

Breaking the Girl

by Brizywitch

A dark Snape/Hermione story. Snape has an obsession and its name is Hermione.

Spitfire

Chapter 1 of 2

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Chapter 1: Spitfire

The room was laced with dark corners. Smoke filled the air, and the smell of cigars and sex clung to Severus' clothes. Cutting a path deliberately through row upon row of screaming, drunk, aroused men, he tried to bypass male monstrosity and accompanying vice, but couldn't help but catch half-mast glimpses of the sweaty pornographic mess from out the corner of his eye. Some received private lap dances, while others were buried, agape, in mounds of enhanced, willing cleavage. Paying cash for the company of beautiful women, money flowed freely from the pockets of suited businessmen, pooling always in the flimsy lingerie of smiling dancers. Making them appear as wind up dolls--*add a quarter, see them dance*--they writhed in sync and on demand with the music blasting from the overhead speakers. Loud and relentless, Snape disliked it immediately. *The soundtrack to moral ambiguity*, he thought. Searching the animated faces of the women working the room, he tried once again, reluctant but determined, to find her.

Why she would work here in the first place was beyond Snape. That she would lower herself to working a strip club, no matter how exclusive, was simply unfathomable to him. The name alone was enough to make him shudder with shame for his sex. 'The Playhouse.' *Merlin, how hideous. For Muggle men with too much money, time, and self-involvement.* Sweeping his calculative gaze about the room, he couldn't make out a single face that wasn't infused with the deep crimson of lust.

It had been disappointingly easy for Snape to infiltrate this Muggle shrine to decadence. He had almost craved a brawl with the security guard at the door. But with a simple wave of his wand, the cement slab posing as a bouncer had let him pass unhindered through the neon shaded gateway. Resembling a crack in the world that led to another reality, he had slipped through bars of Muggle exclusivity and found himself in a shadowy cave; surreally lit and throbbing like a living organism. His prize student was somewhere in this miasma-- *Merlin help him*-- and if he had to, he would take to it with a knife and cut her out bodily.

Unable to see her from his current perch on the stairs, he looked for and found a seat in the back corner that afforded him an unimpeded, full view of the room. Settling himself temporarily behind the low slung table, he tried to ignore the group of men loudly appraising the dancer on stage, but it was hard. To be sure, she was a stunning creature, but that was not why he was here.

Spotting a buxom brunette weaving her way toward his table, he cringed.*What does she want?*He hoped she wasn't keen on giving him a lap dance because he really wasn't in the mood. *Hexing on the other hand; now that could be arranged.*

Smiling down at him, she fought over the din of the room to ask, "So, honey, what'll it be?"

"Pardon me?" Snape questioned, puzzled by her intrinsically Muggle statement.

"To drink, love; what's it to be?" she clarified, now grinning down at him expectantly.

"Oh. Firewhisky, thanks," Snape said without thinking. *Oh, shit!* Cringing inwardly at his slip, he quickly appended, "Single malt whisky."

Smiling indulgently, she winked and left with a, "Sure, honey," and a wiggle in her step.

Hold on a moment. Snape shook his head at his own stupidity and went to stop the waitress with his hand. She looked at him with a mixture of surprise and apprehension. "What is it, love? Want to change your order?"

"No. I'm sorry," Snape apologised, quickly releasing his hand from her wrist. "I just wanted to know if a... girl, I know, is working here tonight." He didn't know how to word his question, but the waitress smiled back knowingly, obviously accustomed to patrons asking after particular favourites.

"Well, let's see, honey, what's her name?" she asked, shifting her weight so the tray she carried was more comfortable.

"Hermione," he replied, almost hesitantly; watching for her reaction, the spark of recognition that would make or break him *Don't let him be right! Prove the blonde brat, that ferret informant to be a liar, please.* "A brunette by the name of Hermione."

The waitress seemed to search her coifed up-do for the memory of a girl fitting that description. Wearing her hair in a fifties style bouffant, it was pulled back viciously from her scalp and solidified to tack, giving the overall appearance of a misplaced model sent back in time. Twice as big as it should normally be, her head appeared huge to him.

After an interminable wait on Snape's part, watching her as she tapped her finger against the drinks tray, she grinned, her features melting down into the ghastly recognition he had so impatiently dreaded.

"Oh, sure, I remember now. Short girl, just new in." She motioned to the stage with her head, her hands taken up by the loaded tray. "There she is and just warming up too, by the looks of it."

Snape's eyes were drawn slowly and inexorably to the stage, where a small, high-heeled beauty was working her body around a pole firmly embedded in the floor. Her blonde, *blonde* hair was whipping around her face in time with the music; it was all he needed to see *Blonde. Not his Hermione. Breathe.*

He could feel his heart start to beat again. It wasn't her. His Hermione was a brunette with the most unmanageable hair on the planet *His Hermione? What a joke.* Thinking it strange that another Hermione would live in London, he nevertheless breathed deeply, inflating his forgotten lungs with a relieved gasp. Paying for a drink he would never get to taste, he threw a twenty down on the table.

Once again glancing up at the dancing girl, he drew his cloak around his body and smirked. Now happily fascinated by the blonde girl on stage that also went by the name of Hermione, he watched her for a moment, marvelling at the strange and wonderful erotica that her graceful movements embodied. Equally amused that the vacant waitress had pointed out a blonde, when he had specifically mentioned a brunette, he thought about leaving her a tip, to buy herself a clue. But still revelling in the fact that he could now cross this place off a long list of possibilities, he let his displeasure slide and watched, amused, as the girl on stage arched over backwards in a gravity defying display of litheness. Holding the pole with one outstretched, lengthened limb, her expression was one of cold, detached ecstasy as her eyes flicked open to lock directly, and purely coincidentally, with his.

Time stopped.

Oh. Holy. Fuck! He would know those eyes anywhere. Pinning him down, tacking him effortlessly like a butterfly specimen splayed out for the world to examine, he couldn't move. It was her. Wearing nothing but high-heels, a thong, and her unnaturally blonde hair, she was there before him, comprehending his presence, knowing him, unravelling him, inch by excruciating inch. *Wake me slowly. I want to remember this pain forever; so when the devil finally catches up with me I am fully prepared* Righting herself in an unhurried weave of motion, she never took her eyes from his stilled black shadow in the corner. They were locked in a moment of horrid recognition, coming to terms with the sudden sledgehammer blow that smashed internal organs together under its weight.

But she had always been quick to adapt, and she did out of necessity at that very moment.

Sliding seductively down the pole, she gave him the smallest of smiles, a hint of a grin that came nowhere near to reaching her eyes.

It was the last day of the school year. One more crop of students had come to fruition and were about to be tossed without ceremony out into the world. For his part, Snape was glad to see the brats go. The year that contained Potter was about to pass out of these walls forever; and it made him want to smile or, at least, snark very prettily. *Good riddance to the lot of them,* he thought. *They won't be missed.* Without the trio of trouble makers and their various hangers-on, he thought he might very well attain some semblance of peace at Hogwarts. His classroom, for one, would be safer. Without the explosive combination of Potter and his assorted antagonists, a full week might pass without a poisoning occurring or a revenge spiking, causing a cauldron to self-combust. Yes, Hogwarts would forever be scarred by the years spent nurturing those miniature Marauders, but at least now he knew he had seen the worst; never again would he have to suffer James Potter's features talking back at him in class, never again would he be forced to live through a surround sound, three-dimensional blast from the past. *Two Potter's in one lifetime. Hell, not even an Order of Merlin, first class would cover it.*

Pouring himself a single shot of firewhisky, Snape counted the minutes until the graduation ceremony was due to start. Unfortunately bound to attend the event, he nevertheless decided that in all of the Hogwarts by-laws, nowhere did it state that he was required to attend while sober. So, upending his glass in a salute to the school governors' lenient foresight, he downed the burning dose in a single, stinging swallow. *Here's to you, Dumbledore, and here's to the end of a fucked up era!*

Pulling himself up with supreme effort, he began to ready himself for the final hurrah, his entire being protesting the idea of self-congratulatory speeches and teary goodbyes. Picking with distracted unease at imaginary lint on his formal robes, he smoothed down the black fabric and reached for his wand. Tucking it safely up his sleeve, he let it rest on his forearm, the fine-grain wood pulling gently at his puckered scars. Thinking back to the reason for angry red lines, his mind rested again on the angry lioness that had come to plague his days.

He needed to confront her before she departed the castle for good. The girl who somehow had devised a way to ensure his survival against the deepening madness of the Dark Lord. The girl who, in more ways than one, had managed to succeed where so many other wizards had come up short. Including himself, he was shamed to admit.

Artificially reborn, the Dark Lord's mind had been altered irrevocably by the assisted process of reanimation. Seventeen years ago, all trace of humanity had been ripped from his body when the Killing Curse intended for Harry backfired; and no amount of blood, bone, or sacrifice seemed able to force it back in. Seeing this initially as a blessing, the Dark Lord had rejoiced at his lack of conscience. No longer plagued by a human soul, he believed himself to be one step closer to achieving immortality.

Conscience, however, was the one thing that bound Voldemort's mind to his soul. *If there was ever a soul to initially bind it to.* Without it, the Dark Lord's thoughts were left un-tethered and as prone as a child's to wander freely about. Simulating insanity, he would do or say the first thing that randomly fired from his frontal lobe, unable to control himself. Stronger than most, Voldemort had been able to resist these effects for over two years, but now, even he was slowly sliding into madness.

