

Vain Wisdom All and False Philosophy

by Battle of Lissa

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2007 OWL Awards Nominee: Fire & Ice Category (SS/HG), Romance Category, Angst Category, and A/U Category.

2008 TNL Awards Winner for Best SS/HG AU Category

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 36

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Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: I must warn that this is a very dark, violent and sexual story. It will contain non-con (Hermione is not the victim) and ambiguous consent.

Reviews and criticism welcomed and strongly encouraged, no matter how harsh. Mainly HBP compliant, yet Dumbledore is still alive. But I promise, I shall make it up to you.

Very special thanks to my wonderful beta, **melusin**.

There is a balance, of sorts, that the gods of nature constantly maintain throughout the ages. For thousands of years, wizards and Muggles have consistently played their fixed role in the grand scheme of time, unaware of their predetermined status. With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began.

And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. He was too blinded by an impatient desire for righteous resolutions before he grasped the nuances of his true task. Saving the world from near destruction at the hands of the usher triggered the perpetual forces and positioned his successor to come to power.

How he wished he could rectify his past mistakes.

"It's spreading," a deep voice called down from his portrait hung high in the Headmaster's chambers.

Dumbledore sighed, turning his bare back toward the mirror as he looked over his shoulder. He reached for a mixing bowl perched on the edge of his dressing-table, scooped up some thick, yellow paste and gingerly applied it to his numb, blackened flesh.

"Yes," Dumbledore conceded, "it will not be long now."

"I hope so," said the portrait bluntly.

Dumbledore stopped his ministrations on his useless shoulder to glare at the portrait. The sandy-haired man in the frame stared wide-eyed, forming an uneasy pinch in his eyebrows as his strong jaw moved side to side uncomfortably.

"I did not mean--"

"It's quite all right, Godric. I fear that I agree," Albus said dejectedly, continuing to apply the dressings to his arm.

"No, it's not all right. *It just is*. First your arm, and then... well... Voldemort is an abomination! This isn't how it is done. His time must come and pass," Godric shouted.

"From the looks of it, he knows what is expected of him. Even when blessed, or cursed however you may look at it, with celestial power, he still sees himself as more extraordinary than those that preceded him," Dumbledore said as he began to dress in his nightshirt.

"What about the boy?" the portrait questioned.

"Whether he is ready or not, his time will come."

"HIS TIME IS NOW!" Godric's face twisted in appalled anger. "You had no right to fight the curse given to you when you destroyed the Peverell Ring!"

"The boy was not ready," Dumbledore said simply, as if this made all the sense in the world. "I had hoped to ease his burden."

"It is not your place! This is not your fight. You did what was expected; Grindelwald was destroyed magnificently. If you accepted your fate with the ring, or in your attempt with the faux locket, Harry would have his boon by now."

"But will he know how to use it?" Dumbledore breathed as he sat on the edge of his bed. "Or would he repeat my past mistakes and destroy Voldemort before it is his time?"

Godric gazed down at the frail old man and shook his head. "Not one of us has ever attempted what you have in mind. How do you know it will even work?"

"Just a hunch, really, but what have we got to lose?"

"The war."

"Maybe, Godric, maybe. But if it comes to that, then there will be others, which will give us a chance to rectify it," Dumbledore said.

"Any idea who is the next in his House?" Godric asked reluctantly. For so long, he had refused to indulge Dumbledore in yet another of his eccentric ideas. In his time, Godric had fought his opponent magnificently, succeeding in thwarting Salazar Slytherin from obtaining a dangerous influence over the education of the wizarding world's impressionable youth. That was all that mattered then, not the potential choices and consequences of the future. They were not his fight.

"Yes," Dumbledore sighed as he pulled back the sheets of his grand four-poster, "I just pray to Merlin that I am right this time."

Dumbledore fought the urge to get up as sleep refused to claim his mind. Far too many nights were wasted obsessively pacing in his bedroom, worrying the floorboards with his never ending thoughts.

So many mistakes, so many choices made in haste, resulting in a series of events taking place before his very eyes. Even with them closed, he could still *see* on the day he destroyed the One that came before Voldemort.

Thanks to inside sources, servants that Grindelwald had spurned one too many times, and in the mist of raining shells and bombs, Dumbledore had taken the risk to Apparate into the bunker where Grindelwald was hiding. Dumbledore moved carefully as the sound of two German men arguing grew clearer with every step. He easily hid in the shadows as the two men were too distracted, lost in their heated argument as the war raged overhead. Dumbledore watched as Grindelwald held his wand to that foul Muggle's head who then begged for his life. The Muggle's wife lay lifeless at his side, eyes open, blankly watching Dumbledore's every move.

Dumbledore's sleeping body twitched as images flashed through his mind.

"Because of your stupid pride, you have ruined everything!" Grindelwald screamed, forcing his wand against the Muggle's skull so he cowered further into his seat.

"But I've done as you asked!" he shouted.

A thick, black haze covered the scene, and their voices were drowned out. The two men became clear once more as Grindelwald pointed his wand between the Muggle's eyes. Pupils dilated, the slack jawed Muggle raised a pistol to his own temple, pulling the trigger and splattering the wall behind him with purple gore.

The sound of a little boy crying distracted Dumbledore from this scene. He turned away from his memory to tread the maze of hallways and doors in the underground bunker.

"Damned!" he heard a burly male voice bellow.

"He doesn't understand!" screamed a woman.

One of the closed doors in the corridor cast a flickering light against the floor and walls. Dumbledore pushed it open, entering a small and modest kitchen.

"That fox cub was practically dead. I saw it bleeding in the dog's mouth!" the man screamed, leaning across the kitchen table toward his wife.

"You can't blame him for wanting to--"

His hand slammed down on the table, eliciting a tiny frightened squeak from underneath it.

"For fuck's sake, he's four years old! Can you tell me how a normal child can kill a dog twice his size without so much as looking at it!"

Dumbledore bent over sideways, raising the cloth from the corner of the table. His old, tired eyes gazed sadly at a pitiful boy with stringy, dark hair and tear-stained sunken cheeks. His whole front was splattered with blood. He was clutching a playful fox cub to his chest, picking at the crusted blood on its fur.

"Stop, please, for heaven's sake!" the woman bawled.

The man stormed about the kitchen, pulling open various drawers and sending silverware crashing to the floor.

"I saw the flesh of that dog rip straight off its back -- and *that* thing was already dead. Heaven will not have him."

A rugged arm with its sleeve rolled up reached under the table. "Give it to me, boy!" the man snarled.

"No," the little boy cried, clutching the animal tighter.

"I SAID NOW!" The man grasped the fox by its neck, causing it to squeal and cry in fright. The squealing continued, directly above the little boy's head, as he fisted his tiny hands against his ears. The spindly table legs buckled under a harsh crunch to the table top. The woman screamed and fled from the room. All that could be heard was the man's ragged breathing.

Dumbledore tore his eyes away from the pathetic child to look above the table. But the kitchen was gone, and he was standing in the rubble of a bomb damaged restaurant.

The ragged breaths continued, heard clearly amidst the whistling sounds of a war just outside the walls.

Dumbledore walked toward the body that had expelled them. On the floor by the door, surrounded by broken glass and upturned nails, lay an horrifically burnt and bleeding soldier.

Dumbledore looked down in disgust at the vivid red arm band around his bicep.

