more exotic, so I'm certain you'll find him entertaining."

Carrow shrugged. "A hole's a hole, innit? What my Alecto wants," he said, with a flash of rotten teeth, "I make sure she gets. The Dark Lord has already promised her that Severus will be hers the minute this little joyride is over, anyway." He looked at Hermione with undisguised repulsion. "Snape was sure the sword was a fake, so little Miss Gryffindor must have switched them right under his nose."

Bellatrix aimed her wand directly at Hermione's heart. "The way I see it, it doesn't really matter. Either the sword's authentic, which means that you and Severus lied to the Dark Lord. Or it's a fake, which means you aided and abetted Harry Potter. Either way, you're fucked." She shrugged. "But I believe in being thorough, and I believe in the right type of inducement."

Hermione looked about helplessly, but there was nowhere to run. She was alone. *Please Severus, if you love me, please come now! Please, I don't want to die alone!*

Bellatrix took a step back, smiled at Hermione, and shouted, "*CRUCIO!*"

-oOo-

Hundreds of miles away, Severus Snape screamed.

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Love Has No Pride John Prine

## Thirty One: The Voices That Are Calling You Away

Chapter 32 of 39

I could never let you disappear...

*Once again, I cannot thank you enough for your continued encouragement and support as this story moves on. I cannot believe it is up to Chapter Thirty One. I told my beta Jules I figured Twenty five was my limit. Just goes to show you that when DahlraMuse gets the bit between his teeth, I have to just hold on and enjoy the ride.*

*This chapter is dedicated to stgulik, my incredible beta. You have no idea how important she is to the integrity and pace of this story. It is also dedicated to you, for continuing to hang in there. The end is in sight; I just hope I can continue to please you.*

*This is a work of fanfiction, and the characters do not belong to me. They are the property of JK Rowling, and I make no money from this work. My payment is in reviews and good karma.*

*Please note this chapter contains violence and character death.*

---

Can I pull you through the night with me before the lights have slipped the shade,

Can I tell you that you're stronger than any shadows that you've made?

I will always try to find you through the tangle and the haze, and the mesmerising voices that are pulling you away.

So I'm staring at the pinholes in the cold October sky, and I'm drinking up the starlight to keep from telling you goodbye.

The more you're fading, the more I want to see you clear, the more you're fading, I could never let you disappear...

---

"Severus! What in the name of Merlin is the matter?" The alarmed voice of Severus' deputy cleared his head somewhat, and he rallied. Then, close on the heels of Minerva's enquiry, Hermione's voice came roaring into his head like the Hogwarts Express.

*Please Severus, if you love me, please come now! Please, I don't want to die alone!*

Pain ground into his body as if he had fallen onto spikes of jagged glass. He cried out, doubling over. His vision swam, and his stomach lurched sickeningly. What was happening to her?

As he tried to straighten, Minerva gasped. No doubt he looked as traumatised as he felt. "Shall I fetch Poppy?" she asked, trying to steady him with her strong hands.

Wave after wave of nausea and pain slammed into him, making sweat break out on his body in a cold, clammy wash of fear. *Think, Severus, think!* he commanded himself. He turned away from Minerva, swallowing hard, trying to keep the contents of his roiling gut in place. He reached out blindly, and his Deputy gripped his hands, supporting him. "Minerva," he began, his teeth chattering so hard it distorted his voice. "Hermione... hurt... dying..."

"Gods, Severus! Where? How do you know?" Minerva looked at him as if she feared for his sanity.

Another blast of pain slammed into him, so intense he turned away from Minerva and vomited, bringing up cocoa and firewhisky onto the wooden floor. He retched until he was churning with dry heaves, fear and despair. He now knew the answer to his question. His wife was being Crucio'd.

Severus knew he was the only one who could save her. But following closely on that thought was the voice of Albus Dumbledore, exhorting Severus to swear to stay and protect Hogwarts, no matter the cost. *For the Greater Good.* Albus had used the phrase so many times it was engrained in Severus' consciousness, like a sliver of glass driven so deep, his body had assimilated it, transformed it into part of his physical being. Severus had sold his soul to Albus' Greater Good. He had pledged to remain at his post until the bitter end, faithful to the Order, whole to Voldemort, the shadow that ever slipped between the dark and the light.

But stronger still was the memory of holding Hermione in that ruined, fire-blackened shell of a house, pledging his life to his witch. "My back will be to yours, always." He remembered promising himself, above all other oaths, including his wedding vows, that before he allowed anything to happen to her, he would take both their lives. And now she was being tortured.

Fuck Albus and his Greater Good; fuck Harry Potter and the Order and even Lily; he had given them enough. If Hermione were to be killed, there was no point to his own life. He thought of what he had lost and what he loved, and knew that to choose one meant the abandonment of the other.

He made his decision.

With a grunt of pain, he allowed Professor McGonagall to help him to his feet. His legs felt like those of a new-born foal's, but he knew what he had to do. Wiping the clammy sweat from his face, he withdrew his wand and aimed carefully at Minerva, chanting the words he had hoped he would never have to recite.

Minerva gasped in shock as she stared down the business end of the ebony wand, but she did not flinch or step back. Beautiful, golden glyphs flew out of the tip, weaving and twisting into the air, and she heard the strong intent, the determined resolve in his sonorous baritone voice. Severus was conjuring forth the spell that would break his, the Headmaster's, protective enchantments over Hogwarts.

"Severus," she whispered, "are you sure you know what you are doing?"

There was a mighty, deep rumble within the castle, as the main defensive wards dropped. With them dropped Severus' authority, his rights, his domain. He nodded to Minerva. Without hesitation, she drew her own wand. She pronounced the counter spell, and the ancient wards juddered ponderously back upward, her authority effectively taking over from him. The protection that was the signature of every Headmaster and mistress that had ever ruled the school was back in place. Anyone awake might have felt the slightest shudder. But most felt nothing, nothing at all.

Severus' voice was strained, his face paper-white. "Hogwarts is yours, Minerva, until I return. If I don't, defend the school, defend the students."

"But Severus, where are you-"

"I have to go to Hermione."

Minerva grabbed him as he turned to go. "Please take care, Severus." On impulse, she reached up and kissed his cheek. He was in too much distress to notice.

He looked down at the bewildered new Headmistress. "Tell them..." He looked away, fighting tears. "Tell them I did the best I could."

As Severus raced away from the school for the final time, he felt a sharp pang of regret. He would have liked to have faced the Dark Lord here, with the full might of Hogwarts' protective power behind him. He had wanted the world to know that, in the end, he was fighting for the light, not against it.

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The first Crucio sucked the breath from Hermione's lungs as if she were in a vacuum. She choked out a scream and fell to her knees, with Carrow's laughter sawing in her ears. "Yeah, that's the place for a Mudblood! Hit her again, Bella!" The witch had been only too happy to oblige. Like an artist dabbling in her favourite medium, Bellatrix painted her with the curse, until Hermione was saturated with its many colours and textures.

The curse did not so much hit as pulverised her, and Hermione's scream was hard and high enough to shatter the windows. Her stomach heaved; she vomited on the Aubusson rug, adding another shocking texture of her own.

Black blades, scorpions, fangs, talons, thorns and barbs; Hermione felt them all drive into her body, ripping her apart and sealing the wounds with a coating of gelignite. These were patched over with a layer of laughter and cat-calls. Hermione tried to withdraw deep within her mind, but she could not outrun the pain.

Then the Cruciatus shorted out all thought processes from Hermione's brain. The will to survive was ripped from her, as vital organs were magically pummeled and reshaped. Her heart was beating so hard and fast it hurt her sternum, and her eyes bulged from their sockets, trying to escape the lethal curse. A large set of fists closed around her bowels and bladder and squeezed until she lost control of them, but Hermione was in too much distress to notice her soiled state.

Just when she thought her heart would burst within, Bellatrix gave Hermione a reprieve. She lay on the floor gasping, her vocal chords spasming from her screams. If she could only remember how to speak, Hermione would have begged the woman to kill her. As it was, she could not remember her name, or where she was or why she was being tortured. Nothing and no one existed but the pain, in the guise of the woman standing over her, holding a wand.

Bellatrix approached her, strolling lazily over to where Hermione lay. She did not bother where she stepped, but allowed her trailing robes to smear the mess on the carpet. The sight made Hermione heave again.

Bellatrix squatted down beside the prone woman. She lifted Hermione's chin in her hand, until Hermione was forced to look up to her. In a perfectly reasonable voice, Bellatrix said, "Now. Let's try this again. Which is the real sword?"

Hermione looked up at Bellatrix blankly, her mouth working soundlessly. *Sword? What is... sword?*

Bellatrix gave her a look of regret. "Well, since you won't tell me, I'm going to start again."

"No," Hermione croaked. That word she knew. She knew what *start* meant. She couldn't take *start* again. She couldn't bear it.

"Yes, I am," Bellatrix answered, almost gently. "But I want you to tell me the truth. Is the real sword here, or in my vault at Gringotts?"

Hermione looked up into the hooded eyes, the lust she saw in them, and a little more of her soul seeped back into her body. She remembered now. She thought of everything at stake, of how easy the truth was, and how hard the next few moments would be. And most of all, she knew that even if she spilled her guts and told Bellatrix Lestrange everything she knew, she would still die on this carpet in the next few moments.

She spat in Bellatrix's face.

Carrow sucked in his breath. "Ooh, very recalcitrant, Madam Lestrange. I think a lesson is in order."

Wiping the spittle from her cheek, Bellatrix rose. "I think you're right. She needs a little more incentive." She looked down at Hermione with a look of pretended respect. "Impressive, though. Most don't have enough juice left to spit. Then again, I have been going easy on you, so far."

She grinned at Hermione when Carrow laughed, then gestured toward the door where Harry and the boys had been taken. "Amcyus, why don't you go downstairs and see what you can find that will help jog Madam Snape's memory? We have quite a little party down there now." Carrow pushed himself from the desk and ambled through the same door everyone else had been pushed through. His ugly laughter floated down the hall, and Bellatrix turned her attention back to Hermione.

"Well, well, well. Alone at last." She walked around Hermione. "I'm going to cast the curse again now. Get ready," she said, as if she were going to give Hermione a present. Hermione began to moan, rocking back and forth. "Get ready," Bellatrix cooed, her laughter soft and sensual. Hermione began to keen, feeling weak with humiliation.

But when Bellatrix laughed at her pitiful state, something galvanised Hermione, filling her with a grim resolve, and she felt the rest of her self-awareness snap back into place. She would not die like some pitiful worm crawling around in her own filth, on this ruined rug. She would die Hermione Granger-Snape.

"Fuck. You," she managed, and dragged herself upright.

There was a scuffling motion, and she heard a man's voice, shouting, "Take your filthy hands off me!"

She knew that voice. She must be more delirious than she thought. Perhaps she ~~had~~ been driven mad, just as the Longbottoms had been rendered insane by this very same woman. Shivering, she whispered, "Severus... I don't want to die... I'm so scared..."

"Oh, my God! Hermione!"

The anguished female's voice sang through the room like an arrow. Hermione glanced in the direction of the sound, and stared in stunned, choked silence. She ~~was~~ mad.

It was her parents. They were standing there, just as if they were alive.

They were dirty and thin and frightened, but they were desperately fighting to go to her. Greyback and Carrow held them back, but just barely.

Hermione moaned pitifully, and tears streamed down her fevered cheeks. "Mummy? Is that really you?" she whimpered, and tried to rise to her feet.

"Let her go, you sick bitch!" her father bellowed, nearly wrestling free from the werewolf.

Bellatrix turned her attention toward the Grangers and extended her wand again. Hermione wailed as the witch almost casually Crucio'd her parents. They writhed on the ground in agony, screaming for mercy, calling her name. Hermione cried, "Stop it! Stop it! I'll tell you what you want to know! Just leave them! Stop hurting them!"

Bellatrix was having none of that. Swords were forgotten; vaults were forgotten. All that mattered were the screams, and the power to elicit them. As Hermione's parents fainted from the pain, Bellatrix laughed a high, shrieking cackle, and shouted over Hermione's screams, "This is more fun than shooting pixies in a barrel! *Crucio!*"

Through the mind-splitting pain, Hermione's body contorted, twisting painfully, until her upper torso was turned in almost the opposite direction from her legs. Hermione had thought the previous pain was unbearable. This was so far beyond 'unbearable' as to be out of the realm of physical science. She could no longer breathe, as her body turned in opposite directions, wringing itself like a washcloth. Bellatrix was slowly twisting her body apart.

"The trick is not to break the back too soon. If you do, the fun's over. You have to be very precise," Bellatrix gloated, rotating her wand, cranking it with her wrist in a slow, corkscrew motion. "I practiced on house-elves until I got it just right." Her voice was breathless with demonic lust.

Hermione's spine twisted until she was blinded and had no other thought but to please, please die. She begged her body to stop struggling. She begged Severus to kill her. She dimly heard laughter, and realised she was screaming her pleas into the room.

The air was filled with the odours of her voided body, the sounds of her torture, the taste of the scream in her mouth as it filled with blood. And as the pain abated, as she drew in desperate, ragged, gulping breaths, Bellatrix struck again, the expression on her face like a happy child's.

Just as Hermione felt her body shutting down, a voice bellowed, "What the fuck are you doing to my wife?"

-oOo-

Severus flew into the room, a vengeance-filled angel in black. *'Stupify!'* he roared, slicing his wand through the air like a whip. The force of the spell knocked Bellatrix off her feet with such force she was thrown against the wall, dazed.

Hermione looked up toward her husband with sightless, staring eyes, unable to focus. "Severus?" she gulped, her voice garbled and fading. "Please make it stop..."

He whirled around to face Hermione. *"Finite Incantatem!"*

*"Incarcerous!"* Severus cursed as several thin ropes shot around his body, pinning his arms to his sides in a crushing bind. A stunning spell rammed into his temple like a fist, and he staggered to his knees. He felt the Crucio drive into his body before he heard it cast, and could tell from the signature bite of the curse that Bellatrix had not cast it. The duration of the curse was curiously brief; Severus lay on the floor, panting, trying to conserve his energy. He had lost his wand when the Cruciatus hit, but he could still free himself with wandless magic if he had enough respite to concentrate his energies.

As he lay still, the temperature dropped around him, and he felt the familiar rush of dread that heralded the arrival of his one remaining Master. Severus immediately rose to his knees before the Dark Lord, just as another gut-churning wave of pain seized him.

"Severus?" The high-pitched, dangerous voice seemed to pull Severus' face upward, and he saw the robed pale figure of the Dark Lord.

"My Lord, why is my wife being tortured? Have I have we displeased you?" He tried not to grunt as a fresh wave of the Crucio was sent deep into his tissues. Agony

warped around him like an iron band. He swallowed back the scream that rose to his lips, and kept his eyes on Hermione. She was fading.

Voldemort looked from Severus to his wife and back. He smiled, a hideous, happy, angry smile. Severus met Hermione's eyes *It will be over soon, my love. It will be over soon-*

"On the contrary, my dear Severus; you've served my victory up on a silver platter," the Dark Lord said, his anger at odds with his words. "I should have known you would have discovered the Hallows, but choosing to share the knowledge with your students and not me? I'm hurt," he said, a false tone of petulance in his voice.

Severus looked at the Dark Lord's unholy visage. His confusion must have been obvious to a blind man. With difficulty, he rose to his feet, swaying with the effort. "My Lord, I truly do not know what these 'Hallows' are. You must believe me when I tell you I have withheld nothing from you."

From the edge of the room, Carrow snorted. "Of course not, Snape! You only showed Lovegood where to find them-"

"Enough, Amycus!" Voldemort stepped close to Severus until they were almost chest to chest. He pawed through Severus' memories, leaving the stain of his corruption behind, like old grease slathered on his frontal lobe. "My former Headmaster is not lying." He looked deeply into Severus' eyes, then smiled again. He began to laugh, and the sound made Severus' testicles crawl in their sac. "You truly don't know! Oh, but my dear Severus, this is delightful! You didn't give the book to Miss Lovegood, she gave it to *you!* Oh, this is poetry, sheer poetry!"

Severus looked desperately at Hermione, as the room echoed with laughter. She was dying. He could feel her bright signature fading within, and in that moment, he made peace with himself. He had pushed her away; she might die believing he had rejected her. But at least he would die with her. He turned back to the Dark Lord. "I am glad we have afforded you entertainment, my Lord," he said, through gritted teeth.

Voldemort sobered. "Oh, but you have done much more than *that*, my beautiful Severus." He turned to the others. "Leave us."

Bellatrix's face fell, as if she had been denied her favourite toy. "But my Lord-"

"Leave. Your time will come, Bellatrix."

"But my Lord, Harry Potter-"

"Will be mine soon enough. Leave!"

Bellatrix, Carrow and Greyback sullenly left the room. Voldemort turned back to Severus. He reached up and lightly stroked Severus' cheek, laughing mirthlessly as revulsion flashed over the dark-haired wizard's face. His voice was ugly. "There was a time when you would have grown hard from my caress, Severus."

Severus didn't dignify the remark with a reply. The Dark Lord glanced at Hermione's prone body. "This is war, Severus. And in war, sacrifices have to be made. But now I shall be generous. Heal your wife."

Severus turned to him, afraid that, in his fear, he had actually misheard the command. "M-my Lord?"

"Heal your wife, Severus. Attend to her wounds. Ease her suffering. She is very close to death. Save her."

Severus felt the magical bonds melt away, and he snatched up his wand with a shaking hand. Kneeling before his wife, he chanted every healing spell he knew, over and over, his wand and his voice trembling with effort. Gradually, some colour seeped back into Hermione's face, and her breathing eased. Groggy eyes opened and trained on him.

*Severus?*

Severus clasped her hand. It was cold. *Hermione, my love, forgive me. Forgive me, please-*

She looked at him in stark, blank confusion. *What is happening?*

Frantically, he took her in his arms. *Hermione, lass, please, you must forgive me! I cannot bear it, please!*

She grasped his robe, and closed her eyes. *Make the pain go away... She fainted.*

"Oh, no," Severus said, unable to prevent himself from speaking aloud. He looked up at Voldemort, ready to beg, ready to betray everything, if he could just get her out of the Manor. "She urgently needs a Mediwitch my Lord. I cannot tell, but she may be bleeding internally."

"All in good time, Severus, my dear boy. All in good time."

As Severus held his dying wife close, the Dark Lord circled him. "Many did not approve of your choice of wife, Severus, but I had great plans for her. And true to form, she exceeded all expectations. Even with you. She restored you.

"Oh, come now," he chided, when Severus did not reply. "Did you honestly think your Lord would fail to see the youthful bloom on your face, the renewed strength in your limbs? Of course, the potion you have been imbibing to keep up with the demands of your child bride was no doubt going to be a gift to me, once you had perfected it." The words were spoken as a question, but the implication was pure demand.

Severus swallowed. *Let him believe it, please, anything to get us away from here-*"Yes, my Lord. I have only just perfected it. We have been working on it for months now. I could bring it to you-"

"I don't need it. You have provided me with a much more potent fountain of youth." Voldemort preened, enjoying this moment so much. "Albus Dumbledore's wand is no ordinary wand, did you know that?" At Severus' stunned look of confusion, he continued. "No? Then allow me to enlighten you.

"Your pupil, Miss Lovegood, has been my guest lately. She very graciously explained the legend of the Deathly Hallows. She was understandably reluctant at first. No doubt, she didn't wish to betray your wife."

"My wife? Why-"

"The Elder Wand, the Cloak of Invisibility, the Resurrection Stone. The Deathly Hallows three artifacts that, taken together, ensure power over Death. Immortality, as explained by Beedle the Bard, within a children's fable. Surely you remember your Beedle the Bard, Severus?"

Severus had a fleeting memory of Luna picking up the book in his study, telling him to give it to Hermione because she would enjoy reading it. He had never asked Hermione if she had actually read it. Lately, he hadn't asked her anything of import, including if she still loved him.

The Dark Lord, warming to his subject, continued. "I shan't bore you with the details, Severus, but once your darling pupil explained the story, I knew. Albus' wand must be THE Elder Wand." Almost to himself, he added, "How could I not have known? How could I not have seen? Of course, Albus would have the Hallows. He would do anything to keep them from falling into the hands of others. He would want them for himself."

Severus stilled, a growing thought making his stomach clench. "What has this to do with Hermione?"

Voldemort produced a long, dark wand. Burl knots marched down its length, like little bulges in the wood. Severus had seen it hundreds of times, grasped in Albus' slender fingers. It was the ultimate profanity to see it twined possessively in the spindly hands of the Dark Lord. "Amazing things, wands, aren't they?" he said. "You can take a wand, any wand, away from its owner, and it will still work for you. Not with the same precision, but it will work. But not the Elder Wand. It will only give its full, true power to the one who defeats its previous master. Only then will the victor be able to use it to its full potential."

Severus swallowed. *Oh, gods...*

"I see you are finally on the same page as I, old friend. You see, your dear wife killed Albus for you, which has cleared the way for me to take full control of the Elder Wand without losing my Headmaster and loyal servant." He gestured at Hermione dismissively. "Bella may play with her all she likes, but in the end..."

Severus looked from Voldemort to Hermione. His voice was hollow. "You're saying when you kill the Elder Wand's current owner, it will transfer its allegiance to you."

The Dark Lord tilted his head almost coquettishly. "How like you, Severus. No fuss, no theatrics. You always knew how to get the job done with a minimal amount of drama. Yes, once your wife is dead, I will be invincible. Think of the glorious sacrifice she is making. This generation's bards will no doubt write stories of her. She will be revered as the witch who handed immortality to your Lord. She will be immortalised as well. And you have me to thank for it."

He made a little moue of regret. "Such noble sacrifices are lamentable, but I'm sure you'll get over it in due time. When I come into my kingdom, you shall have any witch you desire as a reward. Narcissa, perhaps? You always panted after her when you were younger. Lucius is certainly in no position to argue. Of course, both Amycus and Alecto Carrow have expressed interest in paying you court, so I am sure your nights would not be lonely."

Severus carefully lowered Hermione to the floor, then stood and turned to Voldemort. "You honour me, my Lord." He looked down again at his wife. "Forgive me, Hermione. Forgive me, my precious, precious wife. But I'm afraid you'll have to hang on a little longer." He turned his wand on Voldemort. "*Expelliarmus!*"

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When it happened, it all happened at once. Severus' spell was quickly executed, but his words, spoken with a blood-thirsty need for vengeance, uncharacteristically tipped his hand. Voldemort skillfully blocked the spell, but before he could retaliate, there was a commotion in the ante-chamber, and Bellatrix, Carrow, Greyback and the three Malfoys came galloping back into the room.

Lucius gasped at the sight before them. "My Lord," he stammered, determined to be the host of the manor. "You honour us. Had I but known you were here-" Lucius' unctuous declaration died on his lips as the door to the Manor's dungeon flew open, and six people burst into the room: Luna Lovegood, Neville Longbottom, Ronald Weasley, Griphook the Goblin, Mr. Ollivander, the wandmaker, and Harry Potter. For a moment, the entire room was silent, as friend and enemy alike stared at one another in disbelief.

Harry broke the stunned silence by lunging at Draco and wrenching the blond's wand from his hand. He pointed it at Severus and shouted, "Snape's MINE!" He threw a Sectumsempra, which missed Severus' head by a mile, although it took a huge chunk of Amycus Carrow out on the way. Carrow went down, cursing, blood spurting from several wounds.

Voldemort bellowed triumphantly, and sent a curse flying toward Harry, but Severus staggered against the Dark Lord, throwing him off balance, and the curse impotently blasted a hole in the back wall, just over the heads of the two unconscious Grangers.

As a barrage of hexes and curses flew through the air, Severus dropped to the ground to protect Hermione. He bent over her, peering about to find an escape route, when he saw Bellatrix taking aim at them both. Without thinking, Severus charged her with a roar that would have made his Muggle progenitors proud, and he plowed into her at a dead run, knocking them both off their feet. Her surprise at his physical assault gave him the precious seconds he needed. Pinning her to the floor, he wrestled her wand from her grasp and cold-cocked her with a right cross. Behind him, there was a thunderous *CRACK!*

Harry and the others had disappeared.

Those remaining looked around, wands raised, shouting useless orders and accusations to one another. In the brief silence, Voldemort turned his fury-reddened eyes to Severus. "I had him! You fool, I had him!"

"Severus!" He turned, and saw Hermione - alive, awake - struggling to stand. In that moment, Voldemort turned his rage away from Severus and back to his original target. He swung his wand arm toward Hermione.

"NO!" Severus bellowed, and leapt in front of her, blocking her with a hasty Shielding spell. Cast with Bellatrix's wand, it was weak and unstable, and in those last precious seconds of his life, Severus knew it had not be enough. The Dark Lord's wand was pointed at his chest.

Just as something clutched his torso and spun him away, Severus saw and heard the scream:

*"Avada Kedavra!"*

Severus was slammed onto his back in a world of bright moonlight and cool breezes. He opened his eyes and saw a beach, smelled the ocean, heard mournful sounds of death and sorrow. It was like watching a Muggle film in slow motion; everything and everyone moving slower and slower, until the scene before him halted down to a freeze frame.

The last thing he saw was a frozen group of horrified faces. Then his vision faded into white nothingness.

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They landed on the beach with an unceremonious thump - a discarded bucket and spade thrown like a petulant child's least-favourite toys. Hermione struggled to sit up and reach for Severus as he lay on his back near the water's edge. His face was turned away from her. She crawled painfully to him. "Severus?" she rasped, her throat raw.

There was nothing. No echo of him within. No movement of his body. Fear clamped a cold hand around her heart. Hermione gazed down at his face, and she knew.

Severus was dead.

"No!" she cried, and painfully pulled his head into her lap. "No. You can't. You promised. You can't be gone. You cannot be dead, Severus!"

But Death had already laid its possessive blanket over them, drawn on the air, over the swelling currents of the ocean that surrounded this little spit of land. Hermione, surrounded by her parents, her friends and family, cradled the lifeless body of her husband, Severus Snape.

He looked so peaceful in repose, as if he was sleeping. If Hermione could have spoken, she would have asked for a wand to *renew* him. Anything to not feel this complete, silent, still death she held in her arms. Anything to not watch the color fade from his already-pale skin; to not have to feel the heat bleeding from his still body.

With a scream, Hermione's magic flew around her in circles, unfettered, spoking in all directions. She rocked him in her arms. "Severus," she wailed, clutching his still form, mad and wild in her anguish. "You can't die. I forbid it!" He had been her life for so long how was she supposed to live without him? "You promised I wouldn't have to face this alone," she sobbed.

Finally, gentle hands pulled at her. She heard her mother's voice. Oh gods, her parents were alive. Her husband was dead. "Hermione, we need to get you inside-"

"I'm not leaving him out here alone in the dark," she wept, holding on to him. "He'll be cold. Oh, Severus, wake up, wake up!" she sobbed, shaking him. She gently pushed his tangled hair from his face. It was dusted with sand, and she tried to brush it away. It would distress him to be seen in such an undignified, disheveled state. "Please

wake up," she pleaded, staring into his angular face, looking for any signs of her husband there. Death made him seem stern, severe. This is how *they* would remember him, she thought. Haughty, cold and implacable. Not her Severus.

Someone crouched beside her and put a large arm around her shoulder. It was Bill Weasley. "Hermione, we need to get you both inside. I'll carry Severus myself," he said softly.

Hermione looked up. A small band of friends were gathered around her: Luna and Ron, Harry and Neville, Fleur and Bill, her parents. They gazed at her silently, and something about their stricken expressions caused Hermione to draw upright. Her voice sounded strong to her own ears, like an enchantment. "This man was a hero. He fought to keep you safe, even when you belittled him, and ridiculed him. He was a great wizard. He was a great man." She closed her eyes. "He was mine, and now he's gone."

Her strength left her, and she sagged. Tears streamed from her eyes, and Bill said quietly, "I'll carry him, Hermione. I promise I'll do it carefully. Now, I'll take over. You can walk beside him, and hold his hand. Okay?"

She nodded numbly. As Bill hooked one arm under Severus' legs, and the other beneath his shoulders, Hermione put her hand on Severus' chest. Bill looked up at her, waiting. "Be gentle with him," Hermione whispered. "He's had little enough of that in his life. Carry him like someone you love."

It took Hermione a moment, but she made herself step away. Bill carefully lifted Severus into his strong arms, and bore him away.

"Come on, love. Let's get you both inside." Hermione looked up into her father's tear-filled eyes.

"Oh, Dad. Mum, they told me you were dead!" She sobbed as her father took her into his arms.

"It's alright, Hermione darling," her mother soothed. "We're alright, your dad and me. We're alright."

"He killed my Severus," Hermione moaned, and her legs buckled. Her father swept her up into his arms. The little party walked toward a cottage over the ridge; they were silent except for the sound of Hermione's grief. Her father carried her, alongside Bill, who was holding Severus in his arms like a child. Hermione couldn't take her eyes off the still figure, his head lying in the crook of Bill's arm. Severus looked so pale and beautiful. And young. He looked... young. But she would never hear the sound of his voice, nor see the love in his black, liquid eyes ever again.

Darkness overtook her, and she was grateful for its numbing emptiness.

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Severus opened his eyes, and blinked at the warm, glowing sunset that came from everywhere. He could not look away from it; it was all around him, even on the ground.

It was the world of his desert dreams, but unlike the dreams, there were no soft, silken robes on his back, or succulent fruit, or sweet cold wine, or his deliciously gravid wife feeding him grapes as they lolled on plush cushions within a cozy nomadic tent.

He slowly pushed himself from the desert floor onto his feet, and looked down at his naked form. He was limned in bright, golden light, and he felt at once ancient and young. He swayed slightly, and looked around at the bright, barren world around him. He saw nothing but sand, and dunes, and unbroken, shimmering nothingness.

If this was death, it was going to be fucking boring.

He gradually became aware of sounds around him, like swishing, rushing wind through dry leaves. He could hear snippets of voices, and laughter, and weeping. Every age, every language, every emotion was represented in the lush currents of sound. He could not hear individual words, just the emotional charge that came with their energy. The sound pulsed with life; it ebbed and flowed, drawing near, fading back. It was as if he was in some nexus between life and death, and could hear evidence of existence all around him, but he was unable to touch, or see, or participate in it.

"Can anyone hear me?" he shouted, then shut his mouth quickly, stunned to hear his voice go no further than inside his own head. And, really, apart from that, he had no idea who or what might answer.

As his eyes slowly adjusted to the glaring sunset, he could see an ocean of sand all around him. Everything was stark and still. He was the only person there. His heart began to pound sickeningly. Was this his punishment to be resigned to this solitary, sandy hell for eternity? A whimper sounded in the vast landscape, and it frightened him because he was the one who had made it.

"Hermione," he whispered like a prayer into the arid wasteland. "Are you alive? Oh, where are you, lass?" Fear gripped him. He felt so empty now without her warmth to fill his heart. Would this be his penance for hurting her so; to be forever denied her glorious company?

In the distance, he saw an approaching figure, its outline shimmering in the heat of the eternally dying day. Though it approached with a steady gate, it seemed to take ages for it to draw closer. Severus turned in a slow circle, his keen eyes squinting into the golden horizon. Just as he was almost at full turn, he saw a fleeting glimpse out of the corner of his eye. The figure was very close now. Severus didn't know whether to be joyful or afraid.

"Who are you?" he said, shamed at how terrified he sounded. "Identify yourself!"

From the dark figure, Severus heard a strange sound. It took him a full ten seconds to recognise it as laughter. It was a laugh he had not heard in years. It hit him with the force of a bludge and almost drove him to his knees. Tears filled his eyes as the dark figure drew close enough to recognise, and Severus cried out.

The figure held out its arms.

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The More You're Fading Randall Bramblett, Rich Someday

## Thirty Two: I Have Promises To Keep

*Chapter 33 of 39*

And I moved...

*We are entering the home stretch, with only a few more chapters to go, and I cannot thank you for your infinite patience. This story is organic; it has no outline, no chapter by chapter sketch.*

*I want to give a special thank you to my beta and friend stgulik, who takes my work and tightens all the bolts, polishes all the chrome, throws out the trash from the back seat, and clips my metaphors before they----*

*And especially for Chapter 32, Jules, thank you for giving me the best kiss I've ever had.*

---

*And I moved as I saw him looking in through my window, his eyes were silent lies.*

*And I moved, and I saw him standing in the doorway. His figure nearly filled the space,*

*And I moved and his hands felt like ice exciting as he laid me back just like an empty dress*

*And I moved but a minute later he was weeping, his tears his only truth.*

*And I moved but I moved toward him*

---

Hermione lay floating on a weightless current of numbed grief. She felt hollow inside, as if there was a deep, empty chasm where her heart had once beat. It was the space where Severus had dwelt, all fierce protectiveness and stubborn love and sterling duty. From the day he gave her his Blood Oath, his presence had been a shielding weight, comforting in its complexity and beauty. But now it was gone.

Grief brought her back to consciousness, like a limb, pin-needling after a long absence of blood. There was nothing numb about her now. Her Severus was dead. The Dark Lord had killed him for protecting her.

She could still feel the aching, twitching spasms deep in her tissues as her body tried to recover from the Cruciatius, but it was background noise compared to the horrific pain of losing Severus. He was the only thing that had kept her heart beating, and she was sure as soon as it realised Severus was gone, it would slow down, like a clock she no longer cared to wind. She was hoping that would be soon. The pain was too great to bear. Hermione closed her eyes and wished for the numbness again. It was not possible to hurt this much and survive.

Sometime later, she opened her eyes and looked around. She was in a tiny bedroom; she could hear the boom of the surf beyond the walls. Some kind soul had removed her ruined robe and changed her into a clean nightgown. Her mind was foggy, and she was aching all over. Her heart thudded dully in her chest.

"Are you alright, Hermione? Can I get you anything?"

Harry sat perched on the edge of her bed, looking at her with haunted eyes. She struggled to sit up, but every muscle protested.

"Where's... where's Severus?" she croaked. "What have you done with him?"

Harry swallowed. "He... he's in the next room. Luna is watching over him for you," he managed, but his voice broke, and tears spilled over. He reached for her hand. "We didn't get back to Malfoy Manor in time." He looked at her with beseeching, sorrow-filled eyes. "I sent Dobby back, but it was too late. I'm so sorry, Hermione. We tried. Please believe me, we tried."

Hermione took the proffered hand. At her touch, he drew her into his arms and rocked her. She allowed him to hold her. "I do believe you, Harry. I know you," she replied. "Where are my parents?" Her voice sounded so unnatural to her own ears, she wasn't even sure she was actually speaking.

"They're resting. They're okay," he added quickly, to reassure her. "They're a little weak, but they'll be okay."

Hermione leaned back out of his embrace and nodded, trying to think past the hollow ache in her chest. Her parents were resting. They would be fine after several healing potions. *I must get Severus to brew that special oh gods* Her thoughts, repetitive and circular, wore a deep groove into her bewildered mind. Her parents were alive. Her husband was dead. Her parents were alive. Her husband was dead. Her parents were alive. Her husband was

She buried her head in her hands and sobbed. She felt Harry's arms engulf her again. "He won't have died in vain, Hermione!" he whispered fiercely. "Everyone will know. I promise. With my dying breath, I promise."

"Please don't, Harry!" Hermione cried, holding onto him. "Please don't. I can't talk about anyone else dying." She looked up at him, and her misery was so awful he looked away. She gripped his shirt, fighting back hysteria. "Oh, Harry, he killed my husband! The Dark Lord killed him. Severus is gone!"

Harry held her as she howled in pain. Her Severus. Her brave, beautiful, complicated, imperfect wizard. She could still hear his frantic voice, begging for forgiveness, but she had been too traumatised, too absorbed in her own torture chamber within to tell him that she had forgiven him. And now he was gone, believing that she had not.

Gradually, she quieted. Her grief, it seemed, was no match for the crushing exhaustion that rubbed against her ruthlessly. She took a deep breath, and rested against Harry's thin chest, wondering if she would ever be able to rise from this bed again.

She knew there were things she had to do, and soon, maybe even later on in the day, she would have to face the others. First, though, she had to do right by her husband.

"I want to bury him here," she said.

Harry hesitated, then replied, "Neville and Ron offered to dig"

"No," she insisted, shaking her head stubbornly, her heart burning with resolve. "I will dig his grave."

Harry sighed. "Hermione, I understand, truly I do, but you're still very weak. You've been subjected to torture."

Hermione looked at him with such intensity he actually pulled back from her. She said quietly, "I will bury my husband. I owe him that much." She looked at Harry imploringly. "Your mother stepped between you and that monster, even though he threatened her." She could see the anguish in Harry's face, but she carried on. "She died rather than give you up. Would you be denied, if you had the chance to lay her to rest yourself to pay that final tribute to her, in exchange for saving your life?"

Harry's eyes filled again. "No, Hermione," he whispered finally. He clutched her hands within his. "And I won't deny it, either."

---

In the strange desert world Severus had woken up in, a figure sauntered up to him, arms outstretched, a smile so wide it made the handsome face glow.

"Reg?" Severus blinked, trying to clear the vision that swam before him. He drew a hand across his eyes. "Merlin! Reg, is it is it really you?"

The young man beamed and with a voice choked with emotion, replied, "It's really me, Sev. Sweet Nimue, it's so good to see you!"

It was Regulus Black, Severus' true friend, whom he'd lost so many years ago. He was even dressed the way Severus remembered; long, sweeping blue-black robes,

perfectly tailored, his elegant serge cloak thrown over his shoulder on the wand arm side. Severus flew into his arms, and the younger man held Severus and kissed his cheek over and over, calling his name as if he, too, were overwhelmed at their reunion.

Reg was the first to pull back. He gave a shaky laugh, reaching up to the taller wizard and brushing the tears from his face. "Oh, Sev. Look at you. You're all grown up now!" He tucked Severus' hair behind his ears, shaking his head and smiling. "You don't know how much I've missed you." Severus shuddered and sobbed, and Reg held on, comforting the man who had once been his best friend. "It's alright, Sev. Shh. It's alright."

Severus, distraught, cried against his friend's shoulder, "It's not alright, Reg. I've failed her! I left her to face The Dark Lord alone! I've abandoned my wife!"

Reg shook Severus gently. As if speaking to a child, he said kindly, "Get a grip, mate. You haven't abandoned anyone. Hermione's safe. She's with her mum and dad and her friends, and everyone's fine. Except her, of course."

Severus pulled back to stare into Reg's deep blue eyes. "Except her? What's wrong? I thought you said she was well." He shut his eyes, trying to block out the image of his beloved wife, growing paler and fainter with each breath. "She was so injured."

"I said she was safe. She's being treated by one of the Order members, so physically she'll be alright." There was sadness and regret in the handsome face. "But she's just devastated, Sev. That witch is hurting without you, my brother."

Severus wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. Gaining some measure of control over his emotions, he looked around at the serene, sterile landscape. "Where am I? What happened to *me*, Reg? What is this place?" He stilled, and readied himself to hear the answer to the question he most wanted to avoid asking. "Am I am I dead?"

To his surprise, Reg laughed. "Well, now, *that* is a question. Ordinarily, I would say yes, you are. But you are one of the special ones, Severus. You were the only one who never knew just how special you were."

Baffled, Severus gaped at his friend. "Reg, I really don't know what you're talking about." He looked around. "Where exactly am I?"

Reg took off his cloak and wrapped it around his naked friend. He settled it on Severus' shoulders before securing the clasp at his throat. "That's better. No use getting sand in your bits."

"Reg," Severus growled, feeling as if the younger man was toying with him, teasing him the same way he'd done when they were lads in school.

Reg looked away, turning his face toward the horizon. A soft, gentle breeze stirred and lifted the strands of his long black hair. In the golden sunset glow, Severus looked at the perfect profile he had always secretly coveted, with its noble brow, straight nose and finely sculptured lips. Regulus Black was the very picture of lost potential; the man, the *wizard*, forever denied.

"Where are you, you ask." He stretched out his arms, as if to embrace their surroundings. "Why, you're here." Together, they looked around at the vast 'here,' then Reg turned back to his friend. "So, you got married. Hermione's a right little work of art, isn't she?" He smiled warmly. "I adore her."

Only talk of Hermione could distract Severus from the bizarre situation. He felt the glow of pride that always came when his beloved wife was acknowledged. "I wish you two could have met," he said. He closed his eyes in frustration. "Reg, I really need you to stop talking bollocks and tell me what happened."

As Reg squinted, looking at something far in the distance, he murmured, "Funny things, prophecies."

---

Hermione accepted a glass of water from Harry. She took several tentative sips, then drank it down greedily. He had also brought her something to eat, but she wasn't sure was up to solid food just yet. "I need to see him," she said, her voice like a sad little ghost's. "I should be there with him."