Now he was prone to calling his servants to him individually, punishing them for baseless crimes and torturing without reason. Inexplicably, only a month ago, Bellatrix had been called to the Dark Lords side and killed without ceremony for failing to kill Alice and Frank Longbottom. No one dared mention that torturing the pair into catatonia was what the Dark Lord had requested so many years ago. Snape least of all wanted to provoke his ire.

And then his rage had turned on his inner-most circle. Lucius, Fenrir Greyback and, oftentimes, Snape himself were summoned with increasing frequency to be tortured for insipid, mundane reasons for hours and hours on end. Remembering darkly the last revel the Dark Lord had attended, Severus recalled how Lucius ended up in a twitching

heap before the night was though, begging for his life, while Snape sat at the Dark Lord's right hand, being informed of the most efficient way to kill a Muggle child. Snape knew it was only a twist of fate that kept their positions from reversing. Next time it could very easily be his body that taunted death with a sharp kick to the bollocks. Voldemort's power coupled with his insanity was now too dangerous to go unchecked. Snape needed a plan to ensure his survival, and that was where Hermione, so unexpectedly, had entered his life.

Severus had, in the past, infrequently offered a small group of seventh years the opportunity to hone their skills in an advanced Potions course outside their regular curriculum. With the abysmal lack of potions artists to pass through Hogwarts in the past ten years, however, Snape had, out of disgust, rescinded the position and almost forgotten about its existence, unwilling as he was to lower his standards to accommodate lower IQ's.

In the past few years, however, two gems had been unearthed in his class, both worthy of reinstating the elapsed position, and both capable of extremely advanced learning. Draco Malfoy had been the first. Although his attitude often made Snape want to slap his pointed face, his genius at potions was undeniable. Coupled with a fierce desire to learn that blossomed in the absence of his two cronies, his skills were now on par with Snape's own when he had been Draco's age.

And then there was Miss Granger, the tiny slip of a girl whose genius far outstripped even Draco's talent for potion-making. Having the capacity to absorb everything and anything she was taught, he had no doubt that she could recite back, verbatim, the entire syllabus if asked. What made her more than just a walking textbook, however, was the rare gift she possessed of being able to absorb and expand upon the knowledge she was given. She consumed textbooks rather than read them.

In their first extra class, she had shocked Snape with her thoughts on Bezoars. Knowing the small, ugly stones to be a powerful antidote for poisons, she had proposed that they could also be brewed with the original poison to negate the effects of the stone as an antidote. This would make any poison originally brewed with a Bezoar in the mix twice as potent, with no fast cure.

Snape had at first ridiculed the idea, knowing that if her idea had merit, generations of master potions makers would have already cottoned on to the idea. Being the ever stubborn Gryffindor, however, she had proceeded to go off on her own and produce a batch of poisons based on the deadly, red orchid leaf just to prove him wrong. Measuring the exact amount needed for her weight and metabolism, she had concurrently brewed the specific antidote needed to counteract the enhanced effects in her body.

Storming into his private laboratory five minutes after she was due for her lesson, Snape had hardly the time to finish his sentence to Draco and get in a caustic remark about her tardiness before she slammed a note and a small vial of green liquid down on his table.

Ready to throw the proverbial book at her for her theatrics, Severus had picked up the note, read the simple message and stopped dead in his tracks.

Force this down my throat within ten seconds, or I will die.

He looked at her with a mixed blend of curiosity and annoyance. "Miss Granger, I don't know what you are playing at..."

She simply raised an eyebrow in a ridiculous imitation of his own and downed the vial of red, globular liquid, palmed unexpectedly from her tightly clenched fist. Immediately, she began to convulse in heavy spasms and fell forward over his desk.

"*Fuck*," yelled Snape, shocked into breaking his strict no swearing policy around students, grabbing the now-fetal girl and pulling her bodily onto the broad wooden table, pushing forgotten stacks of papers violently to the floor.

"*Draco, hold her down, now, we need to give her that fucking vial! Where is it?*" In the confusion, it had rolled under a stray piece of paper. Draco frantically searched for it with one hand, finding it by touch alone under a stack of ungraded fifth-year essays.

"Here, sir," Draco gasped, holding the vial out to him. Snape grabbed it and forced it down her throat. Within seconds, she was coughing up a brown, gelatinous fluid and turning over of her own volition. Slowly catching her breath, she spat up the remainder of the now violet gore and caught his furious glare.

"*What the fuck were you thinking, you stupid girl!? You could have killed yourself! What the fuck was that?*" Snape bellowed, now in a full-blown rage, not caring what language came out of his mouth so long as she felt his wrath. Smashing the empty vial against the wall of the classroom, he grabbed her around the shoulders and shook her violently. "*Explain yourself, NOW!*"

Hermione sniffed loudly and swallowed hard. Not from a penchant to cry in the face of his towering fury, but because some of the liquid had forced itself up into her nasal cavity. Propelled up there by her violent coughing fit, it now flowed slowly down the back of her raw, acidic throat. Moving her legs under her body so she was seated cross-legged on his table, she wiped the remainder of the violet spit from her mouth with the corner of her school tie. Breathing deeply, almost casually, as if Draco wasn't staring at her like she was mental and Snape wasn't seconds away from self combusting, she reached into her school robes and produced the proposal for her Bezoar theory; still scarred with the brutal red scratches he had scrawled across it, Snape snatched it from her hand, recognizing it immediately.

"Miss Granger," Snape's voice was low and dangerous, "you mean to tell me that you almost *killed yourself* to prove a point?" He paused, desperately trying to reign in his temper. This was beyond insanity. "Go immediately to the hospital wing, and have Madam Pomfrey scan your vitals, especially your esophageus. There is no telling what damage your little stunt has done to your throat, not to mention your vocal cords."

Looking to Draco, who had not so much as breathed since Hermione had regained control, he barked, "Draco!" Draco jumped. "You will escort Miss Granger to the hospital wing. Make sure that she makes it there in one piece. And while you're at it, remind her politely that the next time she wishes to poison herself to prove an *untested* theory, to do so around someone who will actually *administer* the antidote." His tone was scathing, but his eyes never touched Draco. Locking with Hermione's, he tried to stare her down in an effort to recover some of his focus. Too angry to think clearly, his first reaction had been to attack in the only way he knew how, with scorn, a reflex he had developed under the cruel tutelage of the Marauders and always put to good use in his classes.

Draco was shocked out of his catatonia. Grabbing Hermione by the arm, he practically dragged her from the desk to the floor. Wobbling slightly when her feet first touched the ground, she grabbed for his arm, leaning into him. Supporting her slight weight, Draco grasped her about the waist to prevent her from falling. Brushing aside her hair as he hunched down to her level, he whispered something in her ear that Snape, in his ear-buzzing fury, didn't catch. Making their way out the door and up towards the infirmary, he could hear her coughing lightly in an attempt to rid herself of the last globs of gel stuck to her throat. Not caring if she choked to death or not, he nevertheless sat in white-knuckled readiness, openly anticipating Draco's shout for help should he need it. Never hearing it, however, he listened to their combined shuffling as they hobbled, encumbered, slowly up the stairs. Echoing loudly off the stone dungeon walls, she let out a series of weak, pathetic coughs, a muffled noise that sounded like she was trying to suppress it.

Leaning back in his chair, Snape breathed deeply. Her little stunt had shaken him more than he wanted to admit. Looking blankly at the abused, scratched parchment in his hand, he didn't have to read it to know what it contained. *She was right. The little know-it-all was absolutely right.* And it stung. It absolutely cut him to the fucking bone.

Severus had always considered himself as a forerunner in the field of Potions, open to suggestion and willing to look outside the box. His many publications had received a great deal of attention in the wider wizarding community, being both cutting edge and useful in everyday life. His accolades even included a citation from the Wizengamot and an Order of Merlin, third class for his improvements to the Wolfsbane Potion. Enough, apparently, to see him invited to speak at the last annual symposium for Potions masters worldwide. He was a Potions master in every sense of the word and deeply proud of it.

But it had taken him years to acquire the level of understanding required to hold that title. No matter that he had still been relatively young when awarded the label. *Still paid for it in blood and sweat.* So, what was it about Hermione that rubbed him the wrong way? What was it about her that made him pause? Was it that her talents rivalled his own? Was he afraid that her brilliance might outshine his own? *Surely not!*

But the idea had gnawed at Snape for Hermione's entire tenure as his Advanced Potions student. It galled him, and disturbed him deeply, that there was a possibility he

was jealous of a student.

That event was to set the tone for her entire tutelage under him. Proposing strange and varied new theories, if Snape disregarded them, Hermione would use herself as a guinea pig; and not once was she wrong in her general proposal. Some kinks needed to be worked out for sure, but they were, as a general rule, hypothetically spot on.

Snape also recalled the growing relationship between Hermione and Draco. It was far from being romantically inclined, but a distinct event had deeply affected how they behaved toward each other. Intensely curious as to the catalyst for this change, Snape had thought himself patient enough to wait for the answer to land in his lap, but it never did. Both had remained closed lipped as to why they had suddenly changed from devout practicing enemies to working side by side so brilliantly together, almost to the laughable point of imitating confidants.

Draco, on his part, had taken up the role of Hermione's research assistant. Noticing her brilliance for what it was, Draco's Slytherin nature had inclined him to *work with* her, to be part of her plans on the ground floor, rather than to work against her and never be privy to her secrets. Setting aside his own father's narrow-minded beliefs, which he had always adhered to in the past, he became her honorary friend, together setting about to prove her theories correct. Snape often caught them in the library, heads bowed together, speaking so low that even Madam Pince couldn't overhear them, discussing their latest breakthrough. They had once even blown off one of his set sessions to work alone together.

