

Soothing Hands

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Rewritten: A story of healing, dedication, love and the reality of war. A PWP that ran away and developed a plot.

1. Levamentum

Chapter 1 of 13

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Disclaimer: Thank you, JK Rowling, for creating the characters and the basis upon which I elaborate, and for allowing me and hundreds of other writers to let them roam outside of their boundaries, if only for a little while.

Chapter One: Levamentum

It was Hermione's favourite time of night at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. Everyone had either gone home or gone to bed, leaving the ancient house to its own uneasy slumber. Finally, she was alone. There were no more demands. She was left to her own devices. Sighing in satisfaction, she savoured the solitude.

She knew it wasn't going to be easy being a Healer's apprentice, and that is why she had jumped at the challenge. All of her spare time was dedicated to the Order. She had made the House of Black her home. She had to admit that it lacked the many comforts of Hogwarts castle, if you could call the hard stone battlements comfortable, but this is where she felt needed. Some of the residents and frequent visitors had come to think of her as Mother Hermione, never mind that she had just turned twenty years old. Her status was second only to Molly Weasley.

Sitting at the timeworn wooden slab of a kitchen table, she finished brewing her own special blend of tea. The calming effect of the herbs radiated outward through her overworked limbs, and she closed her eyes for a scant second, welcoming the relief it brought to her aching muscles. One of her hands lovingly caressed the supple leather of the book in front of her as she allowed her body and mind to unwind. A week ago she had discovered that the Black family library had its own *Restricted Section* of sorts, and she had found an ancient book on charms and potions that healed Dark Arts spells. Of course, like many books that came before, it wound its way around her heart and she quickly became attached. When she wasn't reading it, she kept it shrunk in a pocket of her robes in case she had a minute to spare.

Her reverie was suddenly interrupted by a noise from the hallway. What sounded like a massive weight fell against the wall, and heavy footsteps stumbled toward the kitchen. Old Mother Black began her ear-shattering tirade only to be silenced...or rather stifled...with a mouthful of canvas by a quick swish-and-flick aimed through the closed door; it was a sneaky little charm Hermione had discovered. It was meant to prime a canvas, but it was quite useful in silencing the old hag. In a heartbeat, Hermione was at the entrance to the hallway where the footsteps had abruptly ceased. Holding her wand at the ready, she threw open the door only to find a hooded figure slumped on the floor.

She knelt by the fallen form, letting her hand touch the heavy black velvet of the hood. The figure beneath shuddered violently at her touch. Taking great care, she pulled back the hood to reveal a stark white Death Eater's mask framed by an erratic fringe of black hair. No matter how many times she had seen her ex-professor in his Death Eater garb, it still elicited within her a certain amount of visceral terror.

"Professor," she urged softly. "Can you hear me?"

He quaked beneath her fingers as she eased the mask over his head, revealing a long, pale face etched deep with lines of pain.

"Professor, let's get you off that hard floor. Come on." She kept her voice low and soothing, knowing his nerves were unable to handle any more stimulation than was absolutely necessary. They had been through this routine a few times, but she had never seen him in such a stricken state before. Her stomach filled with fear.

Knowing that any spell she used would only make his condition worse, Hermione coaxed him upward with light fingers. Legs shaking violently, he could do nothing but allow her to direct him into the kitchen where he slumped onto the nearest chair. Quickly, she poured another mug of her special brew in a feeble attempt to calm him, although she knew that he was too far gone to be helped by a simple cup of tea.

Nudging the mug toward him, she urged him to drink. His long fingers reached for it, but they trembled so terribly that she was afraid most of it would end up spilled over his robes. Not that it mattered much with the condition they were already in.

"Please let me help, Professor," she spoke gently, guiding the mug to his mouth.

After a few agonizing moments of tipping the tepid tea past his quivering lips, he seemed to relax ever so slightly. He was still miserable with pain, but his features had softened a bit and he had regained a modicum of control.

"Thank you," he croaked between spasms of pain. She sat down in the chair next to his. Seeing him in this much pain made her feel nearly hysterical with helplessness. She had to calm herself before she spoke. She didn't want him to know how much he was scaring her.

"What did they do to you? Is this all from the Cruciatus?" she asked gently, schooling the panic from her tone.

"Among other things," he sobbed as the next wave of pain shot through his tortured body. "Damn Albus and his bloody fool ideas."

Since she was a member of the Order, Hermione knew the headmaster had sent Severus with disinformation to give Voldemort. Each time he came back slightly worse for wear, and each time he took a little longer to recover. The past few months he had taken to returning to number twelve, Grimmauld Place instead of Hogwarts, rejecting what he described as 'Madam Pomfrey's bloody overbearing bedside manner.' Hermione took it as a compliment that at his worst, he preferred her care to anyone else's.

"So it didn't work then," she said, more a comment than a question.

"Well, apparently," he choked on a cough, "we have an informant inside Hogwarts who is passing information to the Dark Lord." He paused as Hermione fed him some more tea. "Unfortunately, the Dark Lord didn't see fit to inform me of this *minor* detail. It seems our reports did not quite compare to his liking."

He collapsed into a fit of coughing that only served to make him shake harder than before. Hermione wanted to soothe him but was at a loss, knowing that the aftereffects of the Cruciatus made his nerves supersensitive. A simple touch would make him cringe with pain. A single spell only intensified the already excruciating effects. She let her head drop, not knowing what to do, when her eye caught the book she had been reading.

She hadn't had the chance to actually use any of the spells in the book, of course, but she remembered there had been something on relieving the effects of the Cruciatus. She looked at the man slumped next to her. She had no idea if it was useful against prolonged bouts of the curse, as he had no doubt experienced, but it was undoubtedly worth it to try.

"Professor, will you let me try to help you?" she asked tentatively.

Only his eyes moved as he attempted to glare at her in his typical professorly fashion. His eyes spoke what he could not: that she bloody well knew there was nothing to be done for him. She had seen him like this at least a dozen times before, after all, and she had been unable to help him then. If he could have spoken, she was sure he would have resorted to calling her 'silly little girl' like he had so many years ago.

Fully expecting this response, she directed his withering gaze toward the book on the table. The room became utterly silent as he held his laboured breath for a moment. She had a feeling he would recognise the book. What she didn't know was that Severus had heard about it but had never found a copy, not through lack of trying. The book was legendary. The possibilities it held were widely known in certain circles. His chest constricted as he held back a grateful sob and simply nodded his head.

Hope renewed, Hermione paged through the heavy parchment pages to the section on the Levamentum Charm, meant to be used for any Dark Arts spell that inflicted pain, but most notably for the Cruciatus. What made this charm unique was that it was not performed on the injured person but on the Healer's hands, giving her the ability to soothe by touch. It was a brilliant charm and she was eager to give it a go.

"All right then, I can help you but you are going to have to let me remove your robes and your shirt. I'm afraid that any spell I use will only irritate the affects of the Cruciatus, so we must do this by hand to prevent further pain."

He nodded almost imperceptively, remembering an incident a little more than a month before when she had unwittingly removed his heavy Death Eater robes with a clever disrobing charm. The moment the magic hit his skin, he had thankfully passed out from the added pain. Not willing to have a repeat of that experience, he agreed readily to having her undress him. Hell, he would even agree to letting Potter, the bloody bane of his existence, undress him if only to avoid extra pain tonight.

Carefully, Hermione unfastened his robes. He sighed as the weight came off his shoulders. She silently berated herself for not having the foresight to remove that heavy garment before he sat down. The buttons on his coat and shirt were especially difficult, as she did not want to cause more pain by tugging too hard. At long last, his shirt opened, revealing his fragile, spell-thin skin. Severus sucked in his breath as the cool air of the room bit into his naked flesh, making him flinch. A fresh surge of pain washed over him and moisture escaped from his clenched eyelids.

"Shhh... Oh, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," Hermione whispered to him as she muttered a warming charm on the room and gave him a moment to compose himself.

She took the time to urge him to drink more tea, tipping the amber liquid into his mouth. When the shaking subsided somewhat, she placed the mug back on the table and continued with her ministrations.

"I am going to remove your shirt now. Will you be all right?" she asked with a hint of anxiety.

It took all of her determination to continue. The last thing she wanted to do was to cause him more discomfort. It was deeply unsettling to see such a strong man reduced to such a level. She waited patiently until he signalled that he was ready.

Putting on her best Healer persona, mostly in an attempt to separate her consciousness from what she was about to do, Hermione released the top button of his trousers so she could gently pull out his shirt without too much friction. She sighed in relief when he didn't even seem to notice. Finally, he was exposed from the waist up, shivering slightly even though the room had been warmed. She stared for a moment at his broad, pale chest, the quaking muscles beneath the skin animating the dozens of accumulated curse scars like a perverse wizard photograph. An intense rush of anger suddenly welled up inside of her for all the pain he had to endure. She wanted desperately to take it all away.

Picking up her wand in her right hand, she touched it to the lifeline in her left palm. She muttered, "Levamentum," and then repeated the procedure with her opposite hand. For an intense but brief moment, her hands glowed. Then, an electrical surge seemed to travel down her arms and out of her fingertips. She looked up to see that he had been watching her with a strained curiosity. Schooling her excitement into a mask of professionalism, she turned to stand in front of him.

Slowly, she reached out to touch his face. He cringed, no doubt in anticipation of the expected pain, but from the moment of first contact, the most extraordinary feeling coursed through her fingers, surged through his skin and melted into his aching muscles. It was as if light itself were replacing the darkness of the curse. Where her fingers travelled, there was no more pain.

The lines of his face softened as her fingers roamed across his cheekbones and outlined the lobes of his ears. She smoothed his forehead and paid special attention to the crease between his eyebrows, then down his prominent nose. The hard line that defined his mouth relaxed as her fingers played across his lips, and she was shocked to discover how soft his lips actually could be. Bringing both hands under his chin, she tilted his face to look deep into his eyes. Slowly, he focused on her.

"Are you all right? Is it working?" Hermione prodded, unable to determine from his inscrutable gaze.

Unable to trust his voice in the aftermath of such exquisite pleasure, he simply nodded his head and retreated once again into the wash of light that seemed to be wiping away all coherent thought.

Her confidence building, she ran her fingers through his hair to massage his scalp. His hair was so fine that it slipped through her fingers without the slightest resistance. It was so straight and so black that it reflected the light like a piece of dark glass. The softness of his hair was a little surprising...the blackness of it lent an oiliness to its sheen...and she took her time letting the strands fall between her fingers like fine-spun silk, lingering on his scalp a little longer than was necessary. She did not think he minded much or even noticed; he was visibly enjoying every stroke of her charmed fingers.

Her fingers brushed over his neck as she circled to stand behind him. Her flattened palms caressed his wide shoulders, met at his spine, and gradually moved lower until she reached the loosened waist of his pants. She slid her hands up both sides of his body simultaneously and then down and around his upper arms, careful not to miss even the most miniscule spot.

Winding her way back to face him, she placed her hands on his collarbones, worked outward and then down over his chest. His pectorals rippled as the light and warmth from her hands spread through the muscles, stimulating them as though they were somehow being electrified. His mouth slackened slightly as her fingers ran over the tight points of his dusty pink nipples and then down over his soft downy stomach until she once again reached the top of his trousers.

She spiraled her hands down his right forearm and splayed his fingers to give each one equal attention. Then, she repeated the same with his other arm. As she finished with the left side, she caught sight of the Dark Mark, which burned blackly in stark contrast to his pale skin.

"You're being Summoned," she stated, in awe at the solid composure he exhibited even though it must have been causing great discomfort.

"Yes," he stated simply. His voice no longer shook but there was a raw quality about it she had never heard before. "I can't go back, Hermione. They were going to kill me tonight. I still don't know how I managed to get away."

How could he sound so calm, so controlled, as though he were talking about the weather instead of the fact that he had been in mortal danger? She grabbed his left arm and pressed her palm against the Dark Mark, trying desperately to assuage the Dark Lord's anger at his unexpected escape. The light pulsed from her hands into his arm and glowed brightly with her determination to make it all go away, but they both knew she wouldn't succeed. Some Dark Magic could never be healed. Reaching over, he removed her hand from the Mark. He met her eyes, turned her reddened palm over and bent to kiss it.

"Thank you for caring, but there is nothing to be done for that bit of magic, no matter how much I wish there was." He smiled weakly as her hands fell to her sides.

She took a deep breath, feeling a little shaky at his display of emotion and more than a little saddened that he had suffered so much and there was nothing she could do to fix it.

"It's not your fault, Hermione; it's mine," he said, as though he knew what she was thinking. She looked up at him sharply, suddenly aware of his more familiar attitude towards her. He smirked, a bit of the old Severus shining through.

"Well, *Professor*," she stressed his title, teasing him slightly, "we haven't finished yet, you know. There's still...well...everything below the waist." She gestured vaguely at his still-clothed lower half. Severus grunted in agreement and tried to stand, but his legs refused to accept his weight. He fell backwards onto the chair, groaning wretchedly.

"I suppose you are right," he conceded. "However, I refuse to stand naked in the kitchen where Molly Weasley...or worse, Mr. Potter...could walk through that door at any moment. Perhaps my room would be more appropriate. I can lie down and it will be less ... bright."

"That's fine with me, Professor. Just put your weight on me a bit then, and I'll help you to your room," she replied, thankful that his room was only one flight up and the first door on the right. If height was any indicator of weight, he was certain to be rather heavy.

She stood next to him and let him grasp her shoulders as he pulled himself up to stand next to her. She never was really aware of how short she was until she was standing next to this man. He had always used his height in the past to intimidate, and it was an admittedly effective tool. Nestling up against his side, she allowed him to lean against her and use her almost as a crutch as they shuffled out of the kitchen and down the dimly lit hallway.

Entering the bedroom, Severus stumbled over to the bed and collapsed, while Hermione Summoned the book and his clothing from the kitchen. She lit a couple of candles, so she would have some light to work by, and removed her robe, revealing her lilac silk pyjama bottoms and matching tank top. He quirked a solitary eyebrow at her appearance.

"Well, what did you expect I'd be wearing at this time of night? I don't sleep in Muggle jeans and a jumper," she scolded him. "Plus, I'd never be able to crawl around the bed like I need to in those robes, now would I?" She took her wand, warmed the room and refreshed the Levamentum Charm on both of her hands. Then, climbing onto the bed, she knelt next to him.

"Will you need any help getting undressed?" she asked nervously, gesturing toward his trousers. To be honest, she wasn't sure she could be completely objective like a Healer was supposed to be with Severus Snape lying in front of her completely naked. If he asked her to remove his trousers, she wouldn't be able to keep up the ruse of disinterest she had displayed until now.

"Turn around, if you would be so kind," he said, sitting up to remove the remainder of his clothing.

Thankful for the reprieve, she averted her eyes and felt the bed shift as he removed his shoes and slid his trousers over his hips, throwing everything to the floor. When the movement finally settled, she turned to find him lying face down on the bed. It was a good thing he couldn't see her face at that moment. The part that presented upward was a rather attractive sight, especially in the soft, golden glow of the candlelight, and she felt her cheeks heat up with the realisation of what she was looking at, of what she was about to do. Her confidence waned slightly. She had no idea where to begin.

"Are you going to sit there and stare at my arse all evening, or are you going to get on with it?" he muttered tersely into his pillow.

Startled that she had been caught staring, she decided the safest place to begin was at his feet.

She never guessed that his feet would be as graceful as his hands, if feet could even be described as graceful; nor that they would be lean, strong, and proportionate to his height. Most of all, she would have never guessed Severus Snape to have ticklish feet. He jerked as she accidentally brushed his soles. It would have been terribly funny if he had not flinched with a fresh wave of pain. To soothe him, she ran her palms over his bristly calves, kneading the knots away, allowing him to slowly relax once again under her touch. Working her way past the backs of his knees and up his thighs, she discovered that his hair became finer and softer the higher she went. She hesitated only a second before her fingers stretched over each buttock, exploring where she had never imagined they ever would. He was soft under her hands as she smoothed away the pain.

"All right, then. Time to turn over," she said, using her best Healer voice that belied a confidence she didn't really feel. It was his turn to hesitate. "Come on, now. It's nothing I haven't seen before." At least, she hoped that sounded more confident than she felt. Sure, she had seen it before, just not on *him*.

Letting out a slow breath, Severus raised himself up on his arms and twisted over to stretch out on his back. She didn't mean to look, but his erection was too conspicuous to miss. And it wasn't just that he was hard, but he was most certainly above average in size. There certainly was some truth to the old adage equating the size of a man's penis to the size of his nose.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. Never one to break tradition in the face of adversity, she started once again at his feet.

His eyes were virtually burning a hole into her head as he stared at her, willing her to look him in the eyes. It was impossible not to notice, but she adamantly avoided his gaze, hoping that he would look away. When they started this little venture, his brain had been too clouded with pain, and he probably had not thought ahead this far. Hermione took his physical reaction as a sign that he was feeling relatively human again. She rationalised it by telling herself that he would have found himself in a similar situation no matter who was performing the magic. On the other hand, he *did* retreat to Grimmauld Place more often than not after the Dark Lord's gatherings, and it most likely was not for the décor.

Hermione caressed his feet with loving strokes, separating each of his toes in pure procrastination. She was thankful the magic worked through her hands of its own accord because her mind had become entirely disorganised. It was true what she had said; it wasn't anything she had not seen before, but she had not expected him to be aroused. Simple deduction told her that it was possible the spell could cause something like this, but it did not explain the fact that he had been staring at her incessantly ever since he turned over.

Suddenly, she found herself at the top of his thighs, unaware of how she got there. She let her hands massage his hips, resolutely avoiding what lie between. She had obviously lingered too long in one spot because the next thing she knew, his hands were grasping hers, bringing them to a halt.

"It appears you have missed a spot." His voice sounded rough and slightly lower in timbre. And then, he slowly moved her hands towards the neglected area.

Placing her palms against his abdomen on either side of his erection, he cradled himself between her wrists, gently guiding her flattened hands up and down. Her lungs felt like they were about to burst; she could not breathe with any regularity, making her vision slightly unfocused and leaving her a little unbalanced. Then, he took one of her hands and rolled it across his swollen sac, moving it in gentle circles, pushing it up so as not to miss the area underneath. Her other hand he brought to glide over the silky head of his shaft and, still using his own hand as a guide, wrapped her fingers around the circumference. She knew her hands were rather small, but she was still surprised when her fingertips did not quite meet each other around the girth. It took a twisting, spiraling motion to make sure she touched every possible millimeter of his length.

She gasped for air. What was he doing to her? Was the spell backfiring? She tried to hang on to some semblance of bedside manner but found it rather impossible under the circumstances. All she could do was watch as his long fingers stretched around hers, silently teaching her the intricacies of pleasuring Severus Snape. A seldom-felt ache spread through her body as she became acutely aware of the situation, and her eyelids closed, unable to control the flutter of her heart.

A feather-light touch brushed across her nipple. Startled, her eyes opened, and she looked down to discover that one of his hands had left hers and was playing with the hardened nipples that pushed through the fabric of her silk tank. Her face reddened with the realisation that he knew she was completely turned on. Unable to avoid it any longer, she looked into his eyes.

That was all Severus needed. Acceptance...and more than a splash of desire--poured out of those Gryffindor-honest eyes. The pain had completely fled from his body, thanks to her, and he endeavoured to reciprocate the most glorious feelings he had experienced. He pushed himself up and stilled the charmed hands that were still skillfully working his shaft. He brought her miraculous fingers up to his lips and kissed them tenderly.

His mouth completely relaxed as he kissed her fingertips, turning her arm over to expose the more delicate skin underneath. He placed his lips softly upon her inner wrist, then the crook of her elbow, and then along the softness of her bicep, up to the dip where her shoulder ended and her neck began. He placed small kisses on her throat, taking his time, making her wait. Her eyes fluttered closed once again, and he kissed her eyelids and the gentle slope of her nose. He waited until he heard her whimper before finally claiming her mouth with his own.

Hermione shuddered as those long-awaited-for lips finally met hers. His mouth was strong and forceful behind those deceptively soft lips, and he seemed to instinctively know just what she liked. She felt the world tilt as he eased her back onto the bed and hovered over her, kissing with an urgency she had never felt from anyone before. It was hard and soft, sharp as he nipped at her lips and sweet as he darted his tongue out to soothe the sting. She grasped his head and held him to her, opening to him, inviting his tongue to spar with her own. He kissed her hard and heavy with a passion as intense as that which he afforded his words and his actions. She was not going to let him go.

Finally, he tore his attention away from her lips and turned it back to her breasts, rolling the tip of one between his fingers while sucking and pulling on the other. It wasn't long before he grew impatient at the cloth that still covered her skin. He sat back, black liquid eyes simmering with intensity. Together, they impatiently pulled the tank top over her head and tossed it to the floor. The sight of her plump breasts spreading to each side as she lay back on the pillows made him groan. He cradled each one, relishing the weight of each breast in his hands.

Slowly, he bent to take one cherry-red nipple into his mouth. She gasped as he sucked and released, building up a rhythm that made her dig in her heels and raise her hips slightly off the bed. The steady give and take sent thrills straight into her belly, making her ache for more. The throb of his erection against her thigh reminded her that she still had her pyjama bottoms on and she wanted very much to feel him against her, skin upon skin. She tugged at the drawstring and tried to pull them down, but he wouldn't move enough to allow her to do it. Instead, he pulled her hands away from the waist of her pants and spread them to either side of her body, ordering her wordlessly to keep them there.

Placing his palms against the flat of her belly, he ran them back and forth until his fingers found their way beneath the fabric, making it possible to pull her pyjama bottoms and knickers down at one time. His eyes focused on the carefully cropped, chestnut-brown curls. Bending her legs, he pushed her knees open to either side. She was completely shaven underneath and she was swollen from prolonged desire. Like a wild animal, he growled much like a lion pursuing his mate, pleased at her evident desire for him.

Then, his talented tongue dipped between her folds, and she cried out, caught completely off guard. He trailed up to her swollen peak and back down to dip into her center to taste the moistness within. She bucked into his mouth as he probed further, testing her depth with an agility she didn't know was possible from such an appendage. Each stroke left her a little more breathless. Her lungs tightened with each hitch of her hips, with each twitch of her legs. It was glorious.

If she thought it couldn't get better, she was wrong. While his tongue continued to twist and wind in the valley between her legs, his nose began to grind against her peak. Her lungs let loose for a second, allowing her to gasp before they shut off access once again. She wound her hands into the sheets and cried through harsh, ragged breaths. She had never felt anything so intense in her entire life, and she silently thanked the deities for giving him the skill and that grand protuberance that could make her feel so good.