"You need to rest, Hermione. You've had some horrific internal injuries-"

"It doesn't matter," she said, stubbornly. "I need to see him. I... I have to..." *I have to put him in the ground soon, and then it will be final. I'll have to let him go forever, and this will be the last time we'll be together, and I'll have to live the rest of my life without my heart and soul, so yes, I want to be with him just a little longer. Surely no one can begrudge me that.*

Harry took her hand. For a moment, he seemed on the verge of speaking, but had to wait until he gained enough courage. Finally, he began, "I wasn't actually aiming at him, Hermione, when I threw that *Sectumsempra*. I just wanted everyone to think he was still my enemy, you know, in case you somehow got away." He shrugged modestly. "I was going for Carrow, actually." He made a face. "Gods, he's ghastly. You wouldn't believe the things he did to Luna before he took her to Malfoy Manor. She told Neville about it when they took us all down to the dungeon. When I think of what Ginny might be going through-" Harry's green eyes grew hard. "I hope I got him good, and I hope Snape's the only one who knows- knew the counter curse." He dropped his eyes. "Sorry, Hermione."

Hermione wiped her eyes with the duvet. "I know. I keep thinking about him the same way. I keep expecting him to come storming through the door, and pull me out of bed and gather everyone together." She closed her eyes, pushing the image of her husband away. "Thank you, though, for trying to keep our cover safe. I was afraid that after Dumbledore-"

"I don't want to talk about that right now," Harry said, a sudden harsh edge making his voice sound strained. "I understand why you did it, but it's still too fresh."

"You understand?" she asked in surprise. "I-I suppose Ron told you about his night at Hogwarts."

Harry nodded. "There's that. And, of course, there's this."

Harry reached behind him and brought out a small but familiar object. Hermione looked down in amazement at her own beaded bag. Harry held it up with a smile. "It's been our lifesaver more than once," he said. "I don't know how we could've survived without it."

Looking at the battered little purse, stained with dirt and blood and Merlin knew what else, Hermione marveled. It seemed like a lifetime ago when she and Severus had sat in his dungeon rooms and carefully planned what to place in the purse for Harry to find. The night she took Dumbledore's life and she and Severus fled from Hogwarts, she had kissed Harry and pressed the shrunken bag into his hands as she told him what she had done was of her own volition. It had been so hard to walk away from him that night, not knowing if he would throw the bag away in disgust, or search its contents and realise the significance of what she'd given him.

"You two were thorough, I'll give you that," Harry said. "We only ran out of the food a day or two before we got snatched. We've lived out of this little bag. The tent, the reference books, the first aid kit, the extra clothes." He shook his head. "It was incredible. Anytime one of us said, 'I wish we had such and such,' I managed to find it in the bag. It was almost like our own portable Room of Requirement."

Harry continued. "I didn't tell Ron and Neville about it. I just pretended that I had put all this stuff together myself. I don't really know why, but at the time I was still trying to get my head around everything that had happened."

Hermione briefly closed her eyes. At least something had gone the way they'd planned. But there had been more in that bag besides camping essentials and reference books.

As if Harry could read her mind, he continued quietly. "I managed to sneak back to Hogwarts before the Ministry fell. I used Dumbledore's Pensieve."

He reached into the bag and pulled out a small box. Hermione's eyes filled as she saw what was contained therein. Dozens of tiny bottles, each one full of memories that



she and Severus had stored there. Each one an explanation of what had happened, and why and how. Memories that were nothing more or less than prime evidence of every secret, every plan, every strategy, everything that had happened up to the day Hermione had taken Dumbledore's life.

"I looked through all of these," he said solemnly. "I know everything now. About Snape and my mother and you. It nearly killed me to accept what Sirius had done to you, what Dumbledore forced you to do, what You-Know-Who thought you were doing. I don't know how you did it, Hermione."

"We did it, Harry. Everything Severus and I did was to help you," she murmured.

Harry shrank the little box and placed it in her hands. "These belong to you. Maybe, in some way, they might help."

Hermione stroked the top of the little box. "Thank you. I'll keep them safe until I can find a Pensieve." She closed her eyes, thinking of the myriad memories they'd stored. Their discussions with Dumbledore, their decision to tell Harry the truth, the night her parents were killed, or so she thought, the day she confronted Dumbledore and bartered her life for Severus'. All those memories of him. She could look at him again, alive and whole, in those memories. Why did that thought both comfort and crush her?

For a moment, the two of them sat in silence, Harry lost in thought, Hermione lost in grief. Harry stared forward, as if looking down a long, dark road. "One last thing. I know that Dumbledore didn't tell me everything about the Horcruxes. There are five left. Including me." He turned to Hermione. "I know I have to die."

---

When Reg did not elaborate, Severus asked, "What is so piggin' funny about prophecies?" In the warm silence, he growled warningly, "Reg—"

"I guess the funniest thing about them," Reg interrupted, as if Severus had not spoken, "is that basically, they're shit."

Nonplussed, Severus waited. Reg faced him, and explained, "Take, for instance, the prophecy you overheard about the Dark Lord." Reg closed his eyes and put his arms out before him, as if blindly groping for something in the dark. In an eerie imitation of Sybil Trelawney, he intoned, "*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ... And the Dark Lord will mark him as equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives.*"

He dropped both his arms and grinned mischievously, the very picture of Slytherin insouciance. "Now, you're a smart wizard, Sev. What exactly does all that mean?"

Puzzled, Severus replied, "We now know it was meant for either Harry Potter or Neville Longbottom, who were both born at the end of July."

"So were you, my friend."

Severus shook his head. Impatiently, he replied, "I was born on the ninth of January, as you well know."

Reg smiled conspiratorially. "Ah, you were *physically* born on the ninth of January, but you were *reborn* as a Death Eater at the end of July, just like me." He waggled his eyebrows. "Remember that big speech the Dark Lord made about the glorious rebirth his Death Eaters would experience in him?" Reg poked Severus playfully in the chest. "He really meant it. You were born again that day."

Severus, stunned, shook his head. "But I can't be the one the prophecy means! I'm not—"

"That's why I say that all prophecies are shit," Reg interrupted with a shrug. "The prophecy could have meant one person, or more than one, any or all... and it did. Harry Potter, *and* you, *and* Neville Longbottom, were each marked by the Dark Lord. Harry Potter, by his scar, you by your Dark Mark, and Neville by Bellatrix Lestrange."

"Bellatrix? What—"

"Bellatrix marked Neville when she tortured his parents into insanity in the name of the Dark Lord."

Severus simply could not believe this. He *would* not believe it. "But fuck's sake, Reg! What about the other parts of the prophecy? 'Born to those who have thrice-defied him?'"

Reg gave him his flirtatious smile. It gleamed with triumph. "That's me, Sev! I brought you to the Dark Lord. I was your sponsor the night you became a Death Eater, which means you were born to the Death Eaters through me. And three times, *I* defied him."

He held up one finger. "He left Kreacher to die on the island, but I had ordered him home. I went to retrieve the locket, and I drank the potion." His devil-may-care manner dimmed somewhat. "I knew it would kill me, but it was worth it." He held up a second finger. "Then I switched the locket, Sev. I stole the Horcrux, then I left a note in the fake telling the bastard what I'd done."

"And the third time?"

"After I placed the fake Horcrux, I made Kreacher return to Grimmauld Place with the real one. The Dark Lord must have gotten an attack of paranoia, because he appeared on the island, asking me why I was there; what I'd done. I lied - I told him that I tried to retrieve the locket, but I wasn't able. He tried to Legilimise into my mind, but I defied him again and he couldn't." Reg grew pensive. "He left me on that island to die, convinced that his Horcrux was still safely hidden under the potion." His smile was one of grim, hard satisfaction. "He never knew I'd stolen it, right out from under his nose."

Severus nodded. "We've only just found out it was a fake ourselves. The Dark Lord doesn't even know the real one has been retrieved."

Reg nodded. "I know. I can 'see' certain things, sometimes." He placed a warm hand on Severus' shoulder. "That's how I knew where to find you when you arrived. And, of course, another Horcrux has been destroyed."

Severus blinked. "Another one? What was it?"

Reg grinned. "I'm looking at it," he said, waggling his eyebrows at Severus.

Huffing in frustration, he snapped, "Reg, what are you talking about? Looking at what—"

Severus stopped. Reg was still giving him that shit-eating grin. *Oh gods, no*

"Well, surprise. Yes. You were his latest, his final, Horcrux."

Severus felt a sickening lurch in his stomach. Almost desperately, he gasped, "That can't be, Reg. I was never—"

"I'll show you." Reg placed a hand over Severus' wildly beating heart, and suddenly, it was as if he were looking into a Pensieve. He saw himself as he was many months back, kneeling before the Dark Lord, his vile Master stroking his face and hair, touching him possessively, like a treasured object. Talking about Hermione, saying those horrible things about her. "*Return to your school, to your little plaything... Kiss her goodnight for me.*"

Then the Dark Lord had seemingly infused him with *Votumtactus*, the Dark Caress. Severus had withstood a sudden, uncontrollable desire to defile Hermione, to take her against her will, to possess her until she was his. *She belongs to me*, he had thought in his madness. *She is mine... I'll take her over and over and I'll smell her maiden's*

*blood and it will inflame me more and I will fuck her and fuck her I'll fuck her in front of Black and laugh as she comes on my cock... I will see her cower and beg and plead for mercy while I do the most unspeakable things...*

Severus shuddered in loathing. It hadn't been the Dark Caress at all. An unstable piece of the Dark Lord's virulent soul had transferred into Severus, making him a carrier, defiling him in ways he had not even realised. That small, malignant piece had stood witness to every loving moment he and Hermione had shared. Every reverent touch, every scalding orgasm he'd given her had been an open show to the Dark Lord's twisted, vicarious lust.

Overwhelmed with revulsion, nauseous with the realisation of what had transpired, Severus felt his knees give. He would have fallen onto the sand, had not Reg held onto him. "Oh, gods, Reg! That fucking, evil bastard! May the Gods damn him!"

Reg, his face filled with pity, nodded. "I think that's a pretty safe bet, my brother."

Severus' helpless, burning anger brought tears of rage to his eyes. "He'll just create another, now that he's killed me."

Reg was shaking his head. "Like Harry Potter, you were an accidental Horcrux. He had killed shortly before you arrived. And like Harry in that moment, you were the only vessel at hand to receive that recently-broken sliver of soul left to him. He's almost soulless now anyway, and it slipped into you without either of you truly being aware of it." Reg gave Severus a grim smile. "But it counts, my brother. Oh, it counts. One more piece of that monster's soul is destroyed, and he did it himself."

Severus digested the information. He did not want to know whose life had been taken. It was difficult enough to accept that it had been exchanged for a piece of the Dark Lord's soul, when Severus stepped in front of the Killing Curse meant for his wife.

"The locket was another matter, Sev. It was made long ago, when his soul was still relatively intact." This time, Reg's smile was wolfish. "Either way, it's too late. He's out of time now. He doesn't have anything left to barter with." His tone was contemptuous. "He's whored his soul away, thinking it will bring him immortality. All it has brought him is emptiness. That's why he has to be stopped, Sev. Nothing will be enough to satisfy him, or his need to destroy. He will spiral down into black nothingness, and take the world with him."

---

Hermione allowed Fleur Weasley to perform another set of healing spells. The physical pain eased to a dull roar, throwing into sharp relief her bleak heartache.

"Ron told us what happened at Hogwarts." Harry smiled. "You know, I was so angry at him for walking out on us, but I suppose, in a way, it was destiny. He was brought to you and Severus."

"Harry, please, not now." Hermione closed her eyes tiredly. "I can't talk about him now. I can barely stand breathing right now, knowing he's in the next room." Tears slid down her cheeks, as if she had an inexhaustible supply.

Harry nodded, looking stricken. "Look, why don't I let you rest, yeah? We'll talk when you're stronger." He rose to go, then turned around. "Everyone here at Shell Cottage knows the truth, and I just want you to know you're safe here. I've told everyone that we're going to regroup. But if you want to join us, we could use every wand we can get."

Hermione nodded. "I need to plan for his- his funeral first. After that, we'll talk." She gave a wan smile as he squeezed her hand and left the room, softly closing the door behind him. Hermione rolled over and curled up in a ball.

She tried to sleep, but every time she closed her eyes she could see Severus, bent over her, pleading for forgiveness. She thought of the times he'd held her, and they'd comforted one another, and made love, and planned, and sheltered one another. She thought of the song he'd taught her so long ago. *Lay me low, where no one can see me, where no one can find me, where no one can hurt me...*

She had not been able to protect him. He had thought of her as his hiding place, but in the end, there was no place to hide.

She lay in the dark, alone. No shelter. Alone. No safe hiding place. Alone.

No Severus.

Alone.

---

For a moment, the two men were silent. Severus mentally recited the prophecy, trying to fathom how any of it truly pertained to him. "Reg, I don't have any 'power that the Dark Lord knows not'."

In reply, Reg gently took Severus' hands in his. His voice was quiet, and melodious, like wind chimes lazily sounding in the evening breezes. "You've known love, Severus, and it has healed you. *He* can't understand love; he can only exploit it, and use it in others. It isn't in him, but you have it, you and that hot-blooded little lioness of yours."

He pushed the cloak aside to reveal Severus' forearm, the fading Dark Mark barely visible. "You and Hermione have all but obliterated it, and now I'm going to finish the job," Reg said, and his jolly manner faded. "I am the reason you took this mark, Sev. I'm very honoured to be ridding you of it."

Reg stroked the inside of Severus' arm, as if he could actually erase the tattoo with his bare hands. His touch was both innocent and sensual; the true potential of the boy he had always been, the unfulfilled desires of the man he would never become. It was the type of caress Severus would not have recognised nor trusted in his youth. Only Hermione ever touched him like this with love and desire.

Reg looked down as his fingers stroked the underside of Severus' forearm, his expression absorbed and loving. Feeling vaguely uneasy, Severus was about to speak when, to his utter amazement, he saw the scar actually fade under Reg's gentle touch. Reg continued his tender ministrations until the tattoo was completely gone. He reached down and pressed his lips to the pale, pristine flesh, then looked up at Severus and smiled. His voice was as sweet as an angel's.

"There. No more Dark Mark. No more Summoning; no more pain. You are as dead to him as if you'd never been born to him. You are as perfect as the day you first took the mark. As perfect as you were on January 9, 1960. Look."

Severus looked down at his body. To his amazement, there were no scars - anywhere. Even the ones that couldn't be eradicated by the magic he and Hermione created were now gone.

He was blemishless.

A thrill of delight raced through him, followed closely on its heels by suspicion. "And what is the cost of this miracle, Reg? What do I have to give in return?"

Reg stared at him for a moment, eyes wide, then laughed again. "See, Sev, this is what I've missed all these years - your good old Slytherin sense of morality. If something is given, then something must be taken away in return."

Stubbornly, Severus persisted, "That's not Slytherin. That's... karma, yin and yang, Sod's law, what have you. Nothing is given without a price. It couldn't be that easy."

Reg shrugged. "Since when has anything been easy for you, Sev? It's all about balance. Hermione took a curse for you; the only reason I'm talking to you instead of her is that you were able to get her to Madam Pomfrey in time. You've paid enough: for your mother's shame, your dad's fists, Lily's rejection, your bad choices, even Sirius. Your slate's clean now. You settled all those debts when you stepped between the woman you love and Tom Riddle's *Avada*.

"And the price? Your price is to go back."

Severus gasped. He wasn't sure he'd heard correctly, and was almost afraid to ask, in case he hadn't. "I'm going back? I get to see Hermione again?" His heart was pounding. The idea that he could hold his witch in his arms again-

Of course," Reg said solemnly, "And when you do, the first thing you have to do is destroy it. The locket, I mean."

In spite of his elation, Severus frowned in confusion. "I thought it had been destroyed already. I gave Harry Potter the Sword of Gryffindor."

Reg shook his head. "He and his mates haven't been able to do it, Sev. You have to. You're the only one that can take care of this one." His lovely eyes dimmed. "I wanted to get the real Horcrux to you. I knew you'd eventually figure out what to do with it, but I died before I could tell Kreacher what to do with it. The love I bear for you ties you to this Horcrux. Because of me, you are the only one who can destroy it. Then, you have to destroy *him*. You and Harry Potter have to kill this bastard once and for all.

"It won't be easy, and I can't tell you that you won't be back here permanently in a week's time. But you have fulfilled your part of the prophecy, and paid your debt freely. You will go back, and you will help Harry Potter defeat Tom Riddle."

Severus closed his eyes. He was actually being given a second chance to make things right. He was being given the chance to see his wife, his incredible wife again, to fight by her side, never to turn away again. It was too good to be true.

Reg shook his head, his expression wistful. "Oh, what I would have given to see that look on your face and know you were thinking about me." He smiled sadly, and added, "Yes, Sev. You get to hold your little Gryffindor girl again. And she is the luckiest witch in the world. I wish I could hate her, but damn it, I love her too much." His eyes filled with tears. "How could I not love the person who has given you so much reason to live?"

He looked at Severus keenly, and something like a blush tinted his perfect face. "You know, after Lily hurt you so, I was convinced you'd eventually turn to me. It was why I wanted you to join the Death Eaters just so I could be close to you. I was totally in love with you," Reg confessed, looking as pitiful as Severus had ever seen him. The hurt in his face left Severus bereft of words. As if he took the older man's silence a different way, Reg shrugged a little. "I still am. I always will be. You were the only one for me, Sev."

The winsome tone of Reg's voice made Severus' eyes fill as well. "I'm sorry, Reg. I'm sorry you felt that way for someone who didn't return it." He closed his eyes. "I have a little first-hand experience with how that feels."

Reg looked away, and wiped his eyes. "When I arrived, Sev, I asked for this: to wait here until you came, so I could ask your forgiveness. You would have never joined the Death Eaters if not for me."

"You don't know that, Reg. I wanted everything they claimed they could provide: power, glory, recognition. You can't blame yourself for something I probably would have done anyway." Severus shook his head. "I never blamed you, and you have nothing to ask forgiveness for."

Looking at his handsome friend, Severus remembered how close they'd been. He thought of himself at that time: defensive, gauche, awkward, and ugly. He'd been so foolish, so prideful and callow and blind as a young man. He had only seen the outward trappings of the other man: his physical beauty, his privileged bloodline, his sunny nature. He had never entertained the idea that a boy like Reg would find anything about him remotely attractive or worthy of admiration. He had cried for the moon, when the sun had always been there for the taking. Had he realised it, would it have changed his life?

Severus put his hand on Reg's shoulder. He felt a heartbreakingly fatherly affection for him. "I wish things had been different, Reg. You deserved better. I wasn't worth it."

Reg smiled up at his friend. "You don't get a vote on who you fall in love with, Sev. Just like you don't get a vote on who falls in love with you. And even though you never felt the same way for me, I never thought less of you for it."

Oh, gods, that hurt, right down to the quick. Severus felt his breath leave his lungs, and tears fill his eyes. What had he done to deserve this marvelous boy's adoration, and how could he have held it so cheaply?

Reg reached up and stroked Severus' face to comfort him. Gently, he said, "You know, if you love someone, Sev, truly love them, you never stop. Love doesn't end when you die. If anything, it just becomes perfect." Tears spilled down his cheeks. When Severus reached out to brush them away, Reg caught his wrist in his hands. "Hell, I'm just getting off on the fact that I could see you and touch you one more time."

"Reg," Severus began, swiping at his own tears, "Are you happy here? I mean..." He searched for the right words. It seemed so incomprehensible, speaking of death this way. "Are you lonely? Do you know if my mother is here, or Lily, or even Albus?"

Reg nodded, as if surprised Severus had even asked the question. "We are all here, and we are content. Death comes to everyone eventually. But I have purpose and companionship, and I am happy." He smiled tremulously. "Even more so, since I've been given the gift of talking with you here, and preparing you to return."

"Listen," Reg said, then grew still. In the silence, above the whisper of the breeze, they could hear a rustling leaf sound of voices. To Severus, they were peaceful, pleasing sounds.

"Those are the sounds of light and love, Sev," said Reg reverently. "Only those chained to darkness will experience an eternity of nothingness. For those who love, there is always light and beauty and togetherness. That's what I mean by perfect love." His face shone with quiet, serene joy. "I promise you, I'm certainly not bored!" He laughed, and sniffed a little.

Severus felt a sweet, sad rush of affection for his old friend, and pulled Reg into his arms *never properly mourned you, Reg. I spent so much wasted time wallowing in Lily's death and my guilt, but I never sat down and said goodbye to you. You deserved better from me. We both did.* He tried to speak, tried to find the words to tell Reg how he felt how the wonder, the sadness, the splendor, the sheer beauty of this meeting was as perfect a gift as Reg's love.

Finally, he managed, "I'm so glad, Reg. I want you to be happy. Seeing you here, now, I don't have the words." Severus paused, his throat tightening with unshed tears. "I never admitted to myself how much I missed you. Maybe I couldn't allow myself to think about it. But I did; I *do*. Every single day, I miss you. You were the best friend, and I'm sorry I didn't value our friendship enough to save you."

"Shh," Reg said, shaking his head. "None of that now, Sev." He made a silly face, the kind he pulled when they were boys to get a rise out of Severus. "We're all about the future now." That mischievous twinkle Severus knew so well was back. "And you're talking to a happy man, my brother. I'm in the arms of the man I love."

Severus could not help but smile, knowing that Reg was only half-teasing. "Thank you for loving me, Reg. I will cherish this moment for the rest of my days." He kissed Reg's forehead, feeling strangely ancient, yet newly born. "I love you, brother."

Reg looked up at Severus with such adoration and hope in his eyes, Severus' heart swelled. Something both elusive and precious passed between them, and he pulled Reg closer, holding Reg like he'd never wanted to when they were boys. It felt as natural as breathing. *Because you hold those you love,* he thought. *You envelope them in a cage of protection and loyalty and shelter them from harm, and they do the same to you.*

He gently cupped Reg's face in his hands, and felt a wave of gratitude and affection sweep over him as he looked into the younger man's eyes. There it was: that look of sadness and longing Severus remembered so well as a boy. He was looking into the face of the first person who had ever truly loved him.

Here, in this vast nowhere, perhaps for the last time in this, or any eternity, Severus had one more chance, one more minute, to be with his friend, to somehow say and do all those things he should have done, to show Reg how much he *was* loved. In another world, another life, he and Severus would have been lovers, and they would

have found happiness together. And Reg had been right; once Severus accepted this, he felt his heart opened wide enough to encompass the vast universe that had granted him this boon.

He opened his mouth to tell Reg, but one look in the wizard's face told him Reg already knew. The sadness in his eyes changed to wonder, to joy, to shining, pure bliss. Reg knew Severus loved him, loved him with the same passion and care as he loved his wife, with the same stubborn pride as he had loved Lily, with the same worshipful wonder as he loved his magic.

Feeling almost outside himself, Severus impulsively dipped his head toward the younger man's. His eyes slid closed as his lips met Reg's in a soft, languid kiss. The warmth of Reg's lips felt no different than the heat of the desert; the breath from Reg's lips no different than the breeze. Almost experimentally, he opened his lips and deepened the kiss, seeking more.

For a brief moment, Severus felt a swooping sensation, as if his feet had left the ground. His fingers tightened and he felt the boy gasp and he drew in more of Reg's breath, as though hoping to hold some of it in his body forever. Time seemed to stop - or were they outside time? - and all they could hear was the sound of their breathing, their heartbeats. It was a healing, crystalline sound, mingling with the whispering which Severus now knew was the music that souls make when they share love.

As they ended the kiss, Severus pressed Reg's head against his chest, cradling the boy in his arms. He smiled, and gave a silent prayer of thanks to the gods for this moment, this gift from the heavens.

He would go into that final battle with the word 'love' as his war cry.

Severus felt pure and clean, awash with a peace within that he'd never before known. Every regret, every folly, every foolish choice, every wrong turn in the road that led to this desert, was forgotten, tossed away like the rubbish they had been, and with them Severus felt the years melt away, leaving him as new and hopeful as the day he had been born. His house was clean.

An unbearable excitement gripped him. In that instant, he couldn't wait to see Hermione again, and tell her everything that had happened since they'd parted. He threw back his head and laughed. *Hermione! Oh, lass, I'm coming home.*

Suddenly, Severus straightened. He could feel a tautness in his gut, as if an iron band were being squeezed around his middle. It was both painful and thrilling. A wild elation seized him, and he cried, "It's happening, isn't it? I'm being pulled back to life. I can feel it!" His entire body was tingling with the knowledge of it. "I'm going back now, Reg!"

Reg stepped back, and with a quick movement, whipped the cloak from Severus' shoulders. "There are several people around you who are going to get the shit shocked out of them, but remember everything I've told you." His radiant smile dimmed the sun. "I really, really hope it will be a long time before I see you again, Severus Snape, and I pray you will be happy for the rest of your days. Take care, until we meet again unto the veil."

The feeling of being compressed terrified Severus. "Reg, what do I-" His words were lost in a sudden rush of wind, which blew around him and snuffed out light and sight and sound, and his world went dark again.

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Luna Lovegood sat upright in the most uncomfortable chair in the room. When you sat up with your departed ones, you needed to feel the pain of loss as a physical thing. She had been taught that. She had volunteered to watch over the slain Headmaster because she knew he was not the evil man everyone called him. She had always believed in him, even after all that had happened. She still believed in Hermione, who had been a good friend, had never ridiculed her beliefs and had never been unkind. She had once even helped Luna find her clothes, when some others had hid them for a prank.

She wiped away a tear; she could feel Hermione's grief through the walls, like smoke drifting through the cottage. Headmaster Snape looked peaceful. Luna had never seen him without a scowl of dissatisfaction upon his pale face.

When Bill Weasley had brought the body into the room, Professor Snape had been covered in blood and sand, and looked awful. Luna felt sad seeing him so unkempt; he was a dapper dresser, like her father. She had cleaned the headmaster carefully, by hand, of course, because that's also what you did to show respect for the departed. She had tidied his clothing, and brushed the tangles from his long, black hair. It wouldn't do for Hermione to see her husband looking anything but his best, Luna decided. Finally, she had transfigured a bed sheet into a transparent veil, and draped it over him.

Now, in the quiet of the cottage, during that time between night's seductive pull and morning's enticing sun, Luna's head dropped, and she straightened and stretched, fighting the urge to sleep. She had been knocked around quite a bit at Malfoy Manor, and she knew her body needed rest, but she had a job to do, and Luna didn't believe you should shirk your duties just because you'd suffered a curse or two.

So she knew she wasn't dreaming when she looked up and saw the boy standing by the Headmaster. He was just a little older than herself, and reminded her of someone, but she couldn't quite place who it was. He was very handsome, with long, black hair and lovely, sapphire blue eyes. When he smiled, he had white, perfect teeth. "Hello gorgeous," he said, giving her a thousand-Galleon smile.

"Hello," Luna said pleasantly, rubbing her eyes. "You're rather beautiful yourself."

He threw back his head and laughed. "Where have you been all my life, Luna Lovegood?"

Puzzled, she replied, "I've been here." A thought occurred to her. "But you haven't, have you?"

"Well spotted," he replied, impressed. He gazed down at the Headmaster's body with an expression of such tenderness that Luna thought he must have known Professor Snape personally. "He looks peaceful, doesn't he?" he asked, and stroked the shoulder through the transfigured veil. He looked up at Luna and winked. "Now that I look closer, actually, he looks a little bored."

Luna thought for a moment, before replying. "Well, I have no idea how to answer that." The beautiful boy laughed again. "Are you here to take Professor Snape away?" she asked.

He seemed surprised at her question. "Why, no." That sunny, perfect smile returned. "I'm here to bring him back."

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And I Moved- Pete Townsend Empty Glass

## Thirty Three: Take Me, I'm Yours

To seek the helpless future, my love, at last I'm here...

*I would like to extend my gratitude to all of you who are still staying with this story. Your patience, your support and encouragement have inspired me. I promised in the beginning I would never abandon it, and now that we are heading into the last, toughest to write chapters, I am glad we have taken this journey together.*

*Thank you, stgulik, the best beta in fanfiction, for never compromising, and never being afraid to tell me the truth. Thank you for being there. All my ragged moans are for you.*

*This chapter is dedicated to the memory of a great SSHG fanfic writer, Leni\_Jess, who passed away on May 24, 2012. A shining light in this fandom has gone out, and our world is a little darker for losing you.*

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*I've come across the desert to greet you with a smile, my camel looks so tired it's hardly worth my while*

*To tell you of my travels across the golden east; I see your preparations invite me first to feast.*

*...I've stood some ghostly moments with natives in the hills, recorded here on paper my chills and thrills and spills*

*...My eagle flies tomorrow it's a game I treasure dear - To seek the helpless future, my love at last I'm here*

*Take me I'm yours because dreams are made of this. Forever there'll be a heaven in your kiss.*

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In the un-light just before dawn, when it really is the darkest, Hermione heard a soft knock. The door opened to reveal her parents standing uncertainly in the doorway.

Guilt warred with joy. She had been so caught up in her grief, she'd not even checked on her beloved parents. In the tangle of Severus' death, she had made no room in her heart to celebrate they were alive. Jean and Martin Granger. The Dynamic Duo, she had always called them. Being told of their death had set her adrift, orphaned her not only in body but in spirit. Realising they were actually alive at the same moment she thought her own life was forfeit had overwhelmed her with confusion.

Now that they were here, recovering from their ordeal, she felt the crushing band around her heart ease. If anyone could or would understand, it would be her parents. "Mum, Dad!" she cried, holding out her arms, and as one they rushed to her bedside. The three of them began talking at once.

"We've been worried sick-"

"I can't believe this has happened-"

"It's just been too much. I'm sorry-"

"Oh, darling, stop. You've nothing to apologise for!" her mother sobbed. Hermione's tears began anew. The two sets of arms which had first held her now enveloped her again. Their safe, solid comfort had been the bedrock of everything Hermione knew about the subject of love, everything she had taught Severus about the power of it. It was a sudden, devastating comfort; just as Severus' final, true declaration of devotion had taken place in the wake of what she had thought was her parents' deaths, so now they renewed their place in her life at the end of his.

It was the only true comfort she had found since he'd been killed.

Jean Granger was the first to pull back and wipe the tears from her daughter's face. She looked thinner, and there were lines on her face Hermione had not seen on that last Easter visit before all hell had broken loose. And her father's wiry hair, so like hers, was completely white now, instead of the salt-and-pepper it had been on that long-ago visit. But their loving eyes were just the same.

Her mother began haltingly at first. "Hermione, darling. I'm so sorry about your prof- Sev-" She paused, clearly unsure what to call him. Biting her lip, she added, "Was he really... were you married?"

Hermione nodded miserably. She looked up at her mother and father, hating the way the tears welled up against her will. "I don't think I can get over this." Her body ached with sadness, as her mother cradled her to her breast. She rocked her as she had when Hermione was a child, and rocking would heal everything.

She lay her head against her mother's shoulder. "He was the most unique, incredible person, Mum. He took such good care of me. I know you would have liked him. He loved and protected me with such strength and faith and passion." She began to pant. "He was complicated and intricate and full of contradictions, but he was so fierce and loyal and brave and beautiful. Oh, gods, Mum. I'm never going to hold him again, and every time I think about him, I can't breathe."

"I know, dearest. I know! I'm so sorry. But you must understand that time will help-"

"Mum, it's not just about time! He and I had a special bond. A magical bond, deep within our minds. We were linked. Our souls were linked, Mum." Hermione pulled away from her mother to look up at her. "And I'm not just talking about that romantic rubbish about 'two hearts beating as one.' It was a real, magical binding. We were joined. Our souls were bound together."

And then, with crystal clarity, Hermione understood. She was broken, as surely as if she'd been a wand snapped in half, with only her core holding her together. "My soul is with him."

Martin Granger patted her hand gently. "Of course it is, darling. I know you. You love very deeply-"

"No! I mean, my soul is literally with him. That's why I can't- oh, don't you see?" she said, tears streaming, clutching at his hands. "I'm never going to be whole again. I'm never going to be truly alive, because when he went, he took part of me with him!"

Sobbing, she allowed herself to be held. They tried to comfort her, but now that she knew why she could not stop hurting, Hermione let her grief drown her. There was no point in trying to be brave anymore.

There wasn't enough of her left alive to pretend bravery.

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For almost an hour they sat and tried to calm and distract Hermione by filling her in on what had happened since they'd last seen one another. "It happened so fast," her mother was saying. "One moment, we were at the surgery, and these strange people walked in. Well," she said with a shrug, "we knew straightaway they were from the Wizarding world. You know how hopeless they can be at blending in with us Muggle folk..." She shook her head, remembering.

Hermione's father put a comforting hand on hers and took up the thread of the story, as was their wont when together. Hermione could never remember a time when her parents hadn't done this: tag-teaming their stories, swapping information. They reminded her absurdly of the Weasley twins when they did this.

"Your mother and I were alone. It was late, and the rest of the staff had left for the day. They Stunned us, then the next thing we knew, we were in some sort of holding cell.

No idea where or why we were there. It felt like days before we were given any food or water. To this day I don't know how long we were left there."

He frowned, and Hermione's heart went out to him. She decided not to tell them they'd been locked away for the better part of a year. Telling them they had been declared dead and their house burned down had been traumatic enough.

Her mother continued, "As time passed, other people joined us. Mr. Ollivander, that sweet little old man who makes wands, was brought in." She shook her head, a bitter look in her eyes. "They treated him so cruelly. Your father and I helped as best we could, but they tormented the poor man abominably. He was quite weak when we were finally rescued."

Martin took up the story there. "Then, not too long ago, a young girl was brought in. Luna, she called herself." He smiled in his fatherly, fond way. "Such a lovely soul. A bit strange, even for you lot, but, still, a kind-hearted person. She told us about you and-" he hesitated, then sighed harshly. "You and your husband. She told us you- she said you... you killed Professor Dumbledore." He shook his head. "Well, your mother and I set her straight on that. 'My Hermione wouldn't harm a soul,' I said." He looked at her with troubled conviction.

"But she told us it was true," Jean said, and took her husband's hand. "And Mr. Ollivander said it was in the *Daily Prophet*." She looked from Martin to her daughter. "What happened, Hermione?" She nodded, as if agreeing with some internal monologue. "If it's true, then there must have been a reason."

And so Hermione told them everything that had happened, right up to the point where they'd been dragged from their cell just in time to see Bellatrix cursing her into the carpet at Malfoy Manor. As the story unfolded, Martin and Jean were horrified, stunned, surprised, delighted and devastated by turns.

"So the old man was dying anyway?" Martin said, frowning. Hermione nodded. He looked angry. "What a manipulative thing to do! To force you and your husband- Severus," he corrected himself, trying to show willing, "Severus, to do this thing. God, these Wizarding types just have their own code of ethics, don't they?"

"Dad," Hermione countered, her voice faintly reproachful. "I'm one of those 'Wizarding types.'"

He looked slightly chagrined, but held his ground. "But who forces innocent people to kill them just to set up an elaborate scheme?"

Hermione shrugged. "The type of person who wanted to see the Dark Lord defeated more than anything else. He wasn't perfect, but Dumbledore wanted us to have every advantage when it came to helping Harry defeat You-Know-Who. Even up to and including branding us as murderers so we could infiltrate the enemy."

Jean Granger pondered for a moment. "So you and Severus were spies?" Her voice sounded impressed, as if in this, too, she was proud of her accomplished daughter.

Hermione nodded. "And right up until last night, we were good ones." She closed her eyes as the grief swept over her, like a wave of nausea. Would she ever stop feeling these surges of painful, disconsolate loss?

From them, she'd learned that Dobby, the house-elf, had appeared shortly after they'd fainted from the pain of the Cruciio and brought them, along with the others, to Shell Cottage, the safest of the remaining safe houses. He had gone back to get Hermione and Severus, but had not rescued them in time.

Apparently, Harry had been forced to issue the most imperious command to Dobby not to damage himself permanently. The hapless house-elf blamed himself completely. He had wept for hours, inconsolable in his failure.

"The woman, that dark one who was torturing you," Martin said, shuddering. "She was an awful sort. Called us horrible names - threatened to do the most unspeakable things to us. Thank God we didn't see her often."

Shifting uncomfortably on the bed, Hermione explained, "Bellatrix Lestrange was keeping you there to use against me. She was jealous over the way the Dark Lord favoured Severus and me over her at times." *And I'll bet she planned to invite us over one night very soon, and present you to us exactly like poor Professor Burbage, just to test our loyalties in front of the Dark Lord. I will fight for the privilege of gutting you like a fish, Bellatrix Lestrange.*

As if sensing her daughter's vengeful thoughts, Jean Granger pulled Hermione close. "Oh, darling, we've all been through such hell. I truly don't know how you and your Severus were able to hang on as long as you did."

Hermione shrugged. "We hung on because we loved each other." She could not bring herself to talk about that last awful argument. She could barely make herself think of it.

Jean continued, "But we're a family, and we Grangers are tough. We're going to get through this, Hermione, and so will you." She looked across at her husband, who nodded and put his arms around his daughter.

Hermione felt their love like a balm over her broken spirit. It was so typical of them. On the day she received her Hogwarts letter, they had been gobsmacked, to say the least. But the incredible news their daughter was a witch had been met with strength and a firm determination to accept and thrive within the changes to their lives. Even her father, who grew antsy if the *Daily Mail* didn't arrive at the same time every day, accepted his daughter's uniqueness, because his love for her overrode his need for habit. Throughout her life, they had been the most unflappable duo, meeting extraordinary paradigm shifts in the fabric of their days with almost bemused encouragement.

When she'd hinted to her mother on that long-ago day that she was in love with Severus, her mother had taken the news in that characteristically open, trusting way that even now moved Hermione. When it came to the daughter they loved, nothing was past consideration. They had never been the type to shy away from a truth, even if it frightened them, and they'd instilled that same attitude in her.

Her father added, "We're not quite back to fighting strength, but we're almost there. That pretty little French girl has been dosing us with potions, and personally, I feel one hundred percent better." He fixed his daughter with a keen look. "We're going to help. Whatever we need to do, we're with you, Hermione. If that means fighting, we'll be with the medics. Both your mother and I are trained in first aid, so we can help there. But however you need us, use us."

His voice broke, and for the first time in Hermione's life, she saw tears in her stalwart father's eyes. "We're going to fight to honour that man of yours. We're going to make sure everyone knows that Severus Snape and Hermione Granger were on the right side."

Hermione hugged her father fiercely. When she pulled back, she corrected him gently. "Hermione Granger-Snape, Dad." Pride stiffened her spine.

"My name is Hermione Granger-Snape."

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Martin and Jean left shortly after, promising to return with something to eat, and maybe some Dreamless Sleep Draught. Hermione thanked them, but knew she was in no fit shape for food. The idea of it made her feel unwell.

As she waited for them to return, the exhaustion of the horrific evening found her. She fell into a thin, restless sleep and dreamed of Severus. He was standing in the middle of what looked like a desert, and he was talking to someone. Suddenly his stern features softened, and he and his companion turned and looked right at her. Even though Hermione could not hear the conversation, she instinctively knew he was talking about her.

A gust of wind picked up the cloak Severus was wearing, whipping it around his body. The man with him reached up and plucked it from his shoulders. He was mother-naked underneath, and looked so pale and vulnerable that all of Hermione's protective love reached out to him. In that moment, he turned to her as if to welcome her.

Just as she started for him, he disappeared with a bright flash of light that burned Hermione's retinas, and the light was replaced by sound, a sound that started out as a distant hum and came rapidly barreling into her consciousness like a freight train-

HE WAS HERE HE WAS ALIVE HE WAS HERE HERE HERE HERE I AM HERE I AM ALIVE I AM HERE I AM HERE I AM I AM I AM

A huge crash of thunder blasted inside the cottage. Lightning scored the night with illumination so dazzling it could be seen through the closed eyes of every inhabitant, jolting them awake.

Martin and Jean hurried into Hermione's room just as she bolted upright in bed, screaming her husband's name.

"SEVERUS!"

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Hermione flew past her parents into the hall and into the adjoining room, which was bathed in light and sound, as if a huge spotlight was blazing from within. She started to dash headlong into the light, heedless of the hands and voices urging caution, but then she froze and all the breath left her lungs. For a moment Hermione stood still, air-bereft, thinking it was just a dream and praying it wasn't and thinking if it was she was going to die and

He was there.

Severus Granger-Snape stood beside the bed: alive, naked, shining like silver.