Initially furious at their absence, Snape had set out to find them with every intention of cancelling their advanced tuition. Incensed at their apparent disrespect for the opportunity to work privately with him, a master, he had set about on an exhaustive search to find them, ending with an unpleasant encounter with the Fat Lady that he would rather forget. Finally locating them in the back of the library, surrounded by books and knee deep in parchment, he had been unable to rail at them as he would have liked due to the location and Madam Pince's bat-like hearing. Forced instead to vent his displeasure in a growling whisper and a series of blood-shot stares, they had nevertheless continued to ignore him.

Hermione had simply rolled her eyes at his temper and interrupted his whispered diatribe by thrusting a half-filled parchment under his nose. Knowing enough to realize this was her latest crackpot theory, Snape glared at her silently before paraphrasing the gist of its contents.

It was her most ambitious idea to date. It proposed a potion that would counteract the effects of the Cruciatus Curse using unicorn blood. Snape looked up at Draco's smiling face and Hermione's cool glare and re-read the proposal more carefully. Realizing that the idea had more than a little scientific backing, Snape soon forgot his displeasure in a wave of curiosity and levitated their work back to his office. Leaving without openly inviting them to join him, Draco had winked at her behind Snape's back and grabbed his bag to follow. Talking late into the night, the two soon became three enamoured of the idea.

From that moment on, Hermione's web of brilliance had both Snape and Draco trapped. Over the next few months, the mismatched trio worked tirelessly on the development of the potion. Almost forgetting his role as teacher while working well past curfew with them, Snape had to continually remind himself that his position dictated formality and reasonable hours. Often slipping into familiar tones and open conversation, it was more often than not Hermione who would jog his memory, stressing the term 'Professor' when he called her anything other than 'Miss Granger.' And it happened often.

Graduation had forced them out of time, however, and the potion was never fully developed.

After their last formal session, Snape had surprised his prize students by producing a bottle of firewhisky and three stout glasses. Proposing a toast to their future, they had drunk to the success of their endeavours, wherever they lay, and parted on more than civil terms.

Holding Hermione back with a wave of his hand, they sat and watched as Draco left the room to join in the end of school revelry. Inviting her to sit down at his desk, he poured them both a second drink.

"Hermione," he began, using her given name just to gall her. Both of them had taken up the practice of verbal sparring, finding each other to be worthy opponents. *Some play wizards chess, we play this.* "I know you realize the effect this potion will have on the wizarding world as a whole, if it is successful; we all do." He kept his tone informal, knowing how she responded to imposed authority. "With the Dark Lord still on the loose, it's hard to imagine anything short of the cure to the Killing Curse that will have such lasting importance."

Hermione sat silently opposite him, sipping her drink slowly. He could see the liquid staining her cheeks. Folding her legs up under her until her chin rested on her knees, she presented herself like a fragile, timid schoolgirl. If it wasn't for her clutching the heavy crystal glassware filled with a measure of firewhisky, she would have appeared the picture of innocence. But Snape was no fool; Hermione was less a schoolgirl today than she was stepping into his classroom a year ago. She was cunning in a way that any Slytherin, even Draco, would envy; and she had the necessary courage, *or foolishness*, to follow through with her schemes. Poisoning herself had been proof enough of that. Narrowing his eyes and trying to ignore her unconscious and off-putting posturing, he forged ahead with what he needed to say.

"Our... no, your," he corrected quickly, "work is not completed, as I'm sure you are painfully aware." Clearing his throat, he leaned forward. "I don't know where you plan to continue your higher education in potions, but I am sure that any institution would be lucky to have you. They have some high end courses available right here in London..." *Shut up or slow down, Snape.* He was coming as close to bumbling as he ever had. Mentally berating himself for letting her fluster him, he composed his thoughts and, in the simplest terms he could find, told her what he wanted.

"Let me speak plainly, Miss Granger. I would like for you to work here for the first year of your potions degree. I have been thinking of opening up an apprentice position for many years, and you are the most worthy candidate I could possibly hope for. You have already proven yourself more than capable brewing and dealing with original potions, and this position would call for just that sort of thinking." Trying to crack a warm smile and having it come out more a grimace, he tried to end on a note that would persuade her to join him.

"What I am trying to tell you, Hermione, is if you want a position as my apprentice, it's yours. You could continue to live in the castle, and we could finish the potion we started together."

Snape watched silently, waiting for her reaction. Steepling his fingers under his chin, he leaned back into his chair, the leather crackling under his long, lean body. Her position hadn't changed, but now she had a look simmering under her features that was both cool and preoccupied. Staring unfocused at his solar plexus, she seemed lost in thought, and Snape found himself unable to look away in case she flicked her eyes up and he missed the tiny movement. *Slytherin tactics; keep the upper hand at all times.*

For the longest time she deliberated, giving him the opportunity to study her. *A soft cotton shell*, he mused, *hiding a molten core, inviting to the ignorant, but deadly to the unwary.* Snape hardly blinked. The bubble of panic slowly rising in his chest was almost unbearable. He wasn't a man prone to wanting things out of his reach, but this girl, her light, had him entranced, and he couldn't think to look away. *Why does she capitulate?* Having tasted the daily sting, the challenge she presented with her singular presence in his life, the thought of her leaving was suddenly excruciating. He realised in that moment that he had arisen that morning just to feel the strange ache in his chest when she was around. *You look for her, Snape. Don't deny it; it has been dwelling inside you for longer than that. Your morals know she is still a child, but no, you always want more, what you can't have.* He had to keep her for himself, if only for a regular dose of her defiant attitude.

Knowing the only way of keeping her close to him was to offer her a position of his own creation, he had approached Dumbledore only hours ago, practically demanding that he open up a position specific to his needs. Dumbledore had expressed his reservations about taking on such a young apprentice; his specific words had been, *"But so young, Severus?"* But he couldn't deny the necessity of their combined research, especially when taking into consideration Snape's position as a spy.

But--*Merlin help him*--there was another reason, one he could never allow any, especially her, to know.

He had thought himself a fulfilled man, finding joy in the simple things afforded to a career spy in life. Teaching his passion, researching the craft; these things had been his, and nothing could disturb his inner calm. But after the night Hermione had poisoned herself just to prove him wrong, he had sat alone in his dungeon for hours, cold and shivering, staring mindlessly at the purple stains slowly weaving into his desk. That night he had felt with a dread certainty that something was missing in his life.

Something in him that was raw and numb had been awoken inadvertently by her presence. And it was on that night that he wished like hell he had never, ever met her.

She had brought him to life in that ugly moment, reanimating his puppet corpse and digging her hands into his soft underbelly to present him with his soul, a cold and sour mess. And now she was leaving. For purely selfish reasons, he wanted to hold this girl to him and never let her go. To tie her to his fate and let them both drown. He wanted, for the first time in his life, something pure, something undiluted by compromise, something free. God, he wanted her. *What was wrong with him?* Without her, his life here at Hogwarts would hold little flavour. He would go back to playing the part of the puppet corpse, his strings pulled by two masters; but he would no longer have blind ignorance to blanket him, to remind him daily that *this* was how it was, and that nothing could change his fate.

He could never allow her to know this strange hold she had on him. He had little doubt that if she did, she would toy with his soul until she grew tired of it, tossing it aside like a forgotten toy without guilt. He had seen her in action, and she was capable of much worse. *Weasley. Road kill. Unworthy boy.* But, he was an addict now, and he had to suffer his life being dictated by a substance. She was his drug and nothing else came close.

He felt an electric jolt pass through him when he realized her gaze had flicked up to his eyes. Having lost himself completely in his own internal world, it was a surprise to find her staring directly at his face, gazing at him with an unreadable calm. Unfolding slowly, her cattish limbs extending, she stood gracefully and skirted around the desk, approaching his seated form silently until she was standing directly beside him. Placing her glass noiselessly on the table-top, she leaned against it casually, folding her arms indifferently under her breasts.

"And what is the real reason you want me to stay here, Professor?" she stated plainly, breaking her silence, her tone startling in its bluntness. "I have hardly been your student for the past few months. What could I possibly learn from you that I couldn't find out with a public library card?"

Severus couldn't move. She had gone for the jugular, and he had been unprepared. He had thought her pensive silence a thoughtful pause, to prove to him she was mature enough to think such a grand offer through. He had expected her to welcome it with open arms. *Welcome the opportunity to learn from the best.* Surely a girl with her passion for learning would want to stay close to the source. He had thought his plan foolproof. But this... He hadn't guessed her indifference and resentment ran this deep. What had he done to deserve her spite? *You have coveted what is not yours for starters. Please, let her not have sensed it!*

"Well, here's a lesson from me to you, Severus." She glared directly at him. "People don't always play your games the way you would have them." She unfolded her arms and placed them behind her on the table. "I do not want your phoney apprenticeship. I want out of this school. To be away from these rooms, this dungeon... and, mostly, away from you. How could you possibly expect me to want the life you so willingly chose for yourself? Lock myself away in a dungeon, with you, and never see the light of day? Squander my youth, on potions and you? I thought you knew me, Snape, at least well enough to know that I could never accept what you are offering. I couldn't," she breathed in deeply, "and I will not."

Her eyes were now ice, and her voice was metronome steady. She looked at him without wavering and held his gaze with a vice-like grip.