The pleasure she felt quickly spread through her body like a brush fire, fueled by his tongue. Short gasps and mewls of pleasure urged him onward, whipping her into a frenzy. Hands that had clutched at the bedclothes now alternately clutched his hair and traveled upwards to twist her own nipples in an effort to find her completion. She couldn't think any longer; all she desired was to climax, and she was nearly there ... almost ready ... And as the waves broke through her and over his mouth and tongue, he slowly settled her back on earth with soothing caresses.

Her heart was still clamouring in her chest as he slowly climbed up her body, nestling between her trembling legs. She felt his erection probe her still-shuddering muscles, and her lazy gaze focused on his own. His guard was completely down. The irritable professor had gotten lost somewhere between her legs and had been replaced by this stranger who looked back at her with utter devotion. And she suddenly realised why he chose to let her tend to his injuries all those times after being Summoned by his evil master. It had nothing to do with not wanting to deal with the rough bedside manner of her Hogwarts counterpart. He chose to be with her because he cared for her and enjoyed her company.

Severus smiled as the realisation dawned on her face. Letting his feelings for her show in his expression...something she was certain to understand...was infinitely easier than finding the correct words to say. It was the one way he could be sure she would see his honesty for what it was. She placed both hands on either side of his face in a

gesture very reminiscent of the earlier events of the evening, except this time she pulled him to her in a kiss that seared his very soul, breaking down all the walls he had so carefully erected over his long years as a Death Eater and spy. And with the force of her kiss, he drove home.

They wrestled, trying valiantly to merge their two bodies into one. She tilted her hips to allow him deeper access, angling upwards into the bone of his hips to grind against him. He consumed her, exploring her depths, searching for the part of her that would fill the void even as he filled hers. Her hands played over his back as she arched into him, rocking her hips down as he thrust in, making her cry out as he filled her completely. His strokes blazed a fire deep within, prodding and stoking it, coaxing it until it increased in size, burnishing her skin with a fierce blush.

The weight of the body covering hers, pushing against her, within her, made her feel cared for, needed in a way she had never felt needed before. The thickness of his body within hers touched nerves that until now had remained dormant. Every withdrawal drew the desire from her loins, making her writhe beneath him with animalistic lust.

Nails dug into flesh. It was pleasure so pure that tears streaked her cheeks. It was a far cry from the pain she had eradicated from his body just moments before. He met all her needs and she met his. Heat spread throughout their bodies as she writhed in his arms, kisses becoming almost violent in their intensity. He drew out only long enough to flip her onto her stomach, then raised her hips up to satisfy his impatience. Pure instinct alone guided him into her depths once more.

The new position brought even greater pleasure for both. Her hands caught hold of the backboard, and she pulled herself up to increase the angle until even the smallest twinge nearly overwhelmed her. His unyielding power combined with the heightened sensation; she couldn't help but scream with every thrust. Suddenly, everything within her collapsed, and her orgasm hit with such force that the bedclothes became soaked beneath her.

Her orgasm took him by surprise. When he felt her muscles contract and her climax flush around him, he lost control. He had never made a woman climax that forcefully before. He lengthened his strokes, though her body seemed to attempt to arrest his movement, enjoying it until he could no longer stand it. His rhythm finally broke, and he came deep inside, letting her muscles draw out every last drop before they collapsed together in exhaustion.

Neither of them had the strength to move, much less speak, for a long while. Severus made one last concerted effort to turn her to face him and gathered her close to his body where they remained. Finally, he tenderly removed the few pieces of damp hair that clung to her face and then leaned down to capture her lips gently between his. Pulling back, he looked into her eyes.

She always knew Severus Snape was a complex man, but the persona he donned for the rest of the world was very simple. As she returned his gaze, she saw the true depths of the man who used to be her professor, the man who used to be a Death Eater, the man who risked his life and nearly died this very evening spying for the Order.

"He won't make you go back, will he?" Fear strangled her voice, forcing it into a whisper.

"I imagine Albus will have a solution up one of his sleeves much like he always does," Severus answered delicately, not wishing to worry or upset her too much. There had been enough of that already this evening. "But he will have considerable trouble convincing me," he breathed into her ear, letting his voice soothe her apprehension.

"Severus?" she asked, trying on his name for size. It seemed to fit very well.

"Yes, Hermione?" He prolonged every syllable of her name as though he were relishing the taste of it on his tongue.

"Don't ever leave me."

His lips parted in mild shock. Then his eyes softened, and he cuddled her against his chest tightly. Pressing his lips to the top of her head, he let her wild curls tickle his nose.

"You silly little girl," he turned the familiar phrase into a term of endearment. "I am going nowhere."

~ End Chapter One

2. The Morning After

Chapter 2 of 13

Albus knocks on the door at a most inopportune time.

Chapter Two: The Morning After

Hermione thrashed in her sleep. Multiple incarnations of Severus Snape had taken up residence in her subconscious. The strangely wonderful flood of emotions after discovering her ex-professor's attraction toward her had resulted in a night filled with dredged up memories and odd dreams. Mostly, his face would hover in front of her, filling her field of vision with its intense, dark stare. Occasionally, odd bits would get all bollixed up and her subconscious mind would transfigure them into a sort of overly dramatic farce.

She found herself standing outside the Potions classroom in her school robes. Harry and Ron were nearby, completely absorbed in some argument involving what else but Quidditch. Malfoy and his gang, appearing no older than twelve years old, were over in a corner, smirking and glancing suspiciously in her direction. She tried to get Harry's attention to let him know Malfoy was up to something, but her two best friends were either ignoring her or had no idea she was there. An oddly familiar and unwelcome sensation drew her attention to her mouth and she noticed that her two front teeth were once again growing slowly longer and longer. Looking about, she saw everybody, including Harry and Ron, cruelly pointing and laughing. The crowd parted and Professor Snape swept past the masses to witness the debacle firsthand. He stood there arrogantly in Neville's grandmother's dress and gaudy vulture hat, his venomous expression clashing with his state of dress. To her utter dismay, Boggart Snape hissed, "I see no difference." Then suddenly, his robes caught fire and soon he was enveloped in flame. Hermione screamed and sat bolt upright in bed.

The bathroom door crashed open and Severus came flying out, wand at the ready, wearing only his pyjama bottoms and looking wildly about the room. Finally satisfying himself that they were still alone, he relaxed and strode over to Hermione who was staring at him, fear brimming in her eyes. He sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled her shaking body to his.

"Shh," he crooned as he kissed the top of her head and smoothed comforting circles between her shoulder blades. When her breathing calmed, he held her at arms length so he could look into her eyes.

"Having bad dreams?" he teased, smiling slightly. "I hope they weren't about me."

She tore her eyes away from his and looked down. "You were on fire," she whispered.

"Fire?" he exclaimed, breaking out in laughter. "Well, my dear, I have only been on fire once and I find it highly unlikely that you had anything to do with it."

Hermione gave him a pained look. He stopped laughing.

"Hermione," he warned. His voice had taken on a tone she had never heard before, sort of incredulous and distressed at the same time. "You cannot mean..." He stopped as she slowly nodded her head. Very uncharacteristically, his mouth fell open in pure shock.

"See, you have to understand," Hermione began quickly, desperate to explain, "Harry's broom was being hexed and I saw you from across the Quidditch field mumbling something and not breaking eye contact and we thought you were the one...well, I had to do *something* to help Harry and it was the only thing I could think of at the time..."

She broke off suddenly as Severus pulled her into a tight embrace. His whole body was shaking with suppressed laughter. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. A first year had lit his robes on fire? And all this time he had suspected the person who had placed the hex on Potter. In fact, it had made him slightly more anxious at the time, realising how powerful that person must have been to have simultaneously thrown a curse in his direction while hexing Potter's broom.

"You thought / was the one hexing Potter? I suppose the next thing you are going to tell me is that you three also suspected me of trying to steal the stone."

He laughed even harder when he felt her shoulders tense up in admission. To Hermione's immense relief, Severus finally took a great big shuddering breath and sat back.

"Well, Miss Know-It-All," he teased, "is there anything else you would like to confess while we are reminiscing about past transgressions?"

"Erm, well, there is one small, really inconsequential thing that perhaps you should know about, just so we can begin with a clean slate and all," Hermione started a little hesitantly. "It seems that I owe you some powdered bicorn horn and shredded boomslang skin."

Severus' eyes widened at that confession. He knew exactly when those two items disappeared from his private stores. Hermione was a second year at the time. He also knew a rare few potions called for both of those ingredients in the exact amounts that went missing.

"You cannot possibly be telling me that you brewed Polyjuice Potion when you were a second year," he stared at her in pure disbelief.

"Yes, I did," she said, a little insulted at his skepticism. "We had to find out if Malfoy was the Heir of Slytherin and I could think of only one way. If it's any consolation, I paid dearly for stealing those ingredients."

"Mmm. Yes, I do recall that you missed about two weeks worth of classes not too long after my stores were pilfered. I cannot imagine that you would have brewed the potion improperly. In fact, I don't remember you *ever* brewing a potion improperly."

Hermione beamed a little at the compliment. "Actually, the potion went quite well. It was the final ingredient that did me in. Apparently, the hair that I thought was Millicent Bulstrode's was actually those of her cat."

Severus inhaled sharply and choked. He fell back on the bed, coughing and laughing and trying to catch his breath. This girl was simply unbelievable! If he had known then what he knew now...well, he probably would not have been too amused then, that was for damn sure. But of course, he had had no interest in her when she was twelve. He had thought her an annoying little chit, to be completely honest.

"Well, my little troublemaker, it seems that I require some compensation for my missing stores then. What would you suggest?" His eyes beckoned her to him.

After watching her ex-professor and ex-tormentor fall apart in laughter at her past infractions of school rules, Hermione was left feeling a bit bold. She threw one leg over his prostrated form, straddling him. Winding her fingers up into the hair at his temples, she pulled his head back, holding it down. Then she slowly bent to meet his waiting lips, lightly brushing them with her own. He tried to raise up to meet her, to deepen the kiss, but she had his hair gripped too tightly and wouldn't relinquish control. He felt himself harden, aroused at her dominance. She kissed his jaw, then placed feather-light kisses along the vein pulsing in his neck, traveling down to his shoulder.

Severus arched his hips into her and groaned as Hermione sunk her teeth into the flesh just above his left nipple. Her tongue swirled down and around, flicking at the little peak and nipping at it gently. She alternated her sweet kisses with sharp bites as she traveled down his sensitive stomach. His erection settled comfortably within the valley between her breasts.

She sat up and pulled her tank top over her head, letting her breasts fall free. Like magnets, Severus' hands were attracted to them almost instantly. He ground his palms against her aching nipples unrelentingly as she undid his trousers. Promptly shoving them down his hips, she leaned over and kissed the tip of the engorged flesh between his legs. In one swift movement, she sucked his length into her mouth as far as it would go.

His head was spinning. The heat of her mouth was setting his brain on fire. Her lips felt like velvet as they enveloped him, sheathing his sensitive shaft with silken caresses that tightened and released in waves. He clutched in desperation at her curls, thrusting up into her mouth and groaning as her throat contracted around him, squeezing the head of his cock against the back of her throat. His heart beat harder and faster. He felt sure death was only a heartbeat away, and this most amazing woman so skillfully swallowing his cock was definitely responsible.

The sensation began somewhere deep inside and took off like a rocket, going higher and higher, trying to escape Earth's gravity. He wanted to keep going and yet at the same time he felt he could not take any more. His breath came in feverish gasps as the oxygen thinned and his mind reeled from the assault. Finally, it was all too great to bear. Stars filled his vision. His lungs were void of breath. And his body exploded into a million tiny particles of light that drifted lazily back down to Earth.

His body convulsed as her delectable tongue lapped up the remnants of his pleasure, her head finally coming to rest on his thigh. He lovingly smoothed the tangles from her hair whilst trying to calm his rampaging heartbeat and erratic breath.

A light rapping on the door roused them from their sated stupor.

"Severus?" Albus Dumbledore called from the other side.

Of course.

Sighing, Hermione tugged his pants up over his hips and carefully fastened them. She placed a reverent kiss on the object of her most recent desire. Then, ever so silently and giving Severus a most wicked smile, she tiptoed off to the bathroom and shut the door as Severus went to answer Albus' call.

Severus knew that Hermione, being the curious vixen that she was, would no doubt have her ear plastered to the other side of the bathroom door. He smirked as he opened the door to find Albus beaming at him from across the threshold.

"Ah, my dear boy, I hope I am not interrupting anything?" Albus insinuated not-so-subtly as he glanced over Severus' shoulder into the room, noticing the very rumpled bed sheets cascading to the floor. Severus' gaze followed the older wizard's and he noticed Hermione had left her lilac tank top in a heap on the floor next to the bed. Secrets never remained secret long where Albus was concerned, especially when one was so bloody apparent.

"Come in, Albus," Severus intoned as he moved to straighten up the bed, tucking Hermione's clothes surreptitiously beneath the pillow. He grimaced with the realisation that he may as well have posted a blasted howler over the bed screaming "I shagged Hermione last night!"

"I won't stay long," Albus said, clearing his throat suggestively. "I am sure you have other matters you would rather attend to."

No fucking shite. Meet Albus Dumbledore, Master of Stating the Bloody Obvious.

"No problem, Albus," Severus lied through his teeth. "What can I do for you?"

"I just stopped by to see how you were after last night. Apparently, you fared quite well." Albus looked almost pleased.

"Actually, I did not *fare quite well*," Severus spat sarcastically, wondering how exactly one could *fare quite well* at a Death Eater meeting. "I was almost killed last night. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that we failed to notice a spy in our midst, a double agent working for the Dark Lord."

Albus straightened up, slightly taken aback. "A spy at Hogwarts?" His eyes stormed over momentarily. "I should have seen that one coming."

"Yes, you should have," Severus snapped.

Feeling suddenly sorry for the old man, whom he knew was most certainly not omniscient no matter how hard he tried to make everyone believe that he was, he continued in a more subdued tone.

"I am sorry, Albus. I do not mean to take it out on you. The Dark Lord received news from this informant that differed significantly from my own. Obviously, this infiltrator is held in much higher esteem than yours truly. The Dark Lord saw fit to perform repeated bouts of the Cruciatus and left me to the other Death Eaters to finish me off. I got away before they could kill me. I haven't yet figured out how. Perhaps some sort of instinct for survival caused me to Apparate. I ended up here."

Albus let out a long breath, rather like a deflating balloon. The news certainly was deflating in more ways than one. He removed his glasses and cleaned them on the hem of his robes, contemplating what to say next. Severus had nearly died because of him. He took the time to let that small fact sink in a bit further.

Looking up, Albus' eyes skimmed across the leather book sitting on the nightstand. The twinkle found its way back into his eyes, making them sparkle. Well, that most certainly would explain how Severus seemed so fit this morning after such a night of trial and tribulation.

"And how is our dear little mediwitch this morning?" Albus quipped at the younger wizard. "I trust she has taken care of you quite satisfactorily, then?"

Damn that man. Severus could swear he heard a muffled squeal from behind the bathroom door.

"Yes, Albus," Severus muttered in defeat, "she has been more than satisfactory. Thank you for asking."

"Good, good. That is most wonderful news. Perhaps I will see you at breakfast then, Severus? And you, too, Miss Granger?" he added, turning in the direction of the bathroom door.

"Yes, Headmaster," Severus and Hermione simultaneously answered from their respective sides of the bathroom door. Albus chuckled to himself in amusement as he ambled out of the bedroom, closing the door behind him.

Hermione emerged from the bathroom looking quite sheepish. She looked positively sexy walking around in just her silk pyjama bottoms and nothing else, her hair all tousled from sleep and sex. She looked up at him almost apologetically.

"How did he..."

"Your shirt was on the floor," he said, drawing it out from under the pillow and handing it to her. She tried to take it from him but he kept a tight hold of it and used it to pull her into a tight embrace.

"Right," she murmured. "But how did he know it was me?" she asked in defeat.

He turned her wordlessly so she could see the book she had left lying on the table next to the bed.

"Oh," was her only answer. "I suppose we should make an appearance at breakfast and get it over with then."

"That probably would be the wisest course of action," he drawled, burying his face into her hair. He drew in a deep breath, relishing the way her scent had mingled with his. Hermione squealed as he picked her up unceremoniously and carried her off to the bathroom.

He loved the way she squealed like that. A buried memory of Hermione as a student slipped from the recesses of his mind. He had snuck up behind her and her infamous friends, startling them. She had squealed nearly the same way. Of course, he had found pleasure in that squeal then but for entirely different reasons. Now, however, it only served to make him extremely hard and wanting her in a most inappropriate way.

Well, it most certainly would have been inappropriate then, but that was then and this was now. He set her down and finished undressing her. She stood before him blissfully nude, all curvy and soft and inviting.

Gazing intently into her soft brown eyes, he slowly grabbed the top button of his pants and tugged until they fell open. Then he let his pants pool to the floor and stepped out of them, pushing them to mingle with hers, lilac and black blending together in harmony.

3. Suspicions

Chapter 3 of 13

Suspicions abound as to who the spy is, and the sensitive sensibilities of others where our couple is concerned.

Chapter Three: Suspicions

Albus Dumbledore was in a rare mood, not at all his usual smug self. All right, he had to admit that ~~he~~^{he} was feeling a bit smug about Severus and Hermione finally finding their way into each other's arms. After all, he had seen that one coming for quite some time. That boy was quite transparent to him, even if he seemed elusive to everyone else. And it was about damn time, too. He was quite sure Severus was going to blow a gasket someday and soon. If anyone was in urgent need of a good shag, it was Severus Snape.

Actually, the headmaster had been quite shocked and upset when he heard Severus' claim that there was a spy at Hogwarts. How could he have been so naïve? He had been so sure that his wards were invincible, that all the charmed minutiae that littered the castle were impervious to tampering. It would have taken someone with much time and patient determination to discover the counter spell for each one. He felt positively foolish. For a brief moment or two, his self-imposed anger battled with the self-

satisfaction he felt at his ex-students' budding relationship. He sat sipping his lemon-infused tea, and eventually, as was his wont, the happier emotions bubbled to the surface. After all, he reasoned, now that he was aware a spy existed, they were really in less danger and could even use the knowledge to their advantage.

Severus surged into the kitchen with Hermione following in his wake. *Their movements complement each other perfectly*, Albus mused as he observed the two take seats on opposite sides of the table, facing each other. Severus, as usual, played to the dramatic, entering a room like a dark and ominous tempest, ready at any given moment to whip things into a frenzy. Hermione, on the other hand, was the calming presence, the eye in the middle of the storm. Albus was beside himself with sheer joy, and his eyes glittered and sparkled across the table at the couple.

Severus rolled his eyes at the elder man. Honestly, why the bloody old buzzard found his sex life so sodding interesting was beyond him. He will probably claim that he "saw it coming" and it was "about damn time he had a good shag" and all that. Bloody old fool. Perhaps if Albus Dumbledore would go and have *himself* a good shag, he would stop interfering in everyone else's love lives.

He looked across the table at Hermione, who was down to business as usual. Her unruly curls cascaded down her back, reminding him of how they felt tangled in his fists as her talented lips surrounded his cock. The memory only served to make him inconveniently hard again. Albus' twinkling glance, however, curtailed it in an instant. Albus Dumbledore could be a poster boy for impotence as a form of birth control. Without a doubt.

"Well, children." The headmaster beamed at each in turn. "This is a serious situation, but I believe it can be used to our advantage if we can find out who the spy is. Severus, I assume you did not see or hear anything that can help us?"

"Unfortunately not," he responded ruefully. "It was spoken of, but I never saw the individual. After last night, it is quite obvious that the Dark Lord does not trust me in the slightest and, in fact, has probably been uncertain of my loyalty for quite some time. It goes without saying that when it is discovered I am still alive, there will be consequences."

The headmaster sat silent for a long moment, his chin resting on his steepled fingers. The cogs were turning double-time in that old brain of his. He desperately wanted to retain Severus as a spy, but he just could not see how to do it without risking the younger man's life.

"Professor Dumbledore," Hermione spoke urgently in a whisper. "You cannot send him back. I...I won't let him go. He will be killed. I...you simply cannot ~~do~~ that to him."

Albus swiveled his gaze in her direction. Such fortitude in such a small frame. A true Gryffindor. He had no doubt that she would do anything in her power to prevent him from using Severus as a spy. Albus sighed deeply.

"No. No, my child, I will not send him back," he replied, slightly defeated but knowing that he could not in good conscience do so. Removing his spectacles, he massaged the bridge of his nose, trying to think, to remember anything, any little detail that would guide him in the right direction. Obviously he had missed something. Whoever the spy was, he was good.

"The way I see it," Severus spoke finally, "we have two candidates: it must be either Pucey or Higgs. You took them both on within the last year, and I cannot imagine that this has gone on for much longer than that. My suspicions, of course, rest with Higgs."

"Or," Hermione said slowly, eyes widening, "it could be Penelope Clearwater."

"Miss Clearwater?" Severus countered sharply. "Whatever makes you think it is Miss Clearwater? She was a Ravenclaw, for Merlin's sake. She is so timid, so innocent, so incapable of..."

"But, Severus, have you forgotten?" Albus interrupted. "Miss Clearwater's parents were both in Slytherin before they were killed and she was adopted by her Muggle relatives. In fact, her father was a suspected Death Eater up until Tom killed him. It was not a well-known or even widely-advertised fact. I believe that our Miss Clearwater definitely has a motive and the ability to carry out something like this. She certainly is quite clever, and I prefer to believe that it would take someone with her level of intelligence to break my wards and disable my charms."

The room fell silent as each member pondered the possibility.

Their ruminations, however, were shattered quite rudely when Harry threw open the kitchen door and unceremoniously dumped his satchel and broom in the corner. He looked and smelled like he had not showered for at least two weeks.

"Oh, Harry," Hermione scolded. "Why do you always have to leave your things lying about?"

"That's what house-elves are for, aren't they? Winky! Where is she anyway?" Harry smiled. He loved to tease Hermione. He went over to give her a giant hug.

"Oh, no, you don't, Mister Potter!" she squealed. "You are not getting a hug from me until you take a long, hot bath with lots of bubbles. What have you been doing anyway? Sleeping in a dragon's lair?"

"You're not too far off," Harry laughed. He backed off under the pretense of desperately needing some tea. He poured himself a cup and glanced at the trio sitting around the table. "So, please enlighten me. To what do I owe the pleasure of having both the headmaster and Potions-professor-slash-double-agent present in my kitchen?"