He looked down at himself, then up at her. His expression changed from confusion to shock to fear to joy, and the glow grew blindingly white as he held out his arms to her. His voice roared into her head with the power and triumph of an anthem. *Hermione! Lass, I have returned to you!*

Hermione ran into the room, tripping over her long robe as she stumbled toward him. With a startled cry, she fell, her arms windmilling wildly, but he effortlessly caught her in his arms and crushed her to his chest before she hit the floor. She sobbed his name, grabbing at his shoulders, flinging her arms around his neck, totally overwhelmed with his strong embrace, his blinding light, his *alive-ness*.

He lifted her up until she was wrapped around him, clutching at him like a vine, and he covered her face with kisses. "Hermione," he whispered, over and over, his kisses hot and frantic, his face as warm as the desert in her dream. "Hermione, my girl," he moaned, and she responded in kind, kissing him with the same wild elation.

The blaze of miracle candlepower that had borne Severus back into her arms gradually faded, leaving the room dark, lit only by the black mourning candles Luna had transfigured. Hermione buried her face against his pale, flawless throat. His arms tightened around her painfully, as if *she* were the dream. Then one hand cupped her chin and held her head so that their eyes met. Hermione looked up into her husband's face, studying it, memorising it all over again: those precious angles and lovely planes, his dark, liquid black eyes, his finely sculpted mouth, his expressive brows. He was really here, and it wasn't a dream. His body, which had been cold and still mere moments before, was warm and pulsing with life, and the heartbeat she had heard against her ear was as strong and sure and constant as it had ever been.

With a wry smile, his beautiful voice washed over the room like sunlight. "Do you think that anything could come between us, lass?"

Hermione gasped; from within, her soul rejoiced, instantly restored by his healing voice. It was the same deep, mellifluous baritone she knew so well, but it sounded, if possible, even more beguiling. It had harmonics and overtones she had never heard before. It was like hearing a familiar voice, coming from a younger throat. It had a youthful lilt to the deep bass notes, giving it a musical quality. It was the sweetest sound she thought to never hear again.

Pressing as close as she could get, she whispered, "Say something else."

He chuckled softly. "And what would you have me say, my girl?"

Hermione laughed shakily. "Anything. Just to hear your voice again."

His warm lips brushed against her forehead. In a voice so low it was a dark whisper in her ear, he replied, "I'll say anything you wish, as long as you'll let me speak to you." He tenderly touched her cheek, and the expression on his face reflected his wonder at returning to life, his joy at touching her again, all bound in the overwhelming realisation that he had literally returned from the grave. His words trembled with emotion as he looked down at her, an expression of awe on his angular face. "The only thing I want to say is, thank Merlin you're alright, and that I love you."

Then he grasped her head in his hands and plundered her mouth in the most searing, passionate kiss he had ever given her.

Dimly, she heard a collective gasp from the crowd standing in the doorway. Heedless of the audience, Hermione gave herself to her husband, savouring the kiss that by rights she should have never tasted again.

Finally, she heard the unmistakable sound of a throat being cleared, and Severus reluctantly raised his head. As he protectively enclosed her in his arms, he murmured, "I think the time for reciting Shakespeare will have to wait, lass. We appear to have company."

Hermione nodded, then turned to the multitude of witches and wizards crowded just inside of the door of the room, their faces shocked and conflicted. With the exception of her parents, who were looking on with a mixture of joy and wonder, wands were in the hands of everyone present. She placed her body between Severus and the others. Brushing her tears aside, she declared, "If you're here to do anything other than welcome my husband back to the land of the living, I'm warning you: you'll have a hell of a fight on your hands."

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Ron was the first to find his voice. He was whey-faced behind his freckles. "What, pick a fight with you? Bloody hell, Hermione, we've just seen someone raised from the bloody dead. I doubt I could cast a shoelace-tying charm right now."

Severus smirked, drawing, "And there are those who question why I fear for the future of the Wizarding world, Mr. Weasley."

Ron started, then grinned ruefully. "Shut it, Snape. Just because you've done the Merlin-freed-from-a-tree shuffle doesn't mean we still have to put up with your snark."

From behind, Hermione heard her husband's soft answering laughter, and the tension eased a bit. Then Harry stepped into the room, wand raised.

Hermione stood her ground. "Harry," she said, low, warningly.

"Hermione, I know you want this to be your husband—"

"It *is* my husband, Harry," she replied, raising her own wand in a defensive pose.

Harry refused to back down. "People don't just rise from the dead, even in the Wizarding world, Hermione." He gestured toward the back corner. "There was someone with him in the room. I saw him. How do we know this isn't some sort of trick?"

"Oh, that was Regulus Black."

All heads turned toward Luna. She had been standing by the bed unnoticed, her fey eyes as serene and untroubled as always. "I was sitting with the Professor." She turned to Severus. "By the way, it's lovely to see you alive again, sir."

"I find myself echoing your sentiments, Miss Lovegood. Thank you."

Hermione grinned in spite of the tense situation. Only Severus Snape could be this steady with his wife acting as his only shield between a band of hostile wizards and his vulnerable bits.

"Anyway," Luna continued, examining her nails, "Reg told me that Professor Snape had unfinished business and had to come back." She turned to Hermione with a smile. "I was just about to come and wake you when I heard you call the professor's name. And then, of course, he was awake."

"And a whole lot of naked. What happened to his clothes?" Ron asked, looking past Hermione to Severus' nude form. *Trust Ron to be gaping over your privates while everyone else is pondering the mysteries of life*, Hermione thought.

*The same thing occurred to me*, came the wry reply, and Hermione could hear a smile in his tone.

"You two are doing that thing again, aren't you?" Ron said. He turned to the others. "They can hear one another's thoughts, you know." He grimaced. "It makes me paranoid. I always get the feeling they're saying things about me behind me back."

"That's because we usually are, Mr. Weasley," Severus retorted, earning a snicker from the group.

Rolling her eyes, Hermione quickly transfigured the bed clothes into a cloak, and draped it over Severus' shoulders. He released her only long enough to perform this task, then put his arms around her again.

"I suspect the light burned your clothes away," Luna replied. "It was extremely bright, you see. If Reg hadn't warned me to shield my eyes, I think I might have been blinded. Returning from beyond the veil requires a lot of energy, you know."

Armed with this information, the group looked around at one another. "I don't know what to think," Harry said, uncertainly.

"I'm telling you, Harry, this is my husband. I have ways of knowing," Hermione snarled through clenched teeth.

"Harry, I just told you," Ron said, regarding his friend uneasily. "They read one another's thoughts."

Ignoring his friend, Harry's wand remained trained on Severus. "Tell me something that only you and I would know."

Severus breathed quietly. "Very well, Mr. Potter."

Hermione could feel indignant anger swelling in her chest. "Harry, the man has just come back from the dead. Severus *does not* have to prove anything to anyone. The way you're behaving, anyone would think you're jealous that you're no longer the only one who survived You-Know-Who's Avada!"

From behind, Severus squeezed her shoulders, and she turned to see a familiar frown on his face. "It's alright, Hermione. Try to look at it from his vantage point." He looked up at the tableau in the doorway. "I would be equally as wary."

Bill Weasley cut in. "C'mon, everyone. This is not a conversation that we need to hear." He began to usher the rest of the household out of the room.

Hermione's parents lingered a moment longer. Jean Granger looked at her daughter. "We'll be right outside, if you need us, dear." She took Martin's proffered hand, then turned to her son-in-law. "I suppose under the circumstances, saying 'it's nice to meet you' comes across as a little bland. One doesn't know how to address a son-in-law they didn't know they had in the best of times, but in this case..." She trailed off.

Severus took pity on her. "Yes, Mrs. Granger, it is a situation that I am puzzling over myself. Would it suffice to say I am glad you are alive, and that I hope you, in return, are glad I'm your new son-in law?"

Martin nodded. "That's a good enough start for me."

Jean leaned closer. Confidentially, she added, "I hope we'll get to speak soon. I must say, life as Hermione's parents has never been dull, but I think this just about takes the ginger biscuit."

Severus bowed to his mother-in-law. "Indeed. We will talk soon." He regarded Hermione's parents thoughtfully, then added, "Thank you."

"Thank you for what?" asked Martin.

Severus glanced at his wife's curly head, then back to her father. "For her."

Martin and Jean exchanged a look, as if they, too, could read one another's thoughts. Jean replied, "Call if you need us."

Hermione watched as her parents left the room, and the door softly closed, leaving Severus, Hermione and Harry alone. She turned back to Harry, loaded for bear. "Say what you have to say, Harry."

Harry shook his head. "Hermione, I just want the truth. I'm so bloody sick of being told half truths and hints and veiled insinuations. We are running out of time." He looked beyond her to Severus. "I have learned that I have to die in order to fulfill the prophecy. I know I'm a Horcrux." With a look of pleading in his bright green eyes, Harry said, "I just want to know the things you *didn't* tell Dumbledore in your memories."

Severus looked grim but relieved. "So you viewed them?" he asked. When Harry nodded, Severus shrugged. "Then I would think my motives were self-evident, Mr. Potter."

Harry nodded, but held his ground. "I want to hear them from you."

Sensing Hermione's boiling point was reaching critical levels, Severus put a hand on her shoulder. "Very well. I will answer your questions, and I will accept your condemnation, but then I must ask that we also discuss this Horcrux you have not been able to destroy."

Harry's eyes widened. "How do you know about that?"

Severus almost, but not quite rolled his eyes. "I've been reliably informed by the man who stole it in the first place." He paused for a moment, as if to collect his thoughts, then began, "Your mother and I became friends before we started school, Mr. Potter. I fell in love with her, but we became estranged, and because of the prophecy I overheard, the Dark Lord targeted her. And because of that, he killed your parents, and tried to kill you."

When Harry didn't reply, Severus went on. "Mr. Potter, I was a foolish, selfish man who believed with all my heart Lily would have chosen me had not James Potter and his friends performed every act of humiliation upon me to reduce me in her eyes. I believed that.

"But I was the one who called your mother a Mudblood. I was the one who drove her away." He lowered his head. "And yes, when I told the Dark Lord that you and Mr. Longbottom were the two possibilities for fulfilling the prophecy, he promised me that he would spare Lily's life as my reward. So, while I didn't tell him outright that you were the one, I didn't discourage him, either."

His voice was hollow with regret. "I should have known he had no intention of saving Lily for me. In the Dark Lord's mind, no one can be more important to a Death Eater than him. The moment I declared my intentions for your mother, she was marked for death. When I found out he'd killed Lily and James, I threw myself at Albus' feet and pleaded for him to take me to Azkaban. Instead, he took me to a different prison: Hogwarts, where I became his spy."



Harry was breathing hard. "So you didn't know Wormtail was their secret keeper?"

Severus shook his head. "No. Until it was revealed otherwise in your third year at Hogwarts, I had believed with all my heart that Sirius had."

"I know," Harry broke in, his face etched with pain. "I saw the memory of him taunting you when he he tried to hurt Hermione." He shook his head. "Sirius was in love with my mother too, wasn't he?"

Severus shrugged. "It is not for me to say." His expression softened, and he added quietly, "So many of us were." Hermione thought he looked wistful, but without the horrible, crushing guilt that had dogged him during the early days of their burgeoning relationship. "She had been my first friend, and like so many boys, I mistook that friendship to be something more than it really was." He frowned. "My family was dirt poor. I had never had anything to call my own before Lily came into my life. I was full of petty jealousy and insecurity, and that is a very volatile potion in the cauldron of the heart, especially in the heart of a young man as resentful and covetous as I."

Harry rubbed at his forehead, as if his scar hurt. "I-I saw from the memories that you asked her to forgive you, but she wouldn't." He looked at Severus with something almost akin to pity. "Perhaps if she had, things might have turned out differently."

The trio were silent for a time, the ticking clock their only accompaniment. Finally, Harry said, "I don't really understand how I feel about this. I want to hate you, because you targeted my parents. But you didn't betray their hiding place, and you didn't cast the Killing Curse on my mother."

"No. A part of me died that night, Mr. Potter," Severus replied, holding onto Hermione's hand. "For many years I told myself I was unforgivable."

"No." The two men turned to Hermione. She was looking at Severus. "Dumbledore told you that you were unforgivable." She turned back to Harry. "Severus wasn't even twenty years old! He was a child caught up between the lies of a madman and the machinations of an arrogant wizard who saw him as nothing more than a tool. Severus has paid for what he did. Harry, from the moment your parents were killed, this man has dedicated his life to protecting you! You saw the memories. You've seen it time and time again while we were at Hogwarts! Do you think that's going to change?" She squeezed Severus' hand. Pleadingly she said, "Grant him his forgiveness, Harry. He deserves it."

Severus returned the squeeze. Patiently, he said, "Hermione, the shared history between myself and Mr. Potter is not a pleasant one. I looked at him and saw his father. I visited James Potter's sins on him every chance I got. I have not been kind to him, even as I sought to protect him. I cannot expect anything from Mr. Potter other than his contempt and mistrust." He looked at Harry. "But at least it will be honest hatred, for the right reasons, and not for half-truths, hints and veiled insinuations."

Harry and Severus regarded one another silently. Finally, Harry said, "I can't afford to hate you, Snape. Whether or not I'll ever learn to like you is another matter, but I can at least forgive you." Harry held out his hand.

As they shook hands, Severus replied, "That was the most I ever hoped to receive, Mr. Potter."

The tension in the room dissipated, and gradually the three of them relaxed. Quietly, Harry asked, "Did you see them? Any of them? When you were, you know, wherever you were?"

Severus grew still, and his body radiated a sudden warmth. Hermione could feel it wash over her, and he leaned against her. "I heard them. I heard their love and joy and purpose." Hermione looked up into his pale, ascetic face, and was stunned at the awe and reverence she saw in his eyes. His voice was as soft and stunned as a child's. "They are there, and they are watching over us all." After the slightest of hesitations, Severus added, "But I will also tell you this, Mr. Potter. I, too, was one of the Dark Lord's Horcruxes."

Hermione gasped in shock, and he turned to her with a smile. "I'll explain it all later, lass, but yes, I, too, was a possibility for the prophecy, like Mr. Potter and Mr. Longbottom." He glanced at Harry. "So perhaps, if my experience is anything to judge upon, the future may not be as bleak as you think."

The three of them stood quietly, lost in their thoughts: Harry hopeful, Severus poised, Hermione relieved. The day grew lighter as dawn broke over the sea, bathing the room in a pearly, peach-coloured light, but they took little notice of it. Hermione could feel Severus' thoughts as they lapped against hers like gentle waves upon a shore. They were soothing, and she leaned against him, taking in his solid, generous warmth.

Harry was the first to break the silence. He regarded Snape thoughtfully. "You told us when we first arrived at Hogwarts that you could show us how to put a stopper in death. And all this time I thought it was just a figure of speech." Shaking his head at the wonder of it all, Harry moved to the door, then hesitated and turned around again. "You know, the Sorting Hat very nearly placed me in Slytherin."

Severus nodded. "I know. It told me," he added dryly. "I would sometimes think of you and Draco Malfoy together in my House and shudder at the implications."

To his surprise, Harry laughed. "So did I." He quieted, then nodded, as if his mind was made up. "There is a lot to be done. We've got a war council to create, Snape."

Harry glanced at Hermione and gave her a crooked smile. "We need to rethink our tactics. They say it takes a thief to catch a thief." He looked at Severus. "I think it will take a Slytherin to defeat a Slytherin." His bright green eyes were grim. "With you gone from Hogwarts, I'm afraid to even think about how Ginny and the others will fare."

"So am I, Mr. Potter."

"Harry. If we're going to win this war together, I think formalities are probably a waste of time at this point in the proceedings."

Severus' mouth twitched, and Hermione sensed the conflicting emotions within. "In that, case, Harry, perhaps we can meet with the others later in the day, and discuss strategy. Slytherin strategy," he added wryly.

Harry nodded. "I'll tell the others." He placed his hand on the doorknob, and turned back. "I'd get rested, if I were you. Killing that Horcrux isn't going to be as easy as you think." He smirked, "Even for you, the Professor-Who-Lived."

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Harry closed the door behind him, leaving the two of them alone. With indecent speed, Hermione locked the door, warded it like a Gringotts vault and placed a blanket-heavy Silencing charm around the room. Turning back, she raced into his waiting arms, gazing up at him with stunned, simple joy.

He sighed as she melded against his body. He cupped her silken cheek and looked down into her face. "There are so many things I must tell you," he said, his body responding to her soft warmth, "but for the life of me, I can't think of a single one of them."

"You can tell me everything later," she said, her soft eyes drinking him in. "Right now all I can think about is getting you naked and showing you just how happy I am that you're alive. But first," she added soberly, "There's something important you have to see."

"What?" he asked, alarmed at the sudden change. "Are you unwell? Is something wrong?"

She shook her head, her face full of wonder. "Nothing's wrong at all, Severus. Look!" Hermione indicated a mirror over a little dressing table. Obediently, Severus followed her and leaned forward to see the reflection of a different man.

His crow's feet, borne of years squinting into dim cauldrons ... the harsh lines of a million frowns ... the vertical score between his brows from every scowl he'd drawn all were gone.

He looked as young as Hermione. No wonder Potter had been disbelieving.

"Merlin," he breathed, peering closer. Like any man who looked at his face every day, he was well familiar with every aspect of it. His hair was still lank and choppy, his nose imposing, and his teeth were in the same crooked configuration as they'd been when they had first grown out of his gums. These were part of the roadmap of his harsh upbringing and the even harsher life he'd chosen for himself. Even they looked better, less hard-edged, more acceptable.

From behind his shoulder, Hermione caught his eye in their reflection. She wrapped her arms around his waist. "You are even more beautiful," she said, her glowing smile warm with pride.

He snorted. "I have never been beautiful, in anyone's eyes but yours, Hermione." Nevertheless, he could not stop staring at his reflection. He recognised this face; oh, yes. He'd studied this face just as carefully, the night he'd taken his Dark Mark. But even then, he had not looked this serene or comely.

He'd been allowed to hit the reset button and start over.

He turned from the mirror to Hermione. Looking into her honey-brown eyes, his love for her washed over him like a desert breeze, and his renewed body immediately responded. Her eyes widened, then glowed with approval.

"Do you still want to get me naked, witch?" he said, his voice silky and sensuous to his own ears.

Hermione gave him a wicked little grin. "More than ever."

"Then come here," he commanded, his voice full of promises. She flew into arms, carrying with her a fire that licked over his body, settling into his veins like heady wine. He sensed the same intoxicating flush within her mind; it was deep and solid, an orgasm in and of itself. He pulled her closer. She closed her eyes and rubbed against him like a cat.

*It's been so long, Severus. Gods, I want you!*The communion between them felt blissfully, wholesomely good, like a knowing hand scratching his back in all those hard to reach places. As their thoughts entwined, their bodies grew hot as they ground against one another, trying to find that sweet friction they needed.

With a ragged moan, he grasped the back of her head and kissed her desperately, parting her heart-shaped lips and sucking her tongue into his mouth. She scrabbled her fingers along his back as he plundered her with abandon. Her kisses had always intoxicated him, and he greedily drank down her moans, nourishing her with growls of his own.

He all but tore the robe from her body as she writhed against him with pagan hunger. Her hands were everywhere - caressing his face, sliding over his chest, leaving a trail of fire down his body until finally she took him in hand, stroking him with movements that were both thrilling and familiar.

With a gasp, she broke away from his suffocating kiss and leaned forward, flicking his nipple with her tongue. He hissed as she sucked it into her mouth, sending sparks of arousal sizzling up his spine. His hands braided into her hair, caressing her scalp, pressing her close, urging her to suck harder, to mark him with her teeth and lips and tongue.

His eyes closed as she released his nipple and slid down onto her knees. A soft palm cupped his balls, and he shivered as she caressed him. "Oh *Merlin*," he whimpered as her mouth engulfed him. The pulses of heat surging throughout his body made his knees buckle and his eyes roll back in his head.

Nearly swooning, Severus sagged down onto the bed as Hermione fondled him. He fell back, his legs dangling off the edge, his hips churning as she licked him from perineum to the tip of his already-glistening cock. Pleasure flashed through him like lightning before a storm.

In one swift, sure motion, he rose from the bed and pulled her up and onto it, scrambling to turn them until he was on top of her. He pressed her into the mattress, kissing her feverishly, parting her thighs until he was nestled between them, his raging erection screaming for her. His fingers blindly enclosed on her soft, warm breasts, and he kneaded the lovely mounds, piercing his palms with her tight, pink nipples. They were hard, and begging for his mouth. Bending forward, he flicked his tongue over the hard flesh, reveling in her mewl of delight. His lips cradled the delectable little tit and suckled it hard, the way she liked it. She was moaning with every breath, clasping his head to her breast, wanting more. He scraped his teeth against the tip, which sent a jolt of electricity from her mind directly down into his balls. His cock was aching, making its presence known, refusing to be denied one second longer.

"Hermione," he rasped, "I need you-"

"Yes!" She was already pulling him where she wanted him to be, her eyes lust-glazed and burning. "We can take our time later. I need you inside me now, please, Severus."

"Oh gods, yes," he moaned, poised over her. He had wanted to go slowly, to make up for the past few weeks of denial, but the moment the tip of his cock slipped inside her hot, wet core, he was lost. He plunged into her and they both cried out as his greedy cock opened and stretched and filled her.

In that stunning moment, Severus stilled, trying to breathe, trying not to come. This was more glorious than the first time he'd lain with her and taken her virginity. This was pure innocence and magic; the entire lexicon of sex and passion, rewritten by their bodies. As he drew back for the next deep plunge, the sensation racing over his cock nearly blinded him.

"Oh, *fuck*, Hermione," he whimpered, teeth clenched. She looked up at him, her face reflecting his bliss, and he dove back into her, making them both shout into the room. "Gods, you are perfect," he groaned. "So tight and hot and sweet..." He cradled her to his chest, and began to move, his rhythm solid and sure, each deep thrust wrenching a gasp from her lips.

"I want more," she panted, and he felt her body surge against his, her hips churning against his. She sounded frantic and hungry. "More, Severus, please. I want more."

Her pleas ignited him, and he raised himself on his forearms. His hand reached between them and stroked her clit, tweaking and flicking it mercilessly. She began to shudder. "If you want more, lass," he growled, feeling her swell beneath his fingers, "I'll give you all you can take."

She closed her eyes, a look of almost painful anticipation flitting across her lovely face. "Then do it," she cried. "Fuck me, Severus. Hard." She closed her eyes and moaned feverishly as he bucked against her.

He kissed her wildly, his fingers stroking the little pearly button. "Hard and fast, like you like it, my girl? Is that what you want? Does my girl want me to fuck her hard?"

He didn't wait for an answer. He pushed himself up on his hands, and allowed his hips to swing free, like a pendulum, feeling her luscious, tight heat sear his cock as he rocked into her. He spread his knees for greater purchase, and slammed into her, fucking her until she was moaning his name with each breath. She met his driving thrusts with her own; their bodies crashed together wildly. His pace was merciless, destroying coherent thought. He hooked her knees over his arms, angling her hips higher, until his relentless thrusts met the soft little ring of flesh within. She threw back her head and howled like an animal. Her climax hit them both like a clap of thunder, and Hermione screamed as she came in great, rapturous spasms.

"That's it. Oh yes," he roared, as her body tensed. "That's what I want. Give it to me, Hermione." Severus cursed helplessly as each pulse clutched his cock like a hundred tiny mouths licking and sucking his shaft. He released her thighs as he rode out the waves of her orgasm, slowing his thrusts as she writhed helplessly beneath him. He crooned to her, calling her sweet names, kissing her swollen lips, reveling in her glorious body. She held him, telling him how much she loved him, how much she needed him, wanted him.

He locked his hands beneath the small of her back and widened his thighs. Holding her torso still, he fucked her, his hips rocking back and forth, rolling, gyrating in and out of her pussy. "Come on, girl," he hissed, his mouth close to her ear. "So good... yesss... Just like that... Oh, lass, you're so sweet to fuck..." Hermione hooked her thighs around his waist, and urged him on, her ragged moans hot in his ear. His pounding hips became a blur as he stoked into her tight heat. "So... close... so...fucking...close..."

he chanted, eyes closed, his release tingling the tip of his cock with white-hot sparks of pleasure.

As if ignited by these sparks, his magic bloomed free. Instinctively Severus pressed his lips between her breasts, pushing the magic into her body. His groin flooded with molten lava, and he barked a sharp sound of anticipation. He was coming, oh gods, yes, he was going to come, and it would incinerate them both, purifying and refining and making them perfect

The magic flew wildly unfettered from him, and in that instant Severus came with a roar of ecstasy, gushing his seed into Hermione's womb. His head kicked back, and he bellowed his release as pulse after pulse robbed him of thought, sight and speech, and he saw red spots behind his eyes. She keened brokenly as she climaxed again, pulling him to her as if she would never let him go again. He cried out her name with each stabbing thrust, until they were both dazed and spent and reduced to a gasping, twitching jumble of arms and legs.

Gradually, Severus' wildly pounding heart slowed. He looked down at Hermione, his heart so full of love and gratitude he wanted to weep. She was lying beneath him, flushed, panting, her own tears of release sliding down her temples. He kissed them away. She whimpered his name, and he soothed her, brought her back down. "Shh. It's alright, lass," he rumbled, his voice hoarse. He shifted, taking his weight off her hips, and wiping the sweat from his face.

He gazed down at her body and smiled at what he saw. From between her breasts, down to the pleasure-soaked curls of her mons, Dolohov's curse was no more.

He stroked the lovely, flawless skin. Although it thrilled him, it did not surprise him. All through their marriage, Hermione had directed their magic to him, healing his scars, his soul, never taking anything for herself. Now he had given back to her, and he understood at last why she allowed her magic to fly so freely over him, bathing him clean. It was good to let it go, to send it just where it was needed.

Severus kissed every inch of the miracle. "My love," he murmured as he cradled her in his arms. "My Hermione."

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Take Me I'm Yours - Squeeze

## Thirty Four: Like I've Never Been Gone

Chapter 35 of 39

The final demons are put to rest.

*Special thanks to my sterling beta, stgulik, as always, for making my fics better than I ever could on their own. We have become a great team, and I can't wait for you to see the projects we are working on.*

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*The wind is coming up strong and fast and the moon is smiling on me,*

*Miles from nowhere, so small a craft in between the sky and the sea,*

*I'm bound for the island, the tide is with me, I think I can make it by dawn,*

*It's night on the ocean, and I'm going home, and it feels like I've never been gone.*

*Seagulls cry and the hills are green and my friends are waiting for me,*

*Great ambition is all a dream, let me drown my pride in the sea,*

*I'm bound for the island, the tide is with me, I think I can make it by dawn,*

*It's night on the ocean, and I'm going home, and it feels like I've never, I've never been gone.*

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It was midday before they were dressed, fed, and ready to take care of the odious task of destroying the locket Horcrux. Reg had told Severus that it was the first thing he had to do upon his return, but Severus had rather thought Reg would forgive him for making his first priority a more personal one.

Now there was no putting it off, and Hermione insisted that, even though she was still a little fragile, she would accompany him. He knew he should feel guilty for contributing to her overall soreness, but he could not. Making love to his wife had been too glorious, and besides, she wasn't complaining.

Harry, Ron and Neville also insisted on going with them, so the party of five set off for a place on the far end of the little spit of land, well away from the cottage *The trio aren't boys anymore*, Hermione thought, watching as they strode down the beachhead in front of her and Severus. *Too much time on the run has chased all the boy out of them.*

*We need every man we can get, Hermione. And while it saddens me that you have all had to grow up too fast, we no longer have the luxury of bemoaning the loss of your collective childhoods.* Severus' thoughts sounded grim in Hermione's mind. She knew what he meant. They were outnumbered; the grizzled veterans of the last war were gone or incapacitated. It was going to take more than just a prophecy gone wrong to win this time.

They paused at the farthest edge away from the Secret-kept safe house, on a little rocky crag. They had brought with them two items; the Sword of Gryffindor, and the Horcrux locket Regulus Black had stolen from the Dark Lord almost twenty years before.

"Are you sure this will work, Snape? None of us could make a dent in it, even with the sword," said Ron.

"I was told I am to be the one," Severus replied, as Harry laid the locket down on a large, flat stone that uncannily resembled an altar. The locket itself was a garish, heavy piece of gold, with a large green crystal set in the lid. Severus, like the others, had tried to open it by several methods, but could not, in spite of Reg's confidence in his ability to destroy it.

The sea breeze lifted their hair; a storm was brewing to the west. Severus could smell the rain on the air as he picked up the sword. The weapon was as heavy as he

remembered from his attempt to mislead Carrow. Goblin-made, finely engraved and bejewelled, it looked more ceremonial than practical, yet the edge was sharp enough to slice a man's hand open to bone. More than once, he'd wished he had buried it Carrow's skull that night, instead of twirling it around to pretend it was just a transfigured letter opener.

Harry watched solemnly as Severus took the great sword in a two-handed grasp. "Listen, Snape. If you can't do it, just walk away from it. No one will think less of you."

Severus looked at Harry carefully. "Potter, why on earth would you say this to me at this juncture? What possible reason could I have for not killing it?" The three younger wizards gave one another furtive, uncomfortable glances. "Well?" Severus pushed, growing irritated at their reluctance.

Finally, Ron spoke. "Look, Snape. We all tried to kill it. Every one of us. We all stood there, like you, holding the sword, ready to strike. But then it showed things."

Severus frowned. "What things?"

"Things you don't want to see, sir," Neville answered, his eyes clouded with shame. "Things you don't want anyone else to know about you. Things you don't want to know about others. That Horcrux can read minds. It'll mislead you, if you're not careful. It'll turn one against the other," he warned, looking away, like he suddenly wished he had kept his mouth shut.

"I am an accomplished Occlumens, Mr. Longbottom," Severus chided, though his voice was much milder than his usual tone when he'd had past reason to address Neville. With a tone that suggested a grudging consideration, Severus added, "But I shall heed your warning, and take every precaution."

He looked at Hermione, and she nodded her encouragement. *This is it*, he thought. "For love," Severus muttered under his breath, and raised the sword over his head to strike.

In that instant, the Horcrux began to tremble on the rock, as if something inside was fighting to get out. It juddered harder, until the chain could be heard clanking against its stone bed. With a scream, the locket flew open and bright green light burst from the centre. A huge serpent rose from the beam, snapping its venom-dripping fangs at Severus.

"Coward! Crybaby! Ugly!" it hissed, and laughed at him.

Severus almost laughed back. *Is that all you have for me, Tom? You'll have to do better than-*

Then the serpent changed, morphed, grew tall, dark haired, its visage drunk-looking and uncannily like Severus'. "No son o' mine is goin' t'queer school up in Scotland!" the drunken man roared. "I'll beat the magic right out' yer! Ugly, scrawny little scrote, what thinks he's better'n his old man! I'll show yer the back of me hand, yeh little shit!"

Severus sneered back at the image of his long-dead father. The man had been foul-tempered and a mean drunk, but he'd stopped trying to control Severus in his sixth year at Hogwarts. Seeing him now filled Severus' heart with a tired sort of pity for the man who could never love the son whose only resemblance to him was a physical one.

"See what I mean?" he heard Neville say, his voice rising to be heard over the vitriol the Horcrux was spewing at Severus. "It'll bring back ghosts to haunt you. Those you fear, those you hate."

Severus glanced at the young man. *You saw me in this locket, didn't you, Longbottom?* he thought. *I was the one spouting abuse at you, wasn't i?*

The image of Severus' father began to distort into another, no less familiar, no less reviled face. Sirius Black, leeringly lustful, cackled down at him. "Oh, come now, Snivellus, you didn't think I wouldn't provide you with the entire floorshow, did you? Let's see who else is waiting for you, shall we?" His body shimmered and dissipated like smoke to be replaced with-

"Oh, no," Harry breathed.

And suddenly, there she was: Lily Evans, as beautiful as the last time Severus saw her alive, smiling at him with her glowing, green eyes, like he remembered so well. She pouted flirtatiously and beckoned to him. He knew this was wrong, so wrong, and yet he surged toward her, his body moving of its own accord.

"Severus, you've come to me at last, my darling," she crooned, her voice as sweet as a siren's. He could actually feel her brush against his chest. "Leave them, Severus," she whispered, glancing over at the stricken expressions of the young wizards. "We have no need for them, you and I," she purred lasciviously, rubbing against him like a large cat.

Severus shook his head. "You're not real," he growled, slamming up his Occlumency walls, but Lily slipped through them like a wraith, opening him up just as she had done when they were young. She laughed, an irresistible sound that made shivers travel down his spine and into his groin. It was the same game of power she had often played with him, and he was as helpless against them now as he had been as a youth.

"I'm yours, Severus," she moaned, writhing against him erotically, her beautiful copper tresses sliding around him like snakes. Her lovely face grew hard. "You don't want that little whore, do you?" she entreated, pointing to his left. "Look."

Suddenly, Severus knew what he would see, and he began to tremble. "No," he ground out, and tried to raise the sword again. It felt as if he were trying to lift the side of a house. His wrists ached with the effort. The wind grew around them, flinging sand in their eyes, raising a cacophony of noises that made it impossible to think, impossible to Occlude, impossible to hear the other four, urging him to be strong. All he could hear, all he could see was Lily. He could even smell her lush perfume.

Lily's smile was so beautiful it nearly stopped his heart. "I'll be yours forever, my love. Look, Severus!" her silvery voice commanded, and against his will, Severus' head turned and saw-

"Gods, no!" he moaned, at the sight of his Hermione, her naked body entwined with Sirius Black's. They were slick with sweat, gyrating against one another in an obscene parody of love. She was riding Black hard, her head thrown back, moaning Sirius' name over and over, her perfect skin flushed with arousal.

Severus gasped. "No, Hermione," he whimpered, and the Sword of Gryffindor fell at his feet with an impotent clang.

"This is what she never wanted you to know about," Lily hissed accusingly, and slithered against Severus' body, cupping his groin lewdly. He grew instantly hard, in spite of the three boys watching him, in spite of his wife looking on during her unholy union with his most hated foe.

Hermione moaned and shuddered beneath Black. As if aware of his gaze, she turned her face to him.

"As if I would want you, Snivellus," she laughed, her eyes glittering with carnal lust, as Sirius grunted and pounded into her. "As if you were anything any woman would want!"

"Listen to that wanton little bitch! She's making a fool out of you!" Lily's voice changed from accusing to cajoling. "Don't you want revenge, love? Don't you have a better use for that sword, Severus?" Lily whispered, her mouth caressing his cheek.

Hermione screamed in pleasure, "Sirius, oh my love, I'm coming!" Severus felt his bowels cramp. How often had she cried out his name like that? How would the Horcrux know, unless it was telling the truth?

"Of course I'm telling the truth," Lily soothed. "I know what she did. Unfaithful harlot! Get rid of her, my love," Lily said, her tongue flicking at his ear. "Kill her and we can be together forever!" The wind rose around them, making it harder to see. Lightning flashed in the sky, followed closely by heavy thunder.

"Severus, NO! Remember what Neville said! It will make you see things you don't want to see!" Severus turned to his right, and saw Hermione, fully clothed, standing beside him, gripping his arm with amazing strength. "That's not me!" She pointed to Lily, who gloated with triumph. "That's not Lily Evans!"

Hermione looked up into her husband's face, and realised she had waited too late to intervene. His eyes were so wide she could see the whites ringing around the black irises; his trance-like fixation on the Lily apparition was too strong to break. "Look at her! She's NOT REAL! Sirius is NOT REAL!" Hermione screamed, her voice thin with fear.

"Hermione, you have to snap him out of it!" Harry shouted over the din.

Severus bent to pick up the sword, his eyes fixated, dull. "Lily," he said, his soft voice carrying over the screaming wind. A huge drop of rain fell on his cheek, but he ignored it. "When did this happen? When did Hermione lie with that dog?" His voice was broken with hurt.

Lily beamed in triumph. "All through the summer before you wed, my darling. The last night she was at Grimmauld House, she was fucking him. How she and Sirius used to laugh at you when she made you jealous!" She turned to Hermione, her voice ripe with contempt. The Hermione in Sirius' arms laughed.

"Oh, poor Snivellus," Sirius mocked, his voice flinty with derision. "Did you think you were the big hero, coming to her rescue?"

Severus picked up the sword and encircled his large, pale hands around the hilt again. He looked at Hermione with eyes that didn't belong to him. She closed her eyes. Surely, surely she was not going to lose Severus. *We should have waited until he was stronger,* she thought. *We should have-*

"And how many times?" Severus hissed, menacingly raising the sword aloft. "How many times did you betray me with this cur?" He wore a strange expression, and Hermione feared for his sanity.

*Severus-*

"Ten, twenty, what does it matter?" Sirius crowed, his laughing voice cruel and horrible. "I fucked her every chance I got, and she loved it!" The voice changed, grew softer, more sibilant. "You told me yourself how she loved to open her legs didn't you tell me what a randy little slut she was?" The veneer of Sirius cracked, and within Severus saw the Dark Lord's heinous visage.

Severus bared his teeth and growled. "Yes, I did. And I was lying!" Suddenly, he pushed the Lily apparition from him and bellowed, "For LOVE!"

He plunged the sword into the heart of the locket so hard the blade pierced the metal and with a shower of sparks, drove into the stone beneath. An unholy scream rose to an unbearable pitch as Lily's face shifted and contorted and changed into the Dark Lord's, then into a serpent, then into a demonic figure that caused them all to cry out in fear. The screaming, screeching, buffeting noise forced them to cover their ears. Lightning split the sky over and over, the answering thunder pressing against their chests.

Severus held the sword in place, his eyes closed, his arms shaking with the effort to pin down the Horcrux. He heard the Sirius/Hermione couple shriek in pain and anger, and heard his wife, his true wife, telling him to hold on, that it would be over soon, be brave, my love, be brave you are *so brave-*

The sudden silence was so loud it spooked him. For a moment, Severus held himself still, trying to breathe. He ached all over, as if his muscles were cramping all at once.

"Severus?" Hermione's voice was soft, like someone approaching a unicorn. "Severus, you did it. You destroyed it! It's over."

Gradually, he opened his eyes, and found that he was gripping the Sword of Gryffindor so hard his arms were trembling. Hermione's arm stole around his waist, but they did not prevent his knees from buckling, and together they slid to the ground, the sword falling from his numbed fingers with a clatter.

It was several moments before his eyes focused enough to take in his surroundings. He looked at the dead Horcrux, lying broken and unremarkable on the slab of stone. Its crystal was shattered, and around the edges was a dull brownish-red substance, like blood. *The blood on his hands,* Severus thought. *It stayed with the Horcrux. Now perhaps Reg can rest.*

He turned to Hermione. She was looking at him with terror-exhausted eyes. "What you saw - that never happened," she whispered, her voice shaking so hard he could barely understand her.

He blinked furiously to wash the grit from his eyes. "Of course it didn't, lass. I told the Dark Lord that you and I had been lovers even before Black died." He took her face in his hands to reassure her that he was, indeed alright. "He had no idea you were actually a virgin before we married."

"Aww, gods, Snape, did we really need to hear that?" Severus and Hermione turned to look at Ron, a pained look on his blushing face. "I'm just getting used to the fact you two are married. I don't really want to know about your sex life."

Severus laughed outright, and kept laughing. It felt so damn good to just laugh, and once he started, he couldn't stop. The three younger wizards were staring at him as if Nifflers were leaping out of his ears. This thought made him laugh harder. He could hear the tint of hysteria, but he didn't care. He had done it. He had killed that gods-forsaken Horcrux. He had sent another piece of that rancid soul to hell. He had repaid his debt to Reg.

He pulled Hermione into his arms, kissing her hard. "Oh, my girl, this has been the most absurd twenty-four hours, and during my life, that's flippin' well saying something." With trembling legs, he hauled himself and Hermione onto their feet. He still felt wobbly, but he knew that would pass.

He glanced at the three young wizards. They were looking at anything and everything but him and Hermione. He couldn't blame them; the Horcrux had shown him some hideous things. He felt a bit odd, but not in the bitter, self-conscious way of old. He found, however, that as long as he held onto Hermione, he felt grounded. Without her, he was half-convinced he'd float away, like a balloon.

He straightened his robes, and took a deep, cleansing breath. Fixing a baleful eye on the three young men, he intoned, "I suppose it should go without saying, gentlemen, that what was observed here, stays here, between the five of us. I have no desire to see a version of this in Rita Skeeter's column as one of the great anecdotes of the war."

All three smiled sheepishly. "You know, Snape," said Harry, "that's exactly what we told each other when we couldn't kill it." He looked at Severus with a mixture of awe and respect. "But just to give you some incentive, I promise not to say a word." He winked at Hermione. "As long as we win."

Severus nodded. "Incentive indeed. Now," he gestured toward the cottage, "and though it pains me to suggest it as much as it will you, no doubt, I think we should resume Occlumency lessons."