"You only want me here so I can brew your precious antidote, so the next time Voldemort gets the urge to play a round of 'curse the Death Eater,' you don't have to suffer. You shouldn't even need me here. You're the *master*, finish it yourself."

She turned to leave the room, and Snape reacted on instinct. Rising quickly, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her back to face him.

He didn't know what to say. For the first time in his life, he was left without words for what he wanted from her. He just knew that if she walked out that door, she would be gone from his life forever.

"Hermione, don't!"

"Don't what, Professor?" she growled.

"Don't just leave. We... we have too much to do. We have to finish."

He tried to keep his voice as even as her own, but her words, and the warmth of her flesh under his palm, unsettled him. He watched her, calculating his reaction like a difficult Arithmancy problem. *Why are you so calm? How can you be analysing me at a time like this? Can't you feel the earth shifting?* He couldn't get a rise out of her, and it was worse than her flat out rejection. Here he was, loosing control, and she was looking at him, almost pensively, deciding where it would hurt most to strike. In hindsight, he should have been surprised that her skin wasn't cold as ice.

"Yes, you already said that. Now the truth, Professor, why do you *need* me to stay?"

Her question hung in the air. *Truth? No, never the truth; just half lies that resemble non-fiction.*

He *did* need her to finish the potion. Although he had worked closely with her on this project, the pure ideas and flashes of inspiration still originated with her. Draco was good at skillful grunt-work, to bounce ideas off and construct an experiment from scratch within specific scientific parameters; but Hermione was the key. She alone had the entire genesis of the potion mapped out in her mind. Loath as he was to admit it, he needed her for this, too.

He was about to speak again, but the words he needed to say stuck in his throat, leaving his mouth dumbly lax, and his voice of reason mute.

"You can't see it, can you?" she mocked, letting out a weak, disparaging laugh at his silence. It only lasted half a second, but it cut him deeply. Jerking her hand away sharply, she examined it with detached curiosity. Watching his handprint change from white relief to blotchy red, she spoke to her hand rather than at him, her voice spouting venom, "It's right before your eyes, and you're either too stupid, blind, or both to see it."

Severus came as close to hitting a woman as he ever had. Restraining himself at the last moment, his open palm came within inches of her face. Still furious, he let it linger there, his fingers flexing mechanically in open rage.

Hermione flinched but did not back away. Instead she reached up and curled her fingers around his own, guiding them slowly toward her face. Pressing his palm to her cheek where it would have struck, she closed her eyes and almost nuzzled into the touch.

Severus couldn't move. He could feel her hair softly caressing the tips of his fingers, her cheekbones moving under pale skin. He could even feel her eyelashes stirring the underside of his palm when her eyes flicked open to gaze at him. Stunned and confused, he watched as she pressed her lips to his frozen palm. Brushing them lightly along the callused base, lingering for a brief moment at the stem of his thumb, she inhaled deeply, memorising his scent before sharply pulling away, dropping his hand like it was leprous.

"What was...?"

"Don't, Professor... *just* don't," Hermione cut him off, backing toward the exit of the room, for the first time that evening mildly off-balance.

"But you have to stay, Hermione," Severus breathed, following her step for step.

Backing into the door, she groped blindly for the handle. "I thought that was my choice." Her fractured smile appeared desperate.

"Then *choose* to stay, here." *Don't make me beg.*

"I already told you, *I can't*. Please, don't ever ask me again."

Severus watched as a single tear rolled down her otherwise impassive cheek, and a moment of clarity left him with a single thought~~s~~*she would never cry in my presence. Sweet Merlin. The girl knows how much I want her!* The little bitch knew, and she was playing with him. Even her tears were contrived. God, he was a fool. A blind, covetousness fool! This was all a just game to her, and he was simply a polished pawn, one of many in her chess set.

"You're toying with me, aren't you?" he questioned rhetorically, his voice a deadly whisper.

She merely gave him a shuttered look, loaded with childish ignorance and hard won amusement. Kinking her head to the side, the salty trail of her crocodile tears glimmered in the candlelight, left unanswered to dry slowly on her cheek.

"Get out," he hissed.

"But, Professor, I thought you wanted me to stay?" she replied acerbically, unafraid.

"I said get out, *now*." His voice was rising steadily.

"Okay, I'll go. But just so you know, *never, ever* come looking for me." Taking a step closer until they were but inches apart, she whispered into his mouth, "From this moment on, *Professor*, you're on your own."

"*LEAVE*," he roared.

A/N: A big Aussie kiss goes out to JenKM1216! You are my cheerleader, my friend and a pain in my ass when it comes to proper comma usage! Thank you for making this story something I can be proud of.

Medusa's Path

Chapter 2 of 2

A dark Snape/Hermione story. Snape has an obsession and its name is Hermione.

Severus was locked in the moment. As he watched, Hermione twisted her body in time with the music. Balancing in heels that shifted her weight un-naturally, she lifted her body slowly from the floor. Curving around the metal beam as though it was merely an extension of her body, she spiralled down and down until her feet contacted the floor, the tension in her muscles belying her control.

He watched as her palms ran over the rounded planes of her body. He watched as she lowered her head to swing her blonde hair forward. He watched as she reached her fingertips out to brush the slick, metallic pole. He watched her as she watched him.

Dark lights ringed his vision. Neon flashes sought to blind him at random moments. He didn't look away; he couldn't. The sight of her awoke something in him that was far more primal than simple lust.

Lust could be categorised. It was the base emotion felt with the whores of Knockturn Alley. The tingling in deep-set veins when the need for release surged to breaking point. Lust was reserved for brief trysts with Wizarding society's answer to Prom Queen. The wet fumbling of two teenagers jammed awkwardly together in a secluded corner. Lust was not what he felt gnawing away his viscera, burning like acid through the lining of his stomach. No, what he felt as he watched Hermione dance was not simple lust...it was hate. She had sold her body to every bidder in this crowded room, and yet, she appeared untouched by the scars of regret. She had thrown her dignity away for something as common as gold, and here he sat, burning to touch her still.

He felt dirty. But it didn't stop the need.

He felt his body react blindly to her deplorable lack of clothing. Biting down, he let it come *Hell*, he couldn't have stopped his body's reaction to her had he even bothered to try. Shifting back in his chair, he let the ache consume him, the pleasure of seeing her naked flesh washing down his spine in waves. Blood drained away from his extremities, filling his core in a hard, fast rush, roaring through his ears until he was deaf to his surroundings.

It left no room for rational thought. A deeply ingrained moral boundary, always adhered to in the past, screamed urgently for attention in his brain, telling him that it was beyond wrong that he see this, telling him that he had only ever known this woman as a child! *Leave now*, it warned. *Just stand and leave*. But the guilt he felt was smothered under a warm layer of antipathy. Squashing it down like the last book in an already too-full book-bag, his lust threatened to bust it open and reveal his innermost workings, but he pressed down hard. Abandoning intellect, he let go, letting his animal instincts guide him.

Her body rolled backwards in a gesture meant only for him. Looking up into the harsh lights on stage, her eyes became black hollows, her mouth a gaping red slash that called to him like a beacon. He swallowed, hard.

Then she did something completely obscene. Something far worse than the hedonistic display he had witnessed of her so far.

She ignored him.

Turning away as though he didn't even exist, she continued to dance with a blaringly obvious dismissal for his presence. Shifting uncomfortably in his seat, Snape barely noticed the waitress return with his drink. Picking up the money Snape had left forgotten on the table, she raised her eyebrows at his intensity, but let him be. She had seen all too often the look of lust on men's faces. Occupational hazard, she thought.

The waitress, however, was not intimately acquainted with Snape's legendary self-control. This obvious display of cracked composure was a severe departure from the norm. Only one person in the room was equipped to appreciate the implications of this change, and she, at that moment, was ignoring him.

She had seen him, damn-it! Why was she, only now, deciding to take no notice of him?

Then it hit him. Time had given her a chance to grow up, but her automatic Griffindor reflexes were still the same, still too much a part of who she was. Narrowing his eyes to black slits, he recalled how she had always gravitated toward the path of most resistance. Unable to justify her behaviour within the confines of his inherently Slytherin mindset, he could, nevertheless, see exactly what she was doing.

She was trying to make him jealous.

Hit with a strain of dark remembrance, Snape realised that although two years had passed, unmarked and shrouded in the silence of distance, nothing had changed. The cold war still raged on and was far, far from over.

Rich, puffy men stuffed her ridiculous black underwear with sweat-stained money. Filling her coffers with tangible, paper-shaped lust for her body, she seemed oblivious to the spectacle she was making of herself. It was all Snape could do not to stride to the stage and rip her from it. *Shit, if she wanted to make him jealous, she was doing a fucking good job of it.*

Smiling a painted smile of gratitude at each of her lecherous benefactors, he watched her set her sights on a young, suited businessman. Making a graceful, knee-whitening beeline toward where he sat, she compacted insult upon injury. Seeing, but not hearing their exchange, Severus watched as the yuppie grinned conspiratorially up at her and produced something small from a silver-lined cigarette case. Holding it out to her, she licked it off the tip of his finger in what Severus would later remember as the most pornographic gesture he had witnessed that night. Never mind the prostitute he had seen going down on a man in the back alley. This was far worse. Too intimate. Too familiar. *Too, fucking public!*

Lingering on the tip, she withdrew it from her mouth with a small grin. Seeing her throat rise and fall in the automatic gesture of swallowing, he could only wonder in passing as to the nature of the exchange.