"You created all this," Dumbledore said, "so you should be proud to wear it."

The gasping man looked up, fear in his eyes at the sight of the old man, and attempted to push himself away.

The soldier's ragged breathing quickened in his efforts, developing into a painful cough. Eyes open, the soldier's final breath coughed out of his lungs as he fell limply against the door frame.

Dumbledore turned, wand raised, as a sudden movement caught his attention.

A handsome boy, no older than nineteen, stood directly behind Dumbledore. He clutched at his head, moaning and twisting from side to side as if in pain. Falling to the floor, his screams continued, speaking in both English and German at the same time.

Dumbledore bent down towards the boy, placing his hand on his shoulder to get him to look up. Dumbledore could feel his erratic, hysterical breathing slow down under the palm of his hand.

The boy lurched at Dumbledore's wand arm, clutching him firmly by the wrist. Immediately, Dumbledore willed his wand to hex the handsome face leering on the other end. Dumbledore's skin blistered and burned under his touch. With all his might, Dumbledore could not pull away, and his skin began to turn black. The boy looked up, eyes blazing scarlet red.

"YOU ARE NOT THE ONE!"

The old wizard gasped, finally yanking his arm free of the mad creature at his feet. Dumbledore raised his wand high before whipping it down...

"Please... " the creature moaned desperately.

Off to his right, a swishing sound rhythmically turned in the air, ending in a sharp snap.

A woman screamed painfully.

"Please!" cried the voice at his feet, desperation heavy in his voice. "I've told you everything. EVERYTHING! I swear I am not lying. Please, I'll do anything you ask of me, just let her go!"

Dumbledore felt a strong tug at the hem of his robes. Finally opening his eyes, he looked down at his feet to find the creature with the mad eyes gone. On bended knees was a young man in his early twenties. Copious strands of his long, limp black hair stuck to his wet face.

The rhythmic whishing sound continued, ending in another snap. The woman screamed again, but with less of a fight in her moaning.

Dumbledore wretchedly looked down at the young man, recognizing the pathetic defeat in those dark eyes.

"You can stop now," Dumbledore heard his voice say to an Auror twirling a whip above his head.

The young wizard fell back on the balls of his feet, relief coursing through him that his mother had not been killed.

Dumbledore turned his back on him, exiting the room, with every intention of trusting anything he said.

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Far off in the distance, miles away from the Headmaster's chambers, in a dilapidated Muggle house on an abandoned street, a man thrashed around frantically in his sleep.

Gasping for air, Severus Snape shot out of his bed and ran toward the window on the other side of his room.

Willing his breathing to slow down, he wrenched open the clasp, allowing the chill of the night breeze to beat against his sweaty face.

As the stench of sulfur and rotting wood traveled in through his window, Severus willed his mind to forget everything he had seen in his dreams.

Allowing his exhausted body to fall to the floor, he rested his head against the cold windowsill. Closing his eyes, he could still see those red eyes on the beautiful boy, laughing as a woman screamed in the distance.

Author's Notes: Again, I must thank my beta **Melusin** who has worked very hard on my story, far beyond grammar and spelling.

Title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book ii. Line 565.

This story is a WIP, but the first 9 chapters are completely written so regular updates are expected.

Chapter One - What In Me Is Dark

Chapter 2 of 36

With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began. And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. Eventual SS/HG. Alternate Universe, HBP death disregarded.

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Author's Notes: And the story begins... with Hermione.

Very special thanks to my wonderful beta, **melusin**.

Hermione hated it here.

"It's for your safety." Dumbledore always reminded her of that.

The faded blanket covering her legs irritated her skin, making her even more restless. A forgotten book hung by her fingertips, while her gaze lingered over the parchment on the table. Her eyes glazed over, unblinking, as her mind became distracted by a variety of thoughts. Dumbledore had personally written to her, reminding her of the importance of not trying to contact her parents. She hadn't seen them for months and longed for the simple comfort of her Muggle home.

"Find contentment in knowing they are safe, Hermione, and remember that your lack of communication keeps them that way."

Contentment my arse, she thought.

Kicking the blanket from her legs, she shifted her sore bum on the hard window seat. "Ugh, look at yourself. Just how much more self-pity can you wallow in?"

Her parents were fine. Harry was fine. She was not only healthy, but had received the annual Hogwarts letter along with Dumbledore's, stating that she was to be made Head Girl. It had been her dream since she was eleven years old.

"So why does it feel so unimportant now?"

Hermione, on the other hand, did not feel fine. She should have been thanking the heavens above to have survived a pretty uneventful sixth year in the middle of a war. But, in truth, such lack of action from Voldemort and his Death Eaters unnerved her to the point of nausea; especially when she did nothing but sit idly like this.

Hermione had had a long, lonely summer, thinking and languishing in the darkness that was Number 12, Grimmauld Place. Although, absolutely safe to all harmful forces that would relish the opportunity to get their hands on a Muggle-born witch, and Harry Potter's best mate, she just never imagined that she would spend so much time there completely, and utterly, alone. At least during other visits, she had had Molly to keep her company, and the blasted twins to evoke the noisy wrath of Madam Black.

Even the plentifully stocked library downstairs held little appeal to her at this very moment.

"What is wrong with me?"

Her question was answered by a deep, irritated growl.

"Sorry, Crookshanks, didn't mean to wake you."

Sighing deeply, she moved to the dull oak dressing table beside her four-poster bed. Looking in the mirror whilst reaching for her hair pins, Hermione stopped to gaze at her reflection. She knew exactly what was wrong with her. Hermione was confused.

Which, of course, was not a sufficient explanation for her current state of mind. She felt exactly the way she looked.

I'm no longer a child.

In fact she was far from it. Hermione was not vain by nature. Outward appearances were never important to her. She never noticed a change in her physical appearance until her thoughts and emotions altered as well. Beauty and pleasure were more than corporal, it strengthened deep from within, like a fire continuously fed. Untouchable, Hermione's loveliness could not wear rouge. No, definitely not vain. *Sensual* was the term she liked to use.

Hermione's signature hair was still as full and thick as ever. Hermione had begun to enjoy the romanticism of her hair and had allowed it to grow to mid-waist, slightly shorter at her crown, with short wispy curls that framed her neck and face.

Her current physical scrutiny followed her into the bathroom as she prepared for her bath. *Sensual*. That description hit her again as she removed her light-blue, satin bath robe. Glimpsing herself in the cracked mirror mounted around the ancient, claw-footed tub, she attempted to critically assess her body.

"No, definitely no longer a child." She smiled.

Truthfully, in the last year, Hermione had gained weight. Naturally, at first she had been extremely self-conscious about her image when her old clothes no longer seemed to fit.

But her reflection possessed both perfections and flaws in equal measure. Her stomach was smooth without the harshness of protruding hipbones that so many girls in her class thought fashionable. All in all, Hermione was mostly satisfied with the reflection before her.

Again the term rushed through her as she lowered her tired body into the scalding hot water. *Sensual*. Her body screamed as her firm breasts rose to the surface, nipples tightening in the cold air. She slowly trailed her fingertips from the base of her throat down the expanse of her chest. Hermione's face flushed as her hands caressed the dip of her waist and the generous flare of her hips. Her back arched against the tub when both hands met below her navel.