Harry winced. "I didn't feel any change when the Horcrux was destroyed. Do you think it's necessary?"

Severus shrugged and hoisted the Sword onto his shoulder. "There is no doubt there is a link between the two of you. As he weakens, he may weaken you."

Hermione nodded. "I'll help, Harry. First thing after the Order meeting."

"Well, can we get something to eat first?" Ron whined. "My stomach thinks my throat's been cut."

Hermione's answering laughter sounded sweeter than any apparition's. "And this is news why, Ron?" she retorted, rolling her eyes.

As she and Weasley traded good natured insults, Severus felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned to see Neville Longbottom. Severus was surprised to discover that the boy had grown almost as tall as he. Neville had been strangely quiet throughout the ordeal.

Severus addressed him formally. "Mr. Longbottom?"

The young wizard opened and closed his mouth several times, as if trying to get up the nerve to speak. With impressive dignity, he finally replied, "You know sir, sometimes I look at you, and I wonder if we're not truly seeing Merlin reborn." Severus must have looked nonplussed, because the boy shrugged self-consciously. "I ponder that, sometimes."

Neville picked up his pace, until he caught up with Harry. They walked side by side, talking quietly as old friends will, and Severus knew that whatever Neville had seen would never be mentioned to a soul. In the light of what had happened to Severus, Neville would think it... disrespectful. And so no one would ever know.

Severus felt Hermione's arm slip companionably through his. "According to Mr. Longbottom," he drawled, "I'm Merlin incarnate."

Hermione didn't reply at once. A few paces later, she laid her head against his arm. "My Merlin," she whispered, hugging his arm.

He smiled and returned her embrace, not caring who saw. "My Nimue."

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Nearing the cottage, the five of them noticed the storm that had burst upon them disappeared as quickly as it had risen. Hermione was sure that the Horcrux had been the sole cause of it. The boys had corroborated this; during their time on the run, the weather had always been dicey wherever they were even if the rest of the area was fair. They, too, had suspected the Horcrux's disruptive influence on the weather.

They decided to call the main core of the Order for the first meeting. As the afternoon waned, Hermione and Severus grew tense, worried that Order members might be inclined to hex first and ask questions later.

"I think Remus and Kingsley should be here, as well as Mum, Dad and the twins," Bill Weasley informed them. Severus readily agreed, but wasn't exactly sure why he was being asked. Now that he had returned, literally, to the land of the living, everyone in the house seemed to naturally defer to him and Potter. It was as if they all saw the two of them as their leaders, though why that should be, Severus had no idea. It was certainly not his wish.

"I will be happy to do whatever needs to be done," he told Hermione, then added uneasily, "but I don't feel comfortable with any mantle of leadership here. *Two days ago I was the second most-hated wizard in Britain*, he added silently. *Now I'm the most-hated reborn wizard in Britain.*

But Harry would have none of it. "I'll tell them the truth," he said confidently. "Remus told me that the last thing Dumbledore said to him and Kingsley was to trust me." He pressed his lips into a thin line. "I'll make them trust me."

That was easier said than done.

Severus easily blocked the four Stunning spells that came his way across the kitchen which was serving as the temporary 'war room.'

Finally, Harry's voice could be heard above all the shouting and cursing. "Listen to me or I walk!" he thundered.

Remus and Tonks, staring daggers through Severus, lowered their wands. Remus looked at Severus, his eyes narrowed. "Give me a reason, Severus. Give me one good reason to trust you." His careworn face was stern, unmoving. "You and Hermione have not acted like innocent people."

Before Severus could reply, Hermione stepped forward. "It's funny you should say that, Remus, because Professor Dumbledore said the exact same thing about Sirius Black the night Harry and I saved his life."

Harry nodded. "He did. And it was true." He looked at Remus. "I trust Snape and Hermione. I have seen their memories, I have circumstantial proof of their loyalty."

"Let's face it, mate," Ron interrupted. "Snape had the chance to send me to You-Know-Who when the Snatchers caught me," He cast a warm look to Hermione. "Instead, he gave me the Sword of Gryffindor and he brought me back to the guys with extra food. That's not exactly the actions of a wizard who is looking to kiss arse with a snake."

"Thank you for that interesting visual image, Mr. Weasley," Severus drawled. He turned his attention back to the Lupins. "I am prepared to do whatever it takes to show my true loyalties, Lupin, but the fact of the matter is that we need to stop posturing and start planning. Now that the Dark Lord thinks I'm dead, he will place the Carrows in charge of Hogwarts." Severus felt his stomach flutter at the thought. "I truly fear for the students. Minerva and Poppy covered for Hermione and me, but the others."

There was a flash of light outside the kitchen window, and Kingsley Shacklebolt walked in, freezing as he caught sight of Severus. "Merlin wept. It's true, then." He looked around at the assembled group. "Minerva got your message." He held out his hand. "Welcome home, Severus."

A *POP!* sounded, and Dobby the house-elf appeared, racing up to Severus. "Headmaster Snape, sir! Dobby has delivered your letter to Professor Tartan, sir!" He handed Severus a parchment, then bowed so low his nose touched the floor. "Professor Tartan said that Dobby is to tell the headmaster that she is happy that the rumours regarding his death were greatly exaggerated."

Remus looked at Severus suspiciously. "What's this about McGonagall?"

"I asked Dobby to take a message to Minerva," Severus replied. "She and Poppy have been covering for us. Madam Pomfrey has known the truth from the beginning."

Without looking at it, Severus placed the parchment in Shacklebolt's hands. It was sealed with the stamp of Hogwarts; the magical red and gold of Minerva's sigil was unmistakable and impossible to duplicate.

Severus turned back to Dobby. "Dobby, would you swear on your honour as a house-elf of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry that this message came from Minerva McGonagall, and that I have never seen the contents of this message?"

The little house-elf drew himself up with touching dignity. "Dobby will do better than that, sir!" He turned and looked at Harry with adoring eyes. "I swear on my devotion to Harry Potter that these things are true, Headmaster, sir!"

Severus turned to the three wary Order members. "I will take a wand oath to corroborate this fact." He took a deep breath. "I will, of course, subject myself to Veritaserum if you wish."

Shacklebolt looked at him carefully. Kingsley had always been a wizard who thought things through. Passionate he may be, but a hothead, no. "In good time, Severus. If need be," he answered, peering closely at Severus' face. "You look different." A grin split the dark face, showing Kingsley's white, even teeth. "I'd say death becomes you."

Severus bowed his head. "All in all, I'm a lot more relaxed. Returning from the dead has a way of doing that."

Kingsley smiled and gave an eloquent shrug. "Only you, Severus Snape, could return from the grave looking better than when he left it."

"Yes, indeed," Remus said, looking at Severus with mistrusting eyes. "One must ask oneself how much he bargained with the devil to do so."

Severus looked at Remus evenly, waiting for his old angry resentment to fill his heart, turning him waspish and defensive. It would not come. It had literally been removed from him.

Severus raised his left arm, and showed where the Dark Mark had lain under his skin for those many years. "I struck no bargains, Lupin. I curried no favours, I made no promises. I was simply asked to return, and I did." He placed a protective hand over Hermione's. "I know what I gained, Lupin."

Kingsley frowned, his dark eyes sweeping over the assembled group. "Innocent until proven guilty, my friends. Remember that," he said, fixing his glare on Remus and Tonks. He broke the Hogwarts seal, and the parchment unrolled itself. The little kitchen was filled with the sound of Minerva's familiar, unmistakable dry Scottish brogue:

"I, Minerva McGonagall, the present Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, do declare the following statement to be a factual and true account of the actions of Severus Tobias Snape and Hermione Granger-Snape."

The voice suddenly changed and became warm and friendly. "And Severus, you clever boy! What a roller coaster you've put me on! Draco Malfoy, telling the entire school you'd been killed by You-Know-Who, then I receive your Patronus, then Dobby pops by with your message!

"Well, if I've learned anything in my lifetime, it's that the one prediction I can make about you is your unpredictability. And Hermione, my dear girl, please hold on. You will not be condemned for much longer." Hermione closed her eyes, and leaned against Severus, as if all the strength had left her.

For an hour, the group sat around and listened raptly as the parchment explained, in Minerva's own words, the incredible events beginning at Dumbledore's death and ending with Severus' flight from Hogwarts the night before. Minerva finished the affidavit by saying, "Severus, the Carrows have been appointed joint Heads now, and without you to protect the students, they are running roughshod over these children. The faculty all know the truth and support you posthumously, of course. The Carrows openly call you a traitor, which makes my hothead Gryffindors no doubt wonder what the hell is going on. I am urging caution, but the school is on a knife edge.

"Kingsley, I entreat you to trust Severus. Trust Hermione. They have voluntarily placed themselves in hell to keep Hogwarts safe. They will fight as they have always fought for the light. Use Severus' knowledge and intellect to help us win this damn war once and for all, and tell Remus Lupin that if I hear he or any of the Order have uttered one foul word against Severus or Hermione, they will answer to me, and he doesn't want to see me with my dander up!

"Hogwarts is preparing. We can only do so much, but we are prepared to be the final staging ground if necessary. I want to get the youngest children out of danger, but the school can withstand a direct attack if need be. We can continue to use Dobby as our go-between. Good luck, and may the gods bless you."

The parchment rolled itself up and fell on the kitchen table. For a moment, the room was silent. "I suppose we're in little doubt of Professor McGonagall's opinion on the subject," Tonks finally said, giving Severus a smile, and he felt the tension lower another notch. He had always gotten along well with Nymphadora; she had been an apt pupil, and had not allowed her former boss' hatred of Severus to colour her own opinion of him as an adult. Moody may have despised and mistrusted Severus, but the new Mrs. Lupin had never been poisoned by the old Auror's judgement.

Shacklebolt regarded Severus thoughtfully, then turned to Harry. "Dumbledore said we were to trust you, Harry." He glanced back at Severus. "Do you trust them?"

Harry looked Severus in the eye, and for the first time in his life, he didn't resent the green eyes that stared into his. He had no room in his soul for it.

With his eyes still locked on Severus', Harry said quietly, "I trust these two people with my life." He nodded. "Now, can we talk about how we're going to defeat You-Know-Who? Isn't that what we've come together for?"

It took another two hours, another round of explanations to the rest of the Weasley clan, who were late owing to multiple Apparations until their trail was lost by the Ministry bloodhounds. Once they stopped hexing and started listening, the entire group had swelled to eighteen, and they were crammed in the cottage's little kitchen like so many sardines.

Mr. Ollivander was still too ill to leave his bed, but had pledged to help supply wands where needed. Severus' wand had been lost at Malfoy Manor, but he had been clutching Bellatrix Lestrange's wand when he landed at Shell Cottage. Mr. Ollivander had promised to create one for Severus as soon as possible.

Severus and Hermione sat among the eighteen, passing food, answering questions, being part of this group of people that heretofore had only accepted Severus on the fringes. Only Remus remained skeptical, but then again, his relationship with Sirius Black and James Potter had defined his feelings for Severus a long time ago.

To Severus, it felt as if he had finally been invited inside after decades of standing out in the cold, peering in, hoping to be part of something. He had thought the Death Eaters would give him that sense of belonging, but he had been a fool to even entertain that thought. Here, he realised, was his people. The people that valued him. Not all of them, but he could live with that. The ones that mattered, the ones whom he had protected and cherished, would protect and cherish him.

He turned to Hermione, and she smiled up at him and took his hand.

"So, I was telling Snape," Harry was saying to Remus, "I think we should fight fire with fire. You know, fight him the Slytherin way."

"And how is that, Severus?" Remus challenged.

The room grew silent. Severus put down his fork, and dabbed his mouth with a napkin. "We cheat, of course."

Tonks laughed, and turned to her unsmiling husband. "Oh, Remus, lighten up! I haven't felt this optimistic about our chances against You-Know-Who since Dumbledore died," she stopped herself, and glanced at Hermione.

Hermione could feel the eyes of the others on her as the conversations grew quiet. Severus leaned forward slightly, as if to intercept any accusations thrown her way. The gesture was not lost on anyone in the room. Hermione looked at the other woman levelly. "It's okay, Tonks. I know what I did. And I know I'll have to answer for it. I'm not going to brag or make it sound like it was no big deal, but I will tell you, he requested it, because he was dying. He asked Severus to do it, but I couldn't stand the thought of that burden on his heart." She looked at the other women, the other wives in the room, her eyes pleading. "I mean, if your husband was charged with a task you knew would break him to do, wouldn't you do it for him?"

The other women lowered their eyes and looked toward their spouses. Tonks said nothing for a long time. She turned to her husband, who looked at her sadly. Finally, she answered quietly, "Yeah, I suppose I would, Hermione. I wouldn't want him to suffer."

Hermione turned to Remus. Looking into his soft brown eyes, Hermione said, "Remus, you once called me the brightest witch of my age. Knowing how he feels about Muggle-borns, do you honestly believe I would ever have betrayed my friends to the Dark Lord?"

"I don't want to think you would, Hermione," he replied. "I want to believe in you."

Severus had seen enough. Peaceful he might be within, but this was Hermione, and he would not allow anyone to doubt his wife one more second. He rose from his chair. "Then do as Albus said, Lupin. Trust Harry." He turned to Harry. "Mr. Potter, I once considered your father my greatest enemy. So much so that I revisited his sins upon you solely because you looked so much like him. For this, I owe you an apology.

"But Hermione and I pledged our love in the ruins of her parents' house-" He turned and bowed to his in-laws, who were hanging onto his every word. "With that love, we vowed we would always fight for one another, that my back would always be to hers, and we would fight for the light until we could fight no more."

He felt his emotions welling in his breast, and he fought back the tears that had once prompted Sirius to give him that awful nickname. Now, they were proof of his heart, and he was no longer ashamed that tears threatened. His voice rose, powerful and beautiful, and the very air stilled to listen.

"All those within the sound of my voice, hear me now as my witnesses:

"I will fight for you, Harry Potter, I will fight to defeat the Dark Lord until he is no more. My back to yours."

The room was so quiet they could hear the sea grass sloughing outside. Harry held out his hand. As Severus clasped it, Harry's eyes were shining. "My back to yours."

Ronald Weasley stood, and put his hand on Hermione's shoulder. His voice was curiously full of power. "My back to yours."

A chair scraped, and Neville clasped Harry's free hand. "My back to yours."

The Weasley twins rose as one. "My back to yours."

Bill embraced his father. "My back to yours."

Fleur Weasley turned to Molly Weasley, and took her hand. "My back to yours, *Maman*."

A diminutive house-elf placed a gentle hand on Jean Granger's shoulder. "My back to yours, Mother of Harry Potter's friend," said Dobby.

"My back to yours..."

"My back to yours..."

"My back to yours..."

Eighteen voices spoke the words, their voices trembling with emotion and purpose. Eighteen witches, wizards, elf and Muggles clasped hands, touched shoulders, held loved ones, shed tears. Eighteen made the vow, and at the centre of this great wheel of dedication, stood Severus Snape, former Headmaster, former Death Eater, former reviled enemy.

He looked across to Remus Lupin, who gazed at him with a yearning hope. *Don't make us regret this*, his expression seemed to say.

Severus walked over to his old nemesis, and held out his hand. "My back to yours, Lupin."

The two wizards stared at one another for several moments, until Remus took his hand. "My back to yours, Severus."

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Never Been Gone Words by Carly Simon

## Thirty Five: The Cry Heard At Night

*Chapter 36 of 39*

I did my best, it wasn't much, I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch...

*I realise that my friends here on TPP will see this chapter as just the last in a long line of chapspam. A little history here.*

*I have been writing this story since January 2011. The length of time between chapter 34 and this one has been almost a year. I had several things come up, and that, coupled with my own fears about this story, meant that I let it sit for a year. I apologise to everyone; I promised I would never abandon it, and I won't.*

*Thanks as always to the best beta and friend in the world, stgulik. She is my rock and my dearest sister in this venture. This story wouldn't be half the story it is without her.*

*So, without further ado, and much trepidation, I give you:*

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*Well I heard there was a secret chord that David played and it pleased the Lord*

*But you don't really care for music, do you?*

*Well it goes like this: the fourth, the fifth, the minor fall and the major lift*

*The baffled king composing Hallelujah*

*Maybe there's a God above but all I've ever learned from love*

*Was how to shoot somebody who outdrew you*

*And it's not a cry that you hear at night it's not somebody who's seen the light*

*It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah*

*I did my best, it wasn't much, I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch*

*I've told the truth, I didn't come to fool you*

*And even though it all went wrong, I'll stand before the Lord of Song*

*With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah...*

---

The Order meeting finally broke up in the early hours of the morning, with each member slipping away into the shadows, each with their roles to play. Although they both felt drained from the emotional ride of the previous two days, Severus and Hermione spent the next hour talking with her parents, making sure they were well. The Grangers were still weak but rallying. Severus concluded it was the knowledge that their beloved daughter was alive which speeded up the healing process as much as Fleur's potions.



As he watched his wife interacting with her parents, he came to understand even more her loving, courageous heart and strength of character. The Grangers were courteous, even kind to him. They listened to the incredible events that had brought them all to Shell Cottage, and offered good advice. And every time he saw the stunned gratitude in their eyes, Severus felt a fierce validation for all that he and Hermione had endured. Funny that he had never considered the idea of having in-laws, much less in-laws like the steady, pragmatic Grangers, but now he was grateful for their presence and practical counsel.

When Hermione related all that Severus had been through, his mother-in-law looked at him with tears in her eyes. "Oh, Severus. I don't know many who would still be standing with the burdens you've had to carry. You poor dear man." She pressed a hand to his cheek. It was a gesture he would have batted away as a young man, but which humbled him now. He had never been mothered, even as a child; it was strange to him that it should feel so welcome.

"The choices I made created those burdens. I'm not blameless by any means," he answered, unable to lie, even by omission of the truth. Then Hermione placed a gentle, warm hand on the inside of his arm. The skin there was pale and perfect; no mark, no scars. His body was healed, and felt innocent, newborn. Her thoughts drifted and rolled in tandem with his, and the sweet assurance that she was with him, her mind anchored firmly with his, filled him with a peace that superseded even the astonishing events of the past few days.

There was a sound, and the four of them turned to see Harry Potter standing in the doorway, looking sweaty and terrified. "He knows," he said without preamble.

For a moment, they stared at one another in silence. They didn't have to ask who Harry was talking about. Severus had discussed resuming Occlumency lessons the day before, and although Harry's ability had strengthened, he still wavered when pushed too hard. "What does he know?" Severus asked grimly.

Harry absently pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose. "The Horcruxes. He feels a change."

"How do you know, Harry?" Hermione asked, a queasy feeling of fear pooling in her chest. Severus clasped her wrist in his hand, and Harry's eyes followed the gesture as if he, too, were calmed by it.

He stilled for a moment to gather his thoughts. "It took me a long time to go to sleep, so I know I was dreaming, but it was more than a dream. I was seeing through his eyes. It was the moment you came back to life." He looked at Severus in awe. "I was...I mean, *he* was afraid. I mean, truly terrified. But he didn't know why. It was just this overwhelming feeling of fear. And then it was a weakness, as if his legs didn't want to support him."

Harry paused. "Then everything in the vision changed. I was at Malfoy Manor, and suddenly it was as if a dagger had been driven through my chest. I could actually feel something being pulled out of me, like a vital organ."

Severus nodded. "That must have been when I destroyed the locket. It was one of the earliest-made Horcruxes; probably one of the most powerful. It stands to reason he would feel its demise more intensely."

Harry nodded in agreement. "I could feel his anger and his rage. He knew exactly what was going on. He was furious..."

"Do you think he suspects you are a Horcrux as well, Harry?" Hermione asked.

Harry grew very calm, and closed his eyes. "I don't think so," he said finally, his voice quiet. "To be honest, I don't think he was even thinking about me. I just kept seeing that snake of his, Nagini."

He paused, then he opened his eyes, realisation dawning. "And then the snake touched him, and he pulled it close, almost as if he was afraid something would harm it." Harry grimaced at the memory. "And that's when I felt the real fear take over. He was angry, but he was so afraid he was almost out of control."

"What's this about a snake?" Martin Granger asked. He and his wife had been following the conversation closely. "Is it one of those Horcruxes too?"

Hermione turned to Severus. "We always surmised as much. I think it's a safe bet he's made Nagini into a Horcrux." She turned to Severus. "And now that the Dark Lord knows what's happening, he's going to keep the snake very close, to protect it from harm." Mentally putting all the items in order, Hermione started counting. "All right. The ring, the diary, the locket, Severus, Nagini, and you, Harry ... According to Dumbledore, there were seven. We only have to find one, possibly two more!"

Harry looked at her in surprise. "Why two? I thought..."

"I was an unintentional Horcrux," Severus answered. "Dumbledore wasn't aware of that when he surmised seven as the magic number of Horcruxes. And even *that* is conjecture. Seven seems to be the correct number, but we don't know for sure. There could be six, or sixteen, for that matter."

Harry looked tired and discouraged. Martin interjected, "At the very worst, your advantage is gone. If he knows about the Horcruxes, he can make more, can't he?"

Severus shook his head. "I don't believe he is able to make many more, Mr. Granger. Each time his soul is split, there is less and less to create the Horcrux. The older ones, the ones he made in the beginning, they were the ones with power. Now that they are gone forever, he's weakening. Soon he won't have the strength left to create any more. The ring, the diary, the locket. Those are the truly powerful Horcruxes. He glanced at the boy. "And, to be honest, Potter, you are probably one of the strongest as well."

"I know that," Harry said, and his shoulders slumped with such an air of defeat Hermione felt a surge of fear for him. He looked at them bleakly. "I know what my destiny is."

He sighed, and closed his eyes tightly. "I know these past few months haven't exactly been a trip to the seaside, but I have learned that life, no matter how difficult, is too sweet to give up easily." A tear slipped down his cheek. "It's so hard, knowing I have to die."

Hermione put her arm about his waist. "There has to be another way, Harry," she said reassuringly, praying she wasn't just feeding him false hope. "There has to be another way to defeat him."

"Weaken him, undermine him, most certainly," Severus agreed, his brow furrowed in thought. "Reg said that I could have also been the one mentioned in the prophecy. He told me I had fulfilled my part of it; perhaps that is enough. In any case, don't be so eager to rush to your demise, Potter. At least give your army a chance to get the odds on your side."

Suddenly Hermione sagged against him, and Severus could feel the fatigue settling into her body like iron. "Lass, you are beyond exhausted. Perhaps we should all rest now. We can discuss this at length in the morning." He turned to the boy who had once been such a bane to his existence. To his surprise he could only feel sad for Potter; the boy was on the verge of giving up. "Try and rest, Harry," he added. "You will need all your wits about you when our Occlumency lessons resume tomorrow."

Harry grimaced, but there was no real rancour between them anymore. He nodded to Hermione's parents, and squeezed her shoulder. "You get rested too, Hermione. We need that brain of yours in top running order."

"Goodnight, Harry."

As they watched a very dejected Potter leave the kitchen, Jean Granger turned to her daughter. "Come along, darling," she said, helping Hermione to her feet. "Do an old lady a favour and let me 'Mum' you a bit. I'll tuck you in. Good night, Severus."

He nodded as she led Hermione toward their room. Martin Granger stood as if to take his leave, but he then locked a keenly intelligent eye on Severus and said quietly, "I want you to be honest with me, son. How bad does it look? For our side, I mean."

Severus felt an unexpected warmth in his chest at being called 'son.' He faced his father-in-law and answered without hesitation, "It is very difficult to feel as optimistic as I have tried to appear, Mr. Granger. The fate of the Wizarding world lies on the rather bony shoulders of that seventeen-year-old boy." They both looked toward the door

Potter had exited.

He sighed bitterly. "We've done everything we can to prepare him, but in the end, I'm afraid his destiny is to be slaughtered like a sacrificial lamb."

"But why?" Hermione's father frowned. "Why is it so certain this Dark Lord has to kill that young man in order to die himself? Why can't we, oh, I don't know, send in an assassin and blow the son of a bitch into a million pieces? Why do we have to just sit here and wait for him to make all the first moves?"

Severus opened his mouth, then closed it. He had no answer. His father-in-law's question merely served to raise more questions in Severus' mind. Were they doing everything they could behind the scenes? Were they truly fighting the war the Slytherin way? For half his life, he'd been backing this prophecy, accepting that his part in Harry Potter's destiny was as iron-clad as the boy's. "I-I don't know the answer to that, Mr. Granger..."

"Martin, please," he interrupted. "We're family now, Severus."

*Family.* The feeling of warmth grew to a point Severus knew was worth fighting every Death Eater in The Dark Lord's army to preserve. "I shall ponder your questions, Martin," he said. "You may have a very good point we've overlooked. Wizards sometimes don't see the trees for the forest."

Granger put a fatherly arm on Severus' shoulder. "I may not be a wizard, Severus, but I studied World War Two strategy. If there's anything we can chuck at this bastard, we ought to start chucking it before he realises what direction it's going to come from."

"I shall look to you for guidance."

The older man smiled. "Anything we can do, consider it done."

Severus bade his father-in-law a good night, and stole into the bedroom that had been allocated for him and Hermione.

He quickly undressed and slipped between the sheets to take her in his arms. His heart pounded with gratitude, and the firm resolve to come out on the other end of this hell alive and together. He pulled her closer, remembering how fine and strong she was, and how close he had come to losing her.

"Were you and Daddy having a heart-to-heart?" she asked quietly.

"Of a sorts. He wanted to know why the Wizarding world is cowering like children in the dark, and not taking the battle to the Dark Lord," he answered ruefully. "And I didn't have an answer for him. He's given me a lot of food for thought."

She shifted restlessly in his arms, obviously distraught.

"You're hurting. Let me ease you," he said. He chanted healing spells, wincing as she made a small whimper of pain. The residual pain from the *Crucio* was like a razor slicing at him through their Blood Oath; it was the kind of pain that went bone deep and days long. It could be up to a week before she didn't feel the cramps every time she shifted from sitting to standing. Severus felt impotent fury; a thousand years of *Crucio* would be too good for Bellatrix Lestrange.

Even as Hermione gradually relaxed against him, he sensed something was amiss. "This is more than *Crucio* backlash, more than pain. What is it? Talk to me, lass." When she did not reply, he added reproachfully, "We promised. No more keeping secrets from one another. No more holding back."

"I'm not, truly." Hermione held onto his hands. Her eyes fluttered shut, and she took a deep breath. "If we win..."

"Hermione..."

"If we win, I'm going to have to answer for Dumbledore, aren't I?"

A cold finger of dread scratched his spine like a nail on a chalkboard. "I don't believe the Order will allow it to come to that, Hermione. You've nearly paid with your life twice already."

She shook her head. "I've been thinking about this and I don't see any way around it. What you did as Headmaster is completely explainable. Our secret marriage, my parents, escaping from Malfoy Manor...all those things can go along way toward exonerating us. You've come back from the bloody dead, for Merlin's sake!" Her voice took on a frantic tone. "But me...I killed Professor Dumbledore in cold blood."

"Hardly cold bl..."

"That's how everyone will view it. No matter the whys or the excuses, the fact is that I took his life. It ... it may even mean time in Azkaban for me."

He drew his wife, his witch, closer to his breast, remembering all the times she had stepped between him and disaster. She had always been the angel with a flaming sword, guarding him against the forces of darkness. He could do no less for her now.

Ardently, he vowed, "I will walk into hell and back before I allow you to spend one day in Azkaban. The gods cannot be so cruel as to ask this of us."

Hermione sighed miserably. "I don't think the gods are listening to us anymore, Severus. I think we're on our own."

A wave of despair rose from her, nearly crushing him with its hopelessness. He held her tightly, rocking her, soothing her. "My love, my little witch," he crooned, desperately trying to banish the desolation in her spirit. "This is the *Crucio* talking. Tomorrow, you won't feel this way. I promise," he declared, praying it would be true.

He loosened his grip, and his touch became more languid, sensual. Thankfully she relaxed, her muscles uncoiling beneath his hands. "I want you to rest, and allow me to care for you," he murmured. He placed a tender kiss on her forehead. "I will hide you away. We'll go to the ends of the earth if necessary. We'll take your parents and disappear where no one will ever find us."

"Just like the song," she murmured huskily. "Just like your song." She eased against him with a soft sigh.

Severus' heart filled with guilty, protective love. He knew he was whistling in the dark; he would never consign her to a life on the run. She knew it, too. Whatever happened, they would face it here, but she was comforted all the same. Her faith in him had always been as huge and valiant as her heart.

"Lie back. Let me take care of you."

Obediently, she settled, and he sat up so that he could lean over her. He opened her robe, revealing her body. In the cool night air, her breasts grew taut and the tight nipples pouted enticingly, begging to be fondled.

He tenderly stroked her forehead, then her cheeks, his hands gliding over her smooth flesh, moving down the column of her throat in long, slow sweeps. His fingers skimmed over the edges of her breasts, down her ribs to her waist, and he repeated the motion until she was breathing deeply with each long pass of his hands. Her amber eyes were locked with his, and he stirred as he saw the pain in them gradually fade, to be replaced with desire. But still, he denied her breasts, choosing to stroke her belly; she made a soft, entreaty sound that made his rigid cock harden to the aching point.

Another long, slow drag of his palms over her ribs, gliding over her belly, and her soft sound of entreaty changed to a gentle demand. As her pain and anxiety bled away, and arousal replaced fear, she presented herself to him in that open, trusting way that made his head spin with need.

Again, his hands cupped her cheeks, and moved down her throat, and this time moved over her breasts in a sensual caress that made her moan and arch her back. When he hesitated, she whispered, "More."

He breathed in deeply, his mind swimming with intense, intoxicating desire. "More, Lass? Would you like more?" he asked, his voice low and velvety. His hands swept upward, caressing and messaging her tender breasts, and she rose sensuously to meet his touch. Her expression transformed into utter ecstasy as he slowly encircled her nipples with the calloused pads of his thumb, making them crinkle into tight, hard tips. His mouth watered in anticipation of suckling the pert little buds. He could feel the sensation in his own nipples, and he had a sudden, swift desire to command her to lick and suck them, just to see if she could in turn feel the delicious teasing through their link. He teased the rucked flesh with the tip of his finger, reveling in the velvety nub, how it hardened and yielded for him at the same.

"Like that, do you?" he moaned softly, his voice little more than consonants and air. His heart was beating hard and heavy in his chest; he could feel the pulse of it in his aching cock. When she made a little inarticulate sound of agreement, he gently rolled her nipples between his fingers, crooning his desire. "Yes. Oh, yes, show me how you like it when I play with that sweet, little tit." Her body went boneless and he could scent her arousal, sweet in his nostrils. Hermione was writhing beneath him now, a siren of wanton, delicious lust. "That's it. That's my girl."

Soon his lips joined his teasing fingers, sucking and nipping, listening to the song of her arousal, playing her body to its tune. He nuzzled her until she was insensate, pushing him down to where he was needed. With a wicked smile, he placed a trail of wet, gentle kisses down the length of her body. He eased her thighs open and parted her glistening labia with his thumbs, revealing the succulent wet petals of her pussy. With a moan of longing, he lapped at her, suckling her clit like a tiny nipple, and she keened his name in a way that sounded like music to him.

He inserted his finger into her tight, slick sheath; she was hot and deliciously wet for him. He withdrew it, and slid it downward, until it encircled her tiny, puckered hold. "Good girl," he breathed against her thigh, as she accepted him. A second finger eased back into her hungry sex, and pumped into her slowly. She cried out and undulated against his movements as he returned to the sweet task of licking her pink cunt. Her hips rose from the bed, and she thrust against his face with abandon. A burst of emotion and pleasure radiated from her, spearing his body with its intensity and power.

Her hands scrabbled at his hair, pulling him closer, her thoughts flooding his with *there, oh, there, Severus, pleasepleaseplease there oh gods yes...*

She choked out a soft cry as her orgasm took her, flooding his mouth with her essence. He drank of her greedily, unwilling to pull away from her delicious sex. She collapsed back in wordless, gasping bliss as he worshiped her body with his caresses, making love to every inch of her skin with his fingertips. Each stroke of his hand was a song of desire, each touch a sonnet of his absolute devotion. Finally, at her feverish urging, he parted her thighs and entered her, nearly swooning at the feel of her silken cunt sucking greedily on his eager cock. He could feel her silent urging, and his control broke.

Severus rose on his arms, his hips swinging free, and fucked her wildly. He fucked her, not caring there were eight other people in the house and her parents were next door and he had forgot a Silencing Charm. He fucked her as if she had not been in pain only moments before. He fucked her with all the desperation of the reality they were forced to live, and the knowledge that death could claim them any day. He fucked her with the heady, rapturous craving of his soul, and because she craved him as well, answering his call with a passion as blazing and fervent as his own.

Her lovely breasts swayed with each thrust, the sight eradicating the last remnants of rational, sane thought. He wrapped his arms around her waist, and drove into her, pistoning his pleasure, his need, into her accepting, willing body. His orgasm danced ever closer, and her soft, urgent voice panted in his ear, "Come in me, Severus... Pound into me, just like that, harder, oh, gods, fuck me, fuck me, tear me apart..."

The muscles of his back tightened and burned as a thousand barbs of intense, boiling pleasure sank into his balls, pinpricks of light and heat *above* and he choked out his cry of, "I'm coming in you! Oh, sweet, oh, gods fuck..."

The searing orgasm blasted over them both, mingling their choked cries of release, thrusting and thrusting his climax into her, leaving them breathless and spent. He fell against her and she clung to him, sweat-drenched and moaning. He kissed her passionately, his senses full of her, his groin aching with the pleasure of coming in the woman he loved so very much.

Looking down into her flushed, glowing face, Severus felt the last of the crippling fear melt away, and they held on to one another, knowing that they could face tomorrow a little less afraid.

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He was back in the desert, the soft sirocco wind redolent with spice and the cool, coming night. He looked around the elaborate tent of his dreams, where he lolled on silk cushions in colours of rust and umber, purple and sage. On ottomans of tooled leather stood golden goblets encrusted with cabochons of turquoise and angelite, chialtolite and chrysoprase; they were sweating with the condensation of the cool wine contained therein.

In his arms, looking as lush and ripe as the fruit piled in the silver bowls at their feet, was his beautiful Hermione. She lay back against him, his chest her throne; her belly was round and full with his child, and with her hair entwining possessively around his wrists, she was the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen. His desire for her surged, and he cupped her heavy breasts in his hands, caressing her with his touch and his voice. He ached to show her just how much he wanted her. She turned in his arms and kissed him, stroking his body possessively. Soft chimes swayed in the breeze, and he wanted to stay in this warm, private place forever.

Dimly he heard the low, soft sound of music, like someone humming nearby. A shadow fell across his eyes, and he glanced up to see Reg looking down at them. He, too, was unspeakably beautiful, even more beautiful than Severus remembered. His deep violet robes swirled and floated in the wind, which lifted his hair like a black silk banner. Beside him stood Luna Lovegood, of all people, arraigned in turquoise robes. Tiny silver bells were attached to the sleeves and the hem; they made tinkling, ice-chip noises as the wind caught them.

As Severus and Hermione watched raptly, Reg started humming a tune that sounded both familiar and totally alien. He playfully pulled Luna into his arms and twirled her around. Their diaphanous robes danced around them capriciously, like magic. Reg hummed louder, and gradually she began humming along with him.

Severus exchanged a glance with his wife; she looked as pleasantly puzzled as he felt. "What are you singing, Luna?" Hermione asked, sounding sleepy and languid.

Reg and Luna gazed into one another's eyes. "He was a bard, after all, Hermione," she replied enigmatically.

Enchanted, Severus asked, "Who, Reg?"

Reg dipped Luna, and was rewarded with a peal of laughter that sounded like the tinkling bells on her robes. He looked up and winked at Severus. "Why, Beedle, of course. He was a bard, a singer, you know."

"No, I didn't know."

Reg pulled Luna upright, and they began to dance around again. "And the objects merely represent the voice."

"I don't understand," Hermione replied, still transfixed by their hypnotic movements. She leaned against Severus, and they watched and listened, like a king and queen being entertained for their amusement.

Gradually Reg and Luna slowed their whirling, twisting dance, and when they came to a gentle halt, he raised her hand to his lips and kissed it, a gallant gesture full of affection. Then they began to sing together. Severus couldn't make out the words or the tune; it was as if he were hearing it underwater. To his surprise, Hermione joined in the song, her voice just as mysterious and incomprehensible. She sang along, lifting her wand like a conductor's baton, sketching out the time with a series of geometric patterns.

Then suddenly, Reg and Luna vanished, leaving he and Hermione alone again, and there was nothing: no beautiful tent, no pillows, no wine or fruit; only the wind and the

fading sound of singing borne away on the desert breeze.

Instead of feeling abandoned or afraid, he was filled with wild elation. He turned and scooped up Hermione in his arms, laughing exultantly. She had done it, she had found...

"...the way! Oh, lass, you did it!" His eyes flew open, and he sat up, wide awake, laughter still bubbling from his lips. Hermione was grasping his arms, her face alight with excitement.

"I was there, Severus! I was in the desert, with you and Luna and Regulus Black..."

"What did you do?" he asked hoarsely. His body was thrumming with joy, but he had no idea why. "Do you know what happened?"

She shook her head. "Not a clue! I knew it was wonderful and thrilling, and ..." She stopped, and they embraced. "That was no ordinary dream, Severus."

"No, I don't think it was, lass." Severus closed his eyes, trying to recapture the vision, but like so many dreams, the more he grasped at it, the faster it unraveled. "It was as if we'd been given the secret to defeating the Dark Lord for good and all." He ran a shaky hand through his oily hair.

Hermione put her arms around him again, and they held one another tightly. "I know! I just felt it was something so simple, yet so very important." They sat up together, and he tucked the covers around her as she began to shiver in the night air. "Severus, what or who exactly was Beedle the Bard?"

Severus took a moment to gather his thoughts. "He was a story collector. Children's stories. Fairy tales and the like. Have you never heard of him?"

She shrugged. "When I first discovered I was a witch, I tried to find out everything I could about the Wizarding world. I vaguely recall hearing the name. I suppose I just assumed it was the Wizarding equivalent of Mother Goose or Aesop's fables. In the Muggle world, pre-school children are read these stories by their parents. With Wizarding kids, I suppose it's the same with Beedle The Bard."

A memory stirred. "Hermione, the night Miss Lovegood and Miss Weasley broke into the Headmaster's study and tried to steal the Sword of Gryffindor, Miss Lovegood told me you should read Beedle the Bard. She actually took a copy from the bookshelf and gave it to me." He lowered his head. "I'm afraid I was so distracted, I took it to our room and tossed it aside. I'm sorry, but I don't even remember what I did with it."

She stroked his back consolingly. "I'm sure we can find a copy. It sounds like every Wizarding home has one..."

A soft tapping at the door made them jump. They hastily pulled on their clothes, and opened the door. Luna Lovegood was standing at the door, looking as if she were no more concerned about the hour than the cause and effect of a falling butterfly in China. In her lilting, sing-song voice, she said, "I'm sorry to bother you, but after that dream, I think we have a few things to discuss."

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At Luna's request, Severus roused Harry, Ron and Neville to join them. They congregated quietly in the kitchen, and while the kettle boiled for tea, Hermione's parents wandered in. Eventually, as the dawn drew nigh, Bill and Fleur joined them.

"Luna, we've all read Beedle the Bard ever since we were children. How can a fairy story bring about the downfall of You-Know-Who?" Bill asked.

"We have a war to win," Severus said, decisively, and his lips twisted in dark humour. "At this juncture, if Babbity Rabbity and her Cackling Stump hold the key to the Dark Lord's defeat, I'm prepared to start cackling."

"Actually, the Story of the Three Brothers is the key," Luna began. "Death tricked three brothers into asking him for special favours. The oldest brother asked for the Elder wand, which rendered him invincible. The second brother asked for a way to recall the dead, and he was given the Resurrection Stone. The youngest, cleverest brother asked for a way to hide from death, and was given Death's own Cloak of Invisibility. The story was told to prove that you can't cheat Death for long.

"But some believe the brothers actually existed, and Beedle's story is a kind of biography. The three items became known as the Deathly Hallows. Does anyone have a quill?"

Neville instantly passed one to her, and she smiled her thanks as parchment was produced. She drew a symbol, which Ron recognized instantly. "Luna, didn't your dad have a medallion that looked like this at Bill and Fleur's wedding? The one Krum was going on about?"

Hermione frowned. "Going on about?"

Ron nodded. "He kept saying it was Grindelwald's symbol, like it was something evil."

Luna continued drawing. "It's not evil. Evil men have used it for their purposes, but it's not evil."