Balling his fists at this very public display of intimacy, Severus waited for his moment. He could outlast this. She would have to come down from there sometime, and when she did, he would be waiting.

He didn't have to wait long.

Hearing the song fade out, a young redhead in an appalling lack of clothing strode out onto the stage to perform next. Winking at Hermione in an unspoken 'tag', she soon had the men in the audience calling out her stage-name, performing to a slow, sultry number.

But Severus had eyes only for Hermione. Following her every move, he watched as the young man helped Hermione down from the stage. Gripping her firmly under the rib cage, she dropped from the stage into the firm circle of his arms in a move that would have been impossible to do alone...especially with her ridiculously high-heeled shoes factored into the equation. *Chivalrous moron*, Severus thought, seething.

Walking over to the bar, Hermione seemed oblivious to the hand firmly ensconced on her flesh. Riding suspiciously low on her body, it sat just above the two indents winking at the small of her back. Apparently content to let the man carry the very one-sided conversation they were having, she shot him large-eyed looks every so often to let him know she was listening. Disengaging momentarily to lean deftly over the bar, she plucked a shirt out from beside the cash register and pulled it over her head. Falling just below her midriff, it was emblazoned with the clubs logo on the front, and the word 'STAFF' on the back. Protesting her new level of dress, the suit nevertheless ordered and paid for their drinks and settled his thick body back on the high-set bar stool, drawing Hermione back with him to rest against his inner-thigh.

Witnessing this was the last straw. Seeing her alone and naked was one thing, but seeing her pressed up against this man, touching him so intimately, was another. Too jagged a dose to swallow, Snape reacted.

Laughing softly at the words being spoken into her ear, Hermione leaned forward to wrap a long, thin arm around the man's neck. Flicking her eyes up, she spotted Snape's approach from across the room and felt a small weight drop in her stomach. Pulling in closer to the warm body beside her, she bit down hard and waited for her former professor to do his worst.

Acting on instinct, Severus pulled his wand from the inner fold of his robes and wordlessly sent a curse at the man. *Try to throw this off you grey-suited prick... Imperio.*

Under the mind-altering influence of the curse, the suit suddenly grew extremely still. Noticing the sudden absence of incessant chatter, Hermione drew back from her perch and shot her companion a wary look. His eyes had taken on a particularly glassy sheen, and he was regarding her with a decidedly dumb expression. Given a split second to pull away as awareness set in, she moved to distance herself from his listless touch, but by then it was too late. Grabbing her by the waist, the suit violently pushed her to the floor with the full force of his body. Smashing several drinks in the process, Hermione went down hard, hitting her hip as she crashed into the floor.

The sound of breaking glass acted like a beacon for in-house security. Snape had only to silently lift the curse and watch with satisfaction as the man was thrown forcefully from the club. Swearing and cursing in confusion, his antics merely added fuel to the fire, and the bouncers manhandled him without mercy or restraint, pushing him through the door with growling threats never to return.

Darkly pleased, Snape shifted the full force of his attention back to Hermione. Bereft of any form of guilt at just having cast an Unforgivable, he was instead filled with a strange satisfaction at seeing her laid low before him.

Hermione took a deep breath and collected herself off the floor with all the dignity she could muster. Noticing with relief that a small contingent of employees were making their way over to investigate her well-being, she welcomed them with a warm smile of gratitude, but kept a watchful eye on Snape as he drifted back into the shadows. Carefully picking out the two stray fragments of glass ground into the soft dermis of her palm, she dropped them indifferently to the floor, letting the small group of women fuss over her for as long as they wanted. If safety came in numbers, she could endure their solicitous pampering for a long while yet. Glaring suspiciously at the menacing figure blending into the mis-en-scene, she slowly tongued away the offending crimson that seeped from under her skin.

Snape watched as she stretched for time. The cheery attitude she was banging out to her co-workers was nauseating in its frenzied momentum, but they seemed oblivious to this altogether polar change in her personality. Then Snape noticed something else strange about her behaviour, she was becoming increasingly uncoordinated. Touching all and everything within her reach, she moved to sit on a high-set bar stool, but misjudged the height and almost fell to the floor again. Something was off. In a moment of unsettling awareness, Snape realised that her usual armour was completely absent. Something was affecting her, but he couldn't tell what. Looking closer, he tried to sniff out what it was.

Her features were still the same. Edged though they were with maturity, she was still essentially the same girl he remembered. The faint shadows under her eyes spoke of long nights that screwed around with her natural circadian rhythms, but that was to be expected from anyone holding down a night job.

No, it wasn't her features that bothered him...it was her eyes. Although they still sparked with a familiar level of maturity, they seemed clouded with something fundamentally 'un-Hermione'. Holding a distinctive glassy sheen, he could have sworn she was under the influence of the Unforgivable he had just cast, or three sheets to the wind, had he not just seen her acrobatics up on stage. Either seemed feasible, but he knew neither was true.

As the crowd around her slowly scattered, he made to move cautiously towards her, but she spotted the movement and sharply drew back. Rising as though stung, she slipped under the bar and disappeared through a panel that Snape hadn't even noticed before now. He didn't even have time to react before she was out of his reach and through a door labelled 'Staff Only'. Surrounded though he was by a crowd of Muggles, he was sorely tempted to throw around his wand, but didn't trust that another Wizard wasn't present to report his misconduct to the Ministry. Although he had Dumbledore on side, he didn't want to test the limits of their friendship.

Growling in frustration, Snape swept silently through to the back entrance. He had to assume she would try to run. If he didn't catch her now, she would disappear again, and it was anyone's guess as to where and to whom she would run. Unwilling to spend another two years feeding the uncertainty that had taken up residence in his body, he swept out the side entrance and set up guard across from the door. With a good view of both the street entrance and the back exit, he waited.

A minute later he was rewarded by her sudden appearance.

Pushing the heavy door open with too much force, it slammed into the guard rail with a loud, reverberating bang. Stumbling out behind it, hand raised mid-thrust, Hermione cringed as the sound rang out over the street. Spotting Snape leaning casually against the façade of the opposite building, she let out a low, sharp curse and allowed the

door to swing shut behind her.

"What do you want, Professor?" she spat, trying to sound stronger than she felt. Her words were caustic, but they ran together like soft ice-cream. Snape noticed, but said nothing.

"I am no longer your professor, Hermione," he drawled, trying to keep his tone low and even.

She snorted softly. "And yet here you are professor, up for another lecture it seems. What is it about the word never that you don't understand?"

Throwing her bag to the ground, she frantically searched for a cigarette. Pulling out a long white pack, she flicked back the top and pulled out a dark-blue cigarette. Fighting and fumbling with the pack, it slipped through her fingers and fell to the wet ground. Being London, it had poured down with rain only minutes before, so she left it to soak in the puddle it had invariably fallen into. Mouthing off a silent curse, she pulled a pink lighter stashed in her jacket pocket and lit the single cigarette she managed to save from the mud. Taking a long, slow drag, she stood to confront him.

"So, I take it you're here for a reason, Professor?" she inquired sarcastically, throwing him a weakly suggestive look that clashed violently with her defensive posture. "Do explain. What could the great Severus Snape possibly want, so desperately, that he would come all the way into the Muggle London just to find it?" Inhaling again, she smiled cynically, tilting her head back to glare arrogantly at him. "The operative word here of course being *come*. I take it it's not a lap dance?" Looking him up and down, her grin twisted with unrelenting boldness. "Or is it?"

"Don't be ridiculous, you silly girl," he growled, trying beyond hope to keep what was running through his mind under control. "There is nothing about this *establishment* that doesn't make me ill. And that includes what you seem to have become."

It wasn't far from the truth, but it was a statement miles away from where he had intended this confrontation to lead. He had plotted and planned this conversation. He had played it over in his head a hundred times in the two years that had passed. Upbraiding her for her lifestyle choices had not been part of the dialogue, but he simply couldn't put the fact that she stripped for a living behind him. It blocked out everything he intended to say.

She smiled a knowing smile. "And just what have I *become*, Professor?" she questioned meekly.

The look that crept onto his face let her know exactly what he wanted to say.

She laughed openly, catching herself on the handrail as she stumbled slightly. Shaking her head to clear it, she looked up at him through heavily lidded eyes, her white, perfect teeth flashing at him behind her red, painted lips.

"Professor, don't presume to know the mind of a nineteen-year-old girl."

"I don't presume to know anything about the inner workings a woman's mind," he said in his deadpan baritone.

"Doesn't seem to stop you from trying though, does it?" she shot back, her smile disappearing abruptly.

He paused for a long moment. She took another drag off her cigarette, flicking the ash away in an overly exaggerated movement.

"Hermione, why are you here?" he asked, point blank.

"My health. The dental plan here is brilliant," she replied sarcastically.

"Don't test me, Hermione," he warned, his tone laced with venom.

"Then don't fuck with me, Professor," she spat back. "I'm really not in the mood."

He cringed slightly at the profanity, trying hard to block the hardwired impulse to deduct points for foul language, but couldn't help himself. "Ten points from Gryffindor."

She laughed at him. "Really, Professor. You can take the bat out of the dungeon, but no matter how hard you try..." She dropped the smile, distracted, her glazed eyes regarding him almost softly. "You can't make him... into a real boy."

He observed her for a long moment, thrown off by her strange words. Swiping her free hand quickly over her lips, she looked at the lipstick that came off onto her fingers with a distant, curious expression.

"You could be so much more than this," he stated. He wasn't trying to appeal to her intellectual vanity; it was quite simply the truth. She shifted her focus from her fingers to his face.