It was at moments like these that Hermione sometimes missed Viktor Krum. Even though their breakup had been initiated by her, Hermione's body still ached at times for the now absent sensation of a male's touch. But no matter how attractive Viktor might have been to her, and no matter how decently he had treated her, it had never felt like enough. Hermione was grateful she had not completely given her body to him. First kisses, first groping, caresses, snogs and the embarrassment that followed were better

left to experimental relationships. First Seamus and then Viktor, the latter getting a bit more physical due to his age, but neither had left her fulfilled. Sexual attraction and butterflies in the stomach could only take a no-nonsense woman like Hermione so far before she became bored and completely disinterested. She just needed something...
more.

Wrapping a large terry towel around her body as she rose from the tub, Hermione realized her thoughts were no more organized now than they had been weeks ago. She loathed this odd feeling of uncertainty that constantly enveloped her.

She was lonely and yearned for some kind of human communication in this large, gloomy house, and yet did not want to be bothered with anyone either. She wanted to enjoy the pleasure of sitting beside a raging fire in the library surrounded by her friends, yet did not want to lose the peace of solitude. She wanted to answer the hum her female body felt at times for the close presence of a strong masculine male, yet did not want empty, emotionless, lust driven completion.

She whipped the wet towel over the back of her desk chair, and pounded her way to her wardrobe. "Blast it all to hell. Stop thinking so much."

But she knew she wouldn't. Long, sticky summer months in a dreary house caused her to develop a nature so overanalyzing that she had begun to talk to herself.

Walking down the stairs on her way to the kitchen, Hermione's thoughts returned to her original observations of the evening, and her total lack of excitement over her Head Girl badge. She knew the truth, but did not want to admit it to herself. In the midst of the war, in the worry over the welfare of her Harry, and in the physical and emotional maturity of her mind and body, Hermione knew being Head Girl just was not that important anymore.

In fact, the idea of becoming overly excited and exerting all of her efforts into the position seemed like such a frivolous waste of time, that she was tempted to owl the badge back.

"We're at war. I should be spending all my free time helping the Order."

With a flick of her wand, the kitchen fire roared to life. She sat by its warmth in her familiar chair. It had been weeks since there had been an Order meeting in this kitchen, and again, the total lack of action on both sides of this battle caused her stomach to drop.

It was the first week of August, and she knew that the house would slowly come to life as the beginning of her seventh year drew near. Her feelings of confusion resurfaced when she realized she was both excited and apprehensive about her friends' return; excited because she had not seen them in so long. She had not laughed with them for weeks. She welcomed the idea of no longer being abandoned in this dark pit of a house. She missed the taste of Molly's cooking, and the smell of sunshine and lemons that was Professor Dumbledore. She wanted to continue the intellectual debates and conversations with Professor McGonagall that had begun at the end of her sixth year, conversations that had led to such a bond being formed with her mentor that had allowed the exchange of given names. Most of all, she was looking forward to a news update from the Order.

And yet, her apprehension grew in equal measures. As much as she loved Harry and Ron, Hermione had noticed that she had become more and more impatient with their behavior during the last school year. Jumping head first into every situation, in an attempt to know everything that was going on in the school, no longer held such a strong appeal.

"We're at war," she repeated.

Such constant thoughtless actions could no longer be simply put down to being a Gryffindor. *They were downright dangerous.*

She did not know if she could describe it as drifting apart, or simply growing up. Hermione just knew that the act of becoming a woman changed everything, and this included childhood friendships. As much as she loved and was devoted to them as brothers, she knew the time of sharing her every thought with Harry and Ron had long passed. After all, what woman tells her brothers everything about her philosophies and emotions?

With her now habitual heavy sigh, Hermione eyed the dwindling fire before deciding to leave the rapidly chilling kitchen.

"I need some company NOW before I go mad." She nervously giggled at her thoughts, *You've been talking to yourself for weeks and now you're afraid of going mad?*

Seating herself at the faded oak dressing table once more, Hermione began to pull the pins from the loose knot at the top of her head. Falling asleep with pins in her hair always made her wake up in the morning with an horrendous headache. Lazily, she walked to the chest of drawers that stood against the wall by the window seat, opposite the door. She pulled a nude slip dress from the top drawer and tugged it over her naked body. No one other than herself ever saw them on her, but they felt appealing to sleep in nonetheless.

Hermione began to feel a familiar hum as her breasts moved against the form-fitting satin that fell to mid thigh.

A different kind of reflection hit Hermione as she pulled back the duvet on her four-poster and slid into the worn sheets; a thought that she did not remember in the morning, and was too tired to analyze as sleep quickly claimed her mind. Before she closed her eyes, she slid a pillow between her knees, and wondered how Professor Snape spent his summer as the Order's spy.

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Severus grunted in disgust as he threw her arm off him.

"Put some fucking clothes on. I told you that you couldn't stay the night."

He scowled menacingly, watching the woman scurry about the room to gather her belongings. He must have been completely pissed to bring this slag back.

The woman grinned stupidly to herself, enjoying the reaction she knew she would cause.

Severus didn't get out of bed until he heard his front door slam downstairs. Reluctantly, he sat up on the side of his bed, massaging the sleep from his face. He had a meeting in a few hours that he was truly dreading the thought of attending. Hell, he dreaded anything that dragged him away from his bed in order to interact with self-righteous crusaders who just enjoyed hearing themselves talk.

Suddenly, Severus lifted his head from his hands and cocked his ear towards a high wall littered with bookcases. He lurched for his wand and flicked it towards the wall. With a violent crack, a hidden door flew open to reveal a terrified looking, portly man standing in a secreted hallway. The short man fidgeted under Severus harsh gaze, unsure if he should stay in place or run.

"I wonder, Wormtail," Severus said smoothly, rising slowly from the bed, "if you will ever learn that you are unable to sneak around adequately in this house. Your years spent as a rodent have deluded your senses enough to believe that you can get around unnoticed, when in fact you have always been intentionally ignored."

Incensed, Peter mustered enough angry courage to step into the room. "Maybe if you stopped force-feeding me that poison I would be able to-- "

"I do not remember inviting you into my room," Severus cut him off.

Wormtail did not have the courage to say anything further as he was staring down the pointed end of a Death Eater's wand.

"I also question why you continuously try to eavesdrop whenever I have guests. Then again, I suppose the closest a pathetic excuse for a parasite like yourself can get to someone of the opposite sex, is to listen to a witch moan through a bedroom door. Please refrain from touching anything."

Face flush with humiliation, Peter tried anxiously to refrain from arguing. "As a matter of fact, I'm here to inform you that the Dark Lord wishes for you to begin your stay at Dumbledore's hideout and to..."

"*Silencio!*" Severus barked. He stormed across the room to the bookcase, looming over the stout man. "I am already fully aware of my orders. Now, before you repeat them aloud, I would appreciate it if you would allow me to verify that the hag has truly left, and to reset the wards on my house."

Severus glared reproachfully at Wormtail before going to the bathroom. The mute man gestured frantically for Snape to remove the hex. After a quick shower, Severus leisurely walked to his large wardrobe, smirking as he dressed.

"Oh, and by the way," Severus paused at a door opposite from the hidden one, "do try to remember that your usefulness to our Master has entirely run its course. There is nothing he would tell you before any of the inner circle members. You are not here to assist me. You were dumped here so you would not get in the Dark Lord's way. He believes I am the only one who can adequately control you. Why don't you use this *quiet* time to reflect on that." Severus smirked at Wormtail's horrified face before slamming the bookcase closed with a flick of his wand.