Severus opened his mouth to exact a most fitting reply when he felt a firm foot connect with his shin. He closed his mouth promptly and glared at the admittedly beautiful offender seated across from him. He exaggeratedly mouthed a silent "What?!" in her direction. His demeanor was anything but innocent.

Oh, but leave it to Albus to muck things up. If they had been paying attention rather than making eyes at each other, perhaps Severus or Hermione could have stopped the next words out of the headmaster's mouth. But, alas, they were not so fortunate.

"Ah, my dear Harry," the headmaster laughed. "And why, pray tell, should *not* join such a lovely couple for breakfast?"

Harry looked up sharply at the headmaster, meeting those ever-twinkling eyes. The horrified expressions on both Hermione's and Professor Snape's faces told the rest of the story. Harry spluttered tea out of his nose, choking and gasping for breath.

"Couple?" he hacked out between laboured breaths. "Couple?! Since when are you two *acouple*? Hermione?" Harry looked at her, and then the panic set in. "It is definitely not nice to play a joke on me when I haven't had any sleep in over two days. Oh, that's it: I'm hallucinating! It's the only thing that makes sense!"

"Severus, close your mouth. It is quite unbecoming of someone your stature," Albus chuckled. He was enjoying this immensely. Severus' mouth snapped shut as he glared at the old man. If ever he had felt like using an unforgivable on someone, now was certainly the time.

"Harry, calm down," Hermione soothed, trying to dispel some of the tension that had crept into the room.

"No way, 'Mione. I will not calm down," he snapped. "Professor Dumbledore has just told me that my best friend is involved with...with...with this..."

"Harry Potter," she began to scold in her most motherly voice, but got no further when the other half of the "couple" decided to put in his two cents.

"Oh, do get a grip on yourself, Mister Potter," Severus began. "I cannot see what is so distasteful about your best friend and...what was it you wanted to say? Let me wager a guess. Giant overgrown bat? Greasy git? Whatever your preference is this week, Mister Potter, you insult your so-called best friend by neglecting to notice that she is a positively attractive woman. Yes, Potter, even to a man like myself. I honestly believe it has been her misfortune to be surrounded by dimwitted boys like yourself who cannot see past their own self-important noses long enough to discover how completely and utterly irresistible she is. I, for one, am finding it quite impossible not to snog

her senseless at every possible opportunity."

Hermione gaped at Severus in shock.

"Please close your mouth, Miss Granger. It is unbecoming of someone your stature," Severus mimicked the headmaster's earlier admonishment.

"Right, then," Hermione added with a smirk, still looking straight into her temperamental lover's eyes. "I suppose you had better get used to it, Harry. It seems I quite fancy this...what did you say Severus? Overgrown bat?"

Looking slightly green, Harry rolled his eyes as Hermione and Severus exchanged glances. The headmaster was even less helpful, laughing and twinkling and shrugging his shoulders. Harry excused himself, abandoning his tea for that long, hot shower.

In Hermione's opinion, it took unforgivably long for the headmaster to take his leave. She had a sneaking suspicion, actually, that he took his sweet time just to torture them. After Severus' little speech to Harry at the kitchen table, her hormones were in overdrive. No man had ever said anything like that about her, or to her, before. She felt most certain that a small token of appreciation was in order.

As soon as Albus disappeared through the kitchen door, Hermione turned to Severus with a predatory look in her eyes. Smirking, he looked down his nose at her as she slowly backed him up against the counter.

"Is there something I can do for you, Miss Granger?" he purred as her body pressed up against his.

"As a matter of fact, there *is*," she hissed as she reached up, pulled him down, and attacked his mouth with unabashed enthusiasm.

Severus grabbed her around the waist and pulled her closer as his lips fought back with equal fervor and his heated tongue insistently wound its way into her mouth. His arousal pushed against her stomach and he growled as she mewed into his mouth. She could feel Severus' inner war, wanting desperately to have her right then and there. Hermione suddenly found herself lifted onto the countertop, her knees spread, and a darkly handsome man with a very persistent erection pressed between her legs.

"Severus, not here," she gasped between kisses.

"Hmmm. You are quite right, my dear. We wouldn't want to further damage Mister Potter's delicate sensibilities, now would we?"

Hitching her legs about his waist, he locked his lips onto hers and stumbled toward the kitchen door to continue what had been started in his room without interruption. He tried valiantly to retain his dignity, but it was terribly difficult with a woman attached to him in such a manner. He shoved the door open with his hip, letting it bang against the wall and proceeded through, only to run into a short, rather rotund woman bustling toward the kitchen.

"Oh! Oh, dear!" the woman exclaimed.

Severus and Hermione released each other's mouths instantly at the sound of Molly Weasley's voice. She stared at them in utter shock, her face red as a beet, and her mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water. Severus chuckled as he dropped Hermione to her feet beside him.

"Oh! Mrs. Weasley, good to see you," Hermione squeaked, her voice at least a fifth of an octave higher than it usually was. It was all Severus could do not to shock the poor woman further and laugh outright. He wouldn't want to ruin his reputation, after all.

"You, too. You, too," Molly sputtered as she spun and quickly disappeared into the kitchen. "Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" was all the two heard as the door swung shut behind her.

"I suppose we can be absolutely, positively sure everyone will know about us now." Hermione grinned as she grabbed the lapels of Severus' shirt and pulled him down to her once again. "Now, where were we?"

"I believe," Severus muttered as he planted kisses around the edge of her earlobe, "that we were just about here. And here. And here."

"But, my dear Severus, you most surely have forgotten. I believe we were right about here." She grabbed his balls, squeezing them lightly and running her palm up his considerable length. He groaned and closed his eyes as his firm length jumped in her hand.

"Well, then, let us most certainly pick up where we left off, shall we?" he murmured as he picked her up once more and headed for his room.

~End Chapter Three

4. Polyjuice Revisited

Chapter 4 of 13

Severus discovers what it's like to be on the receiving end of one of Hermione's plans.

Chapter Four: Polyjuice Revisited

Severus was most definitely in love; there really could be no other reason for the senseless thoughts that held his logic hostage and clouded his judgment. At the moment he was too busy to let that bother him much, though, as he forfeited all thought to his senses.

Even the simple act of watching his lover's beautifully flushed face as his tongue danced around her sensitive areas stoked the fire that burned in his soul each and every time he saw her. It only furthered his desire to bring her to heights she had rarely, if ever, been and feed off her unhindered responses. He drew her closer to the precipice where her reason sacrificed itself willingly, luring his to the edge where it unbiddenly followed like two lovers falling to their demise.

Skillfully, his tongue played over and within, knowing just what to do and when it was enough. Her juices flowed from the pleasure he elicited, and he drank deeply as though he were dying and she was the source of life. Pointing his tongue, he forced it into her and ground his nose against her swollen bud, savouring her taste and scent like a fine wine, swirling his tongue in her essence until her hips lunged upward and her muscles quickened in response.

Screaming, her orgasm came crashing down upon her, which had the effect of turning his already besotted mind to mush. Clambering up to reach her before she began

the spiral downwards, he buried his hard shaft within her to the hilt. Ah, sweet Nimue, there was nothing more beautiful than a woman who was being made love to.

Still in the throes of orgasm, her swollen embrace gripped him as he tried to gain access to her deepest point. Her heat burned, hardening his length further and sparking an uncontrollable lust. Though she was drenched from the attention of his tongue and the release of her desire, she was a snug fit, and he filled and stretched her to the limit. No other woman could satisfy him in such a way. She was perfection.

"Yessss," she hissed in his ear as another wave of her ebbing climax tightened around him.

He groaned as Hermione's head fell backwards and her hips tilted upwards in an effort to prolong the sensation. It was nearly his undoing. Diverting some of his attention away from what was happening below, he nipped roughly at the flesh beneath her ear and down her neck toward her shoulder. Soft whimpers vibrated beneath his lips.

Whimpers quickly turned into pleas, pleas that caused Severus' hips to flex involuntarily in response. He groaned at how good it felt to be surrounded by her, loved by her. Her body seemed to hold him tightly inside, reluctant to let him go as he pulled back; his return was met with a gasp as he nestled against the softness within.

Quickened breaths and fervent moans echoed off the silent walls, reflecting their passion. The nipples that peaked hard against his chest begged to be appeased, and he angled his neck to take one between his lips. Winding his tongue around the very tip made her breath catch in her throat and her back arch in a silent appeal for more. Sucking the nipple hard and catching it with his teeth, he caused her to scream and grasp his already flexing buttocks with both hands, driving him into her harder. Taking his cue, he drew her hips higher to change the angle of attack and was rewarded with the whispered ramblings of the woman in his arms.

"Oh! Severus, yes! Harder ... again! Please, don't stop, I'm so close ... harder ... oh, please! Just a little more ... there! Oh, gods yes, Severus!"

Her head thrashed against the pillows while her hands sought purchase on something, anything: in his hair, down his back, on the headboard, in the sheets. She was a woman mad with pleasure, and it was all because of him.

He focused on Hermione's face, trying to keep his vision from clouding over so he could watch her beautiful face as she neared her climax. The tension inside of him wound tighter, threatening to snap at any moment. Skin moist and hair damp with perspiration, heels and knees digging into the mattress, every breath a syllable of ecstasy, senses alive and screaming with the intensity of every stroke. Only when the passion broke and her body collapsed into paroxysms did he finally let go.

Her eyes were wet and wide as they stared into his, committing his expression to memory as he came inside of her. He saw the unspoken words behind those eyes and the bitten lip as she tried to keep them from accidentally tumbling out. It was not the time for those words yet. He suckled the wounded lip, caressed her swollen mouth with his own, and they kissed softly and quietly until their bodies gave in to sheer exhaustion.

Sitting in front of her dressing table mirror, Hermione contemplated her reflection while ignoring the sharp pulls of resistance as her comb caught in her damp curls. She snagged a rather stubborn knot and subconsciously went about detangling it as her mind visited more important matters. Severus had left to prepare for dinner, and she was feeling the loss keenly even though he was just down the hall showering and changing.

It was odd how hot water and a few scented bubbles always seemed to set her mind in motion. She had stumbled upon an idea, a very rough plan, while soaking her well-used muscles in the tub. By the time she finished washing her hair, she was almost certain it would work. She knew Albus would be more than willing to go along with it and probably more than a bit relieved as well. But Severus? Moreover, she was not certain that she herself wanted to go through with the plan. She frowned slightly at her reflection.

"I know exactly how you feel," a silken voice answered her unspoken thought from the doorway. She glanced up into the mirror to find Severus staring back at her. He had dressed in his usual stark, ultraconservative teaching robes, a reminder that he had to return to Hogwarts after dinner. The thought brought her mood down a notch.

"Hmm?" she said absent-mindedly, not having truly registered his comment.

Severus took a few steps forward to stand directly behind her. Removing the comb from her fingers, he lifted the next section of curls and began to gently comb out the snarls. His expression was haughty and fairly reminiscent of her school days. Odd how the look that would have wilted her composure a few years ago now made her want to take him immediately on the hard floor.

"I *said*, I know how you feel. After all, a Slytherin falling in love with a Gryffindor is most certainly a source of great consternation."

She looked up sharply into his reflected eyes. Did the man just say 'falling in love'? Her heart leapt in her chest and froze. ~~He~~ *He* was falling in love with *her*?

"Yes, my dear, I most certainly *did* say 'falling in love.' Truth be told, it seems I have been doing so for some time now."

She turned in her seat to face him. He knelt before her and took her face in his hands, running his thumb over her bottom lip where she still bore a mark.

"Now," he purred, "would you mind enlightening an old man as to what ghastly thing was so unspeakable that you had to cause yourself damage?"

Her eyes glazed over as she enjoyed the touch of his finger caressing her lip. Such gentleness from a usually hardened man was certainly enough to draw confessions of love out of her. She had never felt this way before. It felt like love, but what if she was wrong?

"I was going to say..." She broke off, looked away and whispered, "But it's too early. Is it possible to feel this way so soon?"

Severus sat back on his heels. "We have known each other for many years, Hermione. While I would never admit to loving you while you were in school, I have always cared for your well-being. In a manner of speaking, my falling in love with you has been a rather long, drawn-out process."

Hermione smirked at her ex-professor-turned-lover. "Well, if you want to think of it that way, then. Since I have known you for, what, nearly nine years, even though most of that time you never passed up the opportunity to...rather skillfully, mind you...abuse and insult myself and my best friends, why then I believe you are right, Professor Snape. It is no wonder I am falling in love with you."

"You impudent girl," Severus grumbled, while miserably failing to stifle a grin. One thing he had to say for this Gryffindor: She had a marvelous way of chastising and mocking him while simultaneously throwing in an endearment.

"I wish I could take you back to Hogwarts with me," Severus murmured against her lips, nipping at them lovingly.

"Well, my dear professor, you may just get your wish," she said, pulling away from him. "I believe I have come up with a plan with regards to our alleged spy."

"My little Gryffindor, the brains behind the action, as always," Severus quipped. "I suppose you are not going to tell me what it is?"

The apprehensive look on her face was answer enough. She had no plans on telling him right now; she knew that he was not going to be entirely happy with the plan. Severus looked away, his hands falling dejectedly into his lap.

"Listen, Severus. No plan is perfect, but it is the only thing I can think of and, the thing is, I am quite confident it will work. It is going to be very difficult for me to propose the idea to the headmaster because I know he will be more than eager to see it put into action. Whereas," she added in a much lower tone of voice, "I most certainly am not."

He turned his eyes up, glancing at her from beneath his brow. She could almost see the young boy he must have been ages and ages ago before life so cruelly took its exacting toll. Hermione took his face in her hands and ran her thumbs over his brow, gently massaging the etched lines of worry from between his eyes. He allowed

himself to relax, albeit slightly, into her caress.

"I love you," she whispered, "and I will make sure you will come to no harm. Do you hear me, Severus Snape? I swear it on my life."

For the first time since he was six years old, he actually felt like crying.

Dinner, thankfully, was a small affair. The only people present were Molly, Arthur, Ginny and Harry. Ron had been held up on an assignment and wasn't due home for another two days. He was taking his apprenticeship with Kingsley Shacklebolt quite seriously and had turned, to Hermione's surprise, into something of a workaholic. Neither Severus nor Hermione minded his absence in the slightest; it meant no further defence of their budding relationship was necessary.

Arthur, as usual, babbled on about the latest bewitched Muggle artifact the Ministry had discovered. It was rather amusing, and he took special care to involve Severus in the conversation, no doubt to keep him well occupied in light of the tense atmosphere. Molly, on the other hand, kept busy cooking and serving and eating and cleaning up, all in an overzealous effort not to look at Severus and Hermione.

Harry was still looking quite uncomfortable, but had no trouble keeping up normal conversation or his meal down, for that matter. Ginny just sat in her seat, beaming at Hermione in between bites until it nearly drove the older witch insane.

"Okay, Ginny, get on with it already before you split at the seams." Hermione scowled at her younger friend. Ginny looked more than pleased at the invitation.

"I just think it is...well, I'm sorry, Mum," she interrupted herself as her mother sobbed into the sink full of dishes. She spoke louder to make sure her mother would hear. "I think it is bloody marvelous that you have found yourself a man, Hermione Granger. And, if you ask me, I think he is absolutely smashing."

Happily, Hermione took another bite of her pudding. Severus glanced at her out of the corner of his eye while he painfully listened to Arthur spout inanities about Muggle telly-vision sets. Having long ago honed the ability to listen to two completely different conversations and keep up with both...it had saved his life on more than one occasion...he had heard everything the youngest Weasley had said. Under the table he grasped Hermione's hand and squeezed it gently. It was, after all, the only direct and pleasant thing that had been said at the dinner table all evening.

Severus cleared his throat as he rose from the table and announced, "I am afraid Hermione and I need to take our leave early this evening. Molly, thank you for a lovely dinner."

The comment was met with an incoherently mumbled response from behind a cupboard door.

"Mister Potter," Severus glared down his long nose at the boy. "Hermione will be accompanying me to Hogwarts. We have a meeting with the headmaster. No doubt she will be in contact with you in a day or two."

Harry nodded silently, looking slightly worried at Hermione as though she were being dragged off to the monster's lair against her will. Ginny elbowed him in the ribs, grinning from ear to ear as she noticed how Hermione's face positively glowed when Professor Snape walked around the table to take her hand. A pinch of Floo powder, a muttered destination, a nod of farewell, and they were gone.

"All right, Mum," Ginny scolded, "I believe it is safe to come out of the pantry now."

Albus rose from behind the desk as Severus and Hermione stepped out of the flames.

"Ah, my children! Come in, come in. I am so looking forward to this meeting. Severus mentioned that you have come up with a plan, my dear." Albus bubbled his way over to them and took Hermione's hand in both of his.

"Well, it is an idea. I wouldn't exactly call it a plan, Headmaster," she replied hesitantly.

"Nonsense!" he bellowed. "Any plan of Hermione Granger's is one worth listening to, and I am most definitely ready to listen. Sit, both of you. Would you like some tea?"

"I believe Firewhiskey would be infinitely more appropriate," grumbled Severus moodily. A tumbler appeared on the table next to him with a double shot on the rocks. He picked it up and thankfully drained half of it.

"Now, Miss Granger, I am sure you are simply bursting to regale us with your brilliant idea."

Severus snorted into his cup as it refilled itself.

"Actually, no, Professor. I am not," Hermione stated simply. "While I am sure it has a high probability of working, I would rather not go through with it at all. However, I feel that any probable idea should be brought out for discussion, which is why I am here tonight."

"That is not the only reason, I hope." Albus chuckled at the moody man across from him who was smoothly finishing his second Firewhiskey. "Now, Severus, I believe you better slow down a bit until Miss Granger has had her say."

The tumbler settled heavily onto the side table in response. He hated being reprimanded by Albus. He hated it even more when Albus was right. It made him feel like a sodding first-year.

Hermione cleared her throat to begin before she changed her mind. It was now or never.

"All right. There's not much to it," she started, looking both men in the eyes and clearing her throat again. For a split second she felt as though she were once again a second-year, proposing to Harry and Ron that Polyjuice Potion was the only way to find out who the Heir of Slytherin was. Instead, two older pairs of eyes looked back at her, their serious expressions urging her on. She may be much younger, but they were prepared to take her quite seriously.

"I know that we are not one hundred percent positive that Penelope Clearwater is the spy, though I daresay we have a good reason to believe so. We could check for the Dark Mark, certainly...most likely after we have properly sedated her," she added as an afterthought. "Anyway, my idea is that Severus would impersonate Miss Clearwater through the use of Polyjuice Potion. He could enter her quarters while Miss Clearwater is safely sedated elsewhere and see if there are any clues that would link her to Voldemort. If it turns out she is indeed the spy, he can use the Polyjuice Potion when Summoned and take her place."

The two men stared at her silently: Albus looked amused, Severus just stared at her with naked incredulity. He had never been on the receiving end of one of her plans before.

"Of course, any other bugs can be worked out once we find out more about the situation," Hermione finished.

"It goes without saying that Miss Clearwater would have to remain sedated once I begin going to the Dark Lord in her place," Severus stated matter-of-factly.

Hermione shifted her gaze in his direction. She wasn't prepared for him to accept her plan so readily, especially since it meant returning to Voldemort's side.

"Yes, she would," Hermione agreed. "She can easily be taken ill and kept in the infirmary. But we will have to work quickly from that point. From the day you return to Voldemort, I figure we will have barely a fortnight to bring things to a conclusion."

Both men's attention came immediately to the forefront.

"A conclusion?" Albus mused. "Yes. Certainly. Why not? Merlin's beard, a conclusion!" Hermione swore he suddenly looked twenty years younger.

"And then we should be rid of Voldemort forever," Hermione added, staring into Severus' eyes. "Don't you see, Severus? Just a little longer and we can be free."

"Free?" he mumbled softly to no one in particular. The idea was alluring, although completely foreign to him. He could not remember a time when he was free. It was an interesting concept, though.

"My dear Miss Granger, your plan is absolutely brilliant. You will, of course, let me know when you are ready to put it into action. I expect we will be seeing a lot more of you at Hogwarts over the next few weeks, and hopefully for quite some time thereafter. There is no need, I presume, to set up separate quarters for you?" he added rhetorically while ushering them out the door.

As the staircase wound its way back down to the floor below, Hermione commented, "I assume you have the ingredients necessary to brew the Polyjuice Potion then, Professor Snape?"

"And I assume you know exactly where to find them, Miss Granger."

She smirked as they traveled the deserted hallways to his quarters.

~End Chapter Four

5. ~~Intermission~~

Chapter 5 of 13

A smut-filled interlude simply because I can.

Chapter Five: *Intermission*

Staring at the man across from her, presently intent upon stirring the cauldron, Hermione was tormented with flashbacks from her not-so-distant school days. Seeing Professor Snape...Severus...in his element, working in his laboratory at Hogwarts, brought home with crystal clarity the fact that she was indeed involved with her formidable Potions professor. This was the man that used to berate her and her friends. This was the man who had criticised her overly large front teeth with two houses as witnesses, for Merlin's sake.

Severus, finishing the latest stage of the Polyjuice Potion, glanced up to find Hermione scrutinizing him. The sight of her chewing on her bottom lip sparked a fire in his eyes that belied his wicked thoughts. He shifted a little and exhaled slowly to maintain his concentration on the potion for just a little bit longer.

"A Knut for your thoughts," he teased as he gave the potion a few final stirs and set it to simmer. It would be another hour before the next ingredient needed to be added.

"A Knut?" Hermione quipped, coming out of her reverie. "This one is worth at least a Galleon."

"It seems you place an inordinate value on your thoughts, then," he shot back spiritedly.

Well, if she had wanted to eradicate the image of the irascible Professor Snape, that certainly did the trick. She smiled, taking note of his current posture, one with which she had become most familiar of late. Her smile became almost feral as she remembered his admonition the day before: "*Turgid members and finicky potions do not excellent bedmates make.*" Carefully, she walked around the simmering cauldron, delicately drew back an errant lock of hair that had fallen in front of his face and fastened it among the rest.

"Has anyone ever told you how utterly charming you look with your hair pulled back like this?"

She let her hand skim down his chest. She always had a rather unchecked fondness for men with long hair. And it was incredibly sexy when a man tied his hair back.

"Has anyone ever told *you* how lousy you are at changing the subject?" he smirked back.

Damn, he was frightfully good at seeing right through her. She made a mental note to practise being a little more opaque where Severus Snape was concerned.