"That so?" she asked, her eyes blinking owlishly at him. His words seemed to slide right off her, like water over and down slick, oiled feathers. Stumbling forward with small, erratic steps, he realised that something about her was very, very wrong. Almost losing it on a sharp edge hacked out of the pavement, she reached out to grab the front of his shirt when he came within reach of her hands, pressing, uninvited, into the close heat of his body. Sliding slowly up his lean frame in a move that felt altogether practiced, she balanced precariously on her tip-toes with her face only inches from his.

Severus was disarmed. Deeply grateful for the shrouded anonymity leant to him by the shadows of the alley, he let her cling to him like a life-raft in a ferocious sea. Remaining perfectly still, he hardly breathed as her body strained closer every time she inhaled.

"So, no more running then, Professor?" she whispered softly, her eyes closing under the weight of something like relief. "Thank..."

Snape only had a moments warning before her grip slacked and she dropped like a bag of rocks. *Fuck!* Reacting quickly, he was able to save her from an intimate encounter with the pavement, but her jacket sleeve ripped sharply as he counteracted the force of gravity.

Finding purchase under her arms, he lowered her into his lap, sliding down the wall he was thankfully now jammed against. Frantically checking her vital signs, he pressed his index finger to her jugular, feeling her pulse gallop wildly through her veins. Opening each of her eyes in turn, he was relieved to find that her pupils were not irregular and uneven, but he nevertheless noticed how grossly dilated they had become, even in the low light of the alleyway. Shaking in small bursts, her tiny body racked itself every few seconds in violent tremors. Mentally running through everything he had learned about magical first-aid, he was rudely reminded that he was smack-dab in the centre of Muggle London. There wasn't much he wouldn't risk for this girl, but if it meant losing his wand... oh, *fuck it!*

Abruptly remembering the pill she had swallowed earlier, he cursed her overt stupidity and tried to guess at the intended effects. *Drugged sex with strange, grey-suited men, perhaps?*

Angry, but relieved nonetheless to have figured out the source of her illness, Snape decided that as long as he kept her warm and horizontal, she would recover. He had dealt with hallucinogenic potions in the past, and mostly they just needed time to clear the system. As long as her blood was allowed to circulate freely and she hadn't taken anything else that would contraindicate the hallucinogen, she would remain stable.

Knowing, however, that he had to at least try to get some of the substance out of her system, he ripped out his wand and transfigured her half used cigarette into a thin, elongated, bitter tasting stick. At about half the size of his wand, he inserted the dark blue stick slowly into her mouth and placed it far enough back so that the bitter tip just brushed the sensitive skin at the stem of her soft palate. Touching off her parasympathetic gag reflex, she unconsciously began to retch. Quickly turning her onto her side, he held her hair back as the meagre contents of her stomach spilled out onto the street. Checking to see that her airways were clear, he watched closely as her erratic

breathing pattern resumed. *Remember to breathe yourself, Severus.*

She had swallowed the pill, without water, less than twenty minutes ago. Whatever had been left undigested after twenty minutes had just been successfully expelled with the contents of her stomach.

Cradling her head softly on his forearm, he carefully pushed back her hair to reveal her face. Noticing a distinct hairline peeping out from under her blonde locks, he ran his fingers under the small groove and was surprised to find that the entire lot came away quite easily. *What's this now?* Grasping the blonde hair firmly in his fist, he pulled it back tentatively, watching in curious amazement as it sloughed off to reveal a brown cap covering her scalp. Peeling away the light material, her long, naturally brown hair was revealed. Somewhat kinked from being forced under the wig, he was nevertheless inexplicably relieved to see that it was still there, that some part of the girl he had once known at Hogwarts still survived under the mask she had so elaborately constructed for herself. Running his fingers deftly through the neatly flattened mat, he gently rearranged it to how he remembered.

Jerked back into awareness by a pack of drunken teenagers carousing in the street, he pulled Hermione to him and raised them both awkwardly off the ground. Slightly numb from having her weight pressed down on his legs, he waited until they stopped tingling before making his way towards the main street. Flagging down a black taxi with surprising ease, he plopped Hermione unceremoniously in the back seat and slid in beside her.

Avoiding the suggestive winks he received from the driver and the sideways jokes about women holding their liquor, Snape directed the driver to take them to the Leaky Cauldron. Spotting a small inn on the way, however, he quickly changed his mind. Dealing with Tom and the clientele of the Leaky Cauldron felt about as palatable to him at the moment as a first date with Potter. Being as he was accompanied by a walking, talking, temporarily unconscious signpost that blared out an invitation to ask unwanted questions, he decided Muggle accommodation would have to suffice. Asking the driver to pull into the parking lot of the 'Silent Night Inn', he slipped him some quietly transfigured Muggle money and hoisted Hermione into his arms, making his way quickly up to the second floor reception.

The night clerk at the Silent Night Inn was a disaster of a man. Wearing a shabby brown jacket that matched perfectly with his hair, his countenance was one of laziness and disdain. Sporting a goatee that looked like a glued on cotton ball, it complemented his face in a way that made him appear more grossly obese than he actually was. Like Elton John gone to seed with a bad haircut, his thick-framed glasses, straight out of a B-grade nerd movie, adorned his beady squinted eyes. And the smell—*oh, the smell...* of the man was unbearable. Permeating the room with a strong odious musk, Snape concluded snidely that bathing was obviously not a requirement to work the graveyard shift at the Silent Night Inn.

Looking up with interest as a tall, black-robed man walked in burdened with an unconscious girl, the man named Larry...with a lamina covered nametag pronouncing to the world, 'Hi my name is Larry'...lay down his stained copy of OK magazine and regarded the two with open curiosity. Interest peaked by the bare expanse of leg the girl was unwittingly showing, he eyed her up and down as the man inquired about a room.

"Will that be for a single hour... or the entire night?" Larry questioned, his eyes fixed on Hermione's legs, practically drooling over the promise such young flesh implied. He had seen a lot of twisted shit in his time at the Silent Night Inn, but never had he seen such a gorgeous, young hooker being brought in unconscious, obviously drugged, for this brand of kinky sex. He observed Snape for the first time since he had walked in with open envy.

Barely containing his anger at the lewd insinuation, Snape ground out in a dangerously low voice, "The entire night, if you don't mind."

Larry continued to stare at Hermione's unconscious form. Uncomfortable, Snape lowered her to the patched fainting couch in the corner of the room and moved to block Larry's line of sight with his body. Pulling out a fifty-pound note, he slapped it down on the counter and demanded the key.

Glancing up at Snape now that his view was blocked, Larry wiped his hands down his un-tucked tee-shirt and leaned back on his chair to stretch for the key.

"Number Six. Down the hall to your right."

Snape snatched the key from his hand and swept Hermione up in his arms. Leaving without a backward glance at the cretin burning a hole in the back of his head, he made his way down the hall, turning right before the staircase, finding room six without coming across another soul. Not wasting time with the superfluous Muggle key, Snape eased his wand from its hiding place and cast a simple Alohomora to open the door.

Casting his eyes about the room, he let out a short snort of derision. The room single-handedly confirmed his worst fears about Muggle accommodation *Lucius was right about something, at least*. With a large, spongy bed planted low in the centre of the room, it pointed directly at a small veneer television that played host to a video cassette, some mints, and a pamphlet shouting about the five porn channels available on pay-per-view. The carpet was a motley, baby-poo-brown colour, and led off to a small bathroom that housed a shower, bath, and chain-flush toilet. And that was it.

Cringing, he placed Hermione softly on the bed before transfiguring the spongy mattress into a comfortable king-size, mahogany trenched bed. Complete with dark-brown cotton sheets and a matching duvet, it was almost the exact replica of the bed he slept on at Hogwarts.

Setting a timer on the process, he decided it would be prudent for the bed to revert to its original 'splendour' at a specific set time. Not knowing what the morning might bring, he had to exercise a certain level of caution, especially as the extravagant transfiguration directly affected the non-magical world and would definitely disturb some innocent Muggles' intrinsic sense of normalcy.

He had learnt this tricky little charm a few years back while raising the Christmas decorations with Flitwick. Unable to abide the thought of dealing with the sickly-sweet tripe again only days later when they had to pull it down, he had sought out Flitwick, the expert on all things Christmas related, who had taught him a complex charm that would reverse process at a specific set time. Informing Snape that he had created this little 'Cinderella Special' ten years ago out of necessity, he had quickly taught him how to wield his wand correctly, but remained closed lipped as to the intriguing *necessity*. In only a single try, Snape had it down cold. Swearing him to secrecy, Flitwick had threatened to spell the dungeons into cheery Santa-Clause throw-up if he so much as breathed a word to Minerva. But he needn't have worried. The cheery little bastard had gone ahead and spelled his dungeons anyway later that night. No matter what Snape had tried, he hadn't been able to budge the damn tinsel for over a month. The house-elves had been most perplexed.

So, setting the magical timer to seven-thirty, only four hours away, he finally felt secure enough to calm down.

Turning to look at Hermione, he was struck by her quiet, innocent features. Breathing evenly, her face looked relaxed, and her body appeared peaceful. Twitching every now and then, she murmured incomplete words and gibberish phrases in her sleep. With no way of telling what kind of hallucinogenic dreams she was having under the influence of the drug, he settled down beside her and absently stroked her hair off her forehead. Relaxing into the quiet intimacy, he propped a pillow under her head to make sure she was comfortable.