Gracefully walking down a narrow staircase, Severus' smirk grew a measure at the muffled sound of banging and kicking against a hard brick wall.

It was going to be another long week.

Author's Notes: Not much drama here, I know, but an introduction of our two favorite characters needed to be done. I'm eager to hear criticism of my take on Hermione. I warned that this was going to be a sexual story, and I have delivered with this small sex scene; Hermione and herself.

Chapter 2 coming up next.

Again, I must thank my **betamelusin**.. Surprisingly, I had the most difficulty writing this chapter. Thanks to her I was able to fix most of my awkward sentences.

Chapter title take from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book i. Line 22.

Chapter Two - No Light, But Rather Darkness Visible

Chapter 3 of 36

With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began. And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. Eventual SS/HG. Alternate Universe, HBP death disregarded.

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Author's Notes: I must thank my beta, **melusin**, who has spent much of her time on my story.

I have been recommended by a reviewer that it would be wise to warn readers that this plot is slow to develop. I will raise questions faster than I will answer them. But, I promise, all will be revealed in due time.

"Is he dead?" Avery rasped throatily, unaccustomed to using his voice for over a year.

"No," croaked Dolohov, "merely Stunned. I would only be able to achieve real damage if I had my own wand."

"Never mind that now," Avery breathed.

Both men ran as fast as their malnourished and vulnerable bodies would allow down the dark stone corridor. Stopping from time to time to catch their breath, they took the opportunity to inspect the various cells they passed.

"How much time do you think we have?" Avery questioned, holding his side, bent over with his back against the grimy wall.

"I told you," Dolohov's body slid down the wall opposite, "I was only able to Stun the pig. Probably not even a good one at that. It won't be long before another Auror takes his shift."

Avery finally rose from his crouched position, pushing his filthy matted hair out of his face. "Come on; we need to find Macnair first."

Both men approached the end of the corridor with their backs pressed against the cold walls. They waited, ears strained for the sound of footsteps that might echo around the screams and moans of the inmates.

"This would be so much easier if the Dementors were still here."

"Shh!" said Avery angrily.

Dolohov continued as his panicked mind raced, "Perhaps we should have sent word to Lestrage or Amycus. They could have asked the Dark Lord to send the Dementors or maybe..."

Avery lunged from the wall toward Dolohov. He gripped his face harshly and slapped his palm across his mouth.

"I told you to shut up! You may be accustomed to this hell-hole enough to want to go back, but I'm not. Wake the fuck up, Antonin! We failed our mission for the Dark Lord and were left here to rot. He doesn't give a rat's arse about us anymore. It is completely up to us, including figuring out a way to get back in his favor."

Avery cast one more disgusted look over his shoulder before he turned left, down another corridor.

"Here. You passed him. He's right here," whispered Dolohov.

Avery ran back down the corridor to inspect the cell Dolohov was peering into. In the far corner was a partially clothed mass of bruised skin.

"Macnair!" Avery called to the body.

No movement.

"Macnair, get up! We're getting out of here!"

Macnair woke with a start, shrinking away from the two shadows standing outside the bars of his cell.

"Avery?" croaked Macnair, disbelief etched on his face that they had actually accomplished this task.

"Who the hell else would it be? Now come here!"

Macnair shakily rose from his makeshift excuse of a bed, which consisted of a pile of soiled cloths.

"What is that?" Macnair questioned as he grasped the wall next to him for support.

"What?" said Dolohov.

"That noise?"

The moment these words issued dryly from Macnair's mouth, a third shadow pounced on Dolohov and Avery from the right. Fear in his eyes, Avery immediately grabbed the figure by the hair to punch him swiftly across the jaw.

"Stop!" the man screamed, a moment before he was kicked relentlessly in the ribs. His body collided loudly with the metal bars.

"For Merlin's sake, it's *me*, you filthy Muggle-duelers!"

"Fucking hell, Nott, what the hell do you think you are doing sneaking up on us like that?"

Nott looked up angrily at Avery, swatting his arm away as he stood up on his own.

"I was trying to be quiet so I wouldn't alert any straggling guards, unlike yourself!"

"How's it going on your end?" Dolohov questioned seriously.

Nott sighed, grasping his ribs as he leaned against the bars of Macnair's cell.

"Everything is going as planned. Goyle overpowered his Auror to nick his wand so he could release Rodolphus. By the time Rodolphus let me out, they were already on their way to Malfoy and Rabastan."

Macnair finally dragged his malnourished body to the bars of his cell, startling Nott as he unintentionally slammed against them.

"Wonderful. Weak excuses for Death Eaters will soon be wandering around in the bitter cold right in front of the prison. Just how the hell are we supposed to get off this damned island?"

"Don't worry," said Avery quietly as he pointed his wand at the lock in the bars. "Malfoy took care of it."

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Hermione finally stopped talking to herself.

Well, not exactly, she at least stopped talking to herself when someone else was in the room. It took a couple of days to break her embarrassing habit, but she expected no different after a summer of complete solitude.

Rubbing crusty sleep from the inner corners of her eyes, Hermione kicked off the heavy grey duvet from her four-poster and lifted her body with a slight moan. Her moan was answered by a sleepy whimper in the corner of her bedroom.

Our bedroom, she corrected herself. She kept forgetting that Ginny now occupied the other four-poster in the room.

Reaching for her familiar pale blue satin night robe, Hermione silently moved to her dressing table. *Never a pretty picture in the morning, are you?* No amount of newly developed skill at taming her hair would ever rid her of the bushy brown mess created from a fitful sleep. Adding to the ghastly image, thick purple patches framed the skin under her puffy, pink-rimmed eyes.

Ginny, Ron and Harry had kept her up well into the night, guessing what could be discussed at this evening's Order of the Phoenix meeting. Harry seemed especially agitated during their exchange.

"We haven't had a meeting in weeks, months even. I know something must have happened for Professor Dumbledore to call one."

"I don't see the point in wasting time discussing it, Harry, since we will obviously know soon enough." In truth, Hermione was desperate to discover why the meeting had been called, but she still meant her words. She just wanted to go to sleep.

Order members would begin to trickle into number twelve, Grimmauld Place before supper time. Even though it was not necessary, Mrs. Weasley refused to entertain such a large party of people in the kitchen without proper food available.

Shaking last night's thoughts from her head, she continued with her morning preparations. Hermione did not enjoy getting up early, but out of habit she found it essential to be the first one to use the lavatory. Six years sharing a room and bathroom with beauty queens such as Lavender and Parvati had rendered her traumatized.

Making sure to don her larger and more reserved bath robe, Hermione continued on tip-toe out of her bedroom to the bathroom at the other end of the landing.

In a melancholic sort of way, she thought of tonight as a special occasion since she would be socializing with so many people she had not seen in months.

What other reason do you need to finally shampoo your hair? She was in for a long fight with her bushy mane.

She had finally mustered the courage to shake her habit of using cheap Muggle products and pay a visit to that colorful corner in the Apothecary at Diagon Alley. She may have recently taken more of an interest in her appearance, but cosmetics and hair products were so foreign to her that shopping for them was intimidating.