Martin Granger leaned forward and peered over his glasses. "Like the swastika used by the German Third Reich in World War Two. It was originally a Sanskrit symbol that meant 'to be good.' Cultures all over the world used it to represent fortune and happiness, but it only took about ten years in the wrong hands to change its meaning forever. To most Magicals now, it's a symbol of great tyranny and evil."

Luna nodded as she finished her drawing. It looked to Severus like a triangle with a circle inside. A line bisected both shapes. "My father is one of many Wizarding folk who wear the symbol," said Luna. "It helps to identify other believers on the quest to find the Hallows. Many people have died in the pursuit of them.

"According to the legend, the person who possesses all three would become the Master of Death. What would You-Know-Who do, if he believed that owning the three artifacts would make him Master of Death?"

"He'd stop at nothing to attain them." Severus shifted uneasily. "When we were at Malfoy Manor, The Dark Lord called Dumbledore's wand 'the Elder Wand.' He said it was the reason he wanted Hermione dead."

"That makes sense," Luna said with a nod. "According to the legends, the Elder Wand will only transfer its allegiance to the wizard who defeats its previous owner."

Severus felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. "When Hermione..." With the slightest hesitation, he continued, "When Hermione defeated Dumbledore, she would have become the *de facto* owner of the Elder Wand, according to legend."

"Hang on." The group turned to Harry. "You said, 'defeated,' not 'killed,' right?"

Hermione consulted the notes she'd been taking. "That's correct."

"Then technically, you didn't 'defeat' Dumbledore, Hermione. Draco did."

Severus crossed his arms. "Explain," he demanded flatly, and Hermione repressed another smile. His entire physical attitude was a holdover from his teaching days, and every person in the room who had ever been his student sat up a little straighter.

Harry continued. "When Dumbledore and I returned from the cave to the Tower, Draco disarmed him. I mean, physically took the wand from Dumbledore. He held him at wand point."

Hermione gasped. "Then Harry's right! I was never the 'owner' of the wand." She looked faintly stunned. "If he had killed me, the wand still wouldn't have worked properly." She bit her lip, looking pensive. *I would have died for nothing.*

*Don't think that way, Hermione. Stay on task. We don't even know if Dumbledore's wands the Elder Wand of legend.*

"Right." She nodded, smiling shakily. "You're right, of course."

"I wish you two would stop doing that," Ron said, with a long-suffering air. "It gives me the heebie geebies."

Ignoring him, Hermione looked at Harry, understanding dawning. "Harry, when we were at Malfoy Manor, you fought with Draco and overpowered him, didn't you?"

Harry's eyes widened. "I did!" He blinked. "I don't believe it...I actually took his wand!" He left the room, and returned shortly with the wand in question. "If the entail follows the logical course, then technically the ownership of the wand would go to me."

Severus met Hermione's eyes. "So Draco defeated Dumbledore, and you subsequently defeated Draco. It seems you are the true master of the Elder Wand, Potter."

Ron gave his friend a pat on the back. "There you are, Harry. You've already got an invisibility cloak, and now you have the wand." Dryly, he added, "All we have to do is conjure up the stone and you'll be a one-man army against You-Know-Who."

"As illuminating as this conversation is, I think you're all missing the point," Luna said suddenly, cutting through the chatter like a knife through butter.

Hermione looked into the expectant faces in the room. "Severus and I shared a dream about Regulus Black and Luna. It turns out Luna experienced the same dream. Reg told us all that Beedle the Bard was a singer. He said, 'The objects merely represent the voice'.

"All of Beedle the Bard's stories would have originally been sung. A Bard is *asinger* of stories. Music is one of the most powerful magical carriers known to mankind. Didn't Professor Dumbledore say that?"

"A magic far beyond all we do here," Severus mused. "I must have heard the old man say that a hundred times."

Hermione shook her head in frustration. Something danced just outside her comprehension, and it was driving her mad. "It's like what we're supposed to do is just on the tip of my tongue. The wisest brother chose to hide from death. Where no one could..." she stopped and grew so still her mother looked at her in alarm.

"Hermione, darling? Are you alright..."

An idea, mad and unthinkable, blazed like a *Lumos* into her mind, illuminating the darkness and confusion with sudden clarity. It was completely insane, but..."Could it be that simple?" Hermione muttered to herself, oblivious to her mother's concern. "Have we had the power to defeat him all the time?"

Filled with power, Hermione started gasping, as if she'd been running. Her hair crackled with a corona of magic and excitement. Then tears spilled from her eyes, and she started laughing and crying at the same time. She felt feverish and dizzy.

Confused, Severus grasped her hand. "Lass, what is it?"

She could feel his apprehension and painful hope. "Sorry, love, but I understand what Reg was trying to tell us," she whispered. She snatched up the Deathly Hallows symbol Luna had drawn. The parchment fluttered in her trembling hand. "At least, I think so. Oh, but it's mad! Well, it sounds mad to me, but I know what to do. Why didn't I think of this before? All the time it's been right under our noses..."

"Hermione," Severus entreated, alarmed and thrilled by the wild, escalating euphoria of her thoughts. "Tell me. I don't understand yet. *Tell us all!*"

When she explained, no one spoke. It took her three tries to get the wand movements correct, but when she succeeded, the resulting mayhem was enough to warrant an Order meeting to be called immediately. Patronuses were dispatched to the Order with urgent messages to come at once. It was a matter of moments until the Lupins and Kingsley Shacklebolt arrived, followed shortly by Molly and Arthur Weasley.

Everyone sat patiently while Hermione explained the story of the Deathly Hallows. "The actual items were legendary. For all we know, they actually do exist, but that's not the point of the story. Beetle the Bard was a singer, and his magic came from music."

"Perhaps you should show them," Luna said. "They will think you're a bit deranged otherwise, Hermione."

Severus had to bite back a laugh; the congregation did look perturbed. "It will make more sense if you allow one of us to take you with us."

"Take us with you? Where are we going?" asked Lupin warily.

Hermione smiled. "Where no one can find us."

"I'll do it, Hermone," Tonks volunteered. She stopped her husband's protests. "Hell, I'm ready to go to Bora Bora if it means we can end this." She held out her hand to Hermione, her intelligent eyes flashing. "Go on then. I'm trusting you. Show me this secret weapon of ours."

Gratefully, Hermione took her hand. "Thank you, Tonks." She stopped for a second to gather her thoughts, then softly sang under her breath; *Lay me low, lay where no one can see me, where no one can find me, where no one can hurt me...*

As she sang, she deliberately etched the sign of the Deathly Hallows into the air, and magic shimmered around her. There was a soft *POP!*, a rush of air and a sudden, brief chill, as if she'd just stepped under a shower of icy water.

Looking around wildly, Tonks barked a sudden curse. "What the hell is going on?" she demanded thunderously. Her hand was like an iron band around Hermione's wrist.

Hermione sighed in relief. It had been terrifying and thrilling the first time she and Severus had passed through the magical veil. Now, knowing they were able to do it effortlessly gave her a feeling of triumph she hadn't felt in a long, long time.

She and Tonks were in a ghostly, sepia-toned landscape of desert...or rather, they could see the desert, just as they could also see the kitchen of Shell Cottage superimposed against it. Between them was a soft, filmy veil of magical energy that hummed and shimmered hypnotically.

There was a feeling of tranquility, but also of anticipation. The very air around them shimmered with *waiting, waiting...* Every time Hermione came, she felt that same sense that something, or someone, was expected, but it wasn't her.

"Merlin, Hermione," Tonks whispered, awestruck, looking around. "Where are we?"

Hermione couldn't prevent the foolishly happy smile from dancing on her lips. "We're nowhere. We're not in the world, we're not dead; we're in between. And while we're here, we can't be seen, we can't be found, and we can't be hurt. We are in the Deathly Hallows."

# Thirty Six: Will Death Tremble To Take Us?

Chapter 37 of 39

Tonight they will come...

Many thanks are due to all of you who have waited so patiently for me to get on with it! This was the chapter that held me up for such a long time - almost a year, to be specific. Thank you, *stgulik*, for all the hard work of getting this battle-ready.

Folks, we are nearing the end. After this chapter, there are two more and an Epilogue. So after almost three years (roughly the time this story spans), Lay Me Low will be completed.

Please note that this chapter contains explicit and sometimes gory violence. Well, there's a war on, you know!

Now - The Battle!

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*We are here to kill war... We are here to laugh at the odds and live our lives so well that Death will tremble to take us..* Charles Bukowski

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*Sinners, monks and thieves all share the air we breathe;*

*Smoke, swords and fire; brave man's true desire;*

*For free men must fight tonight all in the glory of war...*

*With steel, dirt and sand, we all have a stake in the land;*

*Tonight they will come...*

*Blood rivers flowing, men die without knowing, we fight as legions against a crown of treason...*

*For many will not see morning sun rising, flags on the horizon,*

*Led by the arrows, then release the dragon,*

*Thus begins the battle...*

---

Tonks stared at Hermione. Her hair had changed from purple to alarmed, agitated red. "How in Merlin's name can we be 'in' the Deathly Hallows?"

Hermione answered, "The 'Hallows' is just a metaphor. The three items - the wand, the stone, the cloak, were symbolic. Beedle The Bard found the true means of hiding from death, but he hid the secret in a story." She paused. They were guessing at this point, but she and Severus agreed it 'felt' right, as if the spell itself were guiding them.

"Beedle was a singer of tales and legends; and somewhere along the line he found this gateway between life and death. Music is a powerful carrier of magic; it could have been accidental, who knows? In any case, he was smart enough to realise what he'd stumbled upon, and practical enough to know how dangerous it could be in the wrong hands."

The Auror nodded. "If you had discovered such incredible power, would you give just anyone the knowledge of how to use it?"

"Exactly. If I were to guess, I would say that Death in the story was played by none other than Beedle himself. He sold the Peverell Brothers the idea of the Deathly Hallows, in the guise of the three items." She felt her stomach flutter; she was still thrilled and terrified by what they had learned.

"But he didn't cheat them; he gave them the knowledge, you see, if they were smart enough." She smiled. "But only the youngest brother, the one who chose to hide from death, was clever enough to figure it out."

Tonks fixed her with a steady, unblinking eye. "And how did you 'figure it out'?"

Hermione's smile of pleasure faded somewhat. "I didn't. Severus was brought here when he died." She explained their amazing spiritual and mental link, and how the song Severus had taught her, coupled with Luna's clues and their dreams, had helped her to reach the conclusion. Tonks listened in rapt fascination, even as she took in the eerie, barren landscape just beyond the corridor.

"So the Deathly Hallows themselves don't really exist?"

Hermione paused. "Well, here is the tricky part. They *do* exist, but they're just magical devices. Personally, I think the brothers used them as a means to further their own desires and needs. But they weren't the catalyst for the spell, and they weren't the Hallows themselves. They were just the symbols of it." She brandished her wand. "That's why wandless, wordless magic is considered the peak of a witch or wizard's power. Wizarding folk need tangible objects to concentrate their magic; wands, crystal balls, cauldrons, brooms. We can relate to the three objects because we prefer *using* objects."

"I see what you mean, but this? This, whatever, wherever it is," replied Tonks, looking around the strange, un-place, "is hard to get my head around."

"I know. It's vast, but at the same time it's claustrophobic. It feels warm, but I want to shiver."

Tonks frowned. "Can you hear that?"

Hermione nodded. The soft, rushing sound carried with it discernible noises. She fancied she heard a dog bark, a child's shrill laughter, a voice singing a song she thought she should know. "Yes. We don't know exactly what it is, but..."

"It sounds so... disturbing," Tonks interrupted, clearly frustrated. "It's giving me the willies, but I also feel left out, like I want to join them."

"That feeling gets more intense the longer you stay," Hermione replied, deliberately blocking the sounds from her mind. "You start hearing voices you recognise. You even fancy they're calling your name. Who knows?" she shrugged. "Maybe they are."

Tonks continued to investigate the terrain, her usually comical face sober. "And why a desert? I mean, if that..." she pointed toward the figures in the cottage, "...is our reality, then what is this?" She gestured out to the endless wasteland, beyond the narrow corridor in which they stood.

Uncomfortably, Hermione replied, "When I killed Dumbledore, my soul was split. Severus brought me here to help me to become whole again." She frowned. "It didn't look like this at that time. We started sharing dreams of this landscape shortly before Severus was killed. This is where he came."

"He said he met an old friend here...Regulus Black."

Tonks' eyes widened. "Blimey! Reg Black. Now that's a name I haven't heard in a long time. He was my cousin, you know." She sighed wistfully. "Such a bloody waste. He was the most handsome wizard I think I've ever seen. Such a bloody waste," she repeated. "And Snape saw him here?"

Hermione nodded. "Reg Black greeted him when he arrived."

Tonks smiled. "They were always thick, Snape and Reg. There was a time when I thought..." Tonks stopped, as if she suddenly remembered herself. "Well, Reg always sort of hero-worshipped Severus."

"Yes, well, in any case, Severus believes it's the land of the dead. I don't know the significance of the landscape, except that in most cultures a desert represents barren, lifeless emptiness." Hermione shivered, thinking of Severus trapped here, confused and fearful, until Reg appeared. "All I know is that it's a place I don't want to go." Death, it seemed, was patient, but seductive. Death expected its due.

Tonks looked into the endless sea of sun-baked sand and shuddered. "Snap. Whatever it is, I'm not in any hurry to hang around and find out more about it."

They turned away from the emptiness and its mesmerising voices, and watched the tableau in Shell Cottage with rapt fascination. The figures were clear, but hazy, as if viewed from behind a scrim. "Why are they moving so slowly?" Tonks asked. "It's like they've been hit with a Time Freezing Spell."

"They haven't been," replied Hermione. "The only conclusion we can come up with is that time means something quite different here. It's less... significant, I suppose." She gestured toward the cottage. "To them, we'll only be gone for a minute or so."

Tonks turned back to Hermione. Briskly, she said, "Alright, it's incredible, I grant you, but how do we use it? It's all well and good to hide from You-Know-Who, but sooner or later we'll have to come out of hiding."

"True, but you came here with me. Try to go back...without me."

The Auror shot her a suspicious look as she drew her wand. *Finite Incantatum!* Nothing happened. She tried several spell-cancelling incantations, some of which Hermione had never heard. Tonks stared at her with stunned comprehension.

"If you bring someone here, only you can take them back?" She whistled, impressed. "What if I hear the incantation and imitate it?"

"It doesn't matter. The spell only works for the caster."

"If I Imperuse you or incapacitate ..."

"I must return you of my own free will. And if you kill me, you lose your only chance to go back. We've tried all sorts of variations."

Tonks gasped in understanding. She spluttered, "But that means...You-Know-Who could never...someone could take him here and leave him!"

Hermione nodded grimly. "And someone's going to." Taking Tonks' hand, she silently canceled the spell. She felt a slight disorientation, as if she'd stood up too quickly, and her eardrums popped as they returned to Shell Cottage again. In a rush of time, space and energy, the two worlds converged into a great, flashing kaleidoscope of sight and sound that left Hermione a little woozy. She hoped that would pass as she grew accustomed to the spell.

Tonks fell against her drunkenly as their friends surrounded them, all talking at once. While they'd been gone, Severus had explained what was happening. That was the major drawback, as far as they were concerned; when one of them was in the Between world, their link was severed. Now, back in his world where she belonged, Hermione's mind was flooded with agitation and relief that she had returned.

"How long were we gone?" Tonks demanded. She looked flushed and bewildered.

"About thirty seconds," he replied.

Tonks snorted, incredulous. "That's impossible!" she scoffed. "It was more like ten minutes!"

"And now you see the implications of this spell. We can move faster, cover greater distances...literally stop time if necessary. We can push a person out of the line of an Unforgivable..."

"Or push You-Know-Who straight into the path of one!" Arthur Weasley said, understanding dawning in his homely, careworn face. He looked at Severus, awestruck. "This is the most astounding magic I have ever seen."

"I have a question."

Everyone turned at the sound of Harry Potter's voice. He walked into the centre of the group, beside Severus and Hermione. To Hermione, he had changed so much in the past few hours it was like looking at a different Harry Potter entirely. Then again, she thought ruefully, they had all been forced to change or die. In Harry's case, he looked like a man who had accepted both.

"If I could somehow take You-Know-Who into this other 'place' with me, could we go beyond?" He paused. "Could I take him into the land of the dead?"

The room was silent. Finally, Severus answered. "I see no reason why you could not pierce that veil, but I can't guarantee you would return, either. When we enter the Hallows realm, we're merely stalling, asking Death to wait. He will not wait indefinitely."

Harry looked thoughtful. "Then we have to make sure I can get to You-Know-Who," he said. "If we can incapacitate his army until they are broken enough to no longer be a threat once he's gone, I can get within touching distance. If you teach me the spell, I can take him out once and for all."

The air in the room seemed to grow heavier. Quietly, Severus replied, "So be it." He and Harry looked at one another in silent, grim respect, and Hermione's heart tripped in her chest. She was looking at a martyr, and the realisation filled her with a strangely sad pride. *He's ready to die, Severus. Oh gods, he's ready.*

*I know lass. And if that is how it must be, at least we can make sure it is not in vain.*

Lupin whispered, "Well, I'll not deny this comes as a bit of a shock."

"It's bloody brilliant, Hermione," Ron said, awed by his friend. "Scary as hell, but brilliant." A slow grin split his face. "I've got a good feeling about this. I think we're going to win."

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Throughout the next few days, the wheels were set in motion. Hermione, with her endless lists and notes, was in her element. Severus looked on approvingly; after months of hopelessness and frustration, it felt incredibly satisfying to actually be able to *do* something. When Hermione Granger-Snape started making notes, it meant she was getting back to normal.

The Order's underground system of communication was contacted. Soon, a steady stream of trusted advisors and Order members paraded through Shell Cottage from dawn to dusk. Martin and Jean Granger, along with Dobby, kept the troops fed and watered. Key people were taught the Deathly Hallows spell. Not everyone could perform it, though; magical ability did not seem to be a factor...intent, however, was an important one. Luna, Molly, Arthur and Fleur, for instance, accomplished it on their first try. It took Harry, Neville, Lupin and the Weasley twins several tries to get the wand movements correct, but they eventually got it in the end. And there were others like Ron, Kingsley Shacklebolt and Tonks, who could not do it at all.

One evening, Neville and Luna asked Severus and Harry to join them outside. They were each carrying a small bag. "We're going back to Hogwarts. We thought we'd leave when it got dark," said Luna.

"Good," Severus replied, forcing himself to sound confident. He refused to repeat all of the instructions again. These were no longer feckless children to badger and intimidate. These were warriors, and they were slipping into the dark heart of the enemy come nightfall. "Try to get word to Professor McGonagall as soon as you can, and tell her we are on the way. I can't tell you when the actual battle will begin, but..." he trailed off, and Longbottom nodded.

"Naturally, sir. We'll contact Aberforth Dumbledore as well; from what I understand he's been helping the DA with food, nursing and the like." He looked at Severus with eyes that were fearful, but determined. "Don't worry sir. We'll make sure the castle is ready when they come."

"If you are captured again," said Severus, "remember this, if you remember nothing else. No matter what you say or do, they will kill you. This isn't the time for Gryffindor posturing. Lie, misdirect, taunt, spit in their faces. In the end, give them nothing."

"We know, Professor," Luna said, and she squared her small shoulders. "Sometimes people have to die for nothing."

"But you'll forgive me if I try to take as many as I can with me when I go," added Longbottom grimly.

Severus shook his hand, studying the boy he'd once dismissed as less than useless. In his place, he saw a man, ready to fight. "Mr. Longbottom, I have no doubt you will keep your head, even while others around you are losing theirs."

Luna smiled up at the younger man. "Neville will be known throughout our world as one of the heroes of the war, sir. Just like you."

Severus shifted uncomfortably. "I have no wish to be remembered as a hero, Miss Lovegood. I only wish to survive."

Luna answered, "You've already done that, sir. Good luck." As Harry and Neville said their goodbyes, she rose on tiptoe and swiftly kissed Severus' cheek. She turned to Neville, whose eyes were already scanning the horizon, restless and wary. "I'm ready when you are," she announced. He nodded, and took her hand. As they walked into the night to prepare themselves for Apparation, she called over her shoulder, "Good luck, Harry. We'll see you at Hogwarts."

The two men were silent as they watched them Apparate away. Quietly, Harry said, "Sometimes I think Luna is the only sane person in Wizarding Britain."

Severus laughed, and Harry joined him. The two former enemies laughed so hard and long, tears spurted from their eyes. "You know, I don't think I've ever heard you laugh before," Harry said, wiping his eyes.

"I think it may be more hysteria than actual humour." Severus sighed, feeling a little giddy, and with that giddiness came a feeling of peace. He had provided Neville and Luna with every tool at his disposal; they were as armed for battle as he could ever make them.

A calm, relaxed silence fell between the two men, and they started back for the cottage. As they walked, Harry asked quietly, "Did it hurt?"

Severus knew without asking what Harry meant, and he shook his head. "I really didn't feel anything."

Harry nodded, and swallowed. "Were you...were you afraid?"

For a moment, neither spoke. Severus slowed his pace, and answered, "Of course I was afraid. I've been afraid for most of my life. But dying wasn't the frightening part. My fear was for Hermione. She's made so many sacrifices for us, for *me*. Her life was in constant danger, because of me. At first, I tried in every way to discourage her, but she held on until I couldn't imagine life without her."

Harry smiled. "She's good at that. Hermione's the most protective person I know."

Severus closed his eyes, picturing his wife. "When Dumbledore informed me of his master plan, I knew we would be marked for death. I had pledged to myself that, should the worst come, I would do the deed, rather than let the Death Eaters defile her. I would then turn my wand on myself."

It was Harry's turn to look surprised. Severus shook his head. "I had caused the death of your mother. I couldn't let him..." he took a deep breath. "No. Not my Hermione."

At the cottage door, Severus stopped, his hand on the latch. "I won't tell you to not be afraid. Your fear will keep the blade of your fighting edge sharp. I will tell you not to give into your fears." He allowed himself a smirk. "I'd like to think I gave you the best training possible in Defense Against the Dark Arts. And Dumbledore's Army filled in the blanks."

He turned the latch, but as he stepped over the threshold, he felt the boy's hand on his arm. Harry looked sad, but resigned. "You taught me a lot, Prof...sorry, Severus. More than I was once willing to admit. Thank you." A steely calm washed over his face, and Severus knew he was looking into the face of a man who had left boyhood behind forever. "I'm ready to do this. If we can break the back of the Death Eater army, I can get to him."

"Don't underestimate him..."

"We have the Deathly Hallows. He's just one wizard, a powerful one, but just one. Get me in his sights. Help me to finish this. And if I have to go with him, well," Harry shrugged. "I've been marked for death since I was an infant. I'd like to think He would welcome me as a friend."

---

A mist hung in the waning light, casting the world in tones of sepia, grey, black and white. Atop a knoll that sat at the very boundary of the Forbidden Forest, Severus watched as Voldemort's army marched toward Hogwarts, a grim, silent procession. Only their motion gave them away, swirling the mists around them, telegraphing numbers and positions and strength.

It was a mighty army, and one that even now stood a chance of winning, but Severus no longer thought about it in those terms. It was, as they say, in the lap of the gods. He had prepared his fighters to the best of his ability. He had drilled defense tactics, he had brewed healing potions. He had made portkeys and rehearsed strategies. He had planned and plotted, schemed and misdirected. He had lied when it was advantageous to do so, and told the truth when absolutely necessary. In short, he had done everything he could to level the odds.

He thought of his wife, and closed his eyes, his heart full of gratitude and love. She was inside Hogwarts, standing with Harry Potter, waiting for the moment when they



would end this war once and for all. By this time tomorrow it would be over. The eerie calm was like being adrift on a still, quiet pond.

He felt Hermione's presence within his soul, and like photographs, he viewed all the moments of their amazing life together. Finding and comforting him at Grimmauld place... taking him to task for tangling her hair into spellknots... the night he poured out his heart to her, only to have her fill it back up again with love.

Then there was the night she'd nearly been killed at the Department of Mysteries, and how he'd literally held her body together while Poppy frantically chanted her healing spells. And the day they took one another's hands in the burned out shell of her parents' house, and pledged their hearts, and their strength...their bond stronger than the most powerful enchantment.

He thought of the first time they kissed; their quaint wedding at Gretna Green. And, oh, that first, intoxicating night they made love. His bride, his virgin bride, so eager for him...Severus Snape, the ugliest and most despised of men, ultimately healed and made beautiful by his wife's love.

There was one memory his mind churned over and over: that awful night, when she stepped forward to finish the job he could not, splitting her soul between life and death. Their perilous trip from Between, and back to life, had changed them both forever. Had they known then exactly what that Between world was, would lives have been spared? Would this battle even be necessary, if they had discovered that the true Deathly Hallows had been in their grasp from the moment he learned to sing a folk song his Muggle father had liked?

*Even a time-turner cannot truly change the past. It can only make it stray from its path for awhile*Dumbledore had said those words to him, the night Lily Potter died.*We all have our destinies; the only thing we can do is live them.*

Hermione. *For love.* His battle cry, his lullaby. He thought of the angry, bitter man that had taken the Dark Mark on that hot summer night, and all the heartache and anguish that followed it. All of it was wiped clean now. Life was sweet, so very, very sweet. He wanted nothing more than to emerge from this night alive, with his brilliant, courageous wife by his side. But he had faced death before, and wasn't afraid of him. As Harry had said, he knew Death would welcome him as a friend.

Surrounding him on the knoll were hundreds, perhaps thousands of wizards and witches, silent and waiting. Many were ordinary Wizarding folk: housewitches, farmers and professionals, simple folk and highborn, Muggleborn and Pureblood. Most were British, but a large contingent represented the Continent. While he and Hermione had raised every smokescreen possible to hide the Order's activities, the Order was busy pulling together every man and woman in every walk of life they could find and recruit to their cause. Here and there was the restless stamp of a centaur's hooves, the soft rumble of Thestrals, the occasional sniff.

Their collective breathing sounded like the rush of a strong, cleansing breeze. Up on the knoll, their task was to disorientate the great beast of an army below, to unsettle it. They were here to divide and conquer, to feed on the beast's arrogance and fear and hatred. Down below, Tom Riddle and his Death Eaters, along with every vile creature that is attracted to his brand of darkness, were moving inexorably closer to Hogwarts.

The castle looked as quiet and unsuspecting as a slumbering babe, but even from here, Severus could feel the hum, like a beehive, thrumming from within. The magic emanating from the sacred walls of the school was powerful enough that even Riddle could feel it, if he only knew how to recognise it.

Thank Merlin he could not, and would not.

A warm hand fell on his shoulder, and Severus turned to the careworn, yet intense face of Remus Lupin. "You've done all you can," he said, his voice little more than a low hum. "Thank you."

Severus nodded; he knew that many would die today, and he whispered to them all, "My back to yours."

"My back to yours," replied the soft echo of a thousand whispers, like a litany of hope. The army of darkness below heard the sound, but to them, it was an ill wind, blowing discord through their ranks, making them restless, uneasy; Severus could see it in the way the bodies ebbed and flowed, moving constantly. Those on the knoll were as still as statues.

*Let tonight finish it. Let me get Harry Potter close enough to take the Dark Lord into hell*Severus prayed. *And let us fight so that Death will tremble to take us.*

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When Hermione and Harry joined the students and faculty in the castle, Minerva McGonagall had burst into tears and apologised to Hermione for her unconscionable behaviour before the Snapes had departed Hogwarts. Hugging her once-star pupil to her breast, she vehemently declared to the tattered remnants of Dumbledore's Army that anyone who even thought of harming Hermione Granger-Snape would have to answer to her. Ginny had been the hardest to convince, and her granite-like stare spoke of an inner bitterness that would not be quickly soothed.

All too soon, a loud alarm sounded, calling all the students to the Great Hall.

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Suddenly, within his soul, he heard Hermione's voice, urgent and excited.*Severus! The Carrows have been disarmed! The castle is secured within. We're ready!*

Almost the moment the words faded away, he saw a minute spark of light arc across the ward boundaries of the castle, like a flash of heat lightening. There was a shimmer in the air above the school, and Severus nodded approvingly. Minerva, as acting Head, had invoked the castle defenses and reinforced the wards. Next, he knew, she would cast the *Piertotum Locomotor* spell, which brought all the stone sentries to life. They would be a stalwart first defense against anyone; theirs was an ancient, strong magic. Hogwarts was in full battle-ready mode.

The first attack came just as night fell. Severus sneered contemptuously; gods, Riddle could be predictable. The hexes strafed the walls like machine-gun fire he'd seen in Muggle films. It was a barrage of light and noise, but no real damage was done. Within the walls, it would sound like the end of the world, loud and frightening. The integrity of the wards would eventually weaken, but by then, he hoped to have broken Riddle's army. He hoped.

He hoped.

---

When the first explosion hit the reinforced wards, Hermione felt as if her internal organs were being pulverised inside her body. The sheer impact of bending physical law with magical intent was overwhelming, and the cry within the walls spread over the castle, enveloping every man, woman and child in a miasma of fear. If battering at the wards filled them with such panic, what would happen if the wards fell?

"Courage!" shouted Minerva McGonagall. "You aren't afraid of a few fireworks, are you? The wards can take quite a few pops and bangs, I can assure you. Voldemort is just cocking a snook at us!"

Ron turned to Hermione, his expression baffled. "Cocking a wha...?"

In spite of her fear, Hermione laughed. Trust Ron Weasley to make her laugh in the middle of a war. "It means he's thumbing his nose at us, Ronald."

"Oh. Well, why didn't she say so?" A look of determination solidified in his smile. "Well then, I say we cock one back at him, eh?"

---

Wandfire battered relentlessly at the magical dome blanketing Hogwarts, throwing out sparks and percussive booms, but it was all thunder and light; nothing penetrated it. Beside Severus, Kingsley Shacklebolt rumbled, "It's a pretty impressive display."

*And a futile one, I hope.*Severus thought grimly. "Hold your position," he intoned, feeling the surge of adrenaline in each and every magical being waiting with him on the

knoll. "Patience. Courage. This is noise; it's meant to confuse and break us. It's all about instilling fear. Save your energy for the real attack."

A second wave of hex-fire blasted at the wards, skidding over the surface like rocks over a still pond. Severus could see the ripples undulating across the warded barrier, but it held. *It is now or never, then.* He raised his wand like a bandmaster's baton. "Now! Sound!" Severus hissed, and the army behind him hissed a reply into the air. The message had been carefully rehearsed; their pronunciation and diction taught to them by none other than Harry Potter himself. For their message to Tom Riddle was in Parseltongue.

The sounds slid over their ears, slick and unctuous, as the eerie words rolled over the knoll:

*You are finished, Tom Riddle. You and your kind are done. I am coming for you.*

The lisping, hissing battle cry washed over Voldemort's army like a wave, disorientating the columns, confusing them.

Voldemort turned, and the look of unholy triumph in his face changed to angry bafflement. Severus allowed himself a smile. Like a serpent scenting the air, the Dark Lord peered into the mist, and Severus knew what he saw. Absolutely nothing. No witches nor wizards nor magical creatures of any kind; just a swirling mist that rolled over his troops, filling them with uncertainty and tension.

"This will give us an advantage of perhaps no more than five or ten minutes," Severus had told this band of warriors the previous night, "but those minutes could win this war."

Raising her glass, Tonks had toasted Severus. "Here's to the longest ten minutes of our lives." As one, the group raised theirs in solemn agreement.

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While they waited for the Death Eaters to tire themselves, battering senselessly against the wards, from above, a sudden chill descended, filling the night with fear and panic. Severus didn't have to look up to see the Dementors bearing down on them. Of course, they would be on the front line, sucking the courage and hope from every breast, leaving numb desolation in their wake. Around him, he could hear his army shifting, feeling the effects of the Dementors' cold breath.

"My back to yours," he shouted, and many replied, but just as many turned to him with blank, fear-shocked faces. Severus felt his own mind cloud and turn dark.

*Dementors, lass. There are so many of them...*

*Courage, my love! Think of all the happiness we've shared!*

He tried, but all he could see was the anguish, the hurt, and Hermione's voice faded as he relived the most awful moments of his life. Hearing that his mother had died two months before he arrived home, coming home to face his father, drunk and already shackled up in Eileen's house with that foul slut from the mill. Finding Lily, lying dead in a pool of her own filth, and Dumbledore making him relive the moment over and over in a Pensieve to remind him of the catastrophe he had caused. Reg, dying alone and in agony in a cave... Charity looking into his eyes as she died... Hermione, dying at his feet in Malfoy Manor, all but twisted in half, as he begged for forgiveness that would never come... All those who cared about him, suffering because of him. He didn't deserve to live...

Severus' vision faded, and he sank to his knees.

*"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"*

The spell burst forth from a hundred throats, and the light of a hundred Patronuses lit the ground as if it were day. Brilliant jets of light streaked across the sky, as broom riders swooped overhead. From all over the world, the best and bravest had volunteered for this prong of the attack, and they rode as one great team, graceful and sure of victory. Dementors were blown away, unable to withstand the onslaught of energy, and the riders rained down chaos from the sky, taunting the Death Eaters with all the arrogance and pride only a squadron of professional Quidditch players could produce.

Severus felt warmth and sensibility flow back into his mind, and he rose to his feet, cursing himself for his weakness *'m alright, Lass.* The sweet feeling of her relief stole into his bones, and he growled to himself, "You'd think I'd never seen a fucking Dementor before. Merlin's tits, I'm the ruddy Wizard-who-lived! Start flippin' well acting like it, sunshine!"

Several around him, Lupin included, laughed, and he knew they were laughing to shake off the Dementors' geas, to prove to themselves they were alright. Severus laughed with them. In the midst of their laughter, he felt his courage return, and fear settled back into a place he could control.

A quick glance around told him that the others had recovered as well. Good.

It was time.

"For love," he whispered, and closed his eyes, picturing Hermione. "Now!"

In the night, a voice rose in the air like a linnet.

*Lay me low, lay me low, lay me low...*

Another voice joined the first, then another, and another, until the music swelled like a wave.

The Death Eaters turned, frantically trying to locate the sound, their ranks growing restless, pushing and pulling against one another.

Behind Severus, the voices rose, their chant lifting into the night air.

*where no one can see me...*

He joined in, and as one, the great army raised their wands and etched the Hallows sigil: a triangle surrounding a circle divided by a line.

*Where no one can find me, where no one can hurt me...*

The great lumbering beast that was Voldemort's first charge swung round to face them, just as the Hallows were invoked. The entire group disappeared, their bodies winking out of existence like a star from the heavens. As they left their dimension and traveled to the Between world of the Hallows, the Death Eaters' cries of triumph died on their lips. They paused, and looked to their leader in bewilderment.

Voldemort recovered quickly, "Fools!" he hissed. "They have only Disillusioned themselves. Finish them!"

The Death Eaters obediently blasted the knoll on which the army of light had stood. Volley after volley shot through the night air, tearing through leaves and blasting the ground, until dust and smoke enveloped the knoll. Shouts of victory echoed through the Death Eater ranks as they continued to waste their magic strafing the knoll.

"Enough!" Voldemort roared.

Gradually, the attack decreased, until silence fell upon them. When the smoke cleared, the knoll was as empty as before. "The ground should be littered with bodies," a young Death Eater growled, looking around suspiciously. "The cowards have Apparated away!"

From his right, twenty Death Eaters disappeared almost at once. Another ten vanished, and the eerie music they'd heard on the knoll sounded again, as witches and wizards appeared directly in front of them, disarmed them before they could react, and disappeared again. The stunned expression on Lucius Malfoy's face was almost comical, as Severus reached into the physical dimension and pulled his old friend back into the Between world with him.

Voldemort turned quickly around, his fury and confusion stamped on his reptilian face. "No matter," he spat, his mad eyes red with anger. "Send in the..."

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*...giants. Oh, Gods, Hermione! Alert everyone in the castle... Giants, they're...*

"...coming! Giants are heading this way! Get ready!" shouted Hermione.

Half of the Order, including most of the Weasleys and younger members of Dumbledore's Army, were waiting in the courtyard, listening to the approaching sounds of battle. At Hermione's cry, they all backed away from the windows as the second wave of Voldemort's army crested the hill just beyond the gates. Hermione could hear the gasps of panic all around her. "Keep your heads!" she shouted, marshaling all her magical energy.

It was terrifying to see creatures the size of three-story houses trundling toward the school, like living mountains. They were grotesque versions of men: large, misshapen heads, long arms and legs, heaving with rock-like muscles. Massive bare feet with toenails the size of tea trays. Their craggy foreheads jutted out over beady eyes; outcroppings of fleshy noses sat huge above thick, slobbering lips. Each giant carried a club, a lance or a crudely formed mace; they were accompanied by Death Eaters, who battered away at the wards, seeking a weak point.

After finding a vulnerable spot, the huge monsters joined the Death Eaters, throwing their physical strength against the barrier that stood fast between them and the castle. Suddenly, the shield, deteriorated by magic and might, shattered like rotten ice on a lake's surface, and the monsters came to Hogwarts.

Many inside cried out in panic, but those in Dumbledore's Army held their ground with silent resolve. They had been prepared for giants; though Hagrid and his half-brother Grawp had spent months trying to align the giants with the Order, in the end, most had sided with Voldemort, swayed by his promises and lies.

Fighting giants would be difficult; magic literally bounced off most of them, and their sheer size meant they could do an immense amount of damage with little energy spent. Long trip wires had been set; it was hoped once the massive figures fell, it would buy those in the castle a little more time before they got back up again.

The creatures were batting away the stone sentinels like toy soldiers, advancing on the school, making the ground shake beneath their feet. Then, just as they reached the outer wall where the tripping wires lay in wait, the giants stopped, leering grins of anticipation on their faces.

"What are they doing?" said a small, anonymous voice, hysteria rising with each word. "Why have they stopped?"

In reply, there was a rushing, clicking noise, and from behind the giants, thousands of acromantula came swarming over the school like water boiling from a cauldron.

Piercing, hysterical screams could be heard outside, as the children of Aragog attacked and injured the first wave of defenders. Working in pairs, the DA threw shields up over the stronger individuals, allowing their superior spellwork to do greater damage. Hermione and several of the Order rushed the rest into the Great Hall.

The spiders were legion; Hermione had never seen so many in one place. They were huge and terrifying, each as large as a centaur. It took three times the magic to slow them down. They rushed at the last wave of stone soldiers, and simply ran over them. Behind them, Death Eaters waited, and between the spiders, the giants, and the fresh wave of troops, Hermione knew they would not be able to hold their position any longer.

"Now!" she screamed, and shaking hands etched the Deathly Hallows in the air. Trembling voices stuttered the words, and entire ranks of students disappeared in to the Between.

The spiders, smelling blood, rushed headlong into the Great Hall, piling upon one another until the very floor seethed and writhed with them. And still they came, clawing over the tops of one another, until the room was filled with the deafening sound of their long legs and clicking pincers. The walls, the floor and the ceiling became black, writhing surfaces.

"Forgive me, ol' friend," came a deep, sorrowful voice, as the large doors of the Great Hall closed behind them. Hagrid turned to his companions, his expression both sad and angry. "Do wha' ye have to," he rumbled, and looked away.

"Yes, Hagrid, sir," replied Dobby stoutly, his little body quivering with righteous indignation. "They shall not harm Harry Potter's friends! They shall not harm Hogwarts!"

With a thunderous *POP!* hundreds of House-elves Apparated into the Great Hall. These were no longer the sweet-faced, eager-to-please elves who polished the silver goblets and set the tables of Hogwarts. These elves were the misfits, the cast-offs; those who had roamed house-less and family-less in shame and sorrow, until Hogwarts welcomed them into its bosom. Today, they were fierce warriors proud for the opportunity to defend their home, protecting the sanctuary that had taken them in when no other would.

There was a series of bright, unearthly flashes, and the eerie shrieks of roasting, burning, panicking spiders filled the air. Aragog had once cost Rubeus Hagrid his wand, but the half-giant had loved him regardless. His children, however, had been held sway by the promises of the Dark Lord, and waged war on Hagrid's home. For that they would pay the ultimate price. Hagrid was saddened, and wept a little as he left them to their grisly fate, but they had made their choice.

No child of Aragog crawled alive from the Great Hall that day.

---

Voldemort bellowed for his troops to advance to the school, and grimly those still in his thrall pressed on, using giants and werewolves to lead the charge. Severus quickly dispatched McNair and Mulciber into the Between world, their faces still blank and heavy with surprise and incomprehension.

As they gaped in shock, Severus performed what had become procedure for those imprisoning the Death Eaters in the Between: he petrified them, gagged them, bound them with magical ropes and took away their wands. He had to be thorough; some had carried as many as five stashed in undetectable extension-charmed pockets. Each time he discovered one, he thought of Hermione and her wondrous beaded bag, and smiled to himself.