"Hmm ... well," she drawled sweetly as she drew circles over his chest. "I just could not help but reminisce over all those delightful moments I spent as a student, listening to your most engaging lectures, raising my hand yet never being called upon, having house points deducted whenever I *did* speak up..."

"You little vixen," he growled, grabbing her waist and pulling her in close so that she was in full contact with his body. And it most certainly ~~was~~ contact, too, she noticed.

"Why, Professor Snape, a professor of your stature becoming aroused by a mere pupil. I am utterly shocked!"

"Ex-pupil," he stressed as his kiss seared down the entire length of her body.

Perhaps if she had known he was capable of such intense passion, she would have made a pass at him as a student. All right, that most certainly would not have happened, but she rather enjoyed the idea that she would have been so bold, and it was a most excellent fantasy.

They were both breathing heavily by the time he forced himself to pull away. They still had to finish the base for the Polyjuice Potion. Severus was a firm believer in getting his work done before indulging in pleasure.

"You are aware, no doubt, that after I add the lacewings, the potion has to stew for twenty-one days," he murmured.

"As a matter of fact, I was aware of that minor detail," she murmured, placing her head on his chest and listening to the heavy beat of his heart. She inhaled deeply. Even through the various scents of the brewing herbs, his scent tantalized her. Twenty-one days. She had her apprenticeship at St. Mungo's. He had Potions classes to teach, rounds to make, a house full of rabid Slytherins to supervise.

"Stay here with me," he whispered into her hair.

Wrapping her arms about him tightly, she looked up questioningly into his fathomless eyes. Severus Snape, the most solitary man she had ever known, was asking her to stay.

"I have my apprenticeship, you know," she offhandedly mentioned, in case he spoke too quickly and needed a way to ease out of the offer.

"Poppy is connected to St. Mungo's on the Floo Network. Must I throw in unlimited use of my personal library to convince you to stay?" he asked half in jest, painfully conscious of the fact that if she held any reservations about staying with him, the offer of being able to peruse his library without restriction would definitely push her in the right direction.

"Mmm. Bribery: a very Slytherin trait," she answered flippantly.

She screamed shrilly when his hand connected with her bum. It stung, but his very capable fingers stroked and soothed the burn. He lifted her with the same hand and ground his mouth into hers, thrusting his tongue between her teeth.

Oh, so that's how he likes to play she thought as she dueled with him for dominance. Two could surely play that game, but not while he was holding her up against him so tightly. She let one hand trail down his body until she found the telltale bulge in the front of his pants. The heel of her palm pressed against it, and her hand moved lower until her fingers reached their ultimate goal, curling lovingly around his firm sac; then she squeezed.

She landed neatly on her feet when, in shock, he abruptly dropped her.

"I believe you need to add those lacewings, Professor," she smiled at him sweetly. If there was one thing she was good at, it was acting innocent when she was anything but. It was a skill delicately honed through years of hanging around Harry and Ron.

"You truly *are* malicious," he purred, nipping her ear painfully, then turning his back to tend to the potion.

Hermione felt extremely satisfied with herself, but decided that it would be best not to show it. Wouldn't want him getting the upper hand or anything.

"If that offer still stands, of unlimited use of your private library that is, I accept."

She barely heard Severus mutter, "Saucy wench."

He was late, and she had become impatient. Slipping into the hot bath, bubbles scented with a hint of sandalwood to remind her of his subtle scent, she let her hands wander over her body. Smoothing over her soft, round breasts, just grazing over the tips of her nipples, she felt them draw up into hard little peaks. She swirled her soapy palms imagining they were his hands, luxuriating in his phantom touch as she drew the sensations up gradually from her core. She was not in the mood to prolong the inevitable; she was desperate to be satisfied.

Her right hand traveled like fire over her stomach and down between her legs. Never since he had first touched her had she gotten any satisfaction from her own fingers. It felt good to massage her swollen lips, smooth a finger around and circle over her clit, but it wasn't Severus. She wanted more. She wanted to feel full of him.

Eyes glazing over, she reached toward the sink and called out, "Accio toothbrush."

If anything good had come from those thankfully rare occasions when Lavender and Parvati had taken her hostage in a vain attempt to make her "one of the girls," it was the discovery of a certain Transfiguration spell they had stumbled upon in *Witch Weekly*. With it you could transfigure a simple object, the longer the better, into a phallus; add another charm and it would vibrate. The spell was so simple that one didn't really need a wand to perform it; the desire alone focused the energy into whatever object one chose. The spell and charm worked beautifully; Hermione actually had to stop Lavender from trying out her Transfigured phallus on the spot. It was just way too much information.

Holding her toothbrush tightly, she concentrated on the spell and felt the toothbrush thicken and take shape in her hand. Her excitement rose another notch as she smoothed a thumb over the ridge and whispered, "Tremulo."

Closing her eyes, she lost no time in submerging the shuddering object and bringing it to rest directly over the extra sensitive bundle of nerves. Instantly, her muscles clenched and her head fell back against the rim of the tub. The vibrations shot straight up her spine. Yes, much better than her fingers. If she couldn't have the real thing, there was certainly no harm in trying her best to replicate that, which only Severus seemed able to accomplish.

Her inner muscles throbbed in time with the vibrations circling around her clitoris, following the path Severus' tongue usually followed. Her eyelids fluttered as she imagined his silken head between her thighs, his talented tongue knowing exactly where she needed to be probed, how hard she liked it and exactly when to move on.

More ... It was time for more. She switched positions, leaning forward and resting her arm on the edge of the tub. Slowly, she inserted the object inside, pressing at just the right angle. She whimpered as it pulsed inside of her like a cock in the throes of perpetual orgasm. Holding it tightly, she rode the vibrating phallus, stroking it against her clit each time she pulled it out. Imagining it was Severus' long, hard cock pumping in and out of her...she could almost imagine him taking her from behind...she felt her muscles begin to clench in time with the rhythm.

Not enough ... She rode out the first climax, but her body demanded more. It wasn't enough. Riding the phallus even harder, she cried, "Tremulo!" once more to bump up the vibrations another notch. She held back a scream and gasped as her muscles grasped the phallus even tighter. She nearly collapsed from the sensation, letting her head fall on top of her supporting arm, moaning as her hallucination fucked her with reckless abandon, entering her forcefully, deeper and harder, while she cried out for more and he growled in pleasure as his orgasm neared and his strokes lengthened and became more deliberate.

Her body tightened. She couldn't breathe. Light seemed to glow behind her eyelids. The phallus sliding in and out of her moved quickly as it drew her closer to completion. She screamed Severus' name, and she could almost hear his growl urging her to come because he was oh-so-close and she was so bloody-fucking-tight and how he needed to feel her walls squeeze around his cock so he could bury his hot semen deep inside her.

She came hard, her body seizing erratically, clenching as the object within her throbbed, prolonging the intensity of her orgasm. "Yes, yes, yes," she moaned as the object continued to move inside of her. One more ... Yes, just one more. She pushed the vibrator hard against her clit and held it there until it wound her up tighter and sent her screaming over the edge again as her body revisited its ultimate pleasure with even greater force.

Needing to catch her breath, Hermione fell exhausted into the bubbles.

Out in Severus' main quarters, the outer door slammed open hard against the wall and back into its frame. She sighed, feeling a bit guilty that she did not possess the self-control to wait for her lover before she started their nightly ritual. But it had felt too good to feel *too* guilty about it, and she was by no means satisfied yet. She knew she would eventually get what she craved before the night was through. She had not been disappointed yet since being invited to stay.

Hermione had not been at all confident that Severus would take kindly to the constant presence of a woman in his quarters. Granted, she had her apprentice duties at St. Mungo's, which took her out of the castle a few hours every day, not counting weekends. However, those were the same hours he spent teaching. She was afraid he would be too set in his ways and tire quickly of her presence.

Severus, on the other hand, was not by any means tired of her presence. In fact, after his protracted solitude, this was exactly what he wanted and needed...someone to come home to, someone who would listen to his ranting and raving, someone to help him take out his frustrations.

"Bloody Dumbledore!" he bellowed from the other side of the door. "How in *Hades* does he expect me to teach a bunch of first-years who would not know the bottom side of a cauldron from their robe-covered arses? He has positively outdone himself this time! I would hand over my fortune in Galleons in utter *shock* if the one criterion of admittance to Hogwarts was **not** 'be able to properly provoke the Potions professor!' I ought to..."

"You ought to what, Severus?" interrupted Hermione, stepping out of the bathroom. Her only attire was the rosy glow of the gloriously hot bath and personal attention she had just treated herself to.

Severus forgot completely what he had been saying or even why he had been angry with the headmaster. In fact, if one had dared to enquire at that particular and most inopportune moment after Albus Dumbledore, his only response could have been, "Albus Who?"

Hermione stood there, blissfully naked, knowing exactly just what that did to Severus' ability to think. She discovered this little trick accidentally only three days into their little cohabitation experiment. Thus, when she heard him yelling from the other room, she knew there was only one way to calm the beast. She drained the tub, towed off briskly, flung the door open and approached him with nothing on except a smile. It was always a tremendous boost to her self-confidence when this tactic had the desired effect.

She took one step toward him then another, watching his eyes roam her body, following the curve of her breast down to the curve of her hip and back again. His tongue flicked out, wetting his bottom lip in anticipation.

Reaching up to his fastidiously buttoned collar, Hermione unfastened one button, then another and another, finding the self-control she had apparently lost earlier. What she really wanted to do was to rip off his clothes, buttons be damned, and have her way with him on the spot...but she wanted to make him suffer. After all, she had been suffering for the last hour, waiting for him to return from his classes, waiting to taste him on her lips, waiting to feel him hard at the entrance to her body.

Even after being near him continuously for three weeks, she had not grown weary of him. He was like a drug that she couldn't get enough of. He made her body sing with pleasure, and all it took was one sultry syllable from him to make her wet with desire.

Severus let out a low, guttural growl as he tore his shirt from her hands and ripped it open completely to his waist. Hermione smirked wickedly; to have this sort of power over a man who rarely lost control excited her more than she expected.

She attacked him like a possessed animal, shoving him backwards into the table. Her fingers grasped at the material that covered his bulge but were too frantic to divest him of it. She fell to her knees in front of the still-clad object of her fancy and sucked at him, nibbling at all the right spots, trying to engulf as much as she could without freeing him from his confines.

Severus groaned and wound his fingers in her wet, wavy tresses in response, feeling the fabric of his trousers become moist both inside and out from her ministrations. Tightening his hold in her hair, he pulled her slowly upward, capturing her magical mouth with his.

Never before had she kissed him with such an intensity. Never before had she been as ready as she was now to be taken with barely a touch upon her body. She ached to feel him against her. She ached to show him how much she needed him. Jumping up, she wrapped her legs about his waist, pushing her hot sex against his dampened crotch and ground herself against him. Instinctively, he grabbed her tightly to him and pushed back.

Her heat permeated his clothing, making him harder. Her movements became frantic, making it nearly impossible to think of anything except releasing himself against her, within her; it didn't really matter how. Her loss of control had drawn him dangerously close to the edge.

"Hermione," he groaned through her kisses. "Merlin's balls, Hermione, I am going to come."

"Yes, Severussss," she hissed as her movements against him became wilder and harder and more insistent. "Come for me. Oh, fuck...I'm ready. Come for me now!" she moaned as she climaxed hard against him.

The throbbing of her sex gave him the final push he needed, and he came inside his trousers, trying somehow to grind it through the fabric and into her instead.

"Oh fuck! Gods, Hermione, what the bloody hell?" he gasped as her legs slid off his hips and she stood on the floor in front of him.

Much calmer now, she unfastened his pants and let them fall. Seeing the sticky mess that covered his semi-flaccid member and the nest of hair that surrounded it, she fell to her knees and proceeded to lick him clean.

She didn't need to hear his groans of encouragement to know she was doing the right thing because his cock began to harden almost immediately. By the time she had removed all evidence of his orgasm, he was ready for another go.

Feeling slightly calmer and not so desperate, she stood up and backed away from him slowly. She loved to tease him; watching his reaction was priceless, not to mention it gave her great satisfaction to know that she could do things to him that other people could not. Taking a breast in each hand, she brought them up to stand at attention. Severus half-sat on the table behind him while his cock strained in her direction like a compass pointing north.

Running her thumbs over her painfully erect nipples, she continued to back away, luring him to her, letting her body call to him. When he finally realised that she was moving in the wrong direction, he shot after her. Screaming, she turned and ran toward the bathroom. But before she could reach the door, he caught her about the waist and pulled her backward into his waiting erection.

"Where do you think you are going, you silly little girl? Do you think you can tease an old man and not pay the price?"

"And what price would you have me pay, *Professor*?" she purred at him playfully. She loved playing these games with him. Every word that fell from his lips, she hung onto, letting her desire take hold and take over her body.

"My, my, what a wet little trollop you are," he whispered into her ear as a hand ran down her leg and slowly up her inner thigh. He thrust a finger inside her and pumped it in and out roughly until she cried out.

"Whatever is the matter, Miss Granger? Is there something you want? Perhaps my attentions would be better spent elsewhere," he drawled into her ear.

He withdrew his finger and let his hand follow the curve around to her backside. Slickened with her juices, the same finger slid easily into her rear entrance where he once again picked up the rhythm. After only a few strokes, the discomfort gave way to pleasure and a low and drawn-out moan escaped from her lips.

He stepped back slightly to admire the sight of his hand pumping in and out of his lover's behind. His other hand reflexively began tending to his own deepening desire. It was a most erotic sight. Deciding that he had just about enough of foreplay for one day, he removed his finger and pushed her roughly facedown upon his bed.

Hermione tried to adjust her position but was reprimanded harshly by the man hovering above her with a sharp slap. Her arse stung and burned her already hot flesh, spreading between her legs.

"Did I say you could move, Miss Granger?" The harsh growl of his voice belied the pleasure he was taking from her, and presently himself, as he stroked his cock in preparation for his ultimate goal. A muffled peep was the only answer she could muster.

"Are my ears deceiving me, Miss Granger, or have your wits left you? I do not believe that was an acceptable answer." His free hand met her arse once more. She jumped

and screamed, a little embarrassed at being taken by surprise.

"Please, sir, have mercy," she pleaded, trying not to let him hear the arousal in her voice.

"Mercy?" he growled as he leaned over, his hot breath on her ear. The tip of his cock danced against her back as he slid it in and out of his fist. Her whines and pleas were exciting him to no end. "In what manner would you suggest I take mercy on you?"

She whimpered inaudibly which elicited another reprimand from his biting palm. She groaned as the moistness between her legs increased in anticipation.

"When I speak to you, wretched girl, you had better answer me forthwith or there will be consequences. It may not be pleasurable for you, but it certainly will be for me."

"Oh gods, Severus," she ground out with difficulty, having no will left whatsoever to speak. "Fuck me already!"

Without further ado, Severus abandoned his self-ministrations and pulled her hips higher. Roughly spreading her legs apart, he thrust forward and granted her wish.

"Ah, yes!" he screamed as he buried his shaft into her again and again, feeling her walls constrict around him. She writhed beneath him, attempting to impale herself even further, as if it wasn't enough.

It was fast and hard and they grew breathless at the effort. Needing to have her closer, he drew her up against his chest, grasping her breasts, twisting her nipples, driving his cock into her even deeper than before, stretching her until he could go no farther. She cried into the emptiness in front of her, bracing her hands on the wall, allowing him free reign of her body. Anything he wanted, she was all for him.

Suddenly, she was convulsing around his cock, and it became more difficult for him to move; her orgasm was demanding, constricting his flesh. His tendons tightened in anticipation, and a few strokes later he followed her into climactic bliss.

The couple collapsed in sheer exhaustion, having spent all their energy releasing the frustrations of the day. Hermione lay contentedly beneath Severus, his soft cock still buried deep within her yet still filling her quite satisfactorily.

And so it was that they both fell asleep.

A/N: *The bell is chiming...intermission is now over. Please return to your seats.*

6. Suspicions Confirmed

Chapter 6 of 13

The spy's identity is confirmed.

Chapter Six: Suspicions Confirmed

Thunder shook the castle. Rain whipped in a vortex about the aged walls while the wind wailed its cacophonous harmony through the crevices in the stone, adding to the tumultuous feeling in the pit of Hermione's stomach.

She sat slumped on the settee in front of the fire, her vacant eyes lost in the sensuous dance of the flame. The Polyjuice Potion was finished. In her hand she held a vial that held a lock of Penelope's hair. For a brief moment in her musings, she contemplated tossing it into the fire and watching it burn. She would have done just that, if it would have changed anything.

She sighed heavily and burrowed deeper into the soft cushions. At first she had been surprised to discover that such a harsh man would have a weakness for soft things. That was until she had gotten to know him better and found that beneath his hard exterior was a soft center. Granted, it was rather deeply buried.

The past few weeks had been the best of Hermione's adult life. She had found that her heart had wound its way around Severus like an errant ivy. She could no longer withdraw without severe personal damage. Her initial passion had turned into adoration, which somewhere along the way had transformed into a love she had never experienced before. Now, because of some foolish haphazard idea of hers, she may just lose him forever. Hermione sobbed and buried her face in the Severus-scented pillows.

Why couldn't she have just kept her bloody mouth shut? Whatever had she been thinking? She had always tried to solve everyone's problems. First Harry's and now Dumbledore's. The problems just seemed to get larger and more out of her control. Who was she to think that she had all the answers? And why the bloody hell did everyone have to listen to her anyway? Right now, for all the world, she would have traded her brain for one of her more vacuous ex-classmate's and find simple enjoyment in things like nail polish and hair accessories and reading the latest installment of *The Top Ten Ways to Curl a Wizard's Toes in Bed* in Witch Weekly. She cursed her overactive brain, not for the first or last time.

She did not hear the door open for all the clamour the storm was creating. When she felt the hand on her shoulder, it awakened something primal within her and her DADA training kicked in. She sprung from the settee with an almost feline swiftness and grace and spun towards her would-be attacker, simultaneously drawing her wand.

Severus blinked, still half-bent over the back of the sofa with his hand extended toward what should have been the still-reclining form of his lover. Quite pleased at her quick reaction as well as at the unexpected response, an almost Albus-like twinkle grew in his eyes. Then his expression crumpled into a state of unadulterated mirth as he gave in to peals of laughter.

Hermione watched his severe countenance crack, at first with a tinge of amusement. But then, as sobs of joy wracked his body and tears trailed down his cheeks, she realised how much she loved to see him laugh, to see him happy. And it dawned on her that the little vial still clutched in her palm was going to change all that. She let the vial and her wand fall to the carpet in front of her, buried her face in her hands and started to cry.

Never let it be said that Severus Snape is heartless or cruel because when he saw Hermione fall apart, he felt his heart tear into a thousand pieces. In three long strides, being careful not to step on the vial or her wand, he enveloped her in his long, strong arms. Her body shook and her shoulders heaved against him as he rubbed her back and murmured incoherently into her bushy curls, cursing himself for his insensitivity.

He knew she had been falling into a trap of despair these past few days. At first he had surreptitiously left chocolate by the bedside, hoping that perhaps it was a passing hormonal thing. The chocolate had disappeared, all right. After all, what woman would disparage a gift of chocolate? But after a couple days, he came to the grim

realisation that her deepening melancholy had nothing to do with hormones but everything to do with the fact that the potion was nearly complete.

Only when her sobs had quieted and her hug seemed less desperate did he dare to pull back and look into her reddened eyes.

"Hermione," he spoke softly. He shook his head, momentarily at a loss for words. What could he say to her that would make a difference? He could not bring himself to lie to her, even if a lie could allay her fears.

"Severus, I was wrong to involve you in this. I don't want you to go back." Her voice dwindled to a near-whine.

Severus wiped away her tears and cupped her face in his hands.

"You did not involve me. I accepted my fate before you were born. Please stop berating yourself." He spoke calmly as if he were speaking to a small child. "This is a war, Hermione. No one is more eager to see it finished than I. You are a brilliant witch, more than capable to look at this situation logically."

"Yes," she nodded at him gravely, "but I cannot look at it objectively anymore."

A feeling foreign to him until a few weeks ago lurched painfully in his chest. He bent to kiss her salty lips, tasting her love for him as if experiencing it for the first time.

"I love you, Hermione," he whispered. "I don't think you could ever possibly understand what it means to me to have you in my life."

Blast! He hated it when the hair got stuck in his throat.

He paused for a moment and gagged. Honestly, how embarrassing. Her somber but unwavering gaze urged him to continue. So, he swallowed the last of the potion and braced himself as the transformation rippled through his body.

His hands unconsciously trailed over his new form. He had never used Polyjuice Potion to take on the body of a woman before. What a shame, he thought as his hands found two quite pleasing lumps of flesh.

"Severus," Hermione warned. His hands dropped away suddenly as if burnt. Damn, but that felt good. He filed several possibilities away for future exploration.

"We have plenty of Polyjuice base for when this whole thing is over," she teased.

Was she smirking at him?

"You little vixen." His voice came out sounding rather squeaky, not at all his usual timbre. Severus winced. He had forgotten how much Penelope Clearwater's voice irritated him. He would have to remember to keep his mouth shut at all costs. Just bloody great. Now she was giggling at him, too.

"I know this must be incredibly amusing for you." Snarling as a soprano just did not hold any satisfaction. "Bugger all. I will meet you back here in an hour, if not sooner," he snapped as he flounced out the door.

Her laughter taunted him until the distance became too great to hear her any longer. Only then could he ignore the fact that his body had taken on a different shape. His mind was still unquestionably Severus, and he wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible.

Reaching the quarters of Miss Clearwater, who lie safely ensconced and slumbering elsewhere in the castle, he mumbled the pilfered password and entered. He illuminated her chambers with a "Lumos" and gave the room a cursory once-over.

Good thing he had decided to forego lunch. As it was, the half-digested potion threatened to make a reappearance. Everything in his sight was shrouded in flowers and lace. If Madam Puddifoot's existed on the first level of Hell, Penelope's quarters certainly descended much further than that; perhaps the fourth level, he groused mentally. He thanked Merlin and several lines of his descendents that he had chosen a woman who was not obsessed with decorating in copious amounts of foliage.

But then his spy's instincts took over and he saw the lavishness for what it truly was: deception. Severus let his eyes roam deeper into the décor, picking out inconsistencies. He walked over to the vanity and sat on the overstuffed hassock. Staring only momentarily at his reflection in the mirror...it truly was disturbing...he perused the room through its reflection. Then he felt through the glass itself.