She detested taking a long time in the shower when she knew there were other people in the house in need of it as well. After casting a quick Drying Charm to her long locks, she flicked her wand to remove the wet mist from the mirrors and walls. Upon seeing no one on the other side of the bathroom door, Hermione crept back to her

bedroom.

"Mornin', Hermione."

"Good morning, Ginny."

"You're up early. We barely fell asleep a few hours ago."

"I know," she sniped. *No thanks to all of you* Hermione frowned at the thought.

Sitting up in bed, lazily stretching, Ginny was completely oblivious to Hermione's mood. It was too early to be naturally perceptive.

"I wonder who's coming tonight? Harry told me that Sirius and Remus might decide to stay here after the meeting."

Hermione smiled at the proposal. Harry's uncles, if not by blood then definitely by choice and admiration, would be wonderful company for him. Harry had suffered terribly during the summer before their sixth year, mourning Sirius' death. It had devastated Hermione to witness his deep aimlessness throughout the first half of their sixth year.

Harry never really asked Sirius how he returned from beyond the veil. There was no coming back; everyone knew that. But whenever the subject was broached, Sirius became extremely quiet and anxious before beginning a new topic of conversation.

That was still yet another project of Hermione's. She spent hours in the Black library struggling to fathom out the complexities of the veil, what or whom created it, let alone how someone traveled through it.

"Hermione?"

Her head snapped up when she realized this was not the first time Ginny had called her name.

Thoughtful brown eyes met perceptive blue ones. "Yes, I'm sorry, Ginny. What were you saying?"

"Let's go and get a bit of breakfast and coffee, eh?"

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The noise in the kitchen seemed to get louder and louder by the minute as more people trickled in for the meeting and Mrs. Weasley's abundant spread.

As old and run-down as the Black family home was, the smell of thick beef stew and familiar smiling faces almost made it cozy.

Hermione decided to claim her favorite plush armchair by the kitchen fire before everyone started to arrive. This gave her a close proximity for conversation with those seated at the long dinner table and a clear view of the doors leading to the entrance hall.

Slowly sipping her lightly sweetened cup of Earl Grey tea, Hermione cast affectionate glances around the room. In attendance, thus far, were of course Harry, Ginny and Ron. Ginny sat by the fire playing an extremely violent game of Exploding Snap with her beloved brothers, Fred and George. Ron was situated next to his brother Charlie at the end of the dinner table, furthest away from the entrance hall doors. By his wide eyes and open mouth full of stew, Charlie must have been giving him a very good rendition of his latest dragon escapades.

On Ron's right side, Harry positioned himself comfortably in his chair, legs crossed with his head cradled in the palm of his hand, elbow on the wooden table. By the way he leaned into Remus, the extent of his loneliness was exceedingly obvious to those assembled. Hermione understood why it was necessary for Harry to stay under the protection that number four, Privet Drive offered him, but surely it would have been better if he stayed here with her.

After all, if it was safe enough to be here alone, surely the two of us together would have been safer? And maybe a bit more sane at that."

"Did you say something, Hermione?" questioned Tonks, who was seated on a stool directly across from her by the fire.

"Oh... no, just wondering who else we are waiting for." Hermione felt a crimson flush spread over her neck as her hair line began to sweat. She really did need to break this awkward habit of hers.

"Almost everyone is here." Tonks casually made a show of looking around the kitchen. "Is there anything on your mind you would like to talk about, Hermione? You know I'll keep your confidences."

"I do know, Tonks, but no, there's nothing," she sincerely replied. Abruptly changing her mind, she said, "You know, I would love to owl my parents or maybe receive one from them..."

"Hermione, I'm sure Dumbledore..."

"Yes, I heard his warning already," she quickly retorted.

Regardless, Tonks' eyes seemed to soften at her rudeness. "It won't be long now I'm sure. Would you like me to talk to him for you?"

Hermione's expression widened with anticipation as she set her teacup down on the side table. "I wouldn't want to bother you."

"Believe me, Hermione, it's no bother at all."

"Thank you, Tonks," she genuinely whispered as she grabbed the hand of her pink-haired friend seated before her.

No words were exchanged as the two women comforted themselves in the small embrace. Such a minute intimacy was greatly needed during dangerous times such as these.

Casually removing her hand, Tonks cleared her throat as she readjusted in her seat. She used the cover of sipping her tea to cast yet another speculative glance at the young lady across from her.

"I must say, Hermione, you look more lovely and grown up every time I see you."

Not used to such sincere praise, Hermione blushed furiously as she eyed the floor and accepted the compliment with a nod of her head.

"I don't mean to embarrass you, but I do mean it. Those robes really do flatter you, I hope you know."

Yes, *I do*. Hermione quickly chastised herself after such a thought. She truly did not think it attractive to let oneself become vain. She would not say she dressed to impress, per se, but she knew her tattered jeans and collared shirts worn for so long no longer appealed to her.

Like I can wear denim anymore with these hips.

Hermione simply appreciated the appeal so many adult witches found in feminine dress robes. The one she was wearing at the moment, colored a deep forest green, truly

complemented the brown in her hair and eyes. The cut of the cloth fell wide on her shoulders, giving a liberal view of her collarbone. She felt more like a woman fully clothed in such a fashion than she did in her many small chemises she wore underneath.

But now was not the time to think such frivolous thoughts as Sirius and Bill strode into the kitchen. An awkward silence fell over the friendly gathering as they eyed the man they had cried over during his funeral service not long ago.

Expecting such a reaction, Sirius painfully, yet playfully, elbowed Bill in the ribs.

"His haircut isn't that bad. It's not polite to stare, you know." Sirius chuckled at the candid expressions around him.

It worked.

"It's bloody awful. He's been growing it for so long!" yelled Ginny as she quickly caught on.

"Ginny!"

"She's right, Mum. You would think he's on his way for an interview with Rufus Scrimgeour himself."

"Not on your life, Ron." Bill knew how to take personal jibes from his family. With brothers like the twins, one was forced to get used to it. He was just relieved to take some of the unwanted attention from the nervous friend beside him.

Making his rounds around the room, Bill beamed stupidly as Harry sprang up from his seat to greet his Godfather.

Seeing him so eager in his greeting, Hermione's indignation flared once again at the complete isolation she and Harry were forced into by being cut off from everyone in this room.

"Don't look so down," Bill teasingly jibed.

She politely rose to hug her friend. "It's good to see you, Bill. Will your father be here soon?"

"Yes, he will be arriving with Moody and Shacklebolt."

"Then that would leave Professor Dumbledore and Professor Snape," she inattentively breathed out while moving to the side of Bill. It was meant to be another thought accidentally spoken out loud, but Bill was none the wiser.

"I think I'll go and greet Sirius."

Sirius really did not think he was prepared for such a sizeable gathering. It was dreadful enough when these inquisitive intimates cornered him one by one; *Merlin knows what they are like in pack*. But it was wonderful to see Harry and Remus again. Maybe he would try not to seclude himself as much as he did over the summer.

"Hello, Sirius."

He defensively turned away from his conversation with Harry to eye whomever was daring to physically stand far too close for his comfort.

"What do you... Oh, Hermione!" Sirius quickly pulled her into a hug as he chastised himself for such discourtesy. "I apologize; you startled me."