Each time he moved between worlds, he found the same lifeless desert awaiting him, and the same fearful look of those he left behind, unable to return with him. To a man, they looked both terrified and confused. Severus did not want to know what they had seen or heard. They were stacked up like cordwood off to one side, and no matter how many he added to the pile, there always seemed to be room for more. He added his two former 'brothers' to the group, then returned to the battle.

Even knowing that it would not be the easy victory their Lord had promised, the Death Eaters fought on, and Severus tried to ignore the screams of the injured and dying. He had to break the group facing the castle...

Flashes of cursework speared the air like lightning, and a wail of agony to his left almost pierced his eardrum.

"Dora! NO!"

He turned to see Lupin bending over his wife, unmindful of the carnage around him. Nymphadora Lupin's face was covered in blood and crushed inward, like a broken mask, her eyes gazing sightlessly up to the sky. A Death Eater Severus didn't recognise took aim at Lupin's head. With a hissed command, Severus struck out. The man's hand, still clutching his wand, fell to the ground. He screamed, and sank to his knees, grasping his wrist.

Looking up at Severus, grimacing in horrified recognition, he stuttered, "You! Y-you're supposed to be dead!" His eyes rolled in the back of his head, and he collapsed, blood pumping from the stump of his severed wrist.

Severus blocked a curse and *Reducto'd* an advancing Death Eater. Then he turned back to Lupin, who was clutching his fallen wife, calling her name. "Lupin, you cannot help her."

"Dora, oh gods, no..."

Severus yanked hard at Lupin's shirt, trying to pull him away, but the weeping man lashed out, growling like an animal, staring wild-eyed and open-mouthed at his dead wife. Severus hauled Lupin to his feet, tearing the dead woman from his grasp. Together they flashed away, into the Between world. The desert swirled around them, as if agitated by the carnage they had left behind. The abrupt silence made his eardrums ache. Lupin cried out, as if he, too, found the change in atmosphere painful.

Hating himself, Severus drew his hand back and slapped the other man's face. "Pull yourself together, man!"

"You had no right to take me away!"

"You must fight! Do *not* make your infant son an orphan. Stand and fight!"

"That's my wife!" Lupin sobbed, trying to pull from Severus' grasp. "That's my Dora!"

Severus shook him and tried to pierce the wall of grief. "Remus! Stop!"

Lupin stilled, surprised at the sound of his given name uttered by his old nemesis. Severus looked him in the eye to keep his attention. "There will be time to mourn, but that time is not now. There are so many others out there who are alive, and they need us. They need *you*."

Lupin looked over his shoulder into the shadowy world they had left. As if in slow motion, they saw the battle rage on. Nymphadora lay on the ground, her face turned away. Lupin sobbed. "Oh, gods, our boy, Teddy. How am I supposed to face him?"

"By giving him a chance to know his mother through his father...now get back out there and fight!!" he growled. "Avenge her if you must, but stop whining and show some of that Gryffindor courage you're so famous for, wolf!" When he didn't answer, Severus shook him again. "My back to yours, man! Merlin's sake, Lupin, we need you. *I* need you!"

Lupin closed his eyes. He took a deep breath, and Severus imagined he could hear the world take a breath with him. When he opened his eyes, they were darker, more feral, and Severus saw the beast that never strayed far from the man. He wiped his face with the back of one grimy hand, and nodded at Severus. Grimly, he growled, "Alright. I want to finish this. For Nymphadora. And our son." He held out his hand. "My back to yours."

Severus caught it in his and together they rejoined the battle, just as the first cadre of giants breached the courtyard of the castle.

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"Head toward the dungeons! Now!" Professor Flitwick's *Sonus*-enhanced voice boomed forth, and they rushed back inside to the inner stairwell.

Hermione, Molly and Arthur, George and Fred, and Dean Thomas remained, hitting the giants with everything they could, until it became obvious they were doing little damage beyond depleting their own magic. The tripwires stalled them, but not long enough. The giants continued their ceaseless, slow advance, like boulders come alive to pound Hogwarts into the ground. Hermione watched in sickened horror as a giant picked up a fleeing student and flung him against the wall like an insect.

It was in that moment that Hermione realised they would not be able to stop the giants inside the castle. Just as they decided to retreat, she heard the great, leathery flapping of wings.

"Oh, thank Merlin! Charlie!" Molly Weasley cried out. "He did it! Look!"

The unholy screech of dragons filled the air overhead. The Death Eaters looked to the skies in triumph, only to realise these beasts were ridden by the legendary Romanian riders. Charlie Weasley, his long red hair streaming behind like a battle flag, led the charge astride a majestic Norwegian Ridgeback. Hermione jumped as Hagrid bellowed, "Blimey, look! It's Norberta! Charlie's riding my own little Norberta! Oh, look at 'er go!"

The giants looked up in puzzlement, as if spotting a swarm of midges. Charlie swooped in, shouting to his mount, and Norberta screamed in reply. Blood-red fire poured from her throat, and the giant bellowed in agony as his body was engulfed in flames.

It would be the stench of charred flesh that haunted the survivors.

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The night stretched on as one endless parade of skirmishes, attacks and feints. There were fires dotted around the castle. Some were made from dragon fire, others from the spontaneous sparks of magic as hex clashed hex and curse countered curse. The air was thick with smoke and spent spells and the sickly sweet scent of death and destruction.

The giants, the spiders, and the werewolves were all scattered or dead, but the dark army fought on. There were so many; Severus had no idea where the Dark Lord had found these minions, but they were coming on too quickly to carry off to the Hallows one by one. It became a fight of duelists and street fighters, Aurors and thugs.

In order to slow down their weaker opponents or those unable to Apparate, Dumbledore's Army, led by that little Irish madman Seamus Finnegan, had sabotaged several of the gate-bridges to the castle. The wizards on the Knoll were still harrying the Death Eaters from behind; the Order hurled themselves at the enemy from the front.

Severus Disapparated and flew into the courtyard of the castle. *Lass, what is actually going on in the castle?* he asked.

"Snake!" Harry Potter ran toward him. He was covered in dirt and blood, but looked otherwise unharmed. With a wry smile, he said, "I never thought I'd say it, but I'm glad to see you! Are we still winning?"

"We're still keeping them busy, I know that much," Severus replied. "I understand you've had a few fireworks here as well."

Harry shook his head in wonder. "I've never seen anything like it. Never *dreamed* anything like it. Those dragons!" He was breathing hard. "Have you seen him? When can we get to Voldemort..."

There was a sudden, sickening feeling of dread and dismay in Severus' gut. Something horrific was happening. He could taste the slick, metallic fear as it kicked Hermione's heart into a pounding, hell-for-leather gallop. A wild cry rent the air; Harry's eyes rolled back and his body convulsed. He was having a seizure.

Severus caught him as he fell, and hastily took him to the Hallows' Between.

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Within one of the alcoves that led into the main hallway, Hermione stood with several others disarming the latest wave of Death Eaters. Bound and unconscious forms littered the ground; Professor Slughorn began to dispatch them all to a small room doubling as a holding cell.

Hermione tried to catch her breath and focus her attention, but it was hard, so hard. Her magic was still intact, but she could feel it fraying along the edges, as if her internal shields were shredding under the strain. There had not been proper time to recover from the attack at Malfoy Manor, and the fighting was depleting her magic faster than she could replenish it. She wanted to disappear into the Hallows to rest and recuperate; the idea of leaving the Battle, of disappearing into that quiet, still world, was so tempting, but she would not give into it. If she did, it might be too difficult to make herself return.

*Strength, lass. Be strong.* Hermione closed her eyes as a loving wave of magical energy washed over her. Like water in the desert, Severus' powerful magic permeated every pore, every crack, every fissure, strengthening and reviving her.

*Lass, what is actually going on in the castle?* She took a cleansing, healing breath...

Suddenly, from the darkness, there came a deafening hiss that echoed down the hall: a rolling, boiling sound that caused her heart to thud loudly in counterpoint.

Voldemort's familiar Nagini Apparated into their midst, its huge head looming, jaws open, fangs dripping venom. It raced toward Hermione, and she froze, her entire body petrified with fear. Just as she felt the snake's rank breath, Professor McGonagall knocked Hermione out of Nagini's path, and the elderly witch took the killing blow meant for her. Hermione heard the awful punching sound as Nagini's fangs tore into the Professor's throat with the ease of a knife plunging through a ripe melon.

Minerva's wet scream of agony turned Hermione's blood to shards of broken glass. *Reducto!* bellowed Hermione, but the spell bounced off the reptile like a child's empty threat. The monstrous brute turned its huge head toward Hermione, not bothering to unlock its massive jaws, and took most of Minerva's throat and tongue with it. Her pitiful cry choked down to a sickening gurgle, and Professor McGonagall fell, a fountain of her blood painting the serpent red.

Those all around froze, stunned by the sudden attack and the sight of their professor, still twitching in her death throes. As Nagini looked around for a fresh victim, a rage like a tempest blinded Hermione. *It was coming to kill me*, she thought. The Killing Curse was on her lips, and she had already raised her wand when a roar of anger and grief rent the air.

There was a pounding of running feet, and a glint of steel flashed overhead. Hermione instinctively ducked as Neville Longbottom leaped over her with the righteous strength of an avenging angel. The Sword of Gryffindor sang through the air, and Neville struck at the serpent, slicing through muscle and bone. Nagini fell dead, cleaved in two, its body writhing, disembodied mouth still hissing, the jaws snapping futilely.

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"Potter! *Ennervate!*" Severus cried, as the younger man sagged against him. Harry's eyes fluttered open, and he looked at Severus blankly for a second.

"What has happened?" he demanded, as Harry struggled to rise to his feet. He held onto Severus and reeled drunkenly. "Is it the Dark Lord?"

Staring wildly at the incarcerated Death Eaters, Harry shook his head. "It's Nagini. It's dead!"

Severus smiled grimly. "It seems that the Dark Lord is running out of Horcruxes."

From within the Between world, he could not feel Hermione's blind, helpless fear.

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Neville looked up from the dead snake in bewildered agony, the bloodied Sword of Gryffindor still locked in his hands.

"Gods, Neville! You saved my life!" Hermione cried, a sob tearing from her chest. "You and the Professor both saved my life."

He shook his head sorrowfully. "I was too late," he said, plaintively, his eyes bleak. "I saw it coming for you. If I had got here sooner..."

"No. I could have saved us both. I just froze." She tried to calm her thumping heart. Neville's eyes were locked on the still form of Professor McGonagall. "Nagini was coming at me, and Professor McGonagall pushed me out of the way. I panicked. I should have gone into the Between." She looked away, sick with shame. "I found the means for us to escape Death, but when the time came, I froze."

Neville shook his head. "There wasn't time. For either of us."

Hermione smiled tremulously. "You did it, though. Thank you, Neville. You were amazing. A true son of Gryffindor."

Neville slumped, his eyes full of tears. "I guess it isn't about what you're supposed to do, is it? It's about doing what you can to stay alive. It's about..."

He stopped with a gasp, as if surprised, the blood draining from his face. "Neville, what is it?" Hermione asked, thinking stupidly that he must have lost his train of thought. "What's wrong?"

Neville didn't answer, but the shock and sadness fled from his expression, leaving repugnance. From behind, a sickly sweet voice said, "Ooh, ickle Neville! Don't you know you shouldn't play with toys that don't belong to you?"

Hermione whirled around at the hated voice as the gloating, laughing face of Bellatrix Lestrange floated into view. She stopped, and stared hard at Hermione, surprise and uncertainty warring in her face. "You!" she spat. "How can this be?" Her expression changed from shock to deranged pleasure. "Well, well, the little Mudblood whore came back to play with me! How delightful!"

"You leave her alone!" Neville hissed, brandishing the sword, fury and loathing flashing in his eyes. "You think you're so powerful, don't you? You...you're nothing but a great bully!"

Laughter rang through the corridor as Bellatrix advanced on them. "Oh, Neville. We're going to have such fun! Almost as much fun as I had with your parents! Did they ever tell you about the time I...oh, but of course they didn't. I drove them insane, didn't I?"

With a roar of rage, Neville rushed toward her. Bellatrix actually looked startled at his audacity, then with a hissed command a jagged hex leapt from her wand, and Neville instinctively blocked it with the sword. There was a deafening clang as the hex enveloped it in a sickly, piss-yellow light. Like a bolt of lightning, the hex raced down the length of the blade, straight into Neville's arms. He screamed in pain and the impact of the blow drove him backward against Hermione.

He fell right on top of her, a dead weight, knocking her to the ground and sending her wand flying from her hand. "Neville, oh gods..." she whimpered, trying to extricate herself from beneath his inert form. She pushed Neville's body away and scuttled back into the dark alcove, making herself as small as possible.

She heard a sickening crack. "Oh, dear, Madam Snape. I seemed to have broken your wand. *lam* sorry," cooed Bellatrix. "No matter. No need for wands for what I'm going to do to you." She sounded as if she had all the time in the world, and her smile was a hideous, vile thing.

She continued her measured, casual stroll toward the alcove, stepping directly on Professor McGonagall's face. There was a crunching noise as she broke cartilage and bone, and Hermione's stomach churned with fury and terror.

"Do you know why I'm so glad you're not dead? Because I get to kill you all over again. And it's going to be a lot slower and more painful this time."

Her laughter ratcheted through the night like the rasp of a saw, and Hermione had to force herself not to cover her ears. She had to escape, had to stay alive, for Severus, for love...

Summoning the last of her strength, she gathered her magic within. *for love*, she mouthed, and launched herself from her hiding place, pouring every ounce of her hatred and vengeance into this last, only chance...

"*Accio Neville's wand!*" Obediently the wand flew to her. "*Reducto!*" she screamed.

A blistering fire of power sizzled from the wand, and flew toward the Death Eater like Fiendfyre. Still laughing, Bellatrix carelessly batted it away, and knocked Hermione off her feet with a silent spell, leaving her breathless.

*Oh, gods... She had nothing left; her magic was fading. Severus...*

Bellatrix approached her slowly, kicking the wand from her grasp. "Was that *really* the extent of your power, Mudblood?" She leaned down toward Hermione. "I'm going to enjoy this. So very, very much." She stepped back, her mad eyes blazing with reflected fire. "When you arrive in hell, say hello to that dried-up old cunt McGonagall for me. And don't worry; your traitor of a husband won't be lagging far behind you." She raised her wand high above her head, her stance as graceful as a manticore's, and shouted, "*Crucio!*"

The pain seemed to split Hermione in two: blinding, scalding, freezing. Her back arched up until only her shoulders and coccyx were touching the ground. It had sharp corners and jagged ends that stabbed into her with each heartbeat. Her chest was on fire; her internal organs expanded and contracted. She couldn't scream, because her larynx was melting. An invisible spear was thrusting into her sex over and over, traveling higher into her body cavity with each thrust...

She fell back when Bellatrix cancelled the spell and lay gasping, whimpering, unable to think. Bellatrix knelt down beside her, looking at her with curiously dead eyes. "It was never anything personal, you understand. Mudbloods are filth; they pollute our purity." With sincere conviction, she added, "But you made it personal. You stole from me. You humiliated me and tried to undermine me in front of the Dark Lord. You were dead the moment you spread your legs for Severus Snape." Almost tenderly, she brushed Hermione's hair from her face. "You just didn't know it."

Hermione closed her eyes and waited for the end. She was not afraid of death. She had come too close, and death had already rescinded her husband. She could go gladly, knowing what awaited her.

*Severus, I love you.*

Her outstretched arm brushed against something cold and hard, and her fingers wrapped around the hilt of Godric Gryffindor's true sword. The sword felt light, playful in her hand ...

Bellatrix was saying, "I do hope you enjoyed fucking him, because I'm going to send him to hell with his cock and balls stuffed in his mouth as little something to remember me by."

... and even as Bellatrix moved to stand, Hermione screamed, "For love!" With all her might, she thrust the sword into the dark witch's side. The blade drove through skin and bone, and power reverberated up her own trembling arm. She pushed the sword in deeper, simply because she could.

Bellatrix screamed in surprise and anger, and tried to rise, tried to roll away. Grasping the hilt with both hands, Hermione pulled the blade toward herself, carving her enemy open from spine to navel like a rancid carcass. She wrenched the sword out again, blood and entrails spilling in its wake.

Bellatrix shrieked, frantically trying to hold her mangled body together. Her face was a rictus of malignant hate and pain, her howl of agony unworldly, unholy. It seemed to rise from her opened body, like the rank stench of her mutilated bowels. Blood and bile poured from the wound, and the scream died away. Bellatrix trembled for what seemed an eternity, then finally fell still, her last breath misting the air with black blood.

Hermione turned away from the dead witch and retched until spots appeared before her eyes, until she was so weak, she could not raise her head. Cool hands pulled her hair so it wouldn't trail in the pool of sick, and gently pulled her upright. The sweetest, most beautiful voice in the world crooned, "Hermione! My brave girl. My beautiful, brave girl."

Hermione stared up at Severus Snape, and her eyes filled. His hair was tangled and streaked with dirt; there were holes in his robes, and a cut on his arm from a slicing hex. His neck had bruises and the skin above his left eyebrow was split and encrusted with dried blood.

He was so beautiful.

Sobbing, Hermione threw her arms around her husband, unmindful of the blood and mess that covered her robe. "Severus! Oh, gods, Severus..."

"Shh. Easy. It's alright."

He quickly cleaned her and removed all traces of Bellatrix Lestrange's grisly demise from her clothing and skin. His magic literally washed over her, removing the Death Eater's taint.

Gathering her into his arms, he whispered, "Potter had some sort of fit. I didn't want the others to see him like that, so I took him into the Between. Had I known..." Adrenaline drained from Hermione, leaving her shaking uncontrollably, even as he petted her. "Shh, my precious girl."

"S-she k-k-killed Professor..."

"I know, lass. And you sent her to hell, where she belongs." His voice was gruff with grim satisfaction. "She'll never hurt you again."

His weary strength and unquenchable resolve went straight to her head like a tonic, enriching her magic and filling her with renewed focus. Her shaking lessened, and she relaxed against him. *That's my girl. Tomorrow, we can mourn for Minerva and the others. But right now, I need your strength. We still have a fight to face.*

Hermione gasped, "But Neville..."

A groan sounded from the floor. Severus released Hermione and knelt beside the boy, who stirred feebly. "Neville!" Hermione cried in relief.

"Wha...?" he slurred, as Severus helped him to sit up. He swayed alarmingly, and Hermione rushed to support him. As he clutched his head, he groaned, "What is Merlin's name just happened?"

"You killed Nagini, Neville!" Hermione began.

"I know that!" he said testily, his expression confused. "I mean, who dropped a boulder on my head?"

Severus pointed to what remained of Bellatrix Lestrange. "She did."

Neville stared at the mess on the floor, then shook his head. "Oh, I remember now. Well, by the gods, it looks like she won't be doing it again."

Severus helped Neville to his feet. "Come on, up you get." Flanking him on either side, they headed toward the Infirmary. "We'll have you looked over by the mediwitches."

Shuffling between them, Neville replied, "Good. Then we can finish this."

Over Neville's head, Hermione caught Severus' eye. "Yes. We can finish this," she echoed.

They paused only long enough for Hermione to wipe the bloodied blade clean on Bellatrix Lestrange's tattered black robe.

# Thirty Seven: Oh, Death

Chapter 38 of 39

Won't you spare me over til another year?

*Well, here we are at the penultimate chapter of this story. All that is left is Chapter 38, and the Epilogue. Thank you for your patience and willingness to travel this road with me and Severus and Hermione.*

*For stgulik, and K, who stand at either end of this journey with me.*

*All characters belong to JK Rowling and Warner Brothers. I make no money from this fic.*

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*The world without spirit is a wasteland. People have the notion of saving the world by shifting things around, changing the rules, and who's on top, and so forth. No, no! Any world is a valid world if it's alive. The thing to do is to bring life to it, and the only way to do that is to find in your own case where the life is and become alive yourself.*

-Joseph Campbell

---

*O, Death. O, Death. Won't you spare me over 'til another year?*

*Well, what is this that I can't see with ice cold hands takin' hold of me?*

*Well I am Death, none can excel, I'll open the door to heaven or hell.*

*'O, Death, someone would pray 'Could you wait to call me another day?'*

*The children prayed, the preacher preached, time and mercy is out of your reach.*

*I'm Death I come, to take the soul, leave the body and leave it cold.*

*To draw the flesh off of the frame, dirt and worm both have a claim.*

*O, Death. O, Death. Won't you spare me over til another year?*

*Oh death how you're treatin' me, you've close my eyes so I can't see.*

*Well you're hurtin' my body, you make me cold, you run my life right outta my soul.*

*Oh Death, please consider my age, please don't take me at this stage.*

*My wealth is all at your command, if you will move your icy hand.*

*Oh the old, the young, the rich or poor; all alike to me, you know.*

*No wealth, no land, no silver no gold, nothing satisfies me but your soul.*

*O, Death. O, Death.*

*Won't you spare me over 'til another year?*

---

The last hour of the battle was nothing short of a bloodbath.

As the fortunes of both sides rose and fell with each passing moment, the Death Eaters threw everything they had at the flagging, exhausted Order. The castle bore the marks of the horrific battle; the courtyard was now a battlefield littered with broken glass and rubble, the flames of dragonfire, the bodies of the fallen.

Many of those who had joined them on the knoll were dead; even Charlie Weasley's dragons could not protect them all from the onslaught of dark witches and wizards and their ilk. The Order was dropping, too exhausted to continue, and when the Death Eaters fell silent, equally depleted, Severus, Remus and Harry spearheaded the herculean effort to get everyone back into the castle. The wards rose again, but he had no idea how long they would hold, or even *if* they would hold.

Hermione was never far from her husband. Together with Dumbledore's Army, they grimly fought back the second wave of Death Eaters along with the broom and dragon riders in the air. They disarmed the enemy, they shielded their allies, they held their dying. As the night turned toward dawn, Man and beast were all exhausted, and the two sides found themselves at an uneasy stalemate.

During a lull in the fighting, those still able to walk searched for the living among the ruins, frantically trying to save every life. Hermione and Severus found Argus Filch buried in a pile of rubble, barely alive. His eyes were bright with fear until he recognised their faces, and he mutely pleaded with them, clearly in agony.

"Hang on, my friend," Severus said, levitating the larger stones from the old Squib's body. As Hermione carefully lifted him out of the wreckage, Filch took what sounded like the first deep breath he'd taken in years.

They gently laid him out on a bed in the hospital and tried to make him comfortable. He looked up at Severus, and tried to speak, but he choked violently, staining his teeth red. Severus laid a hand on the old man's shoulder. "Don't waste your strength, Argus. You need to remain still."

Filch's eyes pleaded with him. "Headmaster..." he rasped, but the effort was too great, and he fell back, his rattling, laboured breathing a terrible thing to hear.

Severus looked deeply into the old man's eyes and put his hand over the old Squib's. "I know. *know*. Thank you for believing in us," he said gently.

Hermione looked down at Filch; his eyes were already clouding. "Thank you, Mr. Filch, for all you've done for Hogwarts. Now rest, because she will have need of you tomorrow."

Filch nodded and closed his eyes, his expression peaceful. He died four breaths later.

The castle reverberated with the sounds of grief and pain. Those not injured or mourning were trying to organise some sort of triage, but in the chaos of the moment, it was almost too overwhelming. Many simply walked around in a daze, speaking in hushed, stunned voices. Others wept quietly, afraid to call attention to themselves. The exhaustion was more magical than physical, and more mental than magical. Those given the task of caring for the injured and dying took Reviving Tonics alongside the fighters.

Hermione's parents had ensconced themselves in the infirmary, where they worked feverishly side by side with witches, wizards and elves. While they could not cast healing spells, their first-aid skills provided excellent backup. Even the ghosts had been called upon to watch over the less critical patients in order to free up hands. The entire castle was in charge of taking care of its defenders, each according to his strengths.

While Hermione paused to speak with her parents, Severus entered the Great Hall. The elves had rid the place of its grisly feast of acromantula; it was now the makeshift morgue. His heart was heavy; students he had taught, colleagues he had worked alongside, even enemies he'd fought; all laid out on the House tables side by side, like pale effigies. Severus' heart bled as he passed face after familiar face: Nymphadora Lupin, with Remus at her side, looking lost and old. Lavender Brown. Colin Creevey. Rory Stone, whom Severus recognised from his own graduating year at Hogwarts. Joe Blankenshop, the Three Broomsticks' bartender. Argus Filch. Witches and wizards long graduated from Hogwarts lay beside students he'd strode past in these halls not two weeks before. So many, and so young.

He passed a group huddled around one body, and the sight of red hair stopped him in his tracks. "Fred... oh Gods, no... FRED!" Molly Weasley moaned, with a sobbing Arthur holding her to his chest. As Severus drew near, he his first thought was how strange it was to see one of the twins lying so very still. His brother George lay beside him, talking to Fred as if he was sure of a response. Harry Potter held the young Ginevra in his arms as she wept and trembled, and Bill held his youngest brother as he cried pitifully. Tiredly, Severus wondered where Charlie was. He had not been seen since the last volley of attack.

The sounds of grief gored Severus' heart. He had led them all into battle with his war cry on their lips. He slowly made his way among the dead, and he made himself speak every name aloud, a sorrowful roll call of familiar names and faces, so his heart would never forget them.

As he walked toward the Head table, Filius Flitwick spied him. "Severus, my dear boy!" he cried, dashing over to his side, his short legs a blur as he waddled across the room. His face was dirty and his hair wild; he had numerous cuts and bruises on his face, but his ferocious fighting spirit was undiminished. Severus took his outstretched hand, his heart beating hard. Tears sprang to his eyes, and he dashed them away.

"Filius, I never dared hope..."

"Minerva told us what happened. All of it," his diminutive colleague said, his grip firm and solid. "After all that happened, it was so incredible. But looking back, I should have seen! I should have known! My dear fellow, please forgive me!"

He looked into Severus' face with such remorse that Severus nearly crumpled with gratitude. "Nothing to forgive, Filius. I had to disarm you that night. I had to keep you all safe."

"There, there, my friend, you're quite right. And you did! We can talk about all that later. Come along," Flitwick chirped, patting Severus' arm. Severus dutifully followed him onto the dais. There, Minerva McGonagall lay, apart from the others, a dark shroud over her mutilated body. Pomona Sprout and Horace Slughorn stood by her side, watching him expectantly. Pomona's moon-shaped face was dirty and tear-streaked, but she smiled at him. "Oh, Severus, thank Merlin. It's so good to have you here. Minerva told us the entire story, you know."

It was not until that moment that Severus realised he had still carried the burden of the deceit he and Hermione had been forced to shoulder. It fell from his heart with such force he almost levitated. He closed his eyes and lifted up a silent prayer of thanks to Minerva; dear Minerva, whose doughty and unshakable strength had enabled him and Hermione to return to Hogwarts as its defenders, and not its villains.

He looked at her black-draped figure, so still. "Gods, I would give so much to have her fighting by our side right now," he said, willing his voice to sound strong. "Albus was dying. It was his plan, all of it."

"He told us, dear boy. Or, rather, his portrait did this evening," Horace said, his voice gruff and sad. "When we knew You-Know-Who..."

"Oh, do call him by name, Horace," Filius said firmly, his voice crabbed with irritation. "There's little point in trying to hide from him now."

Slughorn sheepishly ducked his head. "Yes, yes, of course. Well, as I was saying, when we knew...Voldemort was coming, Minerva called us into the Headmaster's study. We dispatched the Carrows after quite an exuberant altercation..."

"Honestly Sluggie, everything's a drama with you!" snapped Pomona, who took up the story. "Those two imbeciles couldn't find their arses with an arse-finder. Getting rid of them was like shooting grindelows in a barrel." She smiled at him gently, and Severus felt his emotions rise. He and Pomona had always got along fairly well. "Well, when that old sly boots Albus told us what he'd done, I wanted to wring his scrawny neck! To put you through all this..."

"It was the only way we knew how to keep our cover. My wife..."

"It's a marvel you two didn't break," Pomona said, briskly, her no-nonsense voice bracing them all.

"She was only protecting me."

"Of course she was, Severus," Filius said consolingly. "Hermione is a wonderful, clever young witch." Almost slyly, he added, "And not without a certain ruthlessness, from what I hear. I understand she dispatched Bellatrix quite efficiently."

"When I returned her to her husband, he apparently agreed." Severus smiled with grim satisfaction. It had been a pleasure to dump Bella's burning, grisly carcass at Dolph Lestranger's feet. He'd been so unnerved, he'd practically followed Severus into the Between of his own volition.

Pomona gave him a narrow-eyed, pleased look. "Good for her. Ghastly witch, that Bellatrix. But the important thing now is that we know the truth, and we've still got a war to win. All of us," she said, fixing a gimlet eye on Slughorn, who was looking anything but comfortable.

"And we will," Filius said confidently. He looked up at Severus. "What's our next step?"

Severus replied, "I'm going to pull everyone together for a counsel. I'll be back shortly."

"Of course," Filius said, and as Severus turned to leave, he called out, "By the way, Severus."

He stopped. "Yes?"

For the first time in almost two years, Filius' eyes sparkled with mischief. "After all this is over, you must promise to tell us the whole story." With a wink, he added, "Of how you dropped twenty years overnight."



Taken aback, Severus allowed himself a chuckle. "The love of a good witch."

He returned to the long corridor that led to the Infirmary. For the injured, the fight was over, but the long battle toward healing had just begun. Aberforth Dumbledore, Ronald Weasley, his brother Percy and Dean Thomas were all badly injured; Dean was not expected to survive. Nearly every professor and Order member had experienced spell damage to some degree. Neville Longbottom was still dazed, but it seemed that the Sword of Gryffindor had once again protected its own. Already they were calling Longbottom the Hero of Gryffindor, and Severus allowed himself a wry smile. "Keeping your head while others around you do not, indeed," he muttered to himself.

Millicent Bulstrode, one of his Slytherins, was leaning over an injured Order member, running diagnostic spells. With a flick of her wand, she announced, "He's not so critical. Burn paste, dittany, murtlap essence. That ankle is broken, though, so he'll need Skele-gro. Off you go, then." A Quick-quotes quill rapidly notated her orders on a piece of parchment, which rolled up and attached itself onto the levitating gurney that bore Millicent's patient toward the infirmary. She stretched her back as if weary and the bones popped. "Ee, that's better," she mumbled to no one in particular.

"Well diagnosed, Miss Bulstrode. You have a promising career in healing."

She whirled, wand at the ready, then did a double take when she recognised her previous Head of House. Her severe features softened. "So, it's true then. Well, I'm glad you're not dead," she said, gruffly.

"Thank you, Miss Bulstrode." He helped her lift a young witch in a spell-tattered robe onto the next waiting gurney. With a twist in his gut, Severus recognised her as one of the Patel twins from Hermione's year. "I dare say your fellow housemates do not share the same feeling," Severus replied.

Bulstrode shrugged. "I wouldn't know, would I? The only reason I'm doing this is I were in t'Infirmary when all the hell broke loose. Headmistress sent 'em all down to t'dungeons. Anyrote, I'm not one to give a shit what *they* think, am I?" She grabbed his arm in a grip as strong as her Lancastrian accent. "Now listen here, Snape, it is true that Vince Crabbe is dead?"

"It is. I'm sorry..."

"Then why ain't he in t'Great Hall with t'others?" Bulstrode's mulish mouth was set grimly. "Don't he deserve the same respect as the rest of 'em?"

Severus started. "Of course he does. He's a Hogwarts student. Are there others missing?"

She shrugged indifferently. "Dunno."

He sighed. "Just because their fathers were damn fools enough to fight for the wrong side, doesn't mean they should be treated like outcasts. I'll try to find out what's going on, Miss Bulstrode, and arrange for the dead and injured Slytherins to be brought here."

Her almond-shaped eyes flashed with respect. She nodded. "Good enough, Headmaster."

At her words, Severus felt Hogwarts shift and shudder, as if the soul of the school was crying out to him. It was the same feeling he'd experienced the day he and Hermione arrived as Hogwarts' most hated Headmaster and wife; the school had recognised him as its chief guardian then. Now that Minerva had fallen, Hogwarts recognised him as its Headmaster again.

As he stood in *his* school, while Voldemort waged war on *his* students, the castle walls groaned and shook. Severus closed his eyes and whispered to Hogwarts itself. "My back to yours." He felt a gentle tremble beneath his feet, and the wards shuddered upward with defiant resolve. Even the ghosts stopped and listened to the castle re-arm itself. Severus could almost feel the school place the role of leadership upon his shoulders again, like a cloak of promise.

He heard a noise, and glanced up just as Filius, Pomona, Horace and Sybil Trelawney approached. Behind them were the remaining Hogwarts staff, and by the looks of it, every Hogwarts student who could walk. They were led by Luna and Neville.

"We await your orders, dear boy," Filius declared, nodding toward his fellow professors. "All of us. Tell us what to do."

Severus looked at his colleagues, and past them to the students. The acceptance, the trust nearly blinded him. These people had watched him leave the castle, thinking he was a traitor and a craven; now they welcomed him as their Headmaster again. They needed him, and this time there would be no defiance, no countermanding. Apologies would be given later, and accepted later, if they survived. Now, his people waited for their Headmaster to tell them how to defend their home.

Suddenly, someone screamed; it was a thin, eerie sound, high-pitched like a child's. Another shriek of fear joined it, then another, until the air was filled with the sound of keening, screeching terror.

An unknown, malignant energy rushed into the castle. Everyone looked desperately around for signs of Dementors, even though they knew it wasn't the same, will-sapping calling card of the guardians of Azkaban. This was something abominable; it crawled down the spine like a scorpion, spreading venom and revulsion as it passed.

The air around them grew thick with the heavy silence that followed. From within the castle, within the room, with his *skull*, came the voice of his former Master.

**"You have fought," said the high, cold voice, "valiantly. Lord Voldemort knows how to value bravery.**

**"Yet you have sustained heavy losses. If you continue to resist me, you will all die, one by one. I do not wish this to happen. Every drop of magical blood spilled is a loss and a waste.**

**"Lord Voldemort is merciful. You have one hour. Dispose of your dead with dignity. Treat your injured.**

**"I speak now, Harry Potter, directly to you. You have permitted your friends to die for you rather than face me yourself. I shall wait for one hour... If, at the end of that hour, you have not come to me, then battle recommences. This time, I shall enter the fray myself, Harry Potter, and I shall punish every last man, woman and child who has tried to conceal you from me. One hour."**

The last words of Voldemort's ultimatum echoed through the ground of the castle until it faded into a slithering hiss.

"I have to go to Potter," Severus said, and the others nodded.

"All our hopes go with you, Severus," Flitwick called out.

He found Hermione just outside the infirmary doors, and they rushed into one another's arms, holding fast, trying to meld their bodies as well as their minds.

"I suppose our timetable has just moved up, lass."

Hermione pressed a fervent kiss on his lips. "Yes, but Harry is ready. I was with him during that speech," she added with a grimace. "He's ready to bring the plan into action."

He took a deep breath, and felt her strength and love bolster his fear. "Well, as they say, timing is everything."

With something like wonder, he stroked her face, feeling the soft skin beneath his calloused fingertips. "For love," he whispered, and kissed her. Her lips were warm, and

so pliant and sweet. She caressed his face as his tongue sought entry, and his body flooded with hope and passion as she opened herself to him, yielding to him. He drank deeply from her, uncaring that others were watching and their world was on fire. He kissed her until he was able to let her go. They came apart slowly, and although he felt her fear for him, he also felt her pride, her regard, her respect. She smiled up at him, trying to be brave, and his heart bloomed with love.

Her voice was shaking as she whispered, "Be careful, my husband. Promise me you'll come back."

He closed his eyes hard, willing them not to fill. How could he be stoic in the face of such love? "I promise by all the gods to try. With all my heart, I swear to you I'll try."

She nodded, hard, as if trying to convince herself his pledge was good enough to live with. "I love you."

"And I love you, lass. More than you will ever know." He pressed his lips to her forehead, then kissed the tears that slipped from her eyes. They filled him, nourished him like a tonic, and he released her.

"Always."

Their eyes met, and he quietly disappeared into the Between world.

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For the first time since he'd began dreaming of the Hallows world, it looked unwelcoming, even ominous. Gone was the golden, eternal sunset. There was no oasis, no tent, no bowls of ripened fruit, no sweet wine, no soft sirocco breeze. The air was cool, and growing colder. The sun was low in the sky, and the first lamplighter stars were only just appearing.

He glanced over to where he had left their prisoners of war, huddled together, fearful and mistrustful. He was pleased to note that of all the Death Eaters congregated, hands bound and wandless, three had moved apart from the others, separate, exclusive, close only to one another.

Severus strode toward the Malfoys, releasing their bonds as he approached. Lucius instantly sprang to his feet, and instinctively placed himself between his family and his old friend. He stood silent, head held high, but his strained eyes and gaunt, unshaven face told a story that belied his haughty bearing.

"Lucius," Severus greeted his one-time friend with a nod. He glanced beyond Malfoy to his family. "Narcissa, Draco. Are you uninjured?"

Narcissa, pale but stoic, dropped her eyes. "We are... unharmed, Severus." She finally raised her eyes to his. "Thank you."

Lucius turned to her uncomprehendingly. "You thank this traitor for bringing down the Dark Lord's wrath upon our heads?" He turned to Severus, his eyes angry and bloodshot. "You have some gall to face me, Severus Snape! You have no idea what he did to us when you and your wife disappeared from our home that day. He punished us all! He made Bellatrix bind Narcissa and..."

"Hush, Father, please!" Draco entreated, his voice hoarse and frightened. The boy looked ill and too young to sport the tattoo Severus knew he would find on his arm., He whispered in a small voice, "Are we dead, Severus? Have you killed us and brought us all to the land of the dead?"

It was on the tip of Severus' tongue to exploit their fear, or at the very least, mislead them. He was a Slytherin, after all. Narcissa put paid to any thoughts of subterfuge.

"Both of you, stop. Do you not understand? While the world around was being destroyed by the Dark Lord, we've been *here*, safe and unharmed!" She pointed in the direction of the still battlefield. "I do not know why you brought us here, Severus, but I do know we would have died out there. The Dark Lord would have arranged it." She placed a beseeching hand on her husband's arm. "We're an embarrassment to the Dark Lord now, Lucius. The only reason he left us alive was to have access to our home. He knew the blood wards would not admit him without a living Malfoy."

She turned back to Severus, and he could see the strain appearing like tiny cracks in a perfect china cup. "That was why I was chosen as... as the recipient for his displeasure. I was expendable; Draco and Lucius were not." She stroked her husband's arm pleadingly. "It has nothing to do with Severus and his wife."

Lucius hissed, "Oh, we've stood here in this eternity and watched. We've watched you betray the Dark Lord time and again. You robbed me of my chance to prove my value to him, to prove the value of my *family* to him, and now you'll leave us to our fate? I knew you were a vindictive little half-blooded cunt..."

"That's enough, Lucius!" Severus growled. "I've had enough histrionics today. I'm not prepared to suffer yours. That's not why I'm here." Leaving Lucius to fume in silence, Severus turned to Narcissa. "You once asked me to make an Unbreakable Vow to protect your son. Did I, or did I not fulfill that vow?"

Narcissa put her arm around Draco; her terse nod was all but imperceptible. "You did. And I have thanked you..."

"Bella is dead. I want no reprisals or vendettas over it."

The startled look of relief on Draco's and Lucius' faces surprised Severus. Narcissa looked grave but her voice was as cool as ever. "I am... prepared to make an Unbreakable Vow to that end."

"Well, I am not. If your word is not enough, then so be it." He turned to Lucius. "The battle is all but ended. I will ask you this question only once, Lucius. And I will take one answer...your first. You will have no chance to change it once it leaves your lips."

Lucius looked as calm as if they were attending a garden party. "Ask your question, Severus. Whatever answer I give, it will be my only answer, for good or no." He lifted his chin and sneered at Severus with all the arrogant impatience of his breeding. "Ask, and by the gods be done with us."

"Alright. So mote it be," Severus drawled, with equal disdain. He smiled, and some of the Malfoy insolence faltered.

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*I'm back. Tell Harry it is done.*

Her heart pounding, Hermione turned to her friend. Harry was pale, but calm. "Severus is back, Harry," she said, hating the trembling in her voice. "He says it is done."

For a moment, Harry sagged, as if his strength had suddenly left him. Then, with a deep breath, he pulled himself together. His eyes were far away, as if seeing the end of the road he'd walked since that night sixteen years before in his parents' home in Godric's Hollow. "Alright. Tell him I'm coming."