Somehow he knew he would find what he was looking for, and he sighed at the predictability and simplicity in which Miss Clearwater's mind worked. She either was very inexperienced or she simply had no fear of being caught. Since she had been coached by the Dark Lord himself, the latter was more likely. A modest incantation, one he used himself at times, revealed a compartment behind the mirror. Inside stood two small Pensieves, one made of obsidian and the other of alabaster.

Rubbing the middle of his forehead to avert the headache that threatened...he always got headaches when he drank Polyjuice...he had a sick foreboding feeling of what he would find when he looked inside each. Glancing briefly into the alabaster Pensieve, he saw images of faculty meetings, encounters with students in the hallways and conversations with the headmaster all tumbling within. At least she chose to leave *some* memories behind; was this perhaps an indication that the girl had a conscience, or was it just a way to organise her memories and give the Dark Lord a more concise picture? He supposed a closer look at the other would answer that question. The darker Pensieve rippled with fragmented memories of dark revels and private meetings with the Dark Lord. He touched neither one, however, finding his task suddenly too repulsive as the headache crashed down upon him full force. Further exploration would have to wait for another day. It was enough for now that their suspicions had been confirmed.

Having at least enough sense in his headache-induced fog to close and re-ward the hiding place, leaving everything as he had found it, he stumbled blindly from the room and returned to the dungeons.

7. Obsession

Chapter 7 of 13

A little fruitful research ... and making Harry ill can be lots of fun.

Grumbling, Harry climbed the stairs of number twelve, Grimmauld Place to investigate the odd thumping noises coming from the library. He could have sworn that he had gotten rid of that Boggart last week. It had been a persistent bugger, though. It had taken him five tries before it finally dissipated. Perhaps he was now cursed with its equally nasty twin.

Harry was shocked to find the library in complete disarray. He ducked just in time to avoid an especially large book as it sailed over a mountain of volumes and landed with a great thunk at his feet. Now it made sense: he would bet his entire fortune that this "Boggart" sported unkempt brown hair, ink-smudged fingers, and owned a rucksack that weighed twenty kilos.

"Hermione!" his voice cracked as another book sailed frighteningly close to his right ear.

His brown-curled Boggart briefly made an appearance over the edge of the massive heap.

"Oh!" Hermione squeaked. "Sorry, Harry. Perhaps you had better move over there." She indicated vaguely to his left, out of the line of fire, before her head disappeared. By the incoherent mutterings, he assumed she was about to resume her activity.

Walking gingerly around a couple smaller piles, Harry finally found Hermione sitting on the floor surrounded by several books in various states of examination. Grumbling to herself and chewing on the end of a quill, she tossed another book aside while simultaneously taking notes.

"Hermione!"

She looked at him blankly, seeming to have already forgotten that he was there. "What do you want, Harry? I'm busy."

"Yeah, I can see that." He was used to her absurd fits of search and find. The thing was, she only got worked up this badly when the subject of her research was near and dear to her heart. He had a sinking feeling where this was going. "Wanna take a break?"

"Not really, no," she replied, rubbing more ink on her nose and returning to the book in her hand.

"Hermione. Come on, now. What are you up to?" Harry also knew the necessity of drawing her out of her derangement, even if it was only for short periods of time. He found it kept her a little more sane and connected to the rest of the world.

Sighing in exasperation at not being left alone, she replied curtly, "Well, if you must know, I believe I have found a way to get rid of Severus' Dark Mark."

All right. So he wasn't expecting *that*. Although, he had suspected it had something to do with the great greasy git she now called her boyfriend.

Harry nudged the toe of his trainers into a crack in the floor tile. "Erm, what do you mean when you say 'get rid of'?"

"I mean eradicate, destroy, terminate, erase, put an end to ... I could quote the entire entry of the thesaurus, if you'd like," she answered in her snippiest tone of voice.

"No need. I get it," he answered, rifling a hand through his mopy hair. "I suppose my next question is why?"

"Why?" Harry cringed, realizing that was entirely the wrong thing to say. Hermione stood to face Harry with hands on her hips. "How can you ask me such a question? Why? Because I don't want to see him suffer any longer, that's why! Because I want him to have *some* inkling as to how normal people live normal lives, that's why! Because I think he has paid long enough for mistakes he made when he was young and stupid, that's why! Because I love him ... that's why."

Her voice softened at the final admission. Harry toed the floor self-consciously.

"You understand love, don't you, Harry? I know you don't understand *me* loving *him*, but I do. I love Severus Snape more than I love myself, and that is saying a lot." Her hands fell from her hips in defeat.

She gazed at the mayhem she had created and giggled. "Perhaps I need a break after all."

"That's my girl." Harry held out a hand and helped her climb over the walls of her prison.

Hermione came down to dinner later that night to find Severus and Harry awkwardly "enjoying" each other's company at the kitchen table. They both looked up at her as though expecting a much-deserved rescue. She glanced at both men respectively and ladled some stew into her bowl.

"How nice to see both of my men getting along so famously." She was tired and felt slightly malicious at the moment. The men shot each other sympathetic looks as they quickly filled their own bowls. In both of their experiences, it was best not to incite Hermione in any way, shape or form when she was in such a mood.

Harry cleared his throat. "Erm, Hermione, how's the research coming along?"

"I'm finished," she replied nonchalantly, the wicked witch of the library having taken her leave. She took a bite of stew, savouring it. She took a few more mouthfuls before saying anything further.

"Did Molly make this? It is positively delicious."

"No," Severus spoke up. "Actually I made it. Would you care for some wine as well?" He poured a liberal amount into her glass.

The two men shot each other a glance akin to worry as she drained half the glass in one go and shoveled another spoonful into her mouth. Harry smirked behind his hand, having seen this type of behavior from Hermione before and sure that his counterpart had not. Although, Severus was putting on quite a show of being extraordinarily calm and patient, and he was determined not to let Harry know that he found this behavior somewhat unusual.

When Hermione finished the stew and wine, she sat back to find both men staring at her.

"What?" she snapped.

"More wine?" Severus poured another glassful, evidently enjoying this newfound facet of his lover. Absentmindedly, she lifted the glass to her lips and drank.

"Well, Hermione?" Harry couldn't contain himself any longer. "Give already!"

Hermione looked over at Severus who had a vague expression of interest on his face, not wanting to appear as eager as Harry.

"Why, Harry, I had no idea you held such an interest in my research," she said saucily. "After all, I believe you found the topic of my research questionable."

"Oh, you wound me," he replied, clutching at his chest. "Now that you are finished having a go at me, will you please tell us, or do I have to get down on my knees and beg?"

She seemed to contemplate it for a second and then gave in. "Oh, all right."

Severus set his glass of wine on the table and lounged back in his chair. "Are you quite finished with your childish banter? I am most interested with what Hermione has to

say."

"You should be, Severus." Hermione knew she'd have his full attention once she said what she had to say. "I found out how to get rid of your Dark Mark."

Severus leaned forward in his chair. "What do you mean 'get rid of'?"

Hermione rolled her eyes, vaguely recalling a similar conversation.

Harry interrupted. "I believe she means, *Professor*: eradicate, destroy, terminate, erase, put an end to..."

"Harry," Hermione warned, "stop baiting Severus, please. This is important."

Severus reclined in his chair, smirking at the reprimand.

"Severus, remember that book I was reading the night you came back from...well, you know, the book with the charm I used?" She did not want to give too much away in front of Harry.

Severus nodded and murmured, "How could I forget?"

"I found a reference to a Dark magic that leaves a mark through which a form of communication could take place, such as a summons or the relay of feelings." She paused for effect before continuing. "It alluded to a spell that could be performed that would reverse the Dark magic, thereby severing the connection. It also alluded to a number of other things."

"What other things?" Severus seemed almost hypnotized by the possibility. Not through lack of trying, he had never found any reference to a Dark mark of any kind.

"Well, it mentioned that the wizard who places the mark draws power from the witch or wizard upon whom he placed the mark. The more people he marks, the greater his power becomes."

Severus let his head fall into his hands and stared at the table. This news weighed on him like a long-awaited diagnosis.

"Also," she continued, a little worried at his reaction, "all the people who are marked are linked, not just to the wizard who marked them but to each other."

Severus sat up straight, his haunted eyes wordlessly burning holes into hers. Hermione reached across the table and grasped his hands tightly.

"Do you know what this means, Severus? I found the spell to rid you of the Dark Mark. When the spell is performed, not only will your mark disappear but so will everyone else's, and ... and the Dark Lord will be left powerless."

Harry sat in stunned silence.

Severus simply stared at the woman in front of him. This woman, the woman that he loved, was going to finally bring him peace. At that moment, this wild-haired, ink-stained girl became a goddess in his eyes.

He stood and leaned across the table. Grasping her shoulders, he pulled her to him and kissed her so hard it hurt. He drew back, only to stare at her with moist eyes, and then drew her roughly into another and more lengthy kiss. The edge of the table bit into her hip with the force that he exerted over her, but it was the last thing on her mind as his tongue slid over her lips with a passion he could not seem to curtail.

"Hey!" Harry shouted. His complaint was barely registered by the snogging couple. "Hey, you two, ~~wæat~~ at this table, for Merlin's sake! Get a room! I mean, *go* to your room! Oh, bloody hell, I think I am going to be sick!" Harry upended his chair in attempt to exit as fast as humanly possible.

Laughter mingled with kisses as Hermione crawled over the table, their lips not once breaking contact, and wrapped her legs around his waist.

"That was too easy," Hermione gasped as Severus nuzzled her neck, trailing kisses over to her ear.

"You taste like ink," he whispered, tickling her ear. Hermione giggled, trying to nudge him away.

"Not so fast, my little bookworm," he growled. "I happen to love the taste of ink." He nibbled down her neck to the top of her t-shirt. "Especially when accompanied by the scent of books. It is most sexy." He pressed into her to make his point.

Grinding her hips in response, she replied huskily, "I suppose I will have to remember not to shower the next time I do some research."

"What is the point? You will be needing a shower after I am through with you anyway," he purred, thrusting his hardness into her softness. "It's a shame."

"What is?" she asked through the golden haze of passion he was inducing.

"It's a shame that you will need a new t-shirt. This one is so ... becoming."

His voice slid down her spine and pooled between her legs. His words did not register until she felt him rend the shirt from her body. He suckled her nipples with the fervor of a man possessed. His hardness pushed through the layers of their clothing, trying to release itself.

Hermione had but one remaining thought in her head as she grasped her wand and muttered, "Divestio."

Without hesitation, his body found its niche and thrust into her. Hermione wound her hands into his hair, holding on for dear life as he ravaged her body, releasing years of pent up frustration and passion all at once.

"Oh, fuck, Hermione," he crooned through their gasps of pleasure. "You feel so good. Oh, gods ... yes!" His pace picked up as she squealed in wordless acquiescence. Faster and harder, he stroked her body inside and out as her screams began to build in volume.

The table shook with the force of their lovemaking, and the room became alive with their mingled cries and groans. Her nails dug into his backside, drawing him into her each time. Every thrust pushed her toward the precipice, higher and higher as the oxygen became thinner and thinner, until fireworks danced in front of her eyes.

"Gods, you are so beautiful!" he moaned into her ear and flew apart, reaching for her deepest point as she screamed her release, and he felt himself being strangled with the strength of her orgasm.

When her breathing slowed, Hermione cast a guilty look around the kitchen.

"We forgot the Silencing Charm," she moaned, feeling more than a little embarrassed.

"Hmm," he agreed as he released her from the weight of his body. "If it is any consolation, I doubt Mister Potter heard us over the sound of his own retching."

Giggling uncontrollably, they dressed and went to bed.

8. Finding Strength

Chapter 8 of 13

A trip into the Pensieve and Severus resumes his role as a spy.

Chapter Eight: Finding Strength

Severus took the gently proffered cup with a shaking hand.

"Severus, I really wish I did not have to ask this of you," Albus attempted to soothe the younger man, "but we need to determine when to place our plan in motion. It is the only way."

"I am quite aware of that, Albus." Severus stared blankly into the cup. "It will be difficult, you understand." Eyes of steel flicked upward, meeting the icy, but not unsympathetic, regard of his elder.

"Yes, my boy, I *do* know it will be most difficult for you. However, you are the only one who can do this." Albus felt his heart go out to his protégé. How many times had he sent this boy off to do unspeakable things? Not once in all these years had Severus ever flinched from his duty. A spark of admiration swelled in the old man's chest.

Nodding, Severus drained the cup in its entirety. Before the headmaster's eyes, the young Potions master morphed into the somewhat attractive, younger, lithe form of the Charms professor.

"If you do not need me any longer, then, Headmaster?" Severus' feminine voice unnerved Albus slightly. He would never become used to witnessing the effects of the Polyjuice Potion.

"Go on, Severus," he replied. "I have taken care of Miss Clearwater for the evening, and she will be none the wiser."

"As you wish, Albus." Miss Clearwater's body gave a very Severus-like nod as he spun to stalk out of the office.

"Severus?" Albus called out in afterthought.

Without turning around, Severus glanced at the high-towered ceiling as if in prayer. "Yes, Albus?"

The old man hesitated for a moment, debating whether or not to impart his final words. "Miss Granger is your greatest asset, Severus. Love is not always a weakness. It can be your strength. Remember that, my boy."

Severus quirked his head slightly in the headmaster's direction before closing the door. "I will remember. Thank you, Albus."

Severus-as-Penelope rounded the corner. His robes clung to his legs in a very undignified manner. Stifling a growl, he tugged them free, never breaking stride. He detested being in this body any more than necessary. The swing of his hips was all wrong. He was an intruder in an unmanageable foreign body.

Coming to a halt outside Miss Clearwater's quarters, he relaxed just a smidgeon and allowed his senses to reach out into the darkened corridor beyond, feeling the chilled air for uninvited guests. When he could detect nothing, he brought down the wards quietly and slipped inside.

Miss Clearwater must not have suspected anything the last time they waylaid her from reaching her quarters, as every ward and everything remained unchanged. *For a spy she is entirely too trusting*, he thought critically. Severus frequently and chaotically changed his wards. His policy was trust no one, not even Albus Dumbledore. He snorted loudly. Albus had asked Severus to come to his office earlier in the evening to discuss an unruly student; once they were in private, he discovered that Albus had a rather distasteful favor to ask of him. Trust Albus, indeed.

Severus sat wrapped in his own thoughts, sitting in front of the roiling Pensieve fraught with dark images. It was now or never. He had been away from the Dark Lord for several weeks, and the Order was desperate for information. He took a deep breath, tipped his head forward, let the tip of his nose touch the spinning surface, and soon felt himself surge forward into Miss Clearwater's recollections.

The smell hit him first: an overpowering metallic stench accompanied by a coppery taste in his mouth that made his teeth ache and his senses cower in self-preservation. He never could stand the smell of the Dark Lord. It had never affected anyone quite like it had Severus. It was his own personal torment and one that had threatened his composure numerous times over the years.

A hissing brought his attention to the right where Penelope stood at the Dark Lord's side, her head tilted back in ecstasy as the reptilian-featured man feasted upon her neck. Severus watched in horror as her robes were splayed open and flung apart to reveal her slim, nude body. The groans that came from her as the Dark Lord seized her curly sex and wrenched her body to him could not have been mistaken for anything but unadulterated desire.

Severus turned away. He refused to watch this. The Dark Lord had taken his pleasures from men and women alike, and it was not an experience he wanted to relive, even vicariously. He wondered briefly if perhaps Miss Clearwater felt the same or if the undisguised pleasure playing upon her half-masked face was genuine.

The scene changed several more times over the course of a few minutes. Miss Clearwater seemed not only to be a spy of the highest order in the eyes of the Dark Lord, but she was without doubt his personal plaything as well. She was constantly in attendance as he commanded his miscreant servant Wormtail, sibilated with Nagini and conferred with other Death Eaters. The Dark Lord trusted her inherently and especially did not trust any of his Death Eaters around her. She was his and his alone. And she had access to information privy only to the closest of confidants.

The realisation that Miss Clearwater was evidently enjoying her position sickened Severus to the very pit of his stomach. He was only too glad to abruptly terminate the connection after having acquired the necessary information.

Again, he took great pains to leave Miss Clearwater's rooms in the precise state he had found them in, and leave early enough to be sure it was Miss Clearwater that was seen leaving the room, should there be eyes to see. Even portraits were not to be trusted any longer: a decree made at the last Order meeting by Albus Dumbledore himself. They gossiped entirely too much, and one could never be sure when an innocuous comment could turn deadly. He was prudently secluded before he transformed back into his own form.

Stalking out of the darkness, he headed straight for the dungeons at a terrifying pace, his robes whipping and breaking behind him like whirlwind waves in a cyclonic storm. His mind was focused on one thing and one thing only: the woman waiting in his quarters.

The door to Severus Snape's quarters shuddered forcefully on its hinges, swinging open to reveal its dark and brooding master. She sat where he had left her: in her favourite place upon the settee in front of the fire, contentedly reading one of his latest Potions journals.

Not looking up from the article, she continued their conversation nearly where they had left off before Albus had summoned him.

"Severus, it says here that milkweed and thistle can be combined to soften the effect of the transformation when using Polyjuice Potion. We should really brew up a new batch this weekend and give it a go. What do you think?" Her pert little nose poked out coolly over the journal as she finally made eye contact.

"Oh, gods!" she moaned and hurdled over the back of the settee. Severus just stared at her, more than visibly disturbed, and his eyes burned wildly, flickering back and forth across her face, as if searching for something.

"What happened, Severus? Are you all right? Is everything okay? Speak to me!" Hermione grabbed both of his arms in a desperate plea to get him to answer her.

The bold grip of Hermione's small hands upon his arms felt like an anchor drawing him back to earth. He allowed himself to be drawn back into the chocolaty intenseness of her gaze.

His hands gripped Hermione's waist firmly like a vise, desperately crushing her, soundlessly begging her not to let go. She opened her mouth as if to say something, but the faraway look in his eyes arrested the breath in her throat. Her head involuntarily tilted, and the question went unspoken.

She was taken unawares when he pulled her towards him and crushed his mouth against hers. He wasn't so much kissing as he was drawing upon her life force as if it were the only thing that kept him alive. He devoured her, completely dominated her, and she allowed it to happen.

A sundry of emotions poured from his body into hers: his longing, his desperation, layer upon layer of frustration that had built up year after year. He bestowed it all upon her through a kiss and she absorbed it out of necessity, giving in to the overpowering need to heal him.

Frantically, his fingers began ripping away at her clothing: first her outer robes, then her gown and finally her knickers. Then he began fumbling with his own buttons. He would not let her go, would not come up for air. If he stopped now, he was afraid of losing himself, of going insane. The thought even occurred to him that he might just possibly die. He could not bear to tear himself away from her taste, her scent, her touch. The woman before him was his lifeline. He needed her more at that moment than he had ever needed anyone before.

As he clumsily climbed out of his clothes, his teeth locked upon her neck and drew at the tender skin there, pulling her hair back to expose the white flesh. Hands flew at lightening speed across his chest, long nails scraping against his hardened nipples, trailing across his stomach, leaving marks in their wake. Hermione pulled his taut erection into her stomach, making it very clear that she was his for the taking.

Invitation taken. Her fall was cushioned solely by the throw rug that his settee sat upon. Penetration was sudden and hard, a stark contrast with the softness of the carpet beneath her. Stroking her from the inside, he felt her every curve surround him and let her body caress and comfort him.

His strokes became punctuated, longer and harder, as all of his pent-up frustrations surfaced. Hermione arched her back uncontrollably beneath his labouring body, highly aroused from his unexpected fervor. Severus was unrelenting and forced her to take her pleasure before his. In a last attempt to crush out the last vestiges of painful and unwelcome feelings, he pushed ahead until finally, they overflowed into her and her body swallowed them whole.

Severus collapsed on top of her in exhaustion, clenching his arms around her shoulders, cupping her head in his hands. He buried his face into her neck and held on, every last part of him shaking uncontrollably.

"I am sorry, so very sorry," he whispered in her ear over and over.

Hermione smoothed his hair and shushed him into silence, cradling him against her chest and speaking soothingly as if to a child. "You should not be sorry, Severus. I am here for you. Whatever you need, I am here. I am not going anywhere."

She wondered if he was crying, his body was shaking so violently. But gradually he calmed down, his grasp loosening somewhat, and after a time, he raised his head to look into her eyes. His eyes were dry. His voice was sure and firm.

"Hermione," he said softly. The black ice of his gaze liquefied into a softer emotion he only ever allowed her to see.

She lifted her hand to caress the side of his face. "I love you, Severus. I do not even have the words to express how much I love you."

"I suppose that is saying quite a lot, then," he chuckled back at her, bringing a smirk to her lips.

Severus dropped his mouth in a much gentler embrace, resting his lips chastely against hers.

He spoke without breaking contact. "I am a weak man, Hermione. You are my strength. A wise man told me that."

"Who? Albus?" Hermione teased.

"Who else?" Severus broke away from her mouth.

"Hmm," she answered pensively. "Are you ready to tell me what is wrong?"

Severus looked at her for a short time, pondering how much of his soul he should reveal to the woman beneath him, this most gorgeous, remarkable woman who believed in him and supported him wholeheartedly and unconditionally.

Deciding to take an honest approach, he replied, "I have spent the last twenty-some odd years of my life living through hell, Hermione. And tonight, I finally realised that we have not yet even begun to fathom the heat of the fire."

With reassumed grace, he stood and offered his hand to help her up off the floor. They held each other in silence, each memorizing the feel of the other's body.

"That's not all, though, is it?" The question escaped from her lips before she could put a stop to it. Did she really want to know everything? Quickly, she recanted, "Never mind, Severus. I am not sure I want to know."

He squeezed her tighter and took a deep, steadying breath. "It is probably best if some things went unsaid," he agreed. "However, ~~can~~ tell you that whatever the Dark Lord has in store for us is going to happen on the Spring Equinox."

Hermione nuzzled her nose into the smattering of graying hair on his chest. "That's not too far off. I suppose, in the meantime, we should try to get in as much of this as humanly possible." Her tongue darted out and traced a circle around his left nipple.

The corners of Severus' eyes crinkled as an unused smile consumed his face. "Well then, my little vixen, let's not delay the inevitable, by all means."

The kisses that followed were more leisurely and lasted far into the night.

9. That Darn Prophecy

Chapter 9 of 13

The trio brings Harry up to snuff.

Chapter Nine: That Darn Prophecy

"Lower."

Gasps punctuated the otherwise silent room.

"I *said* lower!" It was most certainly a command now.

Hermione giggled as she lazily traced her tongue around his navel, dipping into its shallow depth and sucking. Her hands rested resolutely on his hips, fingers splaying and kneading the muscles but not venturing any further. She was trying to drive him mad.