"It's all right, really. I haven't seen you in so long." She grinned at the smiling face behind Sirius. "I'm sure Harry doesn't mind the interruption, do you, Harry?"

"You know I don't."

"Well, please, sit down, sit down. Now, tell me, how has my beloved house treated you these past months?"

Hermione rolled her eyes at his obvious sarcasm. "If I may be blunt?" Gathering her strength at his smiling nod, she said, "It was absolutely horrid."

"Of course it was. I'm surprised Harry didn't stay here with you." He looked expectantly at his godson.

Harry gazed back at them. A startled expression on his face flashed for a second before Hermione answered.

"He had to stay with his horrid aunt and uncle again this summer."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, avoiding their eyes.

"Hmm... Dumbledore," Sirius said with a shake of his head.

The friendly chit chat was quickly joined by Remus and Ron, which successfully made everyone forget that Sirius was the proverbial elephant in the room. Hermione felt so grateful to have her two best friends back and thoroughly enjoyed the playful banter exchanged with Sirius and Remus. So lost was she in her enjoyment of the conversation, Hermione took no notice of the arrival of Mr. Weasley, Moody, and Shacklebolt. Neither did she notice the pair of appraising eyes, belonging to the owner of the house, that kept glancing in her direction.

Author's Notes: Again, I must offer my gratitude to my talented beta, **melusin**.

Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book i. Line 62.

I prefer writing dialogue, as opposed to one character reacting to his/her environments and emotions. Because of this, I have numerous subplots involving minor characters, so further introductions were needed.

Next up: Omniscient Dumbledore, more of this meeting, and Snape.

No, your eyes did not deceive you; Sirius is a main character in this story. More of him and his story to come.

Chapter Three - Justify the Ways of God to Men

With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began. And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. Eventual SS/HG. Alternate Universe, HBP death disregarded.

Nominated for best fic in the 2007 OWL Awards: Fire & Ice Category (SS/HG), Romance Category, Angst Category, and A/U Category

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: I must thank my beta, **melusin**, who has spent much of her time on my story.

"It is quite wonderful to walk into a room full of such mirth during harsh times as these."

Lemons, sunshine, twinkling eyes, Hermione had never felt so at peace all summer than at the moment when Professor Dumbledore walked into the kitchen.

"No, no, don't any of you dare get up. We can forgo such pleasantries while I take a seat as well." He twinkled at them while his tired old body sought Hermione's favorite chair. Dumbledore's robe hung loosely on him, hiding his injured hand from their view.

As she watched him slowly lower himself into the seat, closing his eyes as he reclined his back, uneasy emotions bombarded Hermione.

He looks like he's in physical and mental pain.

At that moment, the last of Hermione's optimism regarding her security chipped completely away. She finally realized that Dumbledore was but a man; a man who might possibly fall the next time he dueled Voldemort. With a fleeting look around the room, the bleak thought finally hit home.

This really is our fight.

With everyone attempting to persuade Professor Dumbledore to join their current conversation, no one in the room took any notice of the black figure that slipped quietly into the kitchen. No one, that is, except Hermione.

Professor Snape always was such an enigma to her. Even now, as she attempted to casually gaze at him, she could not hide the inquisitiveness from her eyes. *He looks as tired as Professor Dumbledore.*

His greasy black hair tumbled lifelessly upon his shoulders, shielding his eyes from everyone in the room. The only facial features visible to Hermione were his prominent nose and high cheekbones. Before she mentally criticized the ashen paleness of his skin, her attention was drawn to the outline of his strong jaw. She lowered her eyes to analyze the rest of him.

Something seemed a bit off about his familiar black robes tonight. Maybe it was his slumped stance against the kitchen counter or the creases it caused in his cloak, but either way, he was not standing in his customary looming manner.

She watched curiously as he rummaged through the various cupboards before pulling out a bottle of Ogden's Old Firewhisky and a small glass tumbler. He tossed his head back as he swigged one... two... three shots of the fiery liquid, Adam's apple bobbing after each swallow. Entranced, Hermione watched this performance, appreciating the fluidity of his movements.

Suddenly, Snape's shoulders squared as his body stood rigidly to survey the room.

Hermione jerked back into her chair. But his deep black eyes were too swift, catching her mid-stare. She quickly turned her head back to Dumbledore.

What was I doing?

Before Hermione could find some logical answer to her question, Professor Dumbledore rose out of his seat to begin the proceedings.

"As much as I am enjoying the company of my beloved friends, I believe we should start the meeting."

The room grew deathly silent as everyone waited for their valued leader to shed light on the grounds for tonight's meeting.

"You all know that a length of time has passed since the last Order meeting. I wish I could say that nothing dreadful has recently occurred in the name of this war." The twinkle from his eye slowly faded out before he continued. "But, unfortunately, that is not the case. We have suspected for much of the past year that Voldemort was patiently biding his time before launching a massive and well thought out attack."

"Who was attacked?"

"Shh, Charlie, let him finish."

"No, it's all right, Arthur. Two days ago, there was another mass breakout from Azkaban. The Ministry of Magic, even under the new regime of Scrimgeour, took my warnings lightly and delegated a paltry amount of Aurors as replacements for the Dementors. I believe this is related to the events of last night. I have recently discovered that there has been a mass slaughter of Muggle government officials all across the country."

Intakes of air could be heard around the dinner table.

"How were they... ?" Ginny paled before she could finish her question.

"I'm afraid to say, my dear, that they did not die peacefully in their beds. The entire Muggle community is panicked and distressed from the reports of unrecognizable piles of bloody human tissue and fragments of clothes at the scenes."

"Sweet Merlin above," Molly sobbed, grabbing a tea towel to fan her face.

"No lives were spared," Dumbledore continued gravely, "women, children -- the elderly. Anyone and everyone in the target houses were brutally mutilated. In the hopes of counteracting the growing hysteria, the Muggle government is claiming that the descriptions of the bodies are a terrible hoax, stating that the Muggles were shot with Muggle weapons."

After another silence, the voice of Remus Lupin echoed in the kitchen. "What do you suppose we do about this, Albus?"

"I'm afraid there is nothing we can do about it at the moment, except be on the alert. The memories of a few Muggle investigators were modified to give the Ministry a chance to inspect what remained of the bodies. Dead, rotting tissue was discovered under the fingernails of a few intact hands."

"Inferi," Shacklebolt announced knowingly to the room.

Hermione's face drained of all color as her hands began to visibly shake at this information.

She took no notice of the compassionate hands rested upon hers. "Do you think they will attack the Muggle government again?" questioned Harry.

"No, no, I don't believe so. I believe that this was a warning to the Muggle-born community only, not the Muggles themselves. A way of showing them, if you will, that if Tom's Death Eaters could easily enter the house of Ministry government officials then no Muggle is safe."

Albus Dumbledore slowly took his seat as he watched the young faces before him fall further into despair.

"Tom's agenda has begun. I expect him, and his Death Eaters, naturally, to now openly target Muggle-borns -- and their Muggle relatives to be precise. This is one of the main courses of action he has obsessed over since he came to call himself Lord Voldemort. "

This was too much.

"Oh, gods, no," Hermione gasped. Concerned eyes turned towards her.

"Fear not, Ms. Granger. Your parents are safely hidden and have been for some time now. I hope you understand my harsh actions of keeping their whereabouts hidden from you."

"Yes, of course. Thank you, Professor," she breathed.