Ginny sprang from her chair, where she had been listening. "No!" she screamed. "You can't just walk out there to die!" Her eyes were swollen from crying, and she turned on Hermione, spitting hatred. "You can't possibly trust them, Harry! You have no idea what they did to us here!"

Madam Pomfrey, alerted to the shouting, appeared from behind a screen. "Miss Weasley, please! I realise you are most upset, but I must insist that you not disturb the other patients..."

"Disturb...disturb the patients!" Ginny cried shrilly. "There are kids here who can't sleep at night because of *what they* did!"

"What *the Carrows* did, Miss Weasley! Headmaster and Madam Snape performed none of those atrocities, I can assure you!" Madam Pomfrey snapped. From her pocket, she produced a small vial. "Calming Draught." She glanced up at Harry. "Make sure she drinks it all."

Harry all but forced the contents of the vial down Ginny's throat, then held her close, murmuring, "Ginny. I have to do this. I have to."

"No, you don't," she sobbed. "Fred is gone. Nobody knows where Charlie is. I can't lose another person I love. Not tonight, Harry, please..." After a moment, the potion did its work, and she calmed, her whimpers dying down to the occasional snuffle.

Hermione turned away; letting Severus go had been hard enough. Watching as Harry gently kissed Ginny goodbye was too much to bear. Harry firmly pried Ginny's arms from around his neck, and left her in the care of her already distraught and grieving parents.

He turned to Ron and pulled him roughly into his arms. "You're like a brother to me," he said quietly. "I love you."

Ron's face crumpled, and he crushed Harry to his chest. "Don't make me lose another brother tonight, then, Harry," he said, his voice thick with tears. He stepped away, wiping his eyes.

Finally, Harry took Hermione in his arms and held her close. They kissed, and Harry whispered in a shaking voice, "Thank you for all you did. Both of you. Tell Severus I'm sorry. For all the... well, you know."

"Harry, you don't know for certain what will happen."

He tried to smile. "Hermione, it's okay. Whatever happens, I know the most important thing...I'm loved. That's somethinge can never understand." Harry's eyes filled with tears. "Severus said that those we love are waiting for us." He glanced around the room at his weeping girlfriend, his grieving best mate, and back to her. "Wherever I end up, whatever happens, the ones I love will be waiting for me."

He glanced around the room. "I love you. Be safe."

He walked away from the sound of crying, of pain and loss and grief, and never looked back.

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The courtyard was as still and silent as the grave as Harry Potter took his last walk toward Lord Voldemort. The look of joy on the Dark Lord's reptilian face was a hideous thing to behold. "Well, well," he said, looking disdainfully at the handful of followers left standing. "My Death Eaters were quite convinced you would stay holed up in Hogwarts, hiding behind its walls like a quivering child, rather than face me. Yet here you are," he concluded, with a flourish of his wand.

"Yet here I am," Harry said, quietly. He held out his hands in surrender. "So now you can do what you've wanted to do all my life. Go ahead, Tom. I'm all yours."

Voldemort closed his eyes and took a deep breath through his slitted nostrils, as if savouring the moment. "How meekly the lion comes to the slaughter," he drawled, his smile reptilian and horrible. "I had hoped there would be a little fight left. It's very discourteous to deny me a bit of sport."

Harry smiled. "We all have our disappointments, Tom. What's wrong, having second thoughts? Afraid of a wandless, untried boy?" He drawled, his enunciation eerily similar to Severus Snape's at his most disdainful.

"Don't, My Lord. It's some kind of trap," someone whispered.

Voldemort opened his eyes and gave the warning's owner a look of sheer disgust. "A trap?" He scoffed. "What manner of trap is he planning to spring?" At their uncomfortable silence, Voldemort grew angry. "Do you dare doubt your Lord capable of defeating a 'wandless, untried boy'?"

He swung his wand in a powerful arc; magic sizzled down his arm and into the wood as he bellowed, *Avada Kedavra!*

The poisonous green light streaked through the air, striking Harry squarely in the chest. Without a sound, he fell like a stone dropped from the sky. Those watching inside the castle cried out in grief, and Hermione felt her heart sink in her chest. "You said he would wait," Ginny said numbly. She grabbed Hermione and shook her, her eyes filling with anger and hate. "You said he would taunt him before he killed him! You said he had time!"

Outside, the Death Eaters shouted and raised their fists in triumph, until their leader screamed and clutched his head. Even as Voldemort staggered under the weight of the pain, he viciously waved off their assistance. "Leave me alone, you pathetic fools! Do not touch me!" With a mighty effort, he stood upright, and shouted to the heavens, "I need nothing from you, any of you! I am your Lord..." he proclaimed, and pointed to the figure on the ground. "...and Harry Potter is DEAD!"

He raised his arms in triumph, but the cheers of his celebrating Death Eaters died suddenly. They stared past their leader in shock. Baffled at their reaction, Voldemort turned and followed their gaze, his face contorting with confusion.

Standing over the prone body of Harry Potter was the last man Tom Riddle had personally killed: Severus Snape.

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"So the rumours were true, then," Voldemort said softly. "My Death Eaters were not lying. You and your Mudblood whore have been sending my followers to the Death you somehow escaped."

Severus allowed himself a smile. "Not escaped. I merely asked for a reprieve."

Voldemort hissed. "And will you ask the same of me? You've switched sides often enough; Death must grow as tired of your indecisiveness as I have."

Severus carefully stepped over Harry's prone body, walking slowly toward his former Master. His voice rang out over the courtyard like thunder over a seastorm. "I never belonged to you. On the night you killed Lily, I pledged my faith to the Order. Oh, I've had to wallow in your shit and darkness to do it, but I've kept my promises. Not like you, Tom. You've been cheating Death for many years now. And now Death wants its due."

Voldemort laughed. He placed a hand on his heart and asked innocently, "I cheated Death? You and the boy survived the Killing Curse. If anyone is guilty of cheating Death, it's you." He glanced at the still figure on the ground. "Although, it seems to me as if the second time's the charm for Harry Potter. Who knows?" he cooed. "The same may be said even for you."

Several Death Eaters laughed, but their laughter sounded strained and uneasy. Oblivious, Voldemort crowed, "Look around you, Severus!" He turned around, surveying the bodies littered amidst the carnage. "I should think Death owes me a debt of gratitude tonight. Look at the rare banquet I have given it to feast upon! I have glutted its maw with martyrs." His visage was malignantly demonic. "Death is bloated with my generosity."

Severus' gut twisted at the blasphemous, obscene declaration. He sneered, "Still taking credit for others' hard work? I think you'll find Death is hungrier than that, Tom. After all, one wandless, untried boy does not a banquet make." In his most seductive voice, he challenged, "Why don't we join the feast together, you and I, My Lord?"

The Slicing Hex left Voldemort's wand in the blink of an eye, but before it could reach its target, Severus disappeared. Death Eaters glanced uneasily at one another, backing away from their leader. Voldemort frantically searched the courtyard, roaring in anger, "How dare you mock me, Snape? Show yourself, and fight!"

"My Lord."

Voldemort whirled at the sound, and froze. Clearly unnerved, he forced his face to relax into calmer lines. With pretend cordiality, he said, "If it isn't Lucius Malfoy, my oldest and dearest friend." He leaned forward and placed the tip of his wand over Lucius' heart. "Tell me: why is it that so many worthy Death Eaters have fallen, and suddenly you appear, alive and well?" He ground the tip into Lucius' breast, and the blond man trembled to hold his ground. "Could it be that you and your pathetic family have been hiding, cowering in fear? Could it be that your fickle faith in me has grown disenchanting again?" His rage seemed to reach a boiling point, and he leaned in to whisper, "Why come to me at the eleventh hour, when the battle is all but done? Give me one reason to keep your worthless carcass alive, Lucius Malfoy!"

Lucius was breathing hard, but he held his ground. Face to face, almost nose to nose, he whispered, "Because, My Lord, if you kill me, I cannot do...this!"

Lucius sharply pushed the Dark Lord into the arms of Severus Snape and immediately Disapparated into the school, where his family awaited him. The remaining Death Eaters watched in frozen horror as their Lord and his former spy disappeared into the Between.

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The desert was in full darkness; an eerie phosphorescent glow that came from the sand and the wind provided its only light. Shadows danced upon the ground, and in that environment Lord Voldemort looked confused and fragile. There was nothing remotely frightening about him.

"Welcome, gentlemen." A slim, tall figure appeared out of the darkness. Reg Black saluted Severus. "Hello, my dear friend. I rather thought I might find you here again."

Severus looked at him carefully. The figure before him appeared to be Reg Black, and yet it wasn't. His physical appearance was off; he was too perfect. This was not the same boy who had visited him the night he died.

The figure gazed past Severus. With a charming smile, he said, "Ah, Harry Potter. You and I have been like two ships passing in the night for many years. Each time I was convinced you would come to me, it became clear it wasn't quite time."

Severus whirled around to see Harry, very much alive, staring at the beautiful, black-haired man. "Have we met?" he asked politely.

The question seemed to amuse Reg greatly. "Not quite," he answered. He turned his attention to Voldemort. "And Tom Riddle. At last. Immortality, it seems, is still not quite within your grasp, no matter how much you have sought to obtain it."

The Dark Lord growled, "What is this place? And who are you?" His arrogant bravado returned. "You are not Regulus Black. I killed him!"

Reg's voice broke into a thousand prisms of sound. "You killed Severus Snape as well. And Harry Potter. And we see how well that went. And many others, in order to put as much distance between yourself and me as humanly possible."

Voldemort sneered, "And who are you? Do you truly expect me to believe that you are Death itself?"

With an elegant shrug, he answered, "It is a very unmusical name, 'Death'. So final. Most refer to me as a Guide, a Traveler, a Companion."

He turned to Harry. Conversationally, he added, "You were destined to come to me when you were a year old. Fate had decreed you would die the night Voldemort entered your parents' house. But our good friend Tom evoked the magic of your mother's love, and marked you as his sworn enemy."

He glanced at Voldemort, who was standing very still. "And instead of coming to me in his stead, Tom, your soul went into limbo, into hiding, until you could use your Horcruxes to return in a body again." He tutted softly. "Very bad form, Tom. You refused to play by the rules." His eyes grew cold. "So yes, Tom, in answer to your question. Yes, you may call me, 'Death'."

Voldemort sneered, "You have no power over me! I am the..."

Death held up his hand, and the Dark Lord's words ended in a gasp, as if being choked from him. "Yes, yes, Tom. Your arrogance is astonishing, if a little tiresome. Take, for instance, my dear friend, Severus Snape. His beloved wife was dying. You taunted him that she was the owner of the Elder wand; like so many before, you believed that owning the three magical items was the key to the Deathly Hallows. Her death was necessary in order for you to command the wand. If you had simply killed her, things would have been very different. But you were stupid enough to make the same mistake twice. You cast your Killing Curse on the man who loved her more than his own life."

He leaned forward conspiratorially. "Shall I tell you something about Regulus Black? Shall I tell Harry Potter of this boy you have always bragged of killing?"

Voldemort grew very still, and Reg continued, "It was Reg Black who watched and waited in the Between, waiting for the man he loved to come to me. He begged me for this honour." He turned to Severus. "I could not deny his love, you see. It was as unshakable as yours is for Hermione, as unfathomable as your mother's was for you, Harry."

Severus felt fear trickle down his spine, like a bead of sweat, heavy and dank. Realisation struck him in the chest like a warhammer. "Reg was still alive?"

Death bowed slightly in acknowledgement. "Reg Black entered my embrace willingly, and his death set off a chain of events that ended the moment Tom killed you. I gave Reg the choice; I would allow him to return to your world, and leave you here with me, or he could send you back."

Severus felt tears threaten. Deep within, a voice accused him of being unworthy of Reg's sacrifice. "Ah, but he thought you were worthy," Death replied softly. "It doesn't matter how you mortals measure yourselves against one another's standard. In the end, their love is all that matters."

He turned back to the fuming Voldemort. "Again, you cheated me, Tom. Again, and again, and once more again." The beautiful face changed, grew more sinister. "I suppose it could be said that all three of you have cheated me. But tonight, all debts will be paid."

The last of the light faded, and the sky turned black. Clouds boiled and distant thunder rumbled far away. Heat lightning flashed over the horizon. The figure changed, grew taller, darker, as if cut from negative space. His voice grew lower as he growled, "You lusted for immortality, Tom Riddle, and stopped at nothing to attain it. There is nothing more offensive to me. You tried to hide away from me; you stole from me by taking the lives of others and stealing away parts of your soul; you taunted me by using minions to restore you to life and take you away from me.

"But you never learned the one truth above all truths: no one defies Death. I have been patient. I have waited until your appointed time, and tonight, you belong to me, Tom Riddle." He enveloped Voldemort in an awful parody of an embrace, and kissed him passionately.

At that moment, Harry gasped, then screamed in agony. He fell unconscious against Severus, who lowered him gently to the ground. A wisp of dark grey matter oozed from his scar, grey and curling like tendrils of smoke. As the last Horcrux leached from Harry's scar, Severus closed his eyes, unwilling to watch as Death drew the last part of Voldemort's soul to himself.

After what seemed an eternity, Harry's eyes opened. The boy looked at him blankly for a moment. "How do you feel?" asked Severus, helping the boy to his feet.

Harry held onto Severus, shaking his head to clear it. He glanced beyond Severus, his eyes growing wide, and whispered, "Oh, Tom."

Unable to resist, Severus turned. Where the Dark Lord had been, Tom Riddle, real and human again, now stood. He was now the man he had been before he tore his soul into shreds. Like Harry, like himself, Tom had dark hair and pale skin; unlike them, his eyes were a startling shade of blue.

He was staring down at his hands in wonder. For a moment he smiled, then laughed. He glanced at the two men and raised his wand. "I'm whole again!" His eyes were mad with unholy glee. "I am perfect again!"

The voice of Death boomed like thunder: "And you are mine. Again!"

A dust storm, sudden and fierce, rose between Severus and Tom, forming a flurry of flying sand and dust. As he squinted against the stinging wind, Severus turned to Harry and shouted, "Turn around. Don't look."

"But why? What will happen..."

"Boy," Severus growled in frustration, "for once in your life will you do as I say without question?" Without waiting for an answer, he pushed Harry to the ground, covering them both with his cloak.

Severus glanced up as the veil of sand grew solid and complete, separating Tom from them forever. He seemed to realise it as well, and stepped into the whirling, twisting storm to join them. Instantly the sand turned into a maelstrom, tearing at his skin, until he was crying out, trying to escape it. Like the glass it is melted to create, it ripped Tom Riddle into jagged pieces. He screamed until the sand filled his mouth and ears and nose and eyes, pulverising them to mush, staining the sand red. It blasted into his skin, etching the flesh from his body, the muscle and sinew from his bones. His body was lifted up in the maelstrom, until it was no more than crimson sand itself, twisting and writhing, a whim of the air and the dust, a tornado of sand-blasted matter.

The dust-devil flew high into the air and was gone as quickly as it came, taking Tom Riddle with it.

Slowly, Severus and Harry staggered onto their feet. The silence was unnerving, and the warm winds gradually blew soft against their faces. Harry looked around, bewildered. "What happened?" he asked, his eyes bleak and confused.

From the shadows a figure approached them, wearing Reg Black's body again. This time, Severus understood the difference. Death was merely using the familiar figure upon which to hang his hat.

His lovely voice shimmered like the shifting sands beneath their feet. "To Tom Riddle? He has been banished into the soulless void for all eternity, Harry. Darkness of his kind does not descend every day, but it will never truly be banished from the earth." His smile was almost fatherly. "How can we learn to carry the light within us if we have no opportunity to compare it to true dark?"

Harry looked pensive for a moment, then asked, "Will he ever be given redemption? I mean, he had such a terrible upbringing. He was unwanted and abused. Was it all his fault?"

Death shrugged. "Listen to yourself, Harry. 'He had such a terrible upbringing. He was unwanted and abused.' Those words could be equally said about you and Severus. It is our choices which make us who we are. Tom chose to use his power to do terrible things. He will spend eternity in the hell he created. He was never capable of understanding the gift of true immortality."

"Love." The word left Severus' lips before he was even aware of saying it. "Only love is eternal; only love can protect us and keep us safe. Only love ensures that we are remembered and cherished, that our children and grandchildren keep us alive through their memories of us."

Death answered, "Well said, my friend. Neither of you ever sought to defeat me; your hearts were pure, and your love was true. That is the only way to defeat Death. You've always known this universal truth, Severus Snape. Throughout your life, you were loved, and you loved, and that love saved you from Tom Riddle's fate.

"You came to me before your time, Severus Snape, and I allowed your friend to return you. One day...and that day is far from now...we will meet again, and this time you will be unable, unwilling, even, to resist my kiss. Until then, I send you back to life, to love and family.

"And this leaves us with a question. What is to become of you, my young friend?" Reg looked down at Harry fondly. "You could stay here, and enjoy new adventures, or you can return with Severus, and live out your remaining destiny. I leave that choice up to you."

To Severus' surprise, Harry seemed to hesitate, as if weighing his choices. His eyes filled as he answered, "Ever since I can remember, I've wanted to belong somewhere, to someone." He looked at Severus with pleading eyes. "I don't just want someone to love me; I want to *love* someone."

Severus replied slowly. "As soon as we are allowed, I'm going back. I can't speak for you, boy, but by the gods, I know what I'd do."

Harry smiled. "Yeah. Me too." He turned to Death. "As persuasive as it sounds to go on these new adventures, I think I'd like to give the old ones a proper go before I move on."

Death smiled beatifically. "Of course. I understand." He turned to go, then hesitated. "But before you go, there is one more thing. For both of you."

His face was suddenly bathed in light, and the light grew brighter, until Severus was squinting, then shielding his eyes, then turning away, unable to bear its brightness. He heard Harry gasp, as if he, too, could no longer face the blinding light. It enveloped them in warmth, like a caress, then gradually faded. Still squinting, Severus made himself face the light; dimly he could see figures walking toward them, growing closer, and as the light became endurable, he recognised each one, and started to weep.

"Oh, Minerva," he cried, as her arms wound about him. "I'm so sorry. Hermione tried..."

"It's alright, Severus. Please don't mourn me." she said, her tears silvery on her face. "You did it, Severus! And you, Harry!" her fierce eyes glowed with satisfaction. "You defeated him! I'm so proud of you both." She looked from one to the other.

"As am I." Charity Burbage smiled up at him. She looked ethereally beautiful, her round face full of the same happiness that once lit up every room she entered.

"Charity," he gasped, sobbing. "Forgive me, please."

"I do, Severus," she said, still smiling. "I understand." Her eyes grew soft with pity. "What you and Hermione have been through. Too much to bear." She glanced to her right. "Don't worry; Minerva and I have given him an earful on that count."

"Who?"

"Severus," said a fatherly voice. "My dear boy."

Severus whirled around at the familiar voice, his emotions warring within. "Albus," he managed, unable to look his former Headmaster in the face. Formally, he continued, "It seems we've won your war. You should be pleased."

"*Our* war, Severus," the old man countered. "And it could not have been done without you and your extraordinary wife." He turned to Harry, his eyes bright and happy. "Harry, my boy! I am so proud of you. Look at what you've done!"

Harry too looked uncertain of his feelings. "Whatwe've done, Professor Dumbledore," he said, stiffly. "You've never given Severus the credit he deserves."

With absolute conviction, Albus answered, "Severus' actions were the catalyst for your misery, Harry."

Harry's eyes grew angry. "And he suffered every day of his life because of it, Professor, because *you* made sure he did! You never forgave him, and never allowed him to forgive himself!"

Albus glowered, "He was the reason your parents were dead, Harry. Becoming my spy gave him the means to atone."

A new voice intruded. "I think he's atoned enough, Professor."

All the breath left Severus' body. He would know that voice were he to live to be a thousand years old. His strength gave way, and he would have fallen to his knees if not for Harry's quick reflexes.

Still holding onto Severus, Harry joyfully cried, "Mum, Dad!"

Severus looked at James and Lily Potter, shocked at how young they looked. James looked no older than his son. "Go to them," Severus urged, his head clearing. He gave Harry's shoulder a push. "I can stand on my own...go to them!" Harry ran to them, and they embraced. His father ruffled his wild dark hair, so like his own, and smiled down at his son with love and happiness.

"Oh, Harry. We are so proud of you, son," James Potter said, his voice thick with unshed tears. "You've been through so much, and you were so brave and strong."

Lily opened her arms, and Harry flew into them. "My baby, my darling Harry," she said, smiling through her tears.

Severus watched the family embrace, and in his heart he saw how it would be when he and Hermione had their own family. *Oh, Hermione. Lily is here, and all I can think about is you. I think I have finally become a man, lass.*

Lily turned to him, a smile of welcome as bright as the light that had brought her here. "Hello, Sev," she said, and placed a kiss on his cheek. The last time they'd faced one another as friends, she had been the same height as he. Now, she had to stretch to reach him. "You're all grown up. You look a little like your dad now."

In spite of his full heart, he laughed. "I hope you didn't come here merely to insult me, Lily."

They laughed together, and for a moment, the years fell away, and he was the ragged little boy, and she the pretty Muggle-born girl with hair like fire, and Severus was filled with gratitude that he had been given the chance to see her this one last time. "I mourned you for so long, Lily. But I mourned you wrong."

Her lovely green eyes dimmed with regret. "I know, Severus. And I regretted never accepting your apology."

"I'm so sorry for what happened, Lily. I know I don't deserve your forgiveness, but..."

"Shh. Of course you deserve it." Her expression hardened. "What you *didn't* deserve was all the hell Albus put you through in my name. That was despicable, and something I never wanted." She patted his shoulder, a gesture left over from their childhood days spent playing in the endless golden autumn days. "I'm glad you've found Hermione. She's the perfect witch for you, Sev. Loads better than I would have ever been."

She took a step back to return to her husband. "Both of you have protected my son in every way you could. Thank you." She and James began to fade away, and hearing Harry plaintively call out to them made him turn away.

From out of the corner of his eye, he thought he could see all those he had fought back to back, those who fell, and they all looked peaceful and happy. Their faces also faded into the soft light, and he silently promised then they would always be remembered, always be honoured.

He turned to Harry, who was staring into the light as if he could still see his family. "Harry, it must be time to go back..."

"Severus, wait, please."

From behind Harry another figure appeared. Sirius Black. As he approached Severus, there was still a hint of his restless swagger, his old insouciant arrogance, but Severus found he could not summon any hatred or animosity for his old enemy.

Harry said, "I know it's time to go back." He stood between the two men. "Sirius, I know what you did to Hermione. It was wrong."

Sirius continued to look into Severus' eyes. "It was wrong, Harry," he replied. His voice was soft and sad. "I've spent a lot of time beyond the veil wishing I could change what happened. I am sorry, Severus. I was a young, arrogant fool, and I grew up to become an old, useless fool."

Severus nodded. "I love my wife, Black. And you did some hideous things to her. But I would be lying if I said that she has not been through hell on my own account as well."

Sirius held out his hand. "I can't make up for what I did. All I can give you is my regret and my plea for her forgiveness. And yours."

Severus took Black's hand. "Death has a way of putting things into perspective."

Sirius' bark of laughter rang across the night. "That's more truth than you know." He sobered. "Thank you for saving Harry. Thank you for saving our world." He released Severus' hand. "Thank you for making her happy."

Severus felt the same strange tug at his waist as the night Reg returned him to life. "Harry, it is time..."

He looked around, but he was alone. Gone were their friends and loved ones, their enemies cowering in a corner of the Between. Gone was the Between world. Even Harry was no longer with him. Suddenly, a light enveloped him in a rushing whirl of sound and wind and blinding joy...

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O Death, traditional

Words in ***bold italic*** are from ***Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows***

## Thirty Eight: Even The Weariest River Winds Somewhere Safe To Sea

*Chapter 39 of 39*

After all the smoke and ashes pass, there's you and me.

*Well, I can't believe this moment has finally arrived. I have several author's notes at the end; I hope you will read them, because I have a lot of people to thank, and a little story to tell you.*

*Thank you for your wonderful reviews. This story changed my life. I hope you enjoyed it.*

This chapter is dedicated to Stgulik, for **EVERYTHING**. You are the answer to so many prayers. You are my Hermione Granger.

It is with a tear in my eye that I write for the final time in this story:

*Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.*

---

*We've been on this road so long, sometimes I forget you're still right beside me.*

*I been tired and you've been strong, when I can't find the step you take the lead and guide me;*

*And something that I meant to say escaped me, but then again, I'd probably say it wrong.*

*So forgive me for these words; what I said and what you've heard, you know there's something deeper than this song:*

*And you can keep all the things that I've given you, my love; I hope they serve you well.*

*I hope that you can tell you're in my heart and I'm better for this ride we took together;*

*and even though it came down way too fast,*

*After all the smoke and ashes pass, there's you and me.*

---

In the Ministry of Magic there is a huge cyclorama which traverses the entire circumference of the main atrium. It was commissioned by A Grateful Government.

To those who survived, it is a rather anaemic depiction of the Battle of Hogwarts, in all its famous glory. Its generic quality might have stemmed from the fact that it stands in a public place where Wizarding folk of all ages and nationalities pass. The more probable reason was that the artist was nowhere near Scotland during the actual battle.

Because of this, it is unsurprisingly sterile for a depiction of a fight its veterans remember as awash with gore and the stench of the dead and burning and dying. The true survivors of the war attended the dedication ceremony of the exhibit, regarded it with sneering disdain, and proceeded to ignore it for the remainder of their lives.

To its credit, though, it does depict an accurate re-enactment in several minor points. At the beginning of the exhibit, the observer sees the Headmistress bring stone knights to life, the vanguard of the school. Nearby, Hogwarts professors and students slow the progress of giants, while dragons fill the sky with fire and blood.

But other major moments of the battle have been so homogenised as to be almost unrecognisable by the parties involved. Common folk, ancient Wizarding elite, Pure-blood and Muggle-born, all are represented as perfect fighters, their aim true, their courage unshakable. All of the Hogwarts students and professors seem graceful as dancers, immaculately clean, not a robe or hair out of place. Death Eaters are portrayed as unspeakably ugly, corrupt monsters; looking, as a Muggle-born wizard quipped, 'like Jews in a Nazi propaganda poster.'

One of the most dreadfully erroneous sections shows Neville Longbottom slaying the mighty snake Nagini, before turning the Sword of Gryffindor on Bellatrix Lestrange as she bore down on a helpless Hermione Granger-Snape. Neville complained bitterly about this heresy. He was ignored.

Further down, the cyclorama depicts a wild-haired Hermione Granger-Snape again, but this time she is a warrior, a Valkyrie witch. She stands back to back with her husband, Severus Granger-Snape, as they battle Death Eaters, giants, Acromantula and Dementors. The words 'For love' and 'My back to yours' float above their heads, surrounded by cupid-arrow hearts. This section was added two years after the rest of the cyclorama was unveiled.

Then there is the depiction of Voldemort killing Harry Potter, and the incredible moment Harry came back to life, even as Snape returned from a totally inauthentic representation of the Between world, where Voldemort was banished, never to return. Those who were there refused to allow the artist to consult with them over the details of the Between, and of course, he was unable to see it for himself. Later it was discovered that Between could not be revisited at all. After Snape returned without You-Know-Who, the occult dimension known as Between had utterly ceased to exist.

The last panel shows the dead, lying in neat rows, their names magically hovering over their heads with the epitaph:

*Either our history shall with full mouth*

*Speak freely of our acts, or else our grave,*

*Like Turkish mute, shall have a tongueless mouth,*

*Not worshipping with a waxen epitaph.*

The irony of this quote was seemingly lost on the Ministry.

---

On a blisteringly hot day in June, Severus strode into the Ministry atrium, waving away reporters with an impatient hand. Even Rita Skeeter could not pierce his stoic armour. As he finally reached the lift that would take him down into the bowels of the Ministry, he prayed once again for strength from those thrice-damned gods who so happily gave with one hand and took away with the other.

This was the greatest, most important battle in a lifetime of epic battles. It was for the life of his precious wife.

---

When the Between world spat him out for the final time, Severus found himself in the exact same place he'd left...the courtyard of Hogwarts. Standing beside him was Harry Potter, looking every bit as confused as Severus. The exultation he had felt during his return fluttered and fell from his heart like a tattered coat. Except for the smoking embers of dying dragonfire, the rubble, the charred remains of creatures he'd rather not think about, they might as well still have been in the corridor Between. They saw no one; nothing moved. No sounds greeted them except the rustle of debris blown over the courtyard by the cold Scottish wind.

"Where is everyone?" Harry said, looking around. "Why is so quiet?"

"I-I don't know." The air above them stilled, until nothing moved. "I didn't exactly expect a hero's welcome, but I expected... something." Growing alarmed, Severus looked around for any signs of life. He reached out to Hermione through their link, but he could feel nothing.

Fear gripped his heart. This was not how it was supposed to be. They had defeated the enemy.

"Inside," he said. "Someone must be there."

As they dashed toward the doors that led into the main hall of the school, Severus had an irrational thought that Death had truly cheated *him* this time, and that this was *his* true Between; an empty void, mocking him throughout eternity with this silent veneer of Hogwarts. His home forever, with only Harry Potter for company. The idea felt so

real and palpable that for a moment, he thought he might be sick.

*Hermione, lass, where are you? Why can't I feel...*

"Harry! Oh, thank the gods!"

Severus whirled around to see Neville, Luna and Remus Lupin emerging from the Great Hall. They ran toward Harry, embracing their friend, and then they all started talking at once. Behind them, at a respectful distance, the Malfoys warily approached as well. Hermione was in neither group.

"What in Merlin's name has happened here?" Severus demanded.

"Gods, what hasn't happened?" Neville began. "After you and Harry and You-Know-Who disappeared into the Between, all hell broke loose. It was a free-for-all." He shuddered. "The last few Death Eaters just went berserk," he continued. "We threw everything we had at them. We lost some good people, but the last Death Eaters, well, I guess when Voldemort died, they... they..." He stopped, unable to meet Severus' gaze.

Confused, Severus asked, "What happened to them? Did they come back from the Between?"

Surprisingly, it was Malfoy who answered. "Here's what happened to them, *Brother*." He grasped his shirtsleeve and yanked it back so aggressively, Severus heard the seam rip. Where Lucius' Dark Mark had been was a hideous crater, as if someone had scooped out a portion of his pale skin with a trowel. Severus forced his face to remain impassive. The scar-tissue was shiny and angry-looking, even though it had been sealed by one of the Healers. Both Draco and Lucius were paper-white, and Narcissa put her arm around her husband.

At the sound of movement behind him, he turned as a group of students, teachers, and Order members appeared from the Great Hall and the Infirmary. "Is he gone?" The speaker was a sixth-year Severus remembered as being in Hufflepuff. Her face had a half-healed burn on the left side. Her eyes were haunted with all she'd seen; it was a look shared by many in the crowd. "Is You-Know-Who dead?"

Harry nodded and addressed his former schoolmates. "Tom Riddle is dead, and he's never coming back. We saw him taken by Death itself."

The numbed calm of the group crumpled, and many began to cry. "It's alright," Harry assured them. "You don't have to worry about him ever again." He smiled at them, and the tears gradually turned to a bleak, shattered joy. They wanted to rejoice, but so many friends were gone. There were so few left they could share their happiness with.

Harry accepted their hugs and accolades with a sort of embarrassed modesty; with a start, Severus was reminded that prophecy had ridden on the back of this seventeen-year-old boy since he was an infant. Like Severus, he had paid his debt to destiny. He was truly free.

Remus glanced around at the crowd forming around them. "I think we should take this somewhere a bit more private, don't you?"

Severus looked at the man who had fought back to back with him, but all he could see was Lupin, that long ago day in Grimmauld Place, saying those exact words to him and Sirius Black.

"Tell me now. Please. I must know where Hermione is," he said, not caring that his voice had taken on a childish, pleading tone. "We go nowhere until someone tells me where my wife is." Blind panic welled up in him, and he was near to blasting his own people out of the way, when Narcissa Malfoy placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. Her eyes were filled with pity.

"Severus," she said, "Hermione has been arrested. She's going to Azkaban."

---

"The day we took the Mark, the Dark Lord told us that as long as he lived, the Mark would live within us. That is how we knew he never truly died, even though we were told he was killed trying to..." Lucius nodded toward Harry. "Everyone thought he had died that night, but the Mark remained."

Severus nodded. "We had always suspected as much, yes."

They had all adjourned to his former study, where the remaining Heads of House and Hermione's parents joined them.

Lucius continued, "But when you killed the Dark Lord..."

"I keep telling you, Malfoy, Snape didn't kill Tom Riddle!" Harry declared vehemently. "Death took him!"

"Please keep your tempers in check, I beg you," Filius urged for the fourth time. "This is helping no one, least of all our Hermione."

Neville turned to Severus, his face tense. "Anyrote, the Death Eaters. When Voldemort died, they all started screaming. The Dark Mark started burning through their arms like fire. They were literally being roasted from the inside out."

"What happened to the other Death Eaters?"

Neville closed his eyes as if he didn't want to face it. "All those we sent to the Between appeared like they'd been chucked out, and all of 'em were burning and screaming. It was horrible."

"They killed one another," Narcissa added softly, her cool eyes tight with strain. "They went mad, Severus. They turned on one another. It was as if the Dark Mark was the only thing keeping them sane. Even Draco and Lucius..." she turned toward her husband, who slumped against her tiredly.

"I owe... your wife," Lucius began, chewing the words as if they were nettles, "my life. The life of my son. She happened to be in the Infirmary when the Dark Marks began to burn. She understood and stunned us long enough to lance the poison, heal our wounds. She saved us...at least, long enough for us to join her in..."

"Please," Luna interrupted quietly. "Can't you see Professor Snape needs to hear about Hermione?" She drew near to him with all the gentleness of a maid approaching a unicorn. Her blue eyes were tired but full of compassion. "Sir, when all the fighting finally ceased, a group from the Ministry came."

"Yeah, once they didn't have to worry about getting their hands dirty," Neville muttered angrily.

Luna continued. "They helped transport the injured to St. Mungo's. Then a group of Aurors arrived, and started questioning everyone." She hesitated, and cut a quick sidelong glance toward Harry. "Ginny started talking to them, and they followed her into the Infirmary."

Harry gaped at Luna in confusion. "Ginny? But...but why? Why wasn't she with her family?"

Filius took up the story. "The Auror-In-Charge told Hermione she needed to come with them. They told her she was being arrested for the murder of Professor Dumbledore. She begged them to wait until you returned, but..." He shook his head. "I'm afraid Miss Weasley became too impatient. She stunned Hermione and knocked her out cold. She was unconscious when the Aurors took her."

Severus stared at them in disbelief. His heart was pounding so hard he could barely breathe. Rage struck him in the chest like a hammer. "Did no one speak in her defense? Did none of you lift a finger to protect her?"



Lupin put a placating hand on his shoulder, but Severus shook it off. Angrily he roared, "Do you not understand what she has been through? And you just let a grief-stricken girl attack her...in front of her own parents?"

"Severus, we tried to intervene!" Filius replied, his voice plaintive, his eyes angry. "We were held at wand-point. You would have thought we were the enemy, the way these Ministry officials were carrying on."

"I can't feel her at all. She must still be unconscious," Severus said, his head spinning with anxiety. "Perhaps the prison is somehow blocking us." The idea that Hermione was in that heinous place... "I have to go to her."

"We're coming with you, son," his father-in-law said firmly.

Harry nodded. "I'm coming too."

But it would be almost a month before any of them saw Hermione again.

---

During the shambles of what the Ministry called the Reconstruction, Severus petitioned the Minister daily for an audience. The imbeciles at the Ministry had shown the good sense to choose Kingsley Shacklebolt as their new minister, but he had his hands full with trying to weed out the collaborators from the Imperused from the innocent. At first, Severus fully expected to be arrested as well, but it seemed that after the first flush of the battle, getting the government back under control was all Shacklebolt had time to do.

Severus had gone to Arthur Weasley, the only other Ministry official he knew that could help, and came away with the feeling he'd been given the brush off. Arthur had done it with polite courtesy, but his cold, brittle demeanour had been impossible to mistake. He was grieving for his lost sons, and he needed to hold someone accountable. Others shared Arthur's outlook; with the majority of the Death Eaters gone, the Granger-Snapes were convenient scapegoats for a multitude of evils. And while Severus didn't give a toss what they thought of him, it occurred to him it might be another reason he was experiencing this maddening delay.

Each day Severus waited outside Shacklebolt's door, from the moment the workday began until the Minister's undersecretary told him that Minister Shacklebolt had left for the day. "Did you tell him I was here?" he fumed, and each time he was answered with an indifferent shrug. No one sympathised with double agents.

In the end, it took the Boy-Who-Lived-Again, Harry Potter, to cloak his sins and demand an audience. Harry had finally pried himself away from reporters and the Weasleys long enough to be of any use to anyone.

"I'm sorry to be the cause of such conflict," Severus said, lying. He could not bring himself to feel much sympathy while his wife languished alone and wounded in Azkaban. "It was never my intention..." he trailed off.

"I know. You're not to blame, Severus," Harry replied bleakly. "The Weasleys are good people, but they're hurting. They need time to recover. Ginny will come around. And if she doesn't, well," Harry shrugged. "Asking me to turn my back on you two was too much, especially after what she did to Hermione."

Ginevra Weasley had not been happy to learn Harry planned to assist the Granger-Snapes. The atrocities she claimed had been performed on her at Hogwarts while Severus had been Headmaster were beyond disturbing. She was still angry and consumed by the bitterness of losing two of her brothers while Severus and Hermione both survived. When asked, she boldly admitted she had been the one to call the Aurors in. She had been glad to hex Hermione into unconsciousness so that they could take her to prison.

"I pray she will come around," Severus replied out of politeness, but inside he fumed. It was a pity Miss Weasley was too young and foolish to realise that revenge never paid dividends commensurate to the cost. *No matter how much you pile on our plate, your brothers will not return in exchange. And now it looks as though it will cost you Harry Potter as well.*

"In any case, I couldn't just sit there if I could actually help," Harry said to the plush carpet in the Minister's antechamber. "You and Hermione saved my life. I can't let her spend one extra second in Azkaban if I can help it."

Severus knew he was supposed to say words of gratitude, but he couldn't summon the energy. His heart was so heavy and full of dread he was surprised it was still capable of beating. While he waited and begged and despaired during the weeks following the battle, he had lived on coffee and fear. He couldn't afford to expend any time or regard for anyone but Hermione.

"Mr. Potter? The Minister will see you now," announced the undersecretary, who gave Severus a sneer of derision as he followed Potter into the office.

"Harry, Severus! I'm sorry you've been kept waiting." Kingsley Shacklebolt shook their hands, and waved them toward a set of chairs. "Please, sit. Tea?"

"No. Thank you," Severus replied, trying to hold onto his temper. "Minister, I've been trying for weeks to talk to you. Hermione is rotting in Azkaban..."

"I know, Severus, I know," Shacklebolt interrupted, holding up a large, dark hand. "I promise I've not been avoiding you."

"Why is it that people only say such things when it's obvious they have?"

Shacklebolt didn't even have the decency to look affronted. "The Wizengamot was petitioned to incarcerate your wife by several influential wizards and witches. The law gives them the right to do so, but it also gives Hermione the right to a fair trial."

"And how fair a trial do you expect her to have, with these anonymous 'influential wizards and witches' baying for her blood?" Severus asked harshly.

The Minister stilled. "I'm going to be honest with you, Severus. Hermione Granger stands accused of murdering Albus Dumbledore. She has confessed to it, and there are witnesses who watched her do it."

"But Albus demanded..."

"Witnesses saw Albus Dumbledore plead for his life, saw her perform the Killing Curse. The evidence is damning, and even more so in the present climate." He took off his glasses. "You disappeared with You-Know-Who into some parallel place, Severus. You came back alone with only your word that he is dead. And any Death Eater who could attest to that fact is dead at the hands of his own 'brothers'."

"Lucius and Draco Malfoy..."

"Are *persona non grata* with the Ministry right now."

"But there has to be something we can do," Harry said, his earnest face set in grim lines.

Shacklebolt looked at the two men. "If I can persuade the Wizengamot to allow her a speedy trial, you may have a shot. If not, I'm afraid..." he raised his hands in a conciliatory gesture.

Severus closed his eyes and reached out for his precious wife. As if far, far down a well, he imagined he could hear her plaintive cry for him. He thought of his pledge to protect her at the expense of their lives. He had never once considered he would be protecting her from the so-called good guys.

*Hold on, lass. I'm coming. And I will get you out of this, I swear on my life.*

He stood. "Get that trial scheduled. And grant me permission to visit her, as often and for as long as I like."