Deciding she was most likely going to sleep out the night, he took off her shoes and slowly undid the buttons that edged her long, deep-green jacket. Twisted as it was around her body, he had a hard time manoeuvring it from her sleeping form, but persevered doggedly, using a technique Poppy often employed on sleeping patients in the hospital wing. *Bloody constrictive Muggle clothing!* Finally managing to get it off her protesting body, he realized with a start why she had been able to make it out of the club in record time. She was wearing exactly what she had worn on stage. *Oh, sweet merciful Merlin!*

Leaping from the bed as though burned, he rapidly tried to justify her near nakedness by telling himself that he had seen it all earlier that night *She can't misconstrue this. I've seen it already*. It didn't make it any less wrong in his mind, however, especially as they were now alone, in a bed, in a seedy motel. Moving to cover her with the blanket, he froze when she let out the smallest of moans. *Control yourself, Snape*. Kneeling down beside the bed, he watched her at eye level, trying to keep his body's reactions under control.

In abject fascination, he watched the rise and fall of her chest. Her nipples, now exposed, were reacting unconsciously to the cold night air, constricting into hard peaks

above the slight curve of her soft breasts. His eyes roamed over her body, studying every inch of her as she curled up her toes and rubbed her feet together. *Too intimate a thing. Oh, how easy it would be to romanticise this.* Causing each of her hipbones to wink up through her skin, her sleepy movements had Severus entranced. She had never appeared more beautiful to him, and it stung him to know that he could never act upon his desire to have her. He wanted to touch her lips, to slide his itching hands over her body, to hear her moan his name into the dark as he unleashed his passion and fury upon her. But he knew, he damn well knew, that she would always be cold towards him. Just because she could, she would tell him no, and he, like the addict he was, would always want more. He wasn't a masochist by any stretch of the imagination, but she made him forget what it was to want something attainable. She would always be the one thing he could never have, and it killed him to know it. Wishing for the first time in his life for ignorance, he craved the power to forget her.

Trying to pull himself together, he eased the blanket out from under her body and laid it over her naked form. He would have to wait till dawn before trying to talk to her again. Now, however, they both needed sleep, especially him.

He had been searching for her for two straight days, ever since he had forced Draco to tell him where Hermione was working.

Surprisingly, both Draco and Hermione had kept up their mismatched friendship long after their combined tenure at Hogwarts had ended. As it turned out, only Draco seemed privy to the particulars of Hermione's life these days. Having long since split from the golden trio, she seemed destined, or drawn, to solitude. Content with her own company and the small life she had built for herself.

Having interrogated Draco for over three hours, the boy had held fast, telling Snape only the bare bones of what he needed to know. Managing to shake loose the type of job she held, Draco had nevertheless remained tight-lipped as to the address and specific location of the club. Whether out of fear of breaking her trust, or some other reason he couldn't name, Draco was, in an unwelcome display of maturity, keeping his own counsel. Shocked and frustrated by the lack of information, Snape had stormed from Malfoy's home in a snit, determined to find her on his own if need be. For some reason, Draco was trying to protect her, and for the life of him, he couldn't puzzle out why.

Not knowing the name of the establishment had proved to be more challenging than he had originally expected. Forced to sift through almost every exotic dance bar in London, he hardly had the energy left to teach during the day, let alone continue his nocturnal search to find her.

But he had persisted with his hard-headed, exhaustive hunt, and it had finally paid off. Able to rest easy for the first time in a long time, he laid down quietly on the bed next to her, appeasing his conscience by pointing out how large the bed was and informing his morality, in the strongest language possible, that it was entirely necessary. Hell, someone had to monitor her breathing throughout the night.

Unable to tear his eyes away from the rise and fall of her chest, he unconsciously moved closer, reaching out to touch her covered stomach with a tentative hand. Powerless to stop himself and unsatisfied with the muffled touch, he inched his hand slowly under the blanket, feeling her soft, young skin pucker with gooseflesh as he drew his hand slowly across her body. Not sure if he was going to wake her with his uncontrollable curiosity, he moved slowly, settling his hand possessively over her lower abdomen, feeling the sensitive flesh dance under his touch. Setting off the nerve-endings under her skin, her entire belly twitched as a functional syncytium, contracting as one in response to his fingers.

Igniting his blood, he could hear it as it rushed through his ears to pool in his loins, the thick, unreasonable fluid trampling any sense of self-preservation he possessed. He was lost here. Here in this small bubble of solitude.

Pressing down more firmly, his fingertips melded into her soft skin, tracking slowly across her lower body. Exploring with his hands where his eyes could no longer see, he felt his way across her skin like a blind man making love. Memorising her body through sense of touch alone, he mapped each curve and remembered each ridge. Dipping down below her hips, he hovered momentarily at the point of no return before boldly reaching between her legs. Moving slowly, his fingers traced small circles in ever expanding rings on her upper, inner thigh. Unashamedly aroused, he drew in short shallow breaths that stained the skin on his face with desire. He knew he was toying with fate by caressing her so boldly, but for this, for her, he would risk everything. Touching her was beyond simple pleasure. It was illicit, callous, and hopelessly addictive. Words like *dirty*, *perverted* and *depraved* looped in his ears, repeating so often that he couldn't help but believe them to be true, but, Merlin forgive him, at this moment it was what he needed.

Hearing her laugh softly in her sleep, he was jerked back to reality. Violently torn between pleasure and self-loathing, he pulled his hand away quickly, looking her over for any signs of waking. Realizing with relief that she was simply dreaming, he was, nonetheless, too rattled by her sudden response to continue his exploration. Wringing his wayward fingers, which itched to touch her again, he pulled his body back, hoping that distance would cool his desire.

Trying without success to find a position that would comfortably accommodate his now raging erection, he folded himself carefully under the blanket and took his time to settle his tightly wound limbs into the semblance of repose. Holding her in his gaze until his eyes fell out of focus, Severus contemplated allowing himself a swift, self-induced release. It would leave him able to sleep more comfortably, and perhaps take away the tension that was coiled at the base of his spine, but the tiny voice that had been berating him from the grandstands of his mind steadily grew louder and relentlessly chanted in his ears that it was far more than he deserved. He was a liar, a manipulator, and a pervert. He was ruthlessly taking advantage of an unconscious girl and enjoying every moment of it. What kind of man was he if he took advantage of unconscious girls?

Finally allowing his conscience in to wash over him in a cool wave of repression, he took heed of his own warnings and closed his eyes, willing his uncomfortable arousal to abate. Dwelling on the first unpleasant thought that popped into his head, he used it to encourage the blood to flow away from his erogenous zones. Feeling the slow pressure releasing its hold on his engorged cock, he breathed deeply.

Opening his eyes with a furrowed snap, he returned to the bed a frustrated man, but safely sheltered inside the vindictive, exoskeleton constructed to house his Professorial persona.

Sighing deeply, he closed his eyes.

Hermione awoke with a start.

Jerking her head from the pillow, a severe sense of disorientation flooded over her. Frantically trying to remember where the hell she was, and how on earth she had gotten there, she tried to place the room around her.

Spots danced before her eyes as blood rushed to her head, and she lay back, pressing the heel of her palm to her forehead in an effort to make the room stop spinning. Feeling warm, hung-over, and strangely naked, she peaked under the covers with budding dread to find that she had indeed been sleeping in a thong and not much else. Scanning the room with frantic eyes, she couldn't place it, but was distinctly reminded of Hogwarts. If not for the baby-poo-brown carpet and the close, unfamiliar walls, she could have sworn she was back at Hogwarts in one of the numerous cavernous bedrooms.

Feeling the bed move beside her, she froze. Like a gazelle stuck in the lights of oncoming traffic, her muscles seized up. Turing over slowly, she took in the features of the man sharing the bed.

A horrified gasp caught in her throat.

There, lying asleep, only inches from her naked form, dressed in only black trousers and socks, was Severus Snape. The night before came crashing in around her, bowling her over in an arctic blast that cracked with a vengeance down her spine.

Suddenly covered in cold sweat, she panicked, trying desperately to fill the gaping hole in her memory between late last night and now. Frantically scanning the room for an exit, her confused thoughts bubbled down into a single, desperate thought that looped over and over in her head...*must get out must get out must get out!*

Heart in her throat, she slid as gently as she could from under the covers, the blood from her feet stinging in her veins as it pressed up under her weight. Contorting in an effort to move the bed as little as possible, she slid under the covers and their suddenly smothering heat, until finally, after a desperate minute that felt like a lifetime, she came free. Rising silently, she watched the sleeping Snape for any signs of waking. Overwhelmingly relieved that he hadn't noticed her, she frantically set about gathering up her things.

Finding her coat in a pile next to the bed, she ripped it on quickly and buttoned it up with lightning speed. Searching next for her bag, she spotted it in a heap by the front door. Running on tiptoe, she snatched it up and held it to her chest like a lifeline, clutching the leather in place of the explanation she so desperately needed. Something, *anything* would do. Just an explanation as to why she had woken up, naked, beside her ex-professor.

Holy shit! Had she slept with him? *What the fuck did he do to me?*

Not wanting to hang around to find out first hand, she turned to confront the wooden veneer door, now the only obstacle between her and freedom.

Holding her breath, she twisted the doorknob until the lock was free. Pulling on it as gently as she could, the door cracked open, and a sliver of daylight appeared. Encouraged by this small victory, she gently began to lever the door open with as little noise as possible. Forgetting to breathe when it creaked and stuttered loudly, she glanced back at the still-sleeping Severus, hoping desperately that he was still unconscious. Expecting to see furious black eyes boring into her from the bed, she exhaled slowly in relief when he appeared to remain undisturbed. His breathing pattern had changed slightly, but he otherwise appeared the same. Gritting her teeth, she bit the bullet and swung the door open in one swift jerk. Hoping to minimize any creaking noises, it still squeaked loudly for a split second before quieting down to rest suspended in space, dormant.