Severus grabbed fistfuls of her hair and tried to drag her head down the last remaining couple of centimetres to the place he most desperately wanted it to be. Hermione pulled back and stared up at the possessed man looming over her. His cock, glistening red in its prolonged arousal, stood straight up in front of her face.

"If you insist on teasing me, wench, I shall have to take matters into my own hands."

"Teasing?" she flirted mercilessly, trying to push him just that tiny bit farther. "I have no idea what you are talking about, Professor, but by all means, if you think you would be better served by taking *matters* into your own hands."

It was a good thing she saw the spark in his eye before he let out a low growl, picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder; otherwise, she would have thought she had overstepped her bounds. As it was, she had the most beautiful view of his arse. The way the muscles moved when he stalked across a room, even with her weight on his shoulders, was indescribable. She reached down to grab hold of that which she fancied.

A resounding smack echoed throughout the room, and her bum burned smartly.

"Ouch!" Hermione screamed. "Bloody *hell*, Severus! That *hurt*!"

"Keep your hands to yourself then, woman," he snarled as he threw her upon the bed. She bounced and her head snapped back to meet his feral glare. Her body buzzed with excitement. Yet, there was still that slight twinge of fear that pulled in her stomach and, strangely enough, heightened her lust for the perverse Potions professor.

He crept languorously and menacingly onto the bed, coming toward her. The tiny thread of fear caused her to involuntarily back toward the headboard, resisting his advances. Severus was having none of that, however; with lightning speed, his fist closed tightly around her ankle.

"Just where do you think you are going, Miss Granger?" his voice dropped dangerously to its familiar black-bat-of-the-dungeons level.

The only thing that belied the foreboding timbre in his voice was what lie in her line of vision. His face, darkened as it was by being pushed to the limits of his patience and control, was framed by his strong, narrow shoulders and sexy, sinewy chest and was punctuated by his most well-endowed and proudly self-proclaiming manhood. It was as if two minds had become one in their quest for fulfillment.

His fingers bit into her small bones. She resisted answering. This side of Severus was new to her, and she wanted to see where this was going. She made a halfhearted attempt to pull her ankle free.

"Tut, tut, my dear. You are not going to get away from me that easily." Severus lifted his palm in her direction and muttered, *Constringo*."

Black silk ropes snaked out from the sides of the beds and wound their way around her wrists, gently securing her to the headboard. She was on display.

His hands ran up the inside of her thighs and pushed them apart, exposing her sex. Leaning forward, he inhaled loudly, making her stir with anticipation. Being tied and at his mercy was different, but extraordinarily good. She felt the moistness gather between her legs and squirmed a little, wanting him to lean in that little bit farther, to put that generous nose to good use.

Instead, he diverted his attention to the right and nipped the sensitive skin of her thigh. Hermione yelped in surprise, silently vowing to return the favor when she was able.

Severus proceeded to plant light, almost nonexistent kisses upon every square centimeter of skin, yet painfully avoided her center. She could almost feel him between her legs, his tongue stroking, his nose prodding. Her legs spread further apart as her heart pounded, engorging the whole area with blood, tempting him to delve just that bit further, to taste all that she offered. Still, he refused to relent.

It was nearly unbearable, the weight of her need. Her hips left the bed, attempting to complete the contact, but Severus merely drew back.

"Must I restrain your legs as well?" he murmured into her thigh, the vibrations chasing around in her belly.

"Perhaps, Professor, if you would so kindly put that giant proboscis where it should be, you would not have to resort to such measures." It was difficult to sound snotty when one could not breathe properly.

"Impertinence was always one of your stronger traits," he growled. Expecting her legs to be tied, she was unprepared for the next spell that escaped his lips, *Corpus Verto*."

She was instantly flipped onto her stomach, arms still somehow frustratingly bound. Severus pulled her hips up until she was on her knees and ran his long digits lovingly across her cheeks. Then, without warning, he struck.

"Fuck!" Hermione screamed more out of self-chastisement for not having seen that one coming more than anything else.

"Watch your language, Miss Granger," he warned and slapped her again. This time, she kept her mouth shut and concentrated instead on the warmth that was spreading through her lower regions.

"Again, Professor," she moaned, deciding that if perhaps she played his little game, she would get what she wanted faster.

"Ah, the minx wants more, does she?" He paused for a moment, as if condescending to consider her request, before striking her again. Smoothing the sting with a few strokes of his palm, he reached lower and snaked one of his fingers inside of her, caressing her inner walls, twisting and drawing the desire out of her.

"Yesss," she hissed as he pushed against the barrier of her womb, increasing the moistness around his finger. He wanted to groan, to give in, to take her right then and there, but he was not through with his cruel temptress ... and he was not going to let up on his little game until he had what he wanted.

With a single finger he coaxed her passion a little higher and then withdrew, eliciting an indignant shriek from the woman tied to the bed.

Severus chuckled wickedly, "Do not fret. You will get what you deserve in short order."

Oh so gently, for he was afraid of frightening her, he pushed his lubricated finger into her other entrance. He paused only when he heard the sharp intake of breath from her lips. Surprisingly, she did not raise any objection; thus, he slid it in even further.

Then, knowing that this was indeed a new experience for Hermione and wanting to show her how much pleasure she could derive from it, he wrapped his other arm around her waist and ran his hand down over her curls, finding the bundle of nerves nestled within. Her breathing faltered, and she whimpered something unintelligible.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" he whispered, nuzzling his face into the wild curls covering her face.

"Mmmmm," was the only answer she was capable of giving as he gently opened and prepared the way for greater things to come.

"I cannot tell you how happy that makes me, little student of mine." Oh, yes. It made him happy, indeed, to be able to partake in one of his guilty little pleasures. He was truly blessed to find a woman like Hermione who was so willing to explore new territory.

He made sure she heard the next spell so she would understand exactly what was going to happen next. *Lubricus*," he murmured as he slid a hand over his long shaft. Then he took mercy on her and released her binds.

Hermione grasped the pillows in front of her, hugging them to her body, waiting for the inevitable penetration. Her breathing came in short bursts as Severus continued to tease her swollen clitoris, allowing the pleasure to distract her, to prepare her.

Then the fullness of his cock rested at her entrance, and he slowly pushed forward. His fingers worked feverishly at the fore to make the passage smoother and less painful. To his immense pleasure, but not to his surprise, Hermione quickly discovered the need to relax, and she actually pushed back into him as he sheathed himself to the hilt.

Her virginal hole was so tight, and her muscles held him snugly inside her body, unwilling to let him move. It was an incredible feeling, sort of like having a snake coiled and constricting, writhing and pulsing around him. It was overwhelming his senses, threatening to eliminate every ounce of resolve he had left.

Oh, but he had one last trick up his proverbial sleeve, and so he concentrated and muttered, *Pro lato*." The finger of his right hand lengthened and thickened, growing to a size not nearly that of that which he had buried inside but quite close. Slowly, he slid it into her vagina, feeling the pressure through the thin barrier as it slid up alongside his cock.

This was what he had been waiting for. Oh, yes. His little seductress moaned beneath him, verbalizing what he was feeling but would not allow himself to express for fear of losing his self-control.

At first, he moved only the enlarged finger-phallus, enjoying the sensation as it slid against his buried cock...in, out, and then in again...over and over, stroking his length while simultaneously bringing her pleasure. He almost did not realise when her moans became declarations of pleasure, urging him to move within her.

"Severus, please," she begged.

Anxious to show him what she wanted, Hermione pulled forward slightly, unsheathing him partway; then she pushed backwards, encouraging him to give her more. Unable to contain himself any longer, his mind completely besotted with pleasure, the combined sensations threw him into a frenzy and he set a rhythm.

"Oh gods Severus yes oh fuck please don't stop bloody fucking hell that feels *sogood*." A litany of strung-together words barely constituting sentences poured from Hermione's mouth.

The thrusting of both members, of being caressed from all angles at once, of having all points of pleasure manipulated simultaneously was more than she could take. Thought was no longer an option. Instead she gave in to the spiraling eddy that began somewhere in her belly and grew to encompass her heart and her entire being.

The storm began to brew somewhere deep in his belly. Hermione's whimpers and addled murmurings mixed with her constricting flesh and combined with the increased fullness and pressure all brought the storm to a head. The wildness of their passion whipped through the room.

Hermione felt the magic spin around their bodies as they spun toward the crux of the storm. She let herself go where it took her, not fighting it in the least, not wanting the feeling to end as the intensity of the physical sensations wound tighter and tighter about her core.

Severus grew tense behind her, thrusting now with great difficulty as he brought them both to the edge. Thunder and lightening crackled in the air around them as they drew upon the magical energy of their union, and light burst forth as their bodies exploded in and around each other, their screams lost in the violence of their passion.

They both collapsed, Severus on top of Hermione, too weak to do much else. Severus performed the counter spell to shrink his hand but could not find the energy to remove anything else. Their breathing was laboured; their hearts beat wildly, almost stumbling in determination to catch up with the ebbing passion.

In the long minutes that followed, when their breathing finally relaxed, their bodies finally felt the strenuous exercise that they had been put through. Severus slowly withdrew from her body and turned her in his arms so he could keep her as close as possible.

"Wow," she whispered. "That was amazing ... I mean ... oh, I don't know what I mean. It was more than amazing. It was utterly ... oh, bugger all!"

Severus laughed, his whole body shaking around her. "I believe I win our little game," he said in between chuckles.

"What game was that?" She tried to retain some of the innocence in her voice that she no longer felt.

"Well, aside from the one where we brutally tempt each other's endurance and patience," he said good-humoredly, "I believe the one I am speaking of is where your wits become so addled that you cannot speak. Since we are fairly even on the first score, then I would have to say that I have won."

Hermione mumbled something inaudible into his shoulder.

"What was that, love?" Severus asked in a sickeningly sweet, mocking voice.

"I *said*, Severus, that you must have been mistakenly under the impression that you were trying my patience. In actuality, I had you right where I wanted you."

"Is that right?" he quipped back. "So you are telling me that you expected everything that happened here tonight?"

"Well..." Her voice and body trembled slightly with the fresh memories.

Severus grabbed her arse and pulled her tightly against his body, which was already recovering quite nicely from its ordeal. "I did not think so."

She looked up into his eyes. "Can we do that again sometime?"

The eagerness so blatantly displayed in her eyes reminded him of her youth, of her incessant hand-waving and perpetual question-asking. Odd, how it was no longer disturbing to him to be reminded of such things. He let out a long, low chuckle.

"We can do *that* again as often as you like."

"Thank you, Professor," she chided sleepily as she yawned, tucking her head against his shoulder.

Severus muttered, "Nox," and they fell asleep.

The next morning, Hermione found her muscles exceptionally achy in all the right places. All right, everything bloody well hurt! She hypothesized that with use and lots of practise, perhaps she would not feel so out of it after a night of acrobatics such as they had.

Severus had the audacity to laugh at her as she got stiffly out of bed and made her way to the loo.

"What are *you* laughing at, old man?" she snapped. She needed a hot shower and a pot of strong tea, for sure.

"You are moving slower than Albus this morning," he shot back as he sat up and stretched limberly. "Strangely enough, I feel just fine."

The door to the bathroom shut with a resounding slam, which only served to make Severus laugh louder. He summoned his lounge robe and fastened it around his body, noticing that he, in fact, was feeling a little achy this morning as well. Ah, but what that little minx did not know would certainly work to his advantage or at least keep him in good humour.

He ordered tea and scones from the kitchens and fetched *The Daily Prophet* from the table where the owl always conveniently left it. The date at the top read March 7th . He sighed. Two weeks until the Spring Equinox. They were meeting with Albus this morning after breakfast.

The tea and scones were hot and waiting when Hermione emerged from the bathroom.

"Ah, the picture of youth returns," he mouthed into his tea, glancing up from his paper.

She gave him a good swat on his shoulder as she passed. "Evil bat."

"Wanton wench."

Knowing that she would not win a battle of words with Severus Snape, she settled for sticking her tongue out at him.

"Careful, little girl, or I will come over there and bite that thing off."

"I suppose that would eliminate any chances of you winning your silly little game, then, wouldn't it?" Oh, pain did wonderful things for the wit.

"Would you care for a muscle relaxing potion perhaps?" he asked, taking pity on her.

"That would be oh-so-kind of you, Severus. You took yours already then, I gather?" she smirked and took a long sip of hot tea, grabbing the potion from his fist.

"That and then some." He glanced up sharply at her. "Have I become *that* transparent to you?"

"I may be a Gryffindor, but I can still charm my way through your Slytherin wiles."

"Hmm." He would have to ponder all the angles of that little dilemma later, he supposed.

The fireplace sprang to life, and Albus' head popped through. "Severus. Hermione," he spoke, looking at each one respectively. "Are you ready to come through?"

"I suppose the sooner the better," Severus muttered nonchalantly, standing up and brushing an errant crumb from his robe. He took his wand, and with a flick his lounge robe transformed into his much more constricting and conservative teaching robes. Hermione did the same. They held hands and went through the Floo to the Headmaster's office.

"Come in, my children," Albus effervesced. "I figured that you had not finished your breakfast yet, so I had the house-elves bring up something of a treat."

Oh dear, Hermione thought as she viewed the small spread on the sideboard, the old codger is buttering us up. One glance at Severus and she knew he was thinking the same thing. Nevertheless, they dug in.

"We are going to have one more for breakfast this morning. He should be here any minute." As soon as Albus stopped talking, there was a slight knock and Harry popped his head through the door.

"Hey, Hermione! Where have *you* been lately?" In three strides Harry was dragging Hermione out of her chair and grabbing her up in a bear hug, trying for all the world to tune out the tall dark presence at her side.

"Kindly unhand my woman, Potter," Severus drawled. Harry turned a slight shade of green before placing Hermione back on the floor, which made Severus almost smile.

"Sorry, Professor," Harry intoned out of sheer politeness, returning to a more palatable color. "I hope you have been well."

Severus smirked. "I certainly have no complaints," he answered as he placed his hand in the small of Hermione's back, setting her back in her chair and bending to place a light kiss upon her lips. "No. None at all."

Hermione's eyes sparkled back at him. She loved Harry...really she did...but his discomfort was irritatingly irrational, and she fully supported having a little fun at his expense.

"Breakfast is on the sideboard, Potter. The sooner we finish eating, the sooner we can get on with this blasted meeting." Severus directed the boy, who looked like he had lost his appetite, over to the spread.

Appetite or not, Harry was happy for the reprieve. He filled his plate and sat on Hermione's opposite side, glad to have something else to occupy his attention. Albus flashed a rather amused smile in his direction, eyes dancing merrily. He knew too well the benefits of a good solid meal in the stomachs of those about to embark upon serious ventures.

After they all had their fill, and Harry was reclining back in his seat massaging his slightly distended stomach, Albus waved his wand to clear the table and began the meeting.

"First things first, I believe Harry needs to be told what is going on."

Harry looked back and forth between the headmaster and Hermione, who met his gaze with a sympathetic smile. "What's going on?" he asked tentatively.

"How much do you know, Harry?" Albus enquired, not wanting to waste more time than was necessary.

"Do you mean about Hermione figuring out how to remove the professor's Dark Mark?"

"Yes, that," Albus said. "Anything else?"

Harry looked at the other three in the room, suddenly feeling very left out. "No *Should* there be something else?"

"No, Harry. I am simply ascertaining how much you know before I go into an unnecessarily lengthy explanation. I thought, perhaps, that Hermione had spoken with you of matters, but it appears she has not." The headmaster glanced up at Hermione who only quirked an eyebrow back at him. "Hermione, maybe you should be the one to explain things. He may take it better from you."

"Wait," Harry interrupted. "What is this? What do you mean I will take it better from Hermione?"

"Harry, the headmaster is just surprised that I had not confided in you." She shot a guarded glare in Albus' direction. "I was under the impression, Headmaster, that we were supposed to keep it amongst ourselves."

"You did well, Hermione. But I think perhaps Harry could have been the exception to the rule if you had seen fit to tell him. After all, we do require his help."

"What kind of help are you talking about?" Harry was beginning to sound positively panicked.

Hermione turned in her chair to face her best friend. "The kind of help we are talking about, Harry, is the kind that will get rid of Voldemort forever."

Harry choked back a laugh. She was serious. He knew she was serious, but his emotions had a tendency to rule his mouth nonetheless.

"Forever? Hermione, you have got to be joking. That monster did not disappear the first time, nor the second time, and the third time he only succeeded in getting stronger. If anything, I would say we could put him out of commission for a while and regroup, but eliminate him completely? It's impossible."

"Do not be so quick to dismiss the possibility, Potter," Severus spat. "I think you of all people should know by now that if Hermione sets her mind to something, she will undoubtedly accomplish it."

Harry had nothing to say to that. He knew the professor was right; he just hated to admit it.

"Remember how I told you I could get rid of Severus' Dark Mark?" Hermione took Harry's hand in hers. She smiled to herself as Severus shifted in his chair and pressed the length of his leg against her own.

"I remember," Harry answered, oblivious to the mild display of jealousy going on beneath the table skirts. "But I don't understand why you need my help."

She took a deep breath. "Well, long story short, we discovered a spy at Hogwarts. Severus has infiltrated her quarters and found some valuable information."

"Hold on a second," Harry broke in, eyes wide. "There is a spy, and it's *awoman*?"

"Yes, Penelope Clearwater," she bit out curtly, without heeding the incredulous look on Harry's face. "Voldemort is planning something for the Spring Equinox. Something major. Severus is going to return to his side when summoned next, but he will be going as Penelope with a little help from the Polyjuice Potion."

Harry was stunned. He was still dwelling on the fact that Percy Weasley's ex-girlfriend was a Death Eater and a spy for the opposite side. And she seemed like such a nice girl, as far as he could remember. Of course, he had been, what, twelve or thirteen at the time; most girls seemed nice to him at that age. Still, she had seemed normal to him. Well, unless, of course, you wanted to take into account that she had dated Percy.

"Harry?" Hermione drew him out of his reverie.

"Erm, yeah." He shook the cobwebs out of his brain. "So what exactly is it I have to do?"

"Well, you won't be helping until the very end. The prophecy, you know."

"You will be performing the final curse, of course, Potter," Severus drawled from his sprawled position on the other side of Hermione. "You should have a much easier time of it, however. Once the Dark Marks are obliterated, he should be in a severely weakened state. I, myself, am quite looking forward to the show. My only regret is that I will not be the one casting the killing curse."

Hermione patted Severus' knee beneath the table in mock comfort. She knew it did not bother him that much or he would have never admitted it to Harry.

"Anyway, Harry, I have it nearly planned out. There are just a few kinks I have to smooth over. Really, all you will have to do is follow my lead when the time comes."

Severus snorted, "Yes, Potter. As if you do not have enough practise doing that already."

The hand on his knee stopped being comforting and instead became quite painful. He reached out to loosen her vise grip.

"What I meant to say," he cleared his throat as the pressure released, "was all you should have to worry about is the Dark Lord. Leave the details to us."

"Fine." Harry slumped into his seat. "So, we are really going to do it, then? In about two weeks?" The pitch in his voice grew higher with each word.

Harry stared off into space for a few moments while the other three exchanged anxious glances. Two weeks. Two weeks suddenly did not seem enough time to accomplish everything he wanted to get done. Not that he didn't trust Hermione's plan, but just in case he didn't make it out of the final battle alive, there were certain things he wanted to experience. He never even...Harry stood up abruptly, knocking his chair to the side.

"Right. Well, then, I need to be off. I have some, er, things to do, people to see and all that. Hermione, you will let me know when and where and all the details later, right? I really should go. Erm, thank you, Headmaster, for having me to breakfast. I...erm, I should really be off now." He murmured and stumbled all the way out the door.

"And *that* is the savior of the wizarding world," Severus groused plaintively.

*A/N: Sorry for the slam on Percy. Erm...sort of. Okay, not really. *evil laughter**

10. The Snake's Lair

Chapter 10 of 13

Severus sacrifices for the greater good.

*A/N: I was a little leery of this chapter and what sort of warning to place on it. You will read about sex in this chapter that is not considered rape, nor is it completely consensual or non-consensual. Sometimes one must do something distasteful for the greater good. Essentially, one says "yes" when one would rather say "no" but cannot. It is not violent in any way but it is squicky. (No, Percy is not in this chapter.) Those who have been following the story may know where I am going with this, but I do not want to give it away before you read. I stress, these are **not** "lemons" to be enjoyed, but sex essential to the plot.*

Chapter Ten: The Snake's Lair

Albus closed and warded the door to the annex off the infirmary and turned toward the somber couple. Neither Severus nor Hermione felt very much like talking.

"It is done." Albus sighed. In a small way, an infinitesimally small way, he was relieved that it had begun. But, a large part of him could not shake the heaviness that rested upon his very soul. He positively despised having to take drastic measures such as this, even when it was necessary. Hopefully in the end, it would all be worth it.

Penelope Clearwater lie dormant behind the heavy wards of the door. Of course, Madam Pomfrey had been apprised of the situation earlier that morning. The Healer had grown paler and paler as Albus filled her in on the identity of their spy and a skeletonized version of events yet to come. After the debriefing, Madam Pomfrey had gone into her office and locked the door, reemerging much later with bloodshot eyes and a more-than-determined, business-as-usual attitude.

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Both Severus and Hermione had been slaving over hot cauldrons for weeks, brewing the base for the Polyjuice Potion. And then one night, when Hermione was deeply immersed in one of the Black family books that dabbled on the edge of the Dark Arts but hadn't quite fallen in yet, she was given one of those rare gifts that strengthens people's faith in the existence of a higher being.

"Sev-er-us," she pronounced slowly, her voice tightly coiled, her eyes not wavering from the page.

Severus had looked up from his grading, slightly alarmed at her tone, thinking something was terribly wrong. But then, Hermione exhaled and looked up at him with her brightly gleaming amber eyes, and the tension he always seemed to hold in his shoulders dissipated.

"Look what I found," she whispered as he came up to look over her shoulder at the open book.

Inside the ancient tome, buried deeply inside a chapter titled *Herculean Herbage* was a single sentence about using the bark of the North American Redwood tree as a means to prolong the effects of the Polyjuice Potion. Of course, it did not explain how much to use or when to add it or how long it would last, and it was such a fleeting citation, but it was there nonetheless.

They had exchanged stares, shocked at their sheer dumb luck, before scrambling over each other to get to the lab. Of course, there had been some long-distance Apparating involved to obtain the ingredient, as no supply shop had ever even dreamed of stocking the stuff. Severus had registered the discovery with the Ministry of Magic under both his and Hermione's names. When this was all over, they would make a neat little profit on the copyright, no doubt.