Hermione felt the prickle of tears seize a constricting hold on her throat. But she refused to cry in front of everyone. Straining to maintain her resolve, she continued, "What are we to do now, Professor?"

"Some precautions have already been taken. We will continue to hide as many Muggle parents we can, regardless of the age of their Muggle-born offspring. But, this will take some considerable time. I'm afraid losses are unavoidable."

"Is this all that Voldemort is planning?" asked an apprehensive Sirius.

"No," a deep, resonating voice answered from the corner of the kitchen, furthest from the entrance hall doors.

Sirius turned hateful eyes upon the dark shadow against the wall. *Of course, leave it to Snape to occupy the one spot in the kitchen untouched by the hearth fire*

"Well, out with it then!" he spat.

"Do refrain from your emotional dramatics, Black," Snape purred menacingly. "I am confident Potter and company would become quite distressed if you collapsed from a theatrical stroke and died." Snape's sneer turned into a satisfied smirk as Sirius' eyes widened. "Again."

Hermione visibly flinched as Harry and Ron lurched from their seats, chairs tumbling to the floor.

"Why you greasy bast--"

"That is enough!"

Instantly reprimanded, everyone, save Snape, reluctantly took their seats as the unfamiliar figure of a livid Dumbledore stood before them.

"Inform them now, Severus."

Snape leaned lazily against the kitchen wall as he slowly drawled, "As you wish, Headmaster." He then locked eyes with Remus.

"It seems that the Dark Lord is planning to use his unyielding influence over Fenrir Greyback to gather support from additional werewolves in the wizarding community. He wishes for them to... extend... their numbers." Snape raised his eyebrow in a challenge. "After all, a bitten Muggle relative is far more horrifying than a dead relative."

"Don't you dare believe that, Remus," Harry whispered as Sirius murderously scrutinized Snape.

"Who's Fenrir Greyback?" asked Ron.

Harry and Hermione exchanged looks, but decided to keep silent. No one answered for good reason, but this mattered little to Snape. Plucking a piece of lint from his robe, he said silkily, "I am certain Lupin could answer that."

Remus' eyes narrowed before he turned away from the ominous man camouflaged in the dim corner. "He's a very evil wizard, Ron. As a werewolf himself, he knows how dangerous he is to others whilst transformed. I'm afraid to say that he purposefully places himself in heavily populated neighborhoods every full moon." Lupin uncomfortably paused, contemplating if he should continue. "Even before he fully transforms, he finds a sick satisfaction in biting his young victims during... while he..."

"Ravishes them," Severus finished smugly.

"No," Harry breathed.

"That's more than enough, thank you, Severus," Dumbledore interrupted. "There are still a few other items on the agenda we need to discuss..." "

Expecting the inevitable, Remus cut him off. "What else do you need me to do, Albus?"

Dumbledore smiled sadly at the determined man. "You know I hate to ask this of you again, Remus, but we cannot allow Voldemort's influence to reign over all the werewolves in the wizarding world."

"I understand. I'll take care of it."

"Wait, hold on a second..." "

"Don't interrupt, Harry."

"But, Hermione! We can't just let him..."

"No, he has made his decision, so don't you dare make it harder for him. We all have to make decisions."

"Quite right, Ms. Granger, which brings the next order of business to you."

Hermione felt all color leave her face again, but her neck grew hot as perspiration made her dress uncomfortably sticky. She swallowed twice before she could continue. "Yes, Headmaster?"

"Since we will be hiding the majority of Muggle parents connected to the wizarding community, I would not be surprised if Voldemort tried to assault Muggle-born students

at Hogwarts."

"WHAT?" Ron, Harry and Ginny screamed in unison.

"For heaven's sake, stop interrupting!" Hermione was getting pretty sick of their attempts to discuss matters before knowing all the facts.

Dumbledore decided to quickly continue during the indignant silence. "So, I would not be surprised if he has already recruited a few loyal followers from within the student population." He paused to carefully choose his next words.

"I believe you have received your Hogwarts' letter congratulating you on your appointment as Head Girl?"

"Yes, sir, about that..."

"Excellent. Then you will appreciate the advantageous opportunity this affords to become my eyes and ears among the students -- due to the unlimited access you will have around the castle, and of course, your increased privileges."

"You mean you want me to *spy* on them?" Hermione was beyond shocked.

"Yes, I suppose you could look at it that way. You will be given the passwords for all four common rooms and access to hidden passages not mentioned on a certain map." He smiled over his half-moon glasses.

"No, absolutely not, Professor."

"This is not *your* call to make, Harry. I am happy to accept your proposal, Headmaster."

In truth, Hermione was pretty frightened by the idea. She could not imagine herself stalking around the Slytherin lair in the dead of night where anyone could happen upon her. But now she had a logical reason to keep her Head Girl badge. Plus, she finally felt like she could be of substantial use to the war effort. It was *her* parents that were in hiding because of this war. It was *her* family that the Death Eaters wished to kill. And, if given the chance, they would gladly kill her as well.

"Harry's right, Hermione, this is way too dangerous for you. You can't be mad enough to..."

"I understand the danger, Ronald, but it's still my decision to make. I am not debating this with you."

Snape examined the uneasy exchange with amused eyes. *That is the third time tonight she has snapped at those dunderheaded fools*

He was also surprised at her complete lack of tearful, female hysterics. He himself had made her snivel by making comments far less distressing than those she had been subjected to tonight. *My, my, how you have grown, Ms. Granger* He sneered after the thought.

"I thank you, Ms. Granger. We will, of course, discuss this further when you arrive at Hogwarts." Dumbledore steadily rose from the armchair at her nod. "It is getting late. I am sure all of you would like to retire for the night. I bid you all a night's restful sleep."

"Fine," Harry spat, springing from the table and storming through the kitchen door.

"I, erm... Better go after him," Ron mumbled uncomfortably.

"I'll talk to you both tomorrow, Ron, okay?"

"Yeah, night, Hermione."

Ron, Ginny, Remus and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley slowly exited the kitchen to ascend the stairs to their preferred bedrooms. The twins would be going back to the flat above their shop in Diagon Alley, while Bill and Charlie fancied some sleep at the Burrow. Moody, Tonks and Shacklebolt remained huddled by the fire, each sneaking glances at Hermione during their in depth discussion.

Sensing Hermione's uneasiness at the exchange, Sirius attempted to draw her out of her discomfort. "I'm sure everything will be all right, Hermione. Dumbledore will guide you every step of the way."

"I know, Sirius. But I can't help being a little nervous."

Casually, Sirius snaked his hand into hers. "If you need anyone to talk to, at any time, you know I'll always lend an attentive ear."

She was little taken aback by his forwardness, but Hermione attempted to hide it as best she could. "Thank you, Sirius. I really do appreciate that."

"Anytime." He gently squeezed her hand before he continued. "Goodnight, Hermione."

"Night." Hermione flushed slightly as the kitchen door closed behind him.

An irritating wave of confusion engulfed her after Sirius left. As she rose from the dinner table to exit the now empty kitchen, Hermione barely noticed the slumped black figure seated on a stool by the kitchen counter; the figure of the dark man who, unbeknownst to her, had perceptively watched her discussion with Sirius through narrowed eyes.

An impulsive idea hit Hermione before she reached the kitchen door.