Hermione didn't even look back. Through the door like a bat out of hell, she let the door swing freely on its inward trajectory. Not even stopping to right the pot-plant she knocked over in her haste to make space between herself and the room, she was halfway down the hallway before the door slammed shut.

Severus was having the strangest dream. Locked in battle with Harry, he was conducting an experiment to see if he could resist the temptation to murder human beings. Dumbledore was standing on the sidelines writing on a scorecard, and Poppy was waiting next to him with a bottle of pills in her hand. Unable to resist the thrill of casting the Killing Curse, he was trying to enunciate the spell correctly, but something was stuck in his throat. Motioning frantically to Dumbledore, he tried to mime what was wrong with him but couldn't. Dumbledore merely twinkled at him and gestured for Snape to look over his shoulder. Turning, he spotted a girl standing in the middle of the Great Hall. Realising it was Hermione, he tried to launch himself at her and explain why he had to kill Potter. But the words just wouldn't come, and she turned her back on him and stalked furiously out the heavy doors which slammed closed in her wake.

Awaking with a start, Severus opened his eyes and was met by a strange bedroom wall. For the longest moment he couldn't place where he was. Then it all came rushing back. Remembering suddenly where he was and more importantly, why he was there, he quickly rolled over to see if Hermione was awake.

Oh-holy-fuck!

Her side of the bed was empty. Jumping from the bed, he grabbed his wand and bolted for the door. Noticing that he was only wearing his pants and socks, he cringed. He could only imagine the conclusion Hermione must have come to upon waking. Dodging back quickly to grab his shirt and throw on his shoes, he lunged for the door and ripped it open with undue force, propelling himself down the hallway after her.

Sprinting out into the parking lot, his eyes searched wildly for her telltale green jacket. Spotting a green-clad figure powering up the road trying to hail a cab, he ran. In her panic she had forgotten the simple fact that she was a witch. She could easily have apparated from the room to a point miles away from him, but she wasn't thinking like a rational person, let alone a rational witch at this point. Her Muggle instincts were simply telling her to run.

"Hermione, wait," Snape yelled loudly over the early morning traffic, his voiced chopped roughly by the force of his feet hitting the pavement.

Hearing him, she turned and ran. He sped up. Only a few meters behind her, he easily closed the distance, outrunning her two paces to one. Shouting for her to stop, he followed her doggedly until she panicked and veered left, disappearing around the first corner in sight. Hearing her cry out in frustration when she realised it was a dead end, he finally began to slow, catching his breath. At that moment, Snape almost thanked the Dark Lord for his madness. If not for the constant threat of torture, he would have allowed himself to go to seed. As it was, he was built like a wiry athlete. Hermione was fast, but he was faster.

Approaching her slowly, arms raised, like he was cornering a wild animal, he watched warily as she dragged her hands through sleep-matted hair. Pulling at it in open frustration, she paced back and forth before the high brick wall, cursing loudly at both him and the obstruction that separated her from freedom. Clawing away heatedly at the occasional tear that escaped down her cheek, she tried to angle her face away from him so he wouldn't see her weakness.

Lowering his hands, Severus stepped forward. Seeing her flinch at the movement, some idle part of his brain wondered why she always seemed so startled by his approach. Last night she had also flinched.

"Hermione, what you woke up to back there," he started, pausing when she whipped around to glare daggers at him, "it's not what you think." His voice was even and calm, but still slightly laboured at having sprinted so far.

"Sure, Snape, and denial is just a river in Egypt," she spat, still heaving from the exertion of running.

"Don't you remember anything about last night?" he asked, trying to keep the edge out of his voice. "The club? Passing out in the alleyway?"

"You, taking advantage of me... You sick bastard!"

She startled a frightened alley cat with her shrill tone, flashing motley ginger as it ran for cover under a pile of soggy boxes.

"No, Hermione," he bit out harshly. "What you saw back there... I was trying to take care of you. You passed out under the influence of some drug. I watched you take it while you were still on stage. I don't know what it was you took, but it had a strong effect. Don't you remember anything?" He tried to repeat the important information, reiterating the fact that this, first and foremost, was *not* his fault.

She stared at him in open disbelief. Why was he telling her stuff she already knew?

"Of course I remember," she spat, choking on the words as she tried to breathe around them. "You came to the club, we talked, and I...passed out. What I don't recall, Professor, is asking to be taken to a shitty motel and... and..."

"Don't even think it, Hermione," Snape hissed, incensed at her insinuation. "I took you there so you could sleep off the after-effects of the drug." Breathing deeply, he bit out the last thought his clenched teeth. "You're the one stupid enough to dope yourself in the first place. Merlin only knows what might have happened to you had I not shown up."

His tone was now openly goading. He knew it looked bad from her perspective, but he couldn't abide being openly labelled a rapist. He had worked too hard to avoid that title. If only she knew how close she had come to overdosing last night, to ending up in a ditch somewhere, at the mercy of whoever happened to find her first. He had gone through hell last night for the sake of her safety; the least she could do was thank him for it.

Actively trying to block out the uncontrolled actions of his hands the night before, he internally grappled for the moral high ground. Glimpsing a spark of righteous anger amidst his guilt, he tried to focus in on it. Bloody hell, he had helped her, damn it! And now she was acting like a spoilt two-year-old. *That's the spirit!*

"I would have gotten home just fine, thank you. What are you, my mother?" she spat out, conveniently acting like the spoilt brat he was trying so hard to create of her in his mind. "And Manny is a friend, not that you would know what that's like. He at least would have left my clothes *on* if I was unconscious," she added snidely, looking at him as though he was the most despicable man on the planet.

"Why so bashful?" he shot back, furious at her defence of that grey-suited, *Manny*. "I thought that's how you made a living?"

"Bastard! You automatically assume I would fuck anyone, including you, just because I strip for a living?" Enraged by him treating her like a child, she desperately tried to claw away at the last of his self-restraint. She wanted to see him pacing like a caged animal. *See how it feels to wipe away tears of frustration before a person you loathe.*

"What makes you think that you, of all people, have the right? What gives you the automatic expectation that I would get my kit off for you, the greasy, dungeon-dwelling bat of Hogwarts? I don't fuck for a living, Severus, I strip."

Left to hang in the air, her words stung him deeply. The same thought had been running through his mind since he had learned what she did for a living from Draco. What *did* he expect from her? He had certainly justified her nakedness in his bed last night by her occupation. Was she so wrong in her assessment of him?

"That's not what I said," he seethed. "Stop putting words into my mouth. I have nothing but disdain for what you... do," he tried to collect himself, tried to put aside his immediate anger, "but that's not why I'm here."

"So, why are you here, Professor?" she snapped, pulling her arms around her body like a protective cocoon. "Looking to rehash the past? Point out the error of my ways? Or are you just here for a good old intervention? If that's the case, don't bother, Harry and Ron have already tried...and failed. I happen to like what I do. And if I'm not mistaken, it's my choice. What I choose to do with my life is my business. I am free to fuck it up with the best of them."

"No, Hermione," he interceded, trying to figure out what had caused her to become so jaded, so cynical about the world, "that is not why I'm here. I didn't even know what you did for a living until two days ago." Breathing slowly, he tried to focus his scattered thoughts. *Time to use that dust covered Slytherin cunning again.* "You need to come back."

"Come back? Where, to Hogwarts?" she questioned sharply, her voice raising in disbelief.

"No," he continued slowly. His original plan *had* been to lure her back to Hogwarts, but now he realised that she would never willingly return to the castle. She was changed in a way that even he couldn't have imagined. Her life was so different; she was so different. "We can go anywhere you want. Any place of your choosing."

"We?"

She scanned him with a look of loaded scepticism. Waiting for him to finish, she planted a hand on her hip, the other linking behind her to hold onto the loosely tied belt of her jacket.

Forging ahead against her closed posture, Snape continued in a tone that held the faintest hint of desperation.

"Hermione, you need to finish your research. The research we started two years ago."

"On the Cruciatus?" she asked, curiously blindsided by the request.

"Yes, the Cruciatus..." *Careful, Severus.* "Hermione, you're not going to like this, but..."

"But what?" she asked, finally curious as to why he had spent so much time and energy pursuing her. Falling into her familiar, deeply ingrained pattern of sponging up knowledge, a deep insatiable hunger that never abated, her eyes slightly cleared of their former anger, and she squinted up at him with a questioning look.

Snape looked at her, feeling the hole he was digging become deeper. Was it worth it? Was she worth it? Forcing himself to question his own motives, to confront his deep-seated demon of need, he realised with a start that she was. She was worth this pain. She was worth the fight. He needed this, needed her in his life; and in the name of all he held sacred, he was willing to sacrifice to have her, no matter the cost. *Just remember that Snape when the hangman finally gets you.*

"Death Eaters, Hermione... They captured someone, close to you. Tortured him for days... Hermione," he paused for a loaded second, "Harry."

As soon as the lie fell from his lips, he knew his days with Hermione were numbered.

Review, review! They get me through the day and are better than tim-tams and tea.

Thanks must go to the wonderful Southern Witch. Without you babe, this would still be circling the bottom of my to-do list, forgotten in the ever rising tide of med-chem study. ech!