Extensive testing ensued, and eventually they were able to lengthen the potency of the potion fivefold. Instead of an hour, Severus now had five at his disposal before he would have to repeat the dosage. It was not much, but it was enough to make him feel more confident attending a Death Eater meeting as Miss Clearwater.

It was not often that a meeting lasted longer than a few hours. In fact, it had only happened a handful of times in the past five years. However, Hermione being Hermione, she had a back-up plan: an extra dose of Polyjuice within a vial and transfigured into a replica of the necklace Penelope always wore. Severus would wear it about his neck as a failsafe.

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Albus turned to go but turned back to the still-silent couple at the last moment. "Everything is ready to go, is it not, Severus?"

"Yes, Albus." Severus' voice fell below normal hearing range. "The next time the Dark Mark burns, I will go."

"Very good, my boy." Albus looked in Hermione's direction. "Inform me when Severus has to leave, Hermione. Deliver the message personally. If I am not in my office, you should be able to find me in the Charms classroom." He tilted his head in parting.

"I still cannot *believe* he decided to take the Polyjuice Potion to teach her classes," Hermione stared after the departing headmaster.

"Hmm," Severus concurred as he tucked her hand into the crook of his arm and led her back to the dungeons. "I suppose it is his way of contributing to the cause, as it were."

"The old man is feeling left out, in other words," Hermione smiled.

"If I remember correctly, he mentioned something about young people having all the fun," he chortled.

They did not have long to wait. Two nights later, Severus' Dark Mark began to burn.

Severus and Hermione didn't speak a single word as he prepared for the ordeal. He took the Polyjuice Potion and then carefully dressed his borrowed body to imitate the visions he had seen in the Pensieve. Hermione placed the necklace around his neck as a final touch.

She placed a hand on Severus' cheek and looked deep into his eyes, looking for any trace of her lover within. Only Penelope stared back at her, although she knew it was really him. Hermione supposed that was for the best. The Dark Lord should be none the wiser.

"Be careful, Severus," she whispered.

"Hermione," his voice trembled slightly. "No matter what happens, know that I still love you."

Severus had not gone into detail when describing what he had seen in the Pensieve, but she had a fairly good idea.

"I know that, Severus. You have nothing to worry about as far as I am concerned, do you understand? You do whatever you have to do to make sure you come home to me."

Looking relieved, he bent over and placed a small kiss upon her lips. It felt just like Severus' kiss but with a softer and much smaller mouth.

Hermione sighed and gently commanded, "Now, go."

The walk to the outskirts of the castle grounds was excruciating. A sense of foreboding gripped his heart and made it quite clear it was not about to let go. He felt like a condemned man on the way to the gallows. Knowing that his fear and opposition were irrelevant, he took a few deep, cleansing breaths to clear his mind; then, he placed his hand over the Dark Mark and Disapparated.

What good fortune, he thought sarcastically as he Apparated directly in front of the Dark Lord. Apparently, Miss Clearwater was not required to debase herself by trudging through the muck and brambles like the rest of the Death Eaters. She most certainly was the Dark Lord's favourite. Severus' stomach clenched.

Prostrating himself on the floor in front of evil personified, he kissed the hem of the Dark Lord's robes, trying not to retch at the stench. It would not do to give himself away in the first five minutes, after all. Silently, he prayed to the gods to have mercy on him tonight. Make it quick. Make it painless.

"Rise, my beauty," the voice croaked above him. A single scaly hand reached down to aid in his progress. The Dark Lord drew Penelope's body up to its full height and sighed. Severus kept his eyes downcast until the creature tilted his face upward so he could look deeply into Penelope's eyes.

Severus pushed the Pensieve memories to the fore of his mind, concentrating on those that consisted of their mutual physical contact. He did not have much more to offer, but he had a lot to hold back. He prayed it was enough.

The creature's laugh was soft but foul as the eye contact broke. "Yessss, my dear. I have missed you as well. I am afraid you will have to be a little patient tonight. Business before pleasure, as usual."

Severus shuddered at the insinuation, and the Dark Lord chuckled louder, under the mistaken impression that he shook out of anticipation.

"My Lord," a silky voice drawled, and a dark-hooded figure crawled to perform the perfunctory greeting.

Lucius.

Severus stiffened beside the Dark Lord. With surprising gentleness, Severus found himself being drawn to the corner of the room where he was allowed to sit. A glass of Firewhisky appeared.

"I do not expect this to take long, my dear," the creature hissed and returned to the slowly forming group.

Severus sipped at the Firewhisky after determining that it was not tampered with. He was surprised when it was free of additives. It was almost as if the Dark Lord actually *cared* for Penelope, not just using her. He shook his head in amazement.

Bits and pieces of murmured conversation filtered their way across the room and fell on Severus' attentive ears.

"What have you to report, Lucius?" he heard the Dark Lord ask.

Lucius' voice droned, as though reciting something from memory. "The stone of the battlements will seek out its brother. When all its occupants have been gathered, therein will begin the slaughter."

Since when did Lucius start speaking in prose?

But then the Dark Lord answered, "With the equinox sunrise, our enemy will meet its demise. You have done well, Lucius, my faithful servant. You would all do well to follow Lucius' example."

Consenting murmurs resounded around the room. Severus pondered the rhyme as he finished off his Firewhisky and placed the empty glass back on the table. He was surprised when it conveniently refilled itself. Looking at the amber-filled glass blankly for a moment, he figured he may as well be as drunk as possible for what was to come next.

Only a couple Cruciatus curses were administered, both at younger members who still had not learned to suppress their grandiose egos in the Dark Lord's presence. The meeting was no longer than an hour, and the elder members milled about afterward for a fraction of that time with Lucius finally offering to continue the party at his estate, as he almost usually did.

Severus was halfway through his third drink when he felt the presence of the Dark Lord at his side. He placed his glass upon the table and stared at the foreign, demure hands folded in his lap.

"Rise," the voice of the Dark Lord commanded. His body obeyed, as he knew it would. Years of serving...or half-serving...the power-hungry wizard had trained him well. Albus had been right: he was the only person who could do this.

Severus kept his eyes cast downward. He would not look into the eyes of the monster before him. Mind over matter, he told himself as a sharp finger traced a line across his cheek and trailed down to the neck of his heavy, velvet robes, resting on the ornate clasp.

"*Pateo*," the creature uttered, and the Death Eater robes seemed to melt open, exposing the long, silk, black gown he had carefully chosen, replete with silver serpent buttons from neck to ankle. Under that, he wore nothing.

He felt the hiss of pleasure on his cheek as the creature leant toward his body.

"You please me, my dear. I will never forget the first time you wore this for me." The Dark Lord's breath floated in Severus' ear.

Severus closed his eyes as the deed commenced. A pair of hands grabbed and kneaded Penelope's weighty breasts through the silk. He wanted to push the serpentine monster away and run from the room, but the fear of his cover being blown was greater than the desire to do so. Horrified, he noticed his body responding to the attention, and he watched as the nipples tightened beneath the Dark Lord's touch. An involuntary response, he reminded himself, similar to being exposed to a cold room.

Thankfully, the Dark Lord seemed to have little or no patience for foreplay. After a scant minute of intense exploration on the upper part of Penelope's body, Severus heard the beast mutter, "*Exuviae*," and Severus was left standing in the nude.

Obviously not one to waste time, the Dark Lord pulled Severus toward him and plunged a hand between Penelope's legs, fingers finding purchase amid the folds and curls. Severus could feel how dry he was. In fact, it seemed as though every bodily fluid had dried up in response to the creature's touch. But he knew he had to relax. He was supposed to be undercover; he was supposed to react as Penelope would. With a little shudder, he accepted that his right breast was being manhandled as well as the small bundle of nerves down below. With his eyes closed, he could almost push aside the knowledge...almost...that it was the Dark Lord manipulating his flesh. Picturing

more pleasant moments with Hermione, he found that, despite his revulsion to the current situation, it was possible to relax enough to allow his body to respond to the stimulation, albeit slightly.

He kept reminding himself that to fight the feelings would arouse the Dark Lord's suspicions. Penelope obviously felt and exhibited desire in those memories he saw. She never did initiate anything; the Dark Lord was too demanding to allow that, and Severus felt relief that he would not be expected to do so. Hermione told him to do whatever he had to do. Had she suspected that he'd have to endure this?

Suddenly, Severus was pushed back to lie upon the table. The Dark Lord spread Penelope's legs wide apart to expose the sex before him. The creature's breath came in short bursts of excitement as it looked upon her flesh.

"Yessss, my lovely one. You are sssso beautiful," the voice hissed.

Severus resisted the temptation to open his eyes. It would be easier to deal with later if he did not look. Not to mention, if the memory needed to be reviewed after he discarded it within a Pensieve, there would be no need for anyone to be Obliviated.

A strange heaviness rested against his opening. He wondered vaguely at first what it was, until it penetrated and began to move with quick, jerky movements.

Severus gasped at the foreign sensation. He felt full. His body seemed to stretch around the width and length as the monster's appendage plunged into him. To feel this as a woman was indeed an experience of a different order. He wondered how it would feel under different circumstances, with a different partner. Analysing the sensations helped him to forget somewhat who was above him and allowed him to experience the tiniest bit of what Hermione must feel when they made love. While he most certainly was not enjoying what was happening, he could definitely see the allure to being a woman with a man inside, rather than the other way around. His mind latched on to Hermione and their relationship, and merely so that he could more accurately behave as Penelope would...at least in his body's response...he concentrated on experiencing the sexual act as Hermione would. He needed to make this as realistic as possible.

The Dark Lord may have been stingy on the foreplay, but he certainly was not selfish. Severus jumped slightly as Penelope's clitoris was found once again and firmly ground in circles in between the animalistic thrusts going on above him.

The creature sputtered in a language Severus had no desire at the moment to figure out. That could be translated later in the Pensieve for all he cared. All he knew was that it was sure to be over soon. Severus concentrated on Hermione and finding his own release...as Penelope undoubtedly would...and found to his surprise that it was building quietly and involuntarily with the extra stimulation. He seemed to be powerless against it. In fact, as it grew, he found himself curious and analysing the sensations once again. The tingling started out softly at his core and began to spread throughout his body. He thought of how Hermione's face looked before she came, and he relaxed into it, trying to emulate her.

In a state of disbelief that this body was about to climax, and relieved that his cover was not going to be blown, he held his breath, waiting for the grinding and the thrusting to complete the act. The penetrating hardness seemed to increase, and the rhythm faltered. Thank gods it was almost over, he thought, and then his body performed its final betrayal and began spasming around the creature's still thrusting cock.

The Dark Lord ceased his hissing and growled, bringing Severus' thoughts sharply and fully back to the creature above him. Severus felt the creature's organ throb inside of him, depositing its fluid with each thrust. And then the fullness was gone, and Severus was left lying upon the table, feeling the creature's seed slide out of his body, matting his pubic hair. Repulsion resurfaced full-force.

A couple cleansing charms...very thoughtful of the Dark Lord in Severus' opinion...and a '*Vestio*' later, Severus-as-Penelope found himself clean and dressed once again. He took a deep, shuddering breath, thankful for the safety of the heavy Death Eater robes that now enveloped his used body.

"Beautiful one," the creature crooned. "Splendid, as always."

"Thank you, my Lord." Severus prostrated himself once again, hoping that this indeed indicated his impending departure.

The creature sighed from above. "When this is all over, we will be together. Nothing will keep us apart, especially that fool Dumbledore."

"Yes, my Lord. I cannot wait," Severus diligently replied.

"Until next time then," the creature helped him once again to his feet.

"Until next time, my Lord," Severus replied and Disapparated.

11. Time and Place

Chapter 11 of 13

Severus' spying is not in vain. The trio now knows the place of the Final Battle.

Chapter Eleven: Time and Place

Hermione awoke the next morning with Severus curled up around her in a fetal position. She couldn't move, nor did she particularly want to.

Severus had returned the night before completely reticent. He had paced in front of the fireplace until the potion finally wore off and then collapsed onto the settee and stared into the fire until even the embers had lost their glow.

Hermione remained in the room but kept silent after her first attempt at communication was rebuked. Her imagination tried to take her in all sorts of wild directions, wondering what exactly had taken place at the meeting, but at least Severus was home and he was not harmed physically. His emotional state was another matter, but her Healer training had taught her that sometimes just a loved one's presence was enough of a comfort. Thus, she remained on the settee beside him, reading off and on, making it clear that she was there if he needed her but she did not expect anything of him, until the fire died and she thought it best to help him to bed.

Like a small child, he let her undress him and tuck him in, then watched as she undressed in the candlelight and climbed in next to him. He reached out and pulled her in, spooning her tightly, and Hermione let out a small sigh of relief. He was going to be okay. He would recover and this whole mess would soon be over.

Unbeknownst to her, Severus was repeating the exact same thing in his mind, creating a sort of mantra, until he finally drifted off to sleep.

It was still early, and she could still smell the moistness of the dungeon walls that deepened with the morning dew. Severus stirred behind her, his arms tightening around her body a fraction, as though he needed reassurance she was still there.

"Good morning," she whispered, hoping that he felt more like talking this morning.

"Mmm," his voice tumbled down her spine and chased itself around her ribcage.

Good, she thought, as relief relaxed her further into his embrace. He shifted and disentangled her from his long arms and legs, turning her around to face him in the dim light. Gathering her close again, he pressed his lips to her forehead and settled once more.

"Glad to see you back in the land of the living." Keeping the mood light around Severus was always a good start.

"Glad to be back," he murmured, blowing a flyaway curl out of his nose. He reached up to comb the night-wildness of her hair away from his face, lovingly drawing each strand out of the way. His lungs expelled a deep sigh of contentment.

Hermione felt as though her heart was breaking for him. He had gone through so much in his life. Granted, much of it was due to poor decisions he had made in his youth. But, really, every man had his breaking point, and she had a feeling Severus had nearly reached his. Warmth spread throughout her body in sheer admiration of his strength.

She pressed her lips against the hollow at the base of his throat and whispered, "I love you *so much*, Severus. I hope you realise that."

Severus pushed her back into the pillows and gazed down at her. His eyes took on a glassy sheen, and his pupils expanded, making them look inky in the early morning light. All he could do for the moment was behold the woman beneath him. He felt so fortunate to have found her, to have someone who knew him and accepted him for what he had been and who he strived to be.

He poured everything he was feeling into a kiss, telling her without words how grateful he was to have her in his life. She was the one thing he could always count on being there, and he was not going to give that up. Desperation to make her understand this seared his soul and burnt hot on his lips.

Hermione groaned under the heat of his emotion, feeling his heart pour into her own. The heat spread and filled her until she felt as though she were glowing from the inside.

Oh so slowly, his tongue moved between her lips, gently twining with her own. Soft. Gentle. Unhurried. He spoke to her with his body and his mind and his heart, yet without a word, and her body responded in kind.

Severus rocked his hips forward and a sweet, languid pressure gradually filled her body. Gasping, her head fell back into the pillow, and her mouth fell away from his. He made love to her like he never had before, with easy and steady strokes, setting her body on a slow simmer. His mouth traveled across her neck to her earlobe, and he lightly nibbled the edge, causing shivers to shoot down her spine.

Pressed against his chest, her nipples hardened into little knots. He abandoned her ear to take one into his mouth. The rhythm of his tongue upon her breast complemented that of his body, and he could feel her vibrate beneath him.

He knew how much pleasure he could bring her. He knew how many different ways he could bring her to completion, and he enjoyed sharing his knowledge with her. Making love to her like this was like a balm to his wounded soul and immensely satisfying. Each thrust into her body was a declaration of love.

Hermione burned beneath him. Her skin flushed a delicate pink that made her look all the more beautiful. She felt a heaviness settle at the point of his penetration and a buoyancy in her chest as her pulse gained speed.

A thin sheen of perspiration coated their faces and their limbs as the heat rose between them. Lungs filled and emptied with increased difficulty. When the friction finally became too much to physically bear, Hermione opened her body to Severus, accepting his love into her as she released hers to him.

Resting his moist cheek against hers, Severus breathed the words into her ear: "And I love you."

* * * * *

It was truly disturbing to see Albus teaching Charms as Penelope Clearwater. Not to mention, he was really not very good at emulating her mannerisms *Blast*, Hermione thought as she waited for the students to file past her, *I should have volunteered to do this* Although, Albus *did* look as though he were having a great deal of fun.

"Hermione!" Penelope's voice called cheerfully from the front of the room. "So glad you could stop by!" Oh, he was laying it on thick, wasn't he?

"Penelope." Hermione grimaced. She really wanted to scold the headmaster for his overexuberance, but this was much too public of a place. "The headmaster asked that I accompany you to his office." Bald-faced lies all for the benefit of wayward ears and gossiping portraits.

"Very well, Hermione." Albus set the wards and swept her out of the room.

"You are enjoying this, aren't you?" she whispered as they made their way to the gargoyle-guarded staircase.

"Very much so," he nodded enthusiastically. "I haven't had this much fun in *years*."

"Hmph. I couldn't tell." She grinned, however. It was as amusing as it was annoying.

Severus was already waiting inside the headmaster's office, pacing back and forth in front of the fireplace. Miss Clearwater's entrance, although expected, caused him to wince slightly. Seeing Penelope only brought back the more difficult memories of the night before.

"Severus! So good to see you!"

"Albus," Severus frowned. "When does that bloody potion wear off?"

"Not to worry, my boy. I should be back to my usual self in no time at all. Lemon drop?"

"Not unless it comes with a double shot of whisky," he growled at the disguised old man. "You really should not be enjoying this so much."

"Oh, what's the harm?" Albus tittered. "I simply cannot get over how *young* I feel!"

This was really too strange for words. Severus glanced at Hermione who was watching the exchange with a glint in her eye. Both had decided that the Redwood-laced Polyjuice would remain their secret and had given Albus the unadulterated version. Severus was ever so glad of that decision at the moment.

"And what, pray tell, do *you* find so amusing?"

Hermione giggled. "Nothing much. You seem a bit jealous is all. I find it a bit ironic."

Severus snorted. He grabbed the tumbler of whisky that had appeared beside him and turned toward the fire. "Just tell me when the old man decides to make an

appearance, would you?" he pleaded under his breath.

Hermione turned back and approached the desk where Albus was preparing tea.

"Albus, honestly, will you take it easy on Severus? This isn't easy for him." She kept her voice low so Severus wouldn't hear.

"I know, my dear. I know. It will all be over soon."

Hermione noticed his hand lengthening first, becoming more wrinkled and gnarled. She looked up into his eyes that were gradually lightening to their usual blue. In no time at all, Albus Dumbledore stood before her once more.

"Won't you have tea with us, Severus?" Albus' voice boomed across the room.

Severus' shoulders drooped and his head fell forward in visible relief before he turned around. Sitting his glass down on the end table, he strode over to the desk.

"Let's get down to business, then, shall we?" Albus grew serious as he passed a cup of tea to Severus and then to Hermione.

Severus stirred a drop of honey into the brew. Albus always brewed a strong cup of tea, and it tended to be harsh on his throat.

"Right." Severus took a sip of the still-bitter tea and cleared his throat. "The meeting, then. The Dark Lord had given Lucius an assignment, it seems. They spoke in verse to verify its completion."

"Do you remember the verse, my boy?"

He grit his teeth, biting back the bitterness. "Of course, Albus, I remember it. Lucius said, *'The stone of the battlements will seek out its brother. When all its occupants have been gathered, therein will begin the slaughter.'*"

Albus asked almost inaudibly, "And what was Tom's answer?"

Severus looked up, curious at the headmaster's tone. "His reply was, *'With the equinox sunrise, our enemy will meet its demise'*. What is it, Albus?"

"Only that our task has become slightly more difficult."

Hermione looked back and forth between the two men, feeling a panic rise slowly within her. "You understand the verse then, Headmaster?"

Albus sighed and steepled his fingers under his chin. "Yes, Hermione. I do."

"Are you going to keep us on tenterhooks, Albus, or do you plan on sharing it with us?" Severus' curiosity was overtaken by his irritation once more.

"Perhaps it has been years since you have read *Hogwarts, A History*, Severus," the headmaster began. He directed his attention toward Hermione, who had blanched considerably. "But I believe it's one of your favourite books, is it not, Hermione?"

Hermione nodded her head weakly.

"As Hermione could no doubt tell you, Severus, the stone that you see around you, the stone that was used to construct Hogwarts castle, was taken from the same vein as that of Stonehenge." Albus let that settle for a brief moment before continuing. "Stone seeks out its brother. Gathering its occupants. Essentially, they are planning to transport the occupants of the castle to a new location, that of its brother. They plan on beginning the battle at sunrise the morning of the Spring Equinox at Stonehenge."

"We have to evacuate the children immediately." Severus got to his feet.

"Sit down, Severus. We cannot make any rash decisions. It would not go unnoticed."

Severus sat down reluctantly, looking for his whisky.

"Headmaster?"

Albus turned toward Hermione. "Yes, my dear?"

"Exactly *how* are they planning to transport a couple hundred of people without their knowledge?"

"The answer is in the first sentence: 'The stone of the battlements will seek out its brother.' Lucius' assignment was to create a Portkey."

Severus did not think it possible for Hermione to get any paler than she already was. She looked as though she were about to faint.

"So the *entire castle* will become a Portkey?" she whispered unbelievably.

"In a manner of speaking. Rather, each stone should behave independently as a Portkey, transporting any person who comes into contact with it. As I said, our task has just become slightly more difficult."

Severus caught Hermione before she slumped to the floor.

A/N: Just two more chapters to go, readers. Thanks for sticking with me through good and bad.

And just in case you are wondering, Hermione is all right. Madam Pomfrey said this happened once before. (They kept it all hush-hush because she needed a break from Ron's stifling attentions.) You have to forgive Hermione this one small weakness. She didn't see this one coming, poor girl.

12. The Battle at Stonehenge

Chapter 12 of 13

The final battle is brought to their doorstep, or rather their doorstep is brought to the battle.

Chapter Twelve: The Battle at Stonehenge

Time is a fickle master. A dash of anticipation makes it ooze like a slowly-cooling lava flow, while a touch of trepidation causes it to slip through fingers like sand. No one was anticipating the battle at Stonehenge, especially Severus.