"Severus, I..."

"Do it, Minister!" Harry Potter barked, surprising the older men in the room. His green eyes were snapping fire. "What the bloody hell good is being the bloody Minister of this bloody country if you can't give this man visiting rights to see his wife? And remind these bloody 'influential witches and wizards' that while they were cowering in their homes, afraid of getting their wands dirty, Hermione Granger-Snape was discovering the spell we needed to win the bloody war!"

---

Severus took a Calming Draught before he and Harry boarded the ferry to Azkaban. He had spent a month imprisoned there, after the first time Tom Riddle had disappeared, and he could still remember the mind-numbing terror the place had evoked in him. He had been only a little older than Hermione, and Dumbledore had been his salvation. How it rankled that the old man was now his wife's downfall.

They entered the prison on the ground floor, a dank, damp place, where a grim custodian took their wands and cloaks. "Warden Oswald's expecting you," he grunted, pointing down the hall. "Last door on the left."

Harry left him at the door. "I'll see what I can do to chivvy them up about her belongings." Severus nodded, and tapped on the Warden's door.

Warden Oswald, a large wizard in his late fifties, was sitting at his cluttered desk, reading Hermione's release parchment as Severus entered his office. His close-cropped hair was iron grey, and he glanced up at Severus with hard blue eyes before returning to the document. "Be right with you, sir," he mumbled. "Have a seat. Langley?"

A blond prison guard appeared in the doorway. "Yes, gov'nor?"

"Some tea for our guest." As they waited, Severus' eyes fell on a brass placard on the warden's desk which read, 'Cedric D. Oswald, Warden-In-Chief.' "An unusual name in the Wizarding world, 'Cedric.' I had a student by that name. Cedric Diggory."

"My godson, Mr. Snape," Oswald answered, his eyes still roaming the parchment before him. "Amos Diggory and I went to Hogwarts together. Terrible thing, that." He sighed as he set the parchment aside and took off his half-moon spectacles. He looked keenly at Severus. His Occlumency shields were water-tight. "So many tragedies these past few years. So many young people."

With more restraint than he thought himself capable, Severus asked, "How is Hermione? Is she eating well? Is she alright?" A bubble of fear welled into his throat, and he had to swallow to prevent himself from choking.

"Mrs. Snape is..." he stopped just as the guard returned with a tray of tea and a few biscuits. "Thank you, Alton."

Once they were alone again, Oswald continued, "Mrs. Snape was only remanded here in custody, you understand. I think she will tell you she's been treated as well as a prisoner can be here. Of course, the Dementors are gone, but there is quite a bit of their residual energy left within the prison."

"I understand. I'd like to take her with me this afternoon," Severus answered automatically, staring at the teacup sitting on the warden's desk. The liquid within quivered, as if the ground beneath them hummed and rumbled, as if they were in the midst of a low-grade earthquake. The warden's cryptic statement had produced a similar sensation in his gut. "My wife has been here for a month. I don't want to think about what she has endured."

Oswald's stern features grew thoughtful. "Mr. Snape, as you may well imagine, I've seen many wizards and witches come to this prison. Some begged for mercy. Some still had their victim's blood on their hands. Some were even innocent. It isn't for me to judge what they've done or whether or not they are guilty. That's for the Wizengamot to decide."

"I understand," Severus answered again. He clenched his teeth, and disciplined himself to calm down, meeting the Warden's unrelenting stare with his own unflinching gaze.

"We watch new inmates very carefully, Mr. Snape, especially witches," Oswald was saying. "Your wife was a model prisoner, polite, patient, self-disciplined. She made a valiant effort to keep her mind and body healthy. Talked to herself, walked the perimeter of her cell, tried to catalogue events, that sort of thing. Her Occlumency shields were strong, and emotionally she was very grounded." He hesitated, then added, "If I may be permitted to say so, it is obvious that she is a witch who is loved and who loves a great deal."

Severus closed his eyes. "She is greatly loved, and is worthy of so much more. She is a good person, Warden."

He fixed Severus with a meaningful look. "This kept her strong for quite awhile. But Azkaban confuses and depresses even the toughest prisoners very quickly. They become disorientated. It's nothing to be ashamed of, Mr. Snape. Your wife fought it for a long time."

Severus' heart hammered in his chest. "I could never be ashamed of her," he said, and coloured at the whining tone of his voice. "Please tell me she's alright. Warden, I..." Tears sprang to his eyes, and he dashed them away impatiently.

"Mrs. Snape has been sleeping a great deal this past week; add to that the fact that her food intake has decreased quite dramatically, and it's not a good sign. To be honest, had a few more days passed, I would have petitioned the Minister myself."

Looking into Oswald's shrewd, pale eyes, Severus shook his head in confusion and fear. "Why?"

"Because that little girl is no murderer."

Severus rose clumsily to his feet. He bumped into the desk, causing the cold tea to slosh from its china cup. "Warden, please. I beg you," he entreated. "Please, no more. I need to go and take my wife home. A month of *this*..."

"Of course." Oswald looked solemnly at a photo on a nearby wall. It showed a younger version of the man. In his arms, he held a young boy of about ten. Cedric Diggory. He stood, and leaned in close to Severus. Quietly, he said, "You won't hear it from many, and I'll deny you heard it from me, but I know what you did. Both of you. I wasn't there, but I know plenty who were. If the courts decide she's guilty, I'll do whatever I can to help her here. I know the innocent ones, even if they have their victim's blood on their hands. I've been here long enough to hear what Azkaban has to say about each and every prisoner. And it tells me she's innocent."

He stepped away. "Langley!" he called. "Langley, please escort Mr. Snape to his wife's cell and prepare her for departure."

"Certainly, gov'nor," Langley replied, and nodded to Severus. "Come with me, sir."

They walked up several flights of stone stairs, the air growing colder with each step. "She's a nice lady, your missus," Langley said, as they ascended. "Azkaban's tough on witches, you know."

Severus nodded, unable to speak. The closer he approached, the more Hermione's despair and misery permeated his soul, until he could barely summon the strength to keep climbing.

---

*Hermione... Hermione! Lass, wake up! It's me!*

Hermione groaned and feebly pushed away the dream. "Leave me alone. Just for one night."

"Gods! Oh, lass, what has happened to you?" Hermione blearily opened her eyes, and promptly shut them. This was a familiar, sweet deception: a dream in which Severus was holding her. It was so vivid she could actually smell his warm, spicy scent, hear his beautiful voice in her mind. She burrowed further into her thin blanket, clutching the dream like a comforting teddy.

"Hermione, for the love of Merlin, open your eyes! It's me, love! I've come to take you home."

Hermione blinked to clear her vision. As sweet as the dream was, the longing for home was enough to chance waking. She tentatively reached out, and when her fingertips made contact with the warm, rough skin of her husband's jaw, she croaked, "S-Severus? Are you real?"

The embrace convinced her he was real enough. As they touched, his thoughts flooded into her tattered mind like a warm summer breeze. Joy and anguish, and anger and relief, indignation and love; every emotion was sharp and sweet, and they healed and soothed her as they washed over her. Her vision cleared, and she looked up into the beloved face, all harsh angles and clean defined lines. His eyes, so dark and full of devotion, were wet with tears. "Severus," she said, "did you say home?"

He gave her a tremulous smile, and the hungry tentacles of Azkaban no longer held sway over her soul. "Yes, lass. We're going home."

---

Granting Hermione's house arrest hadn't come a moment too soon, though the timing was less than ideal for Harry. While they waited for a trial date, he insisted they stay with him at Grimmauld Place. He'd even insisted on vouchsafing for Hermione, but Shackbolt had still made them both take a wand oath that the Granger-Snapes wouldn't leave the country before the trial. "I had to work too damn hard to get it; I'm not going to risk my career or my reputation on you two doing a runner on me and mucking everything up," he'd growled.

Harry also invited Hermione's parents to live there as well, at least until they could find a new house of their own. As well-meaning and helpful as this gesture was, it drove the final wedge between Harry and the Weasleys. When Ginny found out the entire Granger-Snape family was now residing at Grimmauld, she issued an ultimatum: if they stayed, Harry would no longer be welcome at the Burrow. Even Ron refused to back up Harry this time.

Harry was understandably saddened by the turn of events, but stubborn enough not to back down. "I don't want to appear ungrateful to the Weasleys," he'd explained, "but I'm not going to argue with Ginny while she's being this unreasonable. She'll come around." Severus gave up all pretense of having patience with the girl. To him it was a petty drama, and Ginevra's petulance seemed more about asserting her power over Harry Potter than with the difference between right and wrong.

It took almost another month of care before Hermione was able to shake off the hideous effects of the prison. All through the first week, she had paced the house as restlessly as an animal, until Severus Apparated them to a rundown old dog track near Spinner's End and allowed her to walk the poison out of her system.

With Poppy's help, she slept peacefully, and gradually the nightmares tapered off. Hours spent communicating through their mental link restored her peace of mind, and Jean Granger's good cooking elevated everyone's mood; it was easier to feel optimistic on a full, satisfied stomach.

The five of them lived comfortably in the old house, and for a man who had once resigned himself to a solitary, unhappy existence, Severus found life surrounded by the Gryffindorish clan surprisingly peaceful. Even Harry Potter no longer rubbed him the wrong way.

Sometimes, in the evenings when they all sat around the table in the tiny, narrow kitchen talking over tea and Jean Granger's scones, the sweet feeling of being part of a loving family would threaten to overwhelm him with emotion. During those times, he would quietly leave the room and stand outside, cursing himself for the sappy fool he was. Hermione always found him, and they held one another until he was able to return.

Now that it was no longer Secret-kept, Grimmauld was full of visitors. It became a refuge for Remus Lupin, who would sometimes bring his infant son round to visit and be fussed over by the women. Filius Flitwick stopped by, filling them in on the slow-going restoration of the school. And everyone who walked through the door, be they Slytherin or Gryffindor, Hogwarts professor or friend, had one common goal: to keep Hermione Granger-Snape out of Azkaban.

On the evening before Hermione's trial, Severus answered a knock at the door to discover the Malfoys, who had come calling to show Hermione their support. They were a quiet, sad little trio standing on the steps, and it was strange to see Lucius waiting so patiently, like a salesman hoping to be invited in. Lucius Malfoy, who had always strode breezily through life, expecting all doors to automatically open for him, because they always had.

They were also under strict orders not to leave the country, and bore their new place in Wizarding society with simple, stoic dignity, like royalty in exile. "I'm sure things will settle down soon, Lucius," Severus offered. With a wry smile, he added, "You always had the ability to fall in a bucket of shit and come out smelling like a rose."

"A rose in need of a garden, Severus," Lucius replied, cryptically. He had never regained the bold arrogance of his earlier days. Instead, a quieter, more resigned Lucius sat at the table, listening to the talk around him, his eyes faintly clouded with longing. *He doesn't believe he will ever find a place for himself again*, thought Severus. Just then, his mother-in-law said something to Narcissa, which brought a ghost of a smile to her lips. Almost unconsciously she placed her hand on her husband's and squeezed gently.

Beneath the table, he felt Hermione's hand slip into his and he held on to her like a lifeline *if we wizards eventually gain any measure of success, it will be because of the fine women by our side, not our own impotent little struggles*.

Later, after their guests departed and the rest of the house were abed, Severus and Hermione made love feverishly, frantically, their coupling full of passion and power and terror. Afterward, wrapped in one another's arms so tightly they could barely breathe, their tears mingling on one another's cheeks, Severus whispered, "I cannot live without you, witch."

She shook her head. "You will never be without me, Severus Snape. I'm in your blood, and you're in mine."

*I can't let you go to prison. I won't.*

Her eyes met his, and he saw the fear of a young, healthy woman in her full bloom, aching, yearning to live free *Don't let them take me to Azkaban again*.

Tears poured from his closed eyes. *So be it, lass. Either you walk out free, or neither of us will walk out at all.*

She kissed him then, and whispered, "Thank you."

---

Severus remembered the evening of the final battle, thinking how it would all be over in twenty-four hours. How ironic that twenty four hours later the battle had only truly begun for them.

The lift doors opened, and Severus walked into the courtroom. In the centre of the room, seated in that awful chair, Hermione looked as vulnerable as a child. She met his eye, and he nodded. *I love you*.

She smiled encouragingly as the Wizengamot shuffled through their papers and the Minister struck the gavel. "The court will come to order." As the whispers and rustling died down, Kingsley Shacklebolt announced, "Hermione Granger-Snape, you stand accused of the murder of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, using the Unforgivable Killing Curse. How do you plead?"

Her voice was calm and steady. "Not guilty."

The court disrupted into angry murmurs, and Severus realised just how few friends they had to support them. The Ministry needed Hermione to be found guilty. Tom Riddle was gone; they needed someone to vilify. Shackbolt struck the gavel again. "Order! I will have order."

As the angry buzzing voices died down, the Minister said, "These are very serious accusations, Mrs. Granger-Snape. Witnesses corroborated the evidence. There are several who stand here to accuse you." His voice rose in the room. "Is there anyone who will rise to defend the accused?"

There was a commotion from the rear of the courtroom as two burly bailiffs came in, carrying two huge portraits, which were faced outward toward the Wizengamot. "Obviously I would stand, but I don't think you'd be able to tell the difference," Albus' portrait-self announced, his eyes twinkling.

"Well, I'm going to stand for Hermione, and I'd like to see you stop me, Kingsley," Minerva McGonagall announced tartly from inside her new frame. She turned to Severus. "Never worry dear. We've brought the cavalry." Like the great witch she had been, Minerva's portrait cried out, "Now, who'll stand with me?"

"I will stand," Severus announced, and rose to his feet.

"So will I," Harry Potter added, and even as he rose Remus Lupin jumped to his feet to add his support. Neville Longbottom was next, and then dozens more witches and wizards moved forward. Severus looked around in stunned disbelief as the declaration carried from one person to the next. Filius, Pomona Sprout. Poppy Pomfrey. Aberforth Dumbledore. Luna and Xenophilius Lovegood. More and more people entered through the door, until the courtroom was ringed with supporters. Severus' heart swelled, and he risked a glance at Hermione, who was peering into each face, her eyes brimming with tears.

Another voice from the back called out. "I will stand, and so will my family." Severus turned to see the Weasley clan join the group, including Bill and Fleur. Ginevra, he noticed, chose not to stand with her family.

In the hushed atmosphere of the courtroom, the Minister looked at the sea of faces and intoned, "Please be seated."

Three drops of Veritaserum were placed on Hermione's tongue, and Severus watched anxiously as her pupils contracted, then dilated. The Minister announced, "Prosecution, you may proceed."

Cornelius Fudge stood up, and Severus' heart sank. He and Fudge had notoriously butted heads over the years, and Fudge was a petty politician who carried a grudge a mile long and a fathom deep.

He looked positively smug as he approached Hermione. "Mrs. Granger-Snape, did you or did you not cast the Unforgivable Killing Curse on Albus Dumbledore?"

Hermione did not hesitate. "Yes." The room buzzed uneasily.

"Objection," Severus replied, standing. "Hermione Granger-Snape may have cast the curse, but she could not have killed Albus Dumbledore."

Fudge looked as if something vile-smelling had been wafted under his nose. "Oh? And how can this be?"

"Because I killed him."

"Order!" The Minister roared, as the room erupted. "I will have order!" He glared at Severus. "Now, Mr. Granger-Snape. What is the meaning of this?"

Severus waited until the room grew quiet. Years of teaching recalcitrant students had taught him how to use his compelling voice, and he waited with cold, imperious calm as the restless group quieted. Softly, he announced, "I wish to confess."

"Severus, no!"

"Hermione, please, I beg of you," he insisted. He turned back to the Minister's chair. "Albus Dumbledore was already dying when the Curse was performed; dying from a potion I created."

"Explain," Shacklebolt replied warily.

"When I was first indoctrinated into the Death Eaters, I was approached by Tom Riddle and ordered to create a Dark Potion. It was made to his exact specifications. It produced dangerous, psychologically damaging visions; it was excruciatingly painful to ingest. It eventually killed whoever drank it. Albus Dumbledore ingested this potion on the night he died. He was almost dead by the time Hermione confronted him."

*CLACK!* The gavel sounded like a clap of thunder. "Must I empty this courtroom?" Kingsley snapped at the restless, dissatisfied crowd. As they silenced, he turned his attention back to Severus. "Did Albus know what this potion was?"

"He did."

"And may I ask why an intelligent wizard like Albus Dumbledore would ingest a potion he knew would kill him? Did you personally force him to drink it?"

"No, I did!"

The courtroom nearly exploded as Harry Potter leapt to his feet. Shacklebolt pounded the gavel so hard Severus thought it was going to shatter.

"Another outburst like that and I'm throwing out the lot of you!" Kingsley bellowed, his dark eyes flashing. "Alright, Harry, what is the meaning of this? Explain yourself. And you lot keep quiet or I'll *Silencio* you all!" he warned to the excited assembly.

Harry stood, and for the better part of an hour, told the court nearly everything that had happened during his sixth year at Hogwarts, starting with the black, hideous mark on Dumbledore's hand. He explained Voldemort's Horcruxes. He even mentioned the day he almost killed Draco with Sectumsempra.

He told how, on the night of Albus' death, he'd learned that Severus Snape had overheard the prophecy regarding Voldemort and himself. He explained that Hermione had begged to speak with him, but in his anger he refused to listen. "She was trying to tell me the truth, but I was too upset. Then Professor Dumbledore asked me to go with him to destroy another Horcrux."

He glanced at the portrait, and continued, "When we arrived at the cave, the Horcrux was at the bottom of a stone basin filled with potion. The Professor told me to force him to drink it all, no matter what he said or did." Harry sighed. "It was horrible. I knew it was making him see dreadful things. He was in so much pain. He begged me to stop, but I made him drink every last drop. By the time we returned to Hogwarts, he was too weak to stand. I didn't realise it at the time, but he was dying. I didn't want to believe it. He had always seemed so indestructible and strong. But he kept his secrets, and maybe if he had told me the truth, we wouldn't be here today."

With tears in his eyes, Harry went on. "When we arrived at the top of the tower, the Headmaster begged me to find Professor Snape. That was all he would say. 'Go and fetch Severus!' I went to find the professor, but then Draco Malfoy and several Death Eaters arrived. Draco was the one Voldemort wanted to do the deed, but I disarmed him. Then Severus came, and Professor Dumbledore pleaded with him. I still hear it in my dreams." He turned to Severus. "I thought he was pleading for his life, but he wasn't, was he? He was pleading for you to end it. He was in agony."

Wordlessly, Severus nodded, his heart heavy with the remembrance of that night. Trying to summon the courage to cast the Curse, hearing Dumbledore taunting him; then hearing the words scissor through the air like flying razors...

The courtroom was finally quiet when Dumbledore's portrait spoke. The voice was infinitely sad. "You all did what you were asked, dear boy. Draco and you, and Severus and Hermione. But the only person who took my life was me."

The portrait held up his hand. Even in the portrait, his hand was black, as the vile curse crept eternally over his fingers. Dumbledore addressed the crowd. "I discovered

that one of Tom Riddle's Horcruxes was his grandfather's signet ring. In my pride, I placed the ring on my finger. I thought it would give me power over him. Instead, its curse rotted me from the inside out. The corruption could not be halted; it was killing me, and nothing could stop it.

"It was then I devised a plan to forever cement the Granger-Snapes into Tom Riddle's mind as his true followers. If Severus killed me, Tom Riddle would reward him. Sadly, it meant Severus would forever be regarded as a traitor to the Order, but I had to send him where he was needed. Draco's soul would have been spoiled by murder, Severus' would be tempered by mercy.

"Thus, with me gone, Severus was a natural choice to head Hogwarts, and therefore could protect the children, including Harry. Soon, I knew, I would be unable to protect anyone, including myself. The Killing Curse was assisted suicide."

The mutterings of the witches and wizards in the courtroom were subdued, for fear of the Minister's wrath, but Severus could feel their uncertainty. Albus had always been a controversial figure, alternately revered and reviled.

The Minister glared at the Wizengamot and once again they fell silent. "And are their witnesses who can corroborate these facts in a Pensieve?"

"Yes," Severus and Harry said together.

"I have one question for the accused," Kingsley continued, and the crowd turned their focus back on Hermione. "If Severus was charged with making this dumbshow of killing Dumbledore, why was it you who cast the Killing Curse?"

Hermione stood, and the courtroom became as silent as a tomb. With her eyes locked on the Minister, she said, "On the day Severus came to me and told me what Professor Dumbledore wanted him to do, I thought about something my husband had once told me. When he realised that the Potters were targeted as a result of the prophecy he'd given to Tom Riddle, he left the Death Eaters forever. Because of his love for Lily Evans Potter, he got down on his knees before Albus Dumbledore and begged him to do anything in his power to save her. He sold his soul to Dumbledore that night, on the promise that she would be protected. And we all know what happened to her."

She turned to the portrait. "I've often wondered about that, Professor. You knew that entire prophecy better than anyone. And you knew which part of the prophecy Tom Riddle knew. Would you have been willing to sacrifice the Potters to ensure the prophecy was fulfilled? Would you have allowed the Potter family to die for your Greater Good?"

The portrait's voice was crabbed and defensive. "Did I know what would happen? Of course not. Of course I wanted to protect the Potters. But in the end, I will admit I used their martyrdom to ensure Severus' loyalty. Do not forget, Mrs. Granger-Snape; I kept him out of Azkaban. That's more than Severus has done for you."

There was an audible gasp, and Severus clenched his fists. Hermione addressed the portrait with narrow-eyed contempt. "Do not dare presume to know what my husband has done for me, Professor. He defended me when you dismissed me outright. He saved my life over and over, many times. You made him believe he wasn't worthy of love or care, but he loved and cared for me far more than you will ever understand. When I thought my parents had been killed, he became everything to me: father, mother, brother, husband, son. And I became everything to him.

"When he told me you ordered him to kill you, I knew the world would forever brand him a traitor and a murderer, and I couldn't allow you to do that to this fine, fine wizard." She turned back to Shackbolt. "Voldemort didn't really care who killed the headmaster, as long as he was dead. So Dumbledore and I made a pact. He would sanction our marriage, and in turn, I would be the one to set his twisted, convoluted plan in motion."

She turned to Severus, her eyes shining with love. "I realised at that moment exactly how you had felt about Lily. You had been willing to do anything to protect her. And I knew then I would do anything to keep you safe, even if it meant I would be forever known as a murderer."

"You cannot murder a dead man, child," Dumbledore's portrait replied softly, his voice full of honest regret. He looked up at the members of the court. "You must understand this, if you understand nothing else: *This witch is no murderer*. We were in a war, and she was a soldier. I was her commander, and I gave her an order. I beg of you, please do not condemn her for carrying out my order in a time of war."

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They sat, knee to knee, holding hands. The small antechamber was a few doors down from the courtroom, and it was blessedly quiet after the noisy din they'd left behind. Severus gratefully held onto the solitude for as long as it was given to them. Hermione was smiling at him, and his heart swelled. *My brave girl. How did I live my life without you?*

She took a deep, bracing breath. "I hope they won't take too much time arriving at a verdict. The suspense is making me feel sick."

He nodded. "When they release you..."

"If, Severus."

"*When* they release you," he repeated stubbornly, "We're getting out of here. Your parents are welcome to join us, but we're quitting Britain."

"Oh, really?" There was a hint of playfulness in her voice, as if it were a game. "And where are you taking me, my husband?"

He caressed her cheek. "Where no one can see us..."

She grasped his hand and kissed it. "Where no one can find us..."

He touched his lips to hers. They trembled against his mouth. "Where no one can hurt you."

The door opened, and still they remained close, uncaring of the rest of the world. Harry Potter said quietly, "They've asked me to fetch you. They're ready to hand down the verdict."

Severus felt Hermione shudder. They stood and held one another. "My back to yours," she whispered.

They walked with their arms about one another down the short hall and back into the courtroom. When a wizard tried to separate them, Severus hissed, "Don't touch her. You don't have the right."

"Yet," the wizard spat, then walked away.

Kingsley Shackbolt resumed his seat and banged the gavel. The courtroom immediately grew quiet. After a brief moment, he began. "I have fought now in two wars against You-Know-Who and his followers; I do not ever wish to fight again. I have seen strong men turn craven; I have seen brave men die horribly.

"There are those who openly fight for the light and against injustice. Others must fight in the shadows. They are called unsavoury names like spy and turncoat, but their role is no less important than the soldier standing proud at the front line. Their actions and motivations are sometimes difficult to understand, because we can't always see the full picture. But their work is no less vital to win the war.

"Hermione Granger-Snape, will you approach the bench?"

Together, Severus and Hermione walked together. The Minister looked down on them, his dark face impassive. "Albus Dumbledore and I used to play chess, you know. He was a daring and tricky opponent; I rarely won. He never gave anything away until it was too late, and I was in check. He always played his most perilous moves near the

end of the game, and he never hesitated in sacrificing a vital piece if it ensured certain victory. 'The battlefield is in our hearts', he used to say. 'If you cannot play to win; play to not lose.'

"Now, I have listened to testimony. I have viewed Pensieve memories. That Dumbledore set this incredible plan in motion doesn't surprise me, and neither does the fact that you were compromised enough to surrender your reputation and your future to his Greater Good. War is not pretty, and it is not sane. And it takes a strong person to do perform ugly acts of insanity in order to win.

"This court finds the defendant guilty of casting the Killing Curse. The sentence is a term of one month in Azkaban." Shacklebolt's mouth twitched. "Including time served."

The assembly roared like a Quidditch crowd, their voices frantic with equal amounts of joy and displeasure. The gavel struck again. "Case dismissed!"

Hermione gasped, then looked up at Severus, the shock written plainly on her face. "Lass, you're free," he breathed, and threw his arm around her. Her knees buckled, but he held her upright, as dozens of friends and colleagues rushed to encircle them. Hermione's parents were the first to throw their arms around their daughter; Harry, Ron and half of Wizarding Britain soon joined them.

In the wild rush of elation, Severus looked down into Hermione's face, and kissed her as if they were the only people in the world.

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## Epilogue

He sat watching the girl sleep. It wasn't necessary, he told himself, but he couldn't stop himself. She sighed in her sleep, and kicked the cover away from her body. There was a slight sheen of sweat on her forehead, and his sensitive nose detected the sweet, mouth-watering tang of her sex. He stirred and hardened, wanting her, always wanting her.

It had been a warm night, and the nearby lake had infused the night air with moist warmth, like a sauna. He smirked at the growing kinks in her already-unmanageable hair. He was tempted to brush the loose tendrils from her slightly shiny face, but he was afraid it would cause her to stir. She looked so peaceful, he was loathe to disturb her slumber. He wasn't there to wake her. He was there to watch over her. A sweet contentment enveloped him, and soon he drifted off, his erection growing flaccid.

They had traveled to several places, searching for this. Oman, Lybia, Peru, China, Brazil. In Mongolia they found it. They had taken one look at Khar Nuur, and knew it was the soft, inviting oasis of their desert dreaming. They located the magical district, and pitched their tent near the water's edge.

Their pale British skin turned ruddy, then brown. Their hair grew long and tangled, except when they bothered to perform Severus' hair taming spell. They drew beautiful patterns on one another's hands and feet with henna; they lined their eyes with kohl to cut the desert glare. They cast cooling charms to keep themselves comfortable, and unwittingly presented an enchanting picture to magical folk and Muggles alike: two exotic, otherworldly people walking among the market stalls and traders of Khar Nuur, wrapped up in their own private world.

During the year that followed, they rutted, fucked, teased, treasured, and exalted one another to their heart's content. They were blissfully anonymous and gloriously happy: eating, sleeping, making love, planning the future and forgetting the war.

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Severus lolled on the heaps of pillows and cushions that served as their desert bed, and watched Hermione approach from the water. Heat made her silhouette shimmer, and the soft breeze caught her gauzy crimson robe and lifted it like the fluttering wing of a bird. Severus had already removed his own lightweight robe; it was carefully packed away with the rest of their belonging in readiness for their trip home.

She entered the tent, bearing a hammered-metal tray of ripe, golden apples, dates, goat's cheese, figs, flatbreads, and a flagon of wine. "Arslandorj had such gorgeous ripe figs at his stall today, so I went a little overboard. We can take some with us for the journey." She turned, and the sight of her heavy, swollen belly affected him as it always did. She would soon be too far along for any fun and games, so he was determined to pleasure her in every way while he still could.

With a groan, she sat the tray down on a low table near their pillow-bed. Severus helped her to undress, and renewed the cooling charm that kept the inside of the tent at a perfect temperature for Hermione's fluctuating hormones. She lay down beside him with a grateful sigh. "I'm getting too fat for these cushions anyway. I'm getting tired of the upturned-turtle dance every time I need to get up."

"I'll help you stand up," he replied lazily, tucking an extra pillow behind her back.

"Soon I'll be too huge to lift. I'm already a cow."

He kissed the pout from her lips. "You look divine, lass, and you know it." She was so beautiful like this: uninhibited, unhurried, undressed. He caressed every inch of her ripe lush body. She was sweeter than any fruit he had ever tasted, and as heady as any wine he had every imbibed. *Oh, my sweet girl... I cannot get enough of you!* He moaned with pleasure, even as she burst, ripe and sweet, on his tongue. Later, lying spooned together, they made slow sensual love, reaching their blistering peak in the white-hot Mongolian sun.

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"I'm going to miss Khar Nuur," Severus admitted, as their drank to their last day in the desert. "Returning to England is going to be strange."

"No stranger than leaving it," Hermione replied, gulping the cool water thirstily. Sex always left her parched. "Besides, Mum and Dad would never forgive us if we had this baby somewhere they couldn't reach." She gave a soft moan of approval as he caressed her swollen stomach. "And Hogwarts needs you."

Severus snorted. "Needs me to be the new whipping boy, more like. I still can't believe those dunderheads petitioned for me to return. Have they lost their collective minds?"

Hermione smiled. She knew he was secretly pleased, but old Snape-ish habits died hard. "It's not as though they had a choice, did they?"

Two months before, a Glossy Ibis had appeared, arriving on the edge of a dust storm. It had slammed headlong into their tent with such force, its long beak pierced a hole in the canvas. Severus had repaired the tent, and was smoothing the bird's ruffled feathers when he noticed the parchment tied to its leg. As soon as they read the contents of Kingsley Shacklebolt's message, they knew their simple, desert life was about to change.

Quite simply put, the school had decided that it wanted Severus to return as Headmaster. He had always suspected the castle was sentient; he could have received no greater confirmation than on the day of the battle, when the castle's wards and defense reset after Minerva's death.

Now, it seemed Hogwarts would not allow any other headmaster to take the helm. Doors would not open. Wards would not reset. The castle petulantly refused to cooperate with any of the governors or its staff. Rebuilding work had ground to a halt, because the castle would not allow itself to be rebuilt.

Baffled, Filius, Pomona, Horace and the newly-named Head of Gryffindor, Bill Weasley, finally managed to gain access to the Headmaster's study. There, they confronted the former Heads and asked for guidance.

*"Isn't it obvious, you thick little man?" Phineas Nigellus Black drawled contemptuously. "The castle is pining for its Master."*

*"Who, sir?" Horace enquired.*

*"Why, that Slytherin brat, of course. Severus Snape-Granger, or whatever he's calling himself nowadays. If you don't get him and his little Mudblood wife to come back, you*

*might as well turn the place into an aquarium."*

"The other portraits corroborated Black's suggestion," Kingsley wrote. "And when the spell was cast to name you Headmaster, the bally place lit up like a Christmas tree. If it had been a dog, its tail would have been wagging."

"It seems that dear Hogwarts was content to pine away while we scratched our heads and tried ineffective healing charms. It simply waited until we got it into our thick skulls what it wanted. Either you must return, or the school will not reopen."

For days, Severus and Hermione talked of the changes it would make to their lives, and if he really wanted to put up with Hogwarts again. The ibis patiently waited while they decided. They nicknamed him *Nergüi*, which meant "*no name*", and he remained with them until Severus penned his reluctant reply. "We might as well have a job when we go back," he grumbled, talking to Hermione's bump. "I won't have any child of mine begging for knuts and sickles in Diagon Alley."

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They Apparated to the old point just outside the perimeter of Hogwarts, pausing a moment until their first-to-be-born stopped kicking her ribs. "I don't think he likes Apparation any more than I do," Hermione announced. With a nod of thanks she accepted the Anti-Nausea Potion Severus had packed just in case. Once her stomach had settled, she put her arms around him, and he held her as close as their unborn child would allow. "Before we reach the castle, I want to tell you something. Something I need to say out loud."

"You sound serious," Severus replied warily.

"I am," she answered. She turned the full battery of her lovely eyes up at him. "I want to tell you how proud I am of you. How proud I am to be your wife."

Abashed, he ducked his head. "You... you could have had any wizard. Any man would be proud to have you..."

"Oh, Severus, why would I want any wizard? I get to spend my life with the most powerful, charismatic, beautiful wizard of our age. I get to have his children. I get to make love to the man of my dreams." She pulled his head down into a kiss. "I'm the luckiest witch in the world."

They held one another for a long time. Severus tried to speak several times and failed, but within their link, he poured out his gratitude, his joy, and his fears *Give them to me, Severus. Together we'll face them. And we'll win every time.*

Reluctantly he pulled away. "As much as I would prefer to stay here with you, we have a castle to placate." Together they looked up at the highest tower, and resumed their trudging journey up the hill toward Hogwarts. *I can't help but feel we're heading to our doom.*

*Don't look at it that way, dear. Think of it as prison with benefits.*

"Let me know if you grow too tired," he said, as the terrain's incline grew steeper.

"I'm not tired," Hermione replied, puffing slightly. "But hold on to me in case I trip and fall. I'd probably roll all the way into Hogmeade before you could catch me."

Severus laughed out loud, and it was his laughter that alerted Hagrid inside the gates. "Blimey, they're here!" He turned toward the castle and bellowed, "They're early! C'mon, you lot! The Headmaster 'n Mistress is here!"

The massive gates swung open by unseen command, and Severus looked up again at the school that had been so many things to him. "And to think, I never dreamed I'd clap eyes on this place again," he murmured. No sooner had the words left his lips than a huge rumbling vibration rose from beneath their feet and throughout the grounds. It was an excited, happy feeling, like the castle thrumming to life.

As if on cue, the clouds parted, and the sun shone down on the castle, bathing it in gleaming, pearly light. They looked upward, and in every window, they could see faces of house-elves, ghosts, faculty, and all were smiling and waving at them. Hermione waved back, and Severus nodded in acknowledgement. A wonderful smell wafted through the air, like home cooking and baking and hospitality. To be greeted in such an auspicious manner was almost unnerving.

*Don't think like that. They are happy to see you, Severus. You deserve this.*

Hagrid escorted them up the steps, helping Hermione, who was definitely flagging. "There's not been a baby born in Hogwarts in the past two hundred and four year. Looked it up myself," he said proudly. His black eyes were moist. "This is a happy day. Welcome home, Perfesser."

*Home. I have come home.*

Severus gasped, trying to maintain his dignity, but his heart was so full it felt as if it would burst. Hogwarts had taken him in, it had protected him. Within its walls, he'd grown from a child to adult. He had met this glorious witch, and she had made him a man. It was where he belonged: here, in this loving place, with all its secret treacheries and soft, sweet acceptance of everyone who had a claim to a place within its sacred walls.

The night he had fled Hogwarts to rescue Hermione, he had left unfinished business. He could feel the deep, ancient magic, humming, alive, joyous, and needing *him* to feel whole again. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, and he at last understood why Hogwarts had called them home.

*My child, and every child who walks through these doors, will be surrounded by powerful human magic, and fostered in its loving embrace. No Hogwarts student will ever feel unloved or abused or afraid while I am here. I pledge to thee this vow,* he told the castle. He would finish what he started.

The tears of joy in Hermione's eyes matched his own and once more Severus thanked the silly, thoughtless gods for the beautiful, loving witch by his side. He took her hand, and together they walked through the doors of Hogwarts, like children returning to the arms of a loving mother.

Finis

*My life goes on in endless song*

*Above earth's lamentations,*

*I hear the real, though far-off hymn*

*That hails a new creation.*

*Through all the tumult and the strife*

*I hear it's music ringing,*

*It sounds an echo in my soul.*

*How can I keep from singing?*

*While though the tempest loudly roars,*

*I hear the truth, it liveth.*

*And though the darkness 'round me close,*

*Songs in the night it giveth.*

*No storm can shake my inmost calm,*

*While to that rock I'm clinging.*

*Since love is lord of heaven and earth*

*How can I keep from singing?*

*When tyrants tremble in their fear*

*And hear their death knell ringing,*

*When friends rejoice both far and near*

*How can I keep from singing?*

*In prison cell and dungeon vile*

*Our thoughts to them are winging,*

*When friends by shame are undefiled*

*How can I keep from singing?*

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Author's Notes:

I can't believe how emotional I am about finishing this story. While I will never make a penny from it, and while many will never know about it, it is the most important thing I have written or perhaps ever will write. This story has been my teacher and my partner, and I owe it more than I can articulate. Lay Me Low taught me how to be a writer.

The Prologue of Lay Me Low came about because of a beautiful song by the Albion Band, which you can find on YouTube ([http://youtu.be/ONDGv\\_PAog0](http://youtu.be/ONDGv_PAog0)). TheHubs(R) loved this album, and introduced me to this plaintive, heart-breaking song, this anguished plea for a hiding place. I had just finished a little story called The Black-Eyed Angel, and the music just sounded like it belonged to Severus Snape. It haunted me.

I wrote the Prologue with no idea of where this story was going. At the time, I was just learning to listen to and trust my Muse, Dahlra. It was an experiment between us; and every time I asked for a new chapter, he pushed me forward. As the story evolved, I realised I was writing a parallel canon story. But I couldn't stop it. It just kept flowing from my Muse to me.

Even now, there are parts of this story I don't honestly remember typing out - my Muse was driving, and I was essentially taking dictation. Consequently, those are the parts of the story I'm the most happy with; the parts in which I know I was trusting in my guide to help me.

One of the most puzzling aspects of this story (and one of the main reasons I ever got negative reviews) was the song lyrics. I was told by my Muse that each story must have a song to accompany it. I had no idea why, but again, I trusted him. I would be in a shopping mall and a song would come on over the loudspeaker, and he would say, "This one! This is the one for the new chapter!"

You have to understand that by the time I got to the part of the story in which it was revealed that the Hallows was actually a song-spell written by Beedle the Bard, no one was more surprised than me. Every chapter was given to me; there was no outline, no plot, no story arc. This story was given to me chapter by chapter by my Muse, and I had no idea where it was going until he took me there. I actually took almost a year between two of the later chapters, because I simply couldn't get up the nerve to write the battle scene, and he wasn't going to give me anything until other projects were completed. And the stuff I wrote on my own was just rubbish - none of it survived the cutting room floor.

During the past three years, several people volunteered to act as a temporary beta for LML; it was too huge to work on alone. Thank you, Talesofsnape, dharkcharlotte, and lilyevansnape, for stepping in and helping in the earlier chapters. Thank you also to Mimi Manderly, who inspired me by telling me that sometimes she knew something was the right thing to do simply because she was afraid to do it. That got me through many a chapter on my own.

Then, one day I got an email from Stgulik, who volunteered to be my permanent beta. Friends, I cannot tell you how much meeting this wonderful woman has changed my life. She is more than a beta; she is a friend, and advisor, a sister.

She taught me so much about writing, and trusting myself, and realising that the best betas will protect your story even from yourself. She truly is my Hermione Granger, and like Severus, I am a better person because of her. We have laughed, cried, argued and fangurled together, and I thank my lucky, lucky stars for her every single day. If I achieve and enjoy any success as a professional writer, and I truly hope to one day, it will largely be because of her.

Jules, I love you so damn much. There aren't enough words to thank you for all you've done.

I have received many art pieces based on different parts of this story. To each artist, I just want to say thank you. It is one of the greatest compliments a writer can receive.

And lastly, I wish to thank each and every person who took the time to read this epic, and write lovely notes of support and encouragement. You have been so patient and kind and caring, and I cannot thank you enough. I have treasured every word you have written to me.

At least two years ago I heard my dear friend Chris Branch sing his song, You and Me, and knew they were given to me for this last chapter. He was kind enough to grant permission for me to use them here. You can find this on his superb album "Letters From California" here: <http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/christopherbranch>

Jules gave me the title of this chapter, and I cried as I typed it. It summed up everything perfectly. I am happy to complete this story; I am sad as well, more so for the fact that I can never truly express just how much it means to me and how much it changed my life.

Lay Me Low is dedicated to Dahlra, my Muse, the keeper of my lifetimes. Every night I close my eyes in hopes I will see you again.