He stood in the gloom of the early morning drizzling rain, glowering as the students boarded The Hogwarts Express. Albus had announced at dinner a few nights before an unscheduled school outing of sorts. His innate talent of finding a rare opportunity at an opportune moment did not fail them. A wizarding troupe was passing through London performing Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The children would stay overnight in London and spend Monday morning in Diagon Alley under the watchful eyes of Aurors before The Hogwarts Express would return to the school late in the evening. They all prayed the battle would be over by then. They all prayed that there would be a school to return to at the end of the day.

Two days earlier, after the final class of the week, all children of known Death Eaters, their friends, and anyone suspected of leaning in that direction, were rendered unconscious as a precautionary measure, much like Penelope Clearwater had been. The lot, Miss Clearwater included, had been discreetly transported to a lesser-known health facility in Northern Scotland, conveniently headed by one of Minerva McGonagall's distant cousins. Albus had watched their departure with a divided heart; it pained him to accuse those whom garnered only suspicion. However, the Order could not afford even the smallest possibility of exposure. They needed to rely heavily on the element of surprise.

Severus stood silently beside the locomotive, silently ticking off the students from his house as they boarded the train. He found himself feeling slightly morose with the knowledge that, due to Friday afternoon's culling of Death Eaters' children, the other Heads of House had a noticeably larger number of students to oversee. That, along with the humidity playing havoc with his Impervius spell, was placing him in a downright sullen mood.

How he longed to be back in bed, wrapped in Hermione's arms. Severus checked off another two students and sighed.

Hermione had awoken early on the eve of the Spring Equinox, her stomach alive with butterflies, her brain shifting into gear as she went over her mental checklist for the hundredth time.

She sensed him standing at the foot of the bed. No doubt, the man was probably fully dressed and watching her sleep with a witty remark about how her brain was in full motion before her body on the tip of his tongue. She sighed inwardly at her inability to corral her scattered thoughts. Worry and apprehension weighed like a tonne of bricks on her already heavy soul.

"Nothing is so wretched or foolish as to anticipate misfortunes."¹

Impatient git, she thought. Though, this little game they played, trying to stump each other with obscure quotes, lightened her mood.

"It is too early to be quoting Seneca, Severus, and I am not anticipating anything." Hermione kicked the heavy blankets off her nude body in frustration and sat up. "Where are you going so early?"

His eyes roamed hungrily over her body. "It is not that early and, as Head of Slytherin, I must supervise my charges boarding The Hogwarts Express."

"Bugger. What time is it anyway?" Hermione slipped on her robe and paused a moment before the mirror to fuss an errant lock back into place before deciding it was a hopeless cause. Then, she rummaged through the discarded clothing on the chair. "Where are my knickers, Severus?" she asked accusingly.

"I would hardly call that bit of floss knickers," he replied tartly.

"What is that? Bat-speak for 'they're in my pocket'?" She quirked an eyebrow. "Fine. I have nothing to do today anyhow except worry about tomorrow, I suppose. I'll just climb back into bed and dream about you standing out in the rain. Send in some tea before you leave, would you, love?"

Severus began unfastening his cloak and removing his shoes. By the time they were off, he had his wand in his hand and spelled off everything else.

"You are going to be late, Severus Snape."

"I couldn't care less," he moaned into her curls.

The Great Hall was filled with Aurors, Ministry officials, and members of the Order. Albus had the house-elves serve a most splendid dinner, of which they all partook with great fervour as though consuming their last meal. When everyone had finished, dishes removed and coffee served, Albus rose and cleared his throat.

"As you are all aware," he began, fiddling with his beard, "tomorrow morning we will all be transported to Stonehenge. After a lengthy discourse with Minister Angus, the head of the Portkey Office at the Department of Magical Transport, I have the immense displeasure to report that Lucius Malfoy somehow obtained the authorization to create a Portkey using a stone of this very castle. It has been confirmed that, as usual, Mister Malfoy has managed to make a mountain out of a molehill and somehow charmed every single stone in this castle to behave as one."

Albus paused while a flutter of extemporaneous exclamations swirled about the room like a flock of Cornish Pixies. Minister Angus had the decency to look properly cowed as various members of the gathering glared at him accusatorily.

"People!" Albus held up a hand. "Need I remind you that Lucius Malfoy has taken advantage of several present, myself included. After all," he grinned, "I always prefer to believe the best of everybody...it saves so much time."²

A titter was heard here and there at Albus' self-deprecation, and Minister Angus' shoulders relaxed a fraction.

"That being said, all unnecessary personnel have been evacuated from the castle. The children of known and suspected Death Eaters have been sequestered in a secure location known only to myself and a handful of others." Albus paused and peered intently at the faces surrounding him. Growing even more serious, he said, "Look around you. We all have our differences. Yet, tomorrow we face a common enemy. Tonight we band together as comrades in arms, and we will eliminate the scourge of the wizarding world."

Random applause skittered throughout the hall, as if people were unsure whether or not it was the proper thing to do. Albus bowed his head until the crowd settled once more.

He looked over the tops of the pince-nez perched on the tip of his nose, "Death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us while we live.³ War is not without its casualties, my friends; but it is time to finally break the stranglehold Voldemort has had on us these many years. It is time to rid ourselves of evil and truly live once more."

On the outskirts of the room, Harry sat in stoic silence.

They dozed fitfully that night, fully dressed, the four of them in Albus' office. Harry was armed with his invisibility cloak, Severus with a dose of Polyjuice Potion. He expected to be summoned by the Dark Lord before the sun rose above the horizon. No one had been in the mood for much chatter. Everything had already been hashed over and talked to death; there wasn't need for any more.

The plan was simple. The Death Eaters would be expecting a great number of students and professors when the Portkey was activated, mostly in their pyjamas and without wands. Instead, they would be greeted by Aurors, professors and others who were fighting for the cause, wands at the ready. Harry and Hermione would be traveling beneath the invisibility cloak.

Hermione had discovered a second use for the Redwood bark in the last couple weeks leading up to the Equinox: a potion that would strengthen the magic of any spell performed by the drinker. She carried two doses in her pocket and one around her neck on a chain. When the time came, she and Harry would get to Severus, she would drink the potion and perform the quasi-dark spells needed to remove the Dark Mark. Harry would then be free to perform his role in the prophecy and kill the Dark Lord once and for all. There were unknowns, where exactly Severus would be and how long it would take to perform the magic, but they felt relatively confident the plan would work.

When Severus' arm began to burn, he woke the others, drank the Polyjuice Potion and took a Portkey to Hogsmeade where he Apparated to the Dark Lord's side. Hermione's lips burned with his final kiss, and the air hummed with their final whispers of love and promises to be careful and to return to each other at all costs. Even Harry shed a tear when Severus left and comforted his friend as she cried in his arms.

Albus notified the others in the castle to prepare for battle, and then there was nothing left to do but wait. Harry and Hermione held each other beneath the cloak, their stomachs in knots. When the first ray of sun illuminated the darkness, the air grew uneasy as the magic around them coalesced, and suddenly, something was pulling them through the very stones of the castle, turning everything inside out. And they reappeared within the circle of Stonehenge, the stones that had served as their Portkeys littered around them.

The Death Eaters stood on the outside, surrounding the ancient monument, and a great murmur rippled through the mass as the group that appeared inside formed a defensive circle with wands drawn. There were hundreds of hooded and masked witches and wizards, and they outnumbered the group inside three to one as far as anyone could tell. Each one of them clung to a silent thread of hope.

Then, as though possessed of one mind, the ranks of Death Eaters parted, and the Dark Lord passed through the entrance of the stone circle and approached Albus who stood waiting at the Altar Stone. Hermione and Harry stood forward of Albus' position and to his left, and from their vantage point, the rising sun formed a crown over Voldemort's head. Hermione fervently prayed that it was not an omen of things to come.

Harry directed her attention to Severus' presence, still disguised as Penelope. He had followed Voldemort at a distance and remained at the edge of the circle between the Death Eaters and those from Hogwarts. Gasps were heard in the crowd as she was recognised; unshaken, Severus played his part while Harry and Hermione stealthily made their way to his side.

Hermione fished a bottle of the Redwood potion out of her pocket and drank it. "Severus," she whispered loud enough for him to hear. "We're ready if you are."

Severus bowed his head slightly and slowly reached up his left sleeve to grasp his wand, baring the skin where the Mark festered. It was a difficult thing to get close enough to touch his arm so that the invisibility cloak would not come into contact. Hermione didn't think her visible hand would be noticed with everything else that was going on. It became one with Severus' skin as she laid it over the Mark, and she began the incantation, her wand pointing through the material of the invisibility cloak.

Severus' skin grew hot to the touch and burnt the palm of her hand. She held fast, concentrating on the spell, occasionally glancing up at Severus' face. He stood quietly, his face impassive to the pain in his arm, watching Voldemort and Dumbledore circle each other warily.

They couldn't hear the conversation between Dumbledore and the Dark Lord, but they could see a discourse was taking place by their body language. It was definitely not words of love that passed between the two powerful wizards. Hermione prayed that Albus could stall the fighting for just a little longer and poured even more energy into the incantation, hoping to break the dark magic in time.

"You need to hurry, Hermione," Harry whispered at her side. "It's going to begin."

And begin it did. As the first curse flew from the Dark Lord's wand, curses also began to fly between the Death Eaters and the group that stood within the circle. Just in time, Severus pulled Hermione to the ground, leaving Harry to stand alone beneath the invisibility cloak.

"Go, Harry!" Hermione hollered above the din. "Get as close to Voldemort as you can!" She and Severus had discussed it at great length. When the connection was severed, it would be as though a blow had been delivered to the Dark Lord, and his magic would visibly diminish. She did not know if Harry had left or had even heard her, but she had no time to worry about it.

Severus covered her almost completely, protecting her from errant hexes, grabbing onto her tightly as she worked her magic on his arm. He screamed as a slicing hex missed its intended target, ripped through his robes and skimmed his leg, but he held on tight nonetheless. "Hurry," he urged. "The Polyjuice is wearing off."

With the reappearance of his old body, there was more of him to protect her, but it didn't make matters any easier. Now they risked Severus being recognised. She was almost there, but the last bit was proving difficult.

"Severus, you need to help," she pleaded, placing his right hand on top of hers. "Say the incantation with me."

The extra magic flowed through the both of them like an electric current, and finally, they broke through the barrier. His skin grew extremely cold, and for a moment, her hand seemed to freeze to his skin. The sudden shift between hot and cold was even more painful than before; her palm was raw. Severus pressed down on her hand, and they repeated the incantation one more time.

Hexes flew through the air as people screamed all around them, but it suddenly felt too quiet, too calm, as though everything around them had shifted into slow motion. Hermione and Severus stood and began blocking and returning the hexes that flew in their direction. Through the haze of burnt-out curses, she saw the Dark Lord stumble and drop to one knee. Where was Dumbledore? Hermione's eyes scanned the area for the headmaster, but she couldn't see him anywhere. Then Harry appeared and stood boldly in front of Voldemort, wand drawn, looking very much like the all-powerful wizard he had always been portrayed to be.

But she had no opportunity to watch what happened next. A curse tore down the side of her arm, and she twirled around to find three Death Eaters bearing down upon them. Even as she held her arm and felt the blood flowing from the wound, she felt calm. She wondered, for a brief moment, if she had ever expected to come out of this alive.

"Severus," an icy voice spoke from behind one of the masks.

"Lucius," Severus replied just as coldly.

"How pleasurable to have the opportunity to kill you twice. I am quite looking forward to it."

Lucius' voice seemed to come from far away. She felt dizzy. She was losing too much blood. All she wanted to do was sleep.

"Go ahead and kill me, Lucius. It won't change the fact that your Dark Lord has failed."

She barely heard Severus' words. She wanted to protect him, but she no longer could. The darkness was closing in on her.

¹ *"Nothing is so wretched or foolish as to anticipate misfortunes." - Lucius Annaeus Seneca, playwright, orator and philosopher (4BC-65AD)*

² "I always prefer to believe the best of everybody--it saves so much time." - Rudyard Kipling

³ "Death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us while we live." Norman Cousins, writer and editor (1915-1990)

13. The Wake of War

Chapter 13 of 13

And what happens after.

Chapter Thirteen: The Wake of War

The light hurt her eyes after being asleep for so long. Everything was too white. Sounds were too loud. Smells were too strong. There was an overpowering scent of gardenia and roses. For a while, she thought she was dreaming. A few times, she found herself wondering if perhaps she had died.

However, as she regained consciousness, and the dull ache in her body became unmanageable, she realised that she was very much alive. It took an eternity before she felt strong enough to open her eyes, and then she did, but only to see if someone could alleviate the pain.

"Hermione," a familiar voice called to her, urging her out of her stupor. She turned her head toward the sound.

"Harry," she whispered as his face came into focus. "Where am I? Where's Severus?"

Harry reached out and pushed a lock of hair out of her face. "You're at St. Mungo's. So is Severus."

"You're okay? What happened? Did we win?" There were a thousand questions she wanted to ask, but no breath with which to ask them.

Harry looked somber. "Yes, we won, if you can call over a score of dead Aurors and Order members winning. Voldemort is dead, in any case, thanks to you."

Hermione smiled, or at least it felt like she was smiling. "Can I see Severus? Where is he?"

"Hermione..." The tone of Harry's voice betrayed his uncertainty. He would not meet her eyes.

"What? You said he was here, Harry. I want to see him." Suddenly, she was very alert. Adrenaline pumped through her system, giving her a false sense of strength. The pain, which was so intense only a moment before, no longer mattered. She tried to get out of bed.

"No, Hermione. You can't. They won't let you see him. He's...he's on the fourth floor." Harry urged her to stay where she was, plumping up her pillows so that she could sit.

She let him pamper her while the news sank in. The fourth floor. The same ward Neville's parents were being kept in. The same ward as Lockhart.

"Is he conscious?" she whispered.

"No," Harry answered. "His eyes are open, but he responds to nobody. They say that four Death Eaters had him under the Cruciatus Curse before they were able to be stopped. I think their goal was to make him a vegetable like the Longbottoms. He hasn't moved since they brought him here."

Tears coursed down her cheeks. She needed to see him. She needed to go to him, to be with him. She needed to tell him...to tell him that she loved him, that she was there for him, that she would never leave his side.

"I need to be with him, Harry. Tell the Healers that I need to see him," she pleaded. If she could have, she would have crawled up the stairs to his bedside. As it was, the boost of adrenaline was short-lived, and she didn't have the energy to wipe away her own tears.

"They know already, Hermione. I told them it would be difficult to keep you here once you found out." Harry gently dabbed her cheeks and wiped her nose. "I'll take you tomorrow. Right now, you need to sleep and build your energy. You'll need it."

Of that, she had no doubt. She already felt the heaviness in her lids. Even the need for sleep was overpowering her need to see Severus.

"Harry?" she whispered, one last thought breaking through her stupor. "The Redwood potion. It's in my robe..."

She never heard his response, because she was already fast asleep.

When she awoke the next morning, her head felt clearer. Her muscles seemed stronger, and she found that she could even make it to the loo without assistance. A vague memory of Harry wiping her nose the night before haunted her, and she was awfully glad to have the energy to use the bathroom and wash by herself.

Refreshed, she exited and saw her belongings lying on a chair. Rummaging through the pockets of her mud-encrusted robes, she found the vial of the Redwood potion. It was cracked, and the potion had dried the pocket stiff. She grabbed at her throat. Where was the vial she had worn about her neck?

"Is this what you're looking for?" Harry spoke from the doorway.

She spun on her heel to face him, wobbling slightly. In his hand was the vial, unbroken and hanging from a chain.

He smiled at her. "Feeling better today?" he asked.

"Much, thanks," she answered, walking over and taking the vial from his hand. "Can I see him now?"

"The Healer said you can if I go with you. They don't think you're strong enough, but I told them you'd probably walk all the way to Scotland if you had to." Harry held out his arm for her to take.

The words 'Spell Damage' stared at her in looming red letters as they approached the landing. It brought reality crashing down upon her. She felt like she had failed

Severus somehow. They had done so well up to the point the Polyjuice wore off. He hadn't wanted to use the Redwood-enhanced version of the potion, arguing that he couldn't fight very effectively as Penelope. She gave in, admitting that he had a point.

If only she had been paying attention. If only she had kept her eyes on Severus instead of the Dark Lord. If only...

Sniffing, she pushed open the great doors and found herself face to face with the Healer in charge of the ward. The slightly plump witch looked her over and then over at Harry, realising who they were immediately.

"The professor is in the corner, next to the window, dear. I'm afraid there hasn't been any improvement since they brought him in. If you need anything, my name is Healer Pickwick." The smile was forced, but the sympathy was genuine. Hermione knew that smile well, having apprenticed at St. Mungo's for over a year and having faced similar situations. She thanked the woman as Harry led her in the direction they were pointed.

Severus was near the window, reclining in a chair. His hair had been pulled back at the nape of his neck, the way she liked it. If one did not know better, one would have thought that he was merely resting, enjoying the view. Except his eyes did not blink, and his expression...well, he had no expression. She would have given her right arm to see even a hint of a sneer curl his upper lip.

Hermione turned. "Harry, I'm going to be here for a while, and I didn't have any breakfast. Would you mind bringing some tea and biscuits from the tearoom?"

"I wouldn't mind at all," Harry whispered, as if anything louder might disturb the silent occupants of the ward. "I'll be right back."

She watched as Harry left through the giant doors they had just entered. When he was gone, she made sure the Healer was occupied and closed the curtain for privacy.

Searching Severus' face, she called to him. "Severus?" He made no move to look at her. Her heart fell into her stomach. Even the Longbottoms responded somewhat to their surroundings, though she supposed it had taken years to reach that level of consciousness. She spoke again, hoping that he could hear her. "Severus, listen to me. Remember our promise to each other? You have to come back to me."

Wiping away a tear that had escaped unnoticed, she removed her robe and stood before him in her hospital-issued pyjamas. Quickly, she drank the Redwood potion and took out her wand. "Levamentum," she whispered, pointing first at her left hand and then her right.

Looking at Severus, she whispered, "We don't have much time before Harry gets back, Severus. Let's make the most of it."

When Harry returned from the tearoom, he found Hermione curled up in Severus' lap, sound asleep. He gently sat the tea and biscuits down on the nearest table and hurried to her side.

"Don't worry, Mister Potter, she's fine," said a weak and barely audible voice.

Harry nearly fell over backwards in shock. To his utter amazement, Severus Snape was looking directly at him. Granted, he looked even weaker than Hermione had the day before, but he was indeed looking at him.

"Prof...Professor?" he asked incredulously. How could it be? Only the day before, the Healers were telling him there was no hope.

"If you are done gaping like a fish out of water, I would like some of that tea." Snape's words were all bark and no bite and certainly very welcome.

Harry grinned widely. "Right away, Professor. Would you like me to place Hermione on the bed first?"

"No," Snape whispered. "I think I would like to hold her for a while. But, I don't think I can hold a teacup at the moment. If you wouldn't mind?"

"Anything, Professor." Harry held the teacup up to Severus' mouth so he could drink. Seeing the professor like this, even though he needed help to do such a simple task, was the best thing he had seen in over a week. Smiling, he put the empty cup on the table.

"Best cup of tea I ever had." The man sighed and stared down at the girl in his arms. He didn't move for so long that Harry thought he had fallen asleep. That is, until he heard the question he was dreading to hear. "Tell me, Potter. Who did we lose?"

Harry sighed. "Albus is gone. Voldemort killed him right before Hermione's spell took effect." He paused, unable to continue.

Severus looked at the boy and felt a little sorry for him, "I think Albus knew he wasn't going to come back. I think he was ready to go."

With a shuddering breath, Harry nodded and continued, "About fifteen Aurors were taken. Kingsley and Tonks are still unconscious; they're not sure Kingsley will make it. Moody lost his other eye. Ron was wounded, too, but he'll be all right. Five members of the Ministry were killed. M...Madam Hooch died two nights ago. Professors McGonagall and Sprout were released to Madam Pomfrey yesterday." He stopped to regain his composure. It was hard to list off the casualties so...casually. "As for the other side, we killed twenty-five Death Eaters by last count and eleven were taken into custody. The rest...well, the rest managed to Apparate away before we began taking prisoners. I imagine we'll never know who most of them even were."

"And Lucius Malfoy?" Severus asked hesitantly.

"Lucius was never found. Actually, Malfoy Manor burnt to the ground this morning. The Daily Prophet blamed it on vandals, but we have evidence it was probably Malfoy who set it to cover his tracks."

Hermione stirred in his arms. "Severus," she moaned sleepily.

"Hush. I'll be all right. Go back to sleep," he whispered and watched as she settled once more in his arms. "Potter? Go tell the Healers that I'm awake and that they need to bring in a larger bed. I am not letting her leave my sight."

"So what did Professor McGonagall say, Severus?" Hermione asked, watching Severus enter their quarters through the mirror's reflection.

"She said, my dear, that she would be more than happy to perform the ceremony. In fact, if I hadn't asked her, she was going to place a specific hex upon my person that would make it impossible for me to father children. I believe those were her exact words."

Hermione giggled. "That's wonderful! That she agreed, Severus, not the threat to your manhood," she added quickly. Picking up her comb, she sighed. "Do you think we're doing the right thing, having the ceremony at Stonehenge?"

"I think, my dear, it is what Albus would have wanted. If we can't have him with us in person, it is only fitting that he be there in spirit." Severus took a few steps forward to stand directly behind her. Removing the comb from her fingers, he lifted the next section of curls and began to gently comb out the snarls.

"Mmmm, that feels so good," she purred as he finished and ran his fingers over her scalp and through her hair. She turned in her seat to face him. He knelt before her and took her face in his hands, running his thumb over her bottom lip.

"I remember a time...it feels like ages ago now...in a situation very similar to this, when I pledged my love to you," he whispered.

"Yes, I remember it well. That's a day I will *never* forget." She took his face in her hands and ran her thumbs over his brow, gently massaging the lines between his eyes. He allowed himself to relax, albeit slightly, into her caress.

"Thank you, Hermione," he whispered.

"For what?" She shook her head slightly, wondering what he could mean.

"For bringing me back. For making sure I came to no harm," he answered simply. "For loving me."

"Oh, I *do* love you," she whispered, now close to tears, "and I promise to love you forever. Do you hear me, Severus Snape? I swear it on my life."

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*A/N: Compared to some, I suppose that this story rather hastily traipsed through its plot. I am generally in favor of writing short pieces of fanfic. This is the longest piece of fanfiction I ever wrote, and it nearly wasn't completed. I finished this the day before HBP hit the bookshelves. "whew!" Somehow, I knew that if I didn't finish it then, I never would. And with the events that unfolded in HBP, it turns out I was right: my muse would have high-tailed it and ran. I hope you enjoyed.*