Shit. Snape internally groaned as he detected her pause. *Can't even get pissed without fucking interruptions.*

"Professor?"

"What do you want, Miss Granger? Professor Dumbledore made it perfectly clear that the meeting is now over."

"I'm sorry to bother you, sir," she replied as she turned away from the door to look at him. She noticed that the bottle of Ogden's was a quarter empty now. His lean hand cradled the tumbler between an elegant middle finger and thumb. Again, she could not help but notice the difference between his posture tonight compared to that of the Potions classroom. His black hair hung over his dark eyes. His upper body leaned onto the kitchen counter, weight supported by his elbows and forearms. One tense leg rested bent on the bar running below the counter while the other stretched languidly, heel on the floor. All too late, Hermione realized she was staring at him. *Again.*

"Well? Are you going to gape at me all night, Miss Granger, or inform me of the reason for your continued unwanted presence?" he barked.

"I'm sorry, Professor, I was just wondering if you could... I mean since I'll be... since Professor Dumbledore wants me too..." Hermione nervously fidgeted as she attempted to find her words.

"Out with it, woman! Speak clearly and desist in your incoherent babbling this instant."

"I... never mind," she quickly gasped before she escaped through the kitchen doors.

Snape watched Hermione's robes billow behind her as she fled the kitchen. He pitched his head back, gulping more poison, and smirked as the kitchen door swung furiously on its hinges.

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Relief washed over Hermione when she noticed Ginny's bed curtains were drawn around her four-poster. She truly did not feel up to being interrogated over the assignment Dumbledore had allotted her. But, the main reason was she knew she looked stressed and agitated from her dialogue with Snape, and she was not prepared to discuss that either.

What was that anyway?

She pulled a nightgown from her chest of drawers as her mind ran away from her. *Why did I just stare at him? And why couldn't I just request his advice on espionage? I made such a fool of myself, running out of the kitchen like that.*

Pulling the last of the pins from her hair, Hermione drew the curtains around her four-poster before she tugged back the duvet.

Malicious tyrant didn't even give me a chance to say anything

Her mind felt hazy as it tried to process too much information at once. She still did not know what to think about the new role expected of her once she returned to Hogwarts.

How on earth am I supposed to spy on anyone? Like the students will just converse about their loyalties to Voldemort in the Great Hall. And passwords to common rooms! I knew the Head Girl and Head Boy need to be aware of them for emergencies, but Professor Dumbledore made it sound like he wants me to regularly visit them.

Hermione needed to explore all the negatives of the situation first. It was just her way. But truthfully, she was more than willing to take on the assignment. She needed to do more for the Order. She needed to feel useful in the fight against Voldemort in some shape or form. But, most importantly, she desperately needed to keep herself busy.

As she slid her favorite goose down pillow between her knees, Hermione's outlook drifted to the dilemma that was Professor Snape. He had startled her more than usual tonight before she ran out of the kitchen. His body, stance and expressions seemed so foreign to her compared to those she was accustomed to seeing at school.

He had seemed strongly approachable to her.

This might have been the reason she attempted to question him about his double-agent activities right there in the kitchen. But once he spoke, his voice and body emanated the familiar mannerisms of her Potions master.

It did not matter though. Hermione had made up her mind. She would somehow corner Snape and ask him to help her in some shape or form. *He is in the Order after all. He would advise me for the sake of the Headmaster.*

As Hermione felt her body drift off into sleep, a rather inappropriate realization entered her mind. He hadn't called her 'silly little girl' when he kicked her out of the kitchen.

He had screamed 'woman'.

Of course, she did not remember this revelation in the morning.

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"You are to stay here until the beginning of term," Dumbledore said impassively, his voice echoing in the silent entrance hall.

"You must have finally gone senile," Severus replied. He had his hand on the doorknob with every intention of leaving this deplorable house as soon as possible.

"Nothing has changed, my boy," Dumbledore said as he walked to Severus' side. "You kept your eyes on him before he came to this house, and you must continue your guard."

Severus' face twisted into a disgusted grimace, but he kept his back to the Headmaster.

Both stood there, silently: Dumbledore determined to have his way, and Severus unwilling to concede.

Severus' finally let his hand fall from the doorknob. Without a word or backward glance, he silently glided up the stairs to find a suitable room.

"Thank you, Severus," Dumbledore called after him. "I will have your things sent over by morning."

Author's Notes: Many thanks to my beta, **melusin**, who is dedicated enough to look over my chapters multiple times.

Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book i. Line 22.

Chapter Four - And Out of Good Still to Finds Means of Evil

Chapter 5 of 36

With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began. And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. Eventual SS/HG. Alternate Universe, HBP death disregarded.

Nominated for best fic in the 2007 OWL Awards: Fire & Ice Category (SS/HG), Romance Category, Angst Category, and A/U Category

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: This is where those multiple warnings begin to rear their ugly head, so please be aware of the story's rating before you continue.

A very heart felt appreciation goes to my beta, **melusin** for all the work and time she has put into my story.

The moment Remus' eyes finally adjusted to the sudden darkness, he took off at a rapid sprint. The wet brush of the Forbidden Forest whipped painlessly against his thick skin as he moved effortlessly in his haste.

It's not a full moon tonight, is it?

Breathing deep and uneven gulps of air, Remus knew he could not run this fast. Glancing down at his legs, he saw pawed feet instead.

He was transformed.

As perplexing as the situation was, Remus comforted himself in the knowledge that he still maintained his mental capabilities. He must have somehow managed to take his Wolfsbane, even if he had forgotten there was a full moon.

Unexpectedly, Remus' feral ears strained at the echo of mimicked footsteps following him deeper into the forest. He abruptly stopped running and crouched low to the sodden ground, hiding himself amidst the fog.

Whoever was following him did not care about being heard.

Twigs snapped and leaves crunched as the hurried footsteps drew closer. An apprehensive dread iced down Remus' back at the idea that this person *or thing*, was running loud, fast and obviously trailing him.

Stealthily, he rose from the ground and moved toward the hurried thrashing, stalking diagonally in an attempt to counter it.

All too soon, the noises halted, and Remus suddenly became aware of the dry chill in the night air. He raised his human hands, tucking them under his robes to maintain body heat.

What the hell?

Before Remus could understand why he was no longer transformed, a massive, shaggy body pounced on him from behind.

With a frightened gasp, Remus realized exactly whose forearm was tightly wrapped around his throat. As hoarse, wet breaths stirred against his ear, Remus dry retched at the stench of rubbish and clotted blood filling his nostrils. He desperately wanted to gain some measure of composure, but on attempting to inhale a steadied breath, he sobbed instead as the man's other arm snaked around his hip.

"It's good to see you again, Remus," the voice rasped as its owner thrust his pelvis against his victim's behind.

Remus froze the moment that voice filled his ears. And, try as hard as he might, he could not stop the tears that flowed down his face as his privates were painfully fondled.

"NO!" Remus screamed, shooting out of bed. With a white knuckled grip on his wand, he jerkily turned about in his room.

Realizing it was another dream, he sank to the floor, the adrenaline pumping through his veins being gradually replaced by grief. Resting his head on hugged knees, Remus rocked himself until the sun rose.

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Despite the stress of the previous night, Hermione felt nothing but satisfaction as she strolled into the full and busy kitchen.

"What'll it be, dear?"

"Just coffee and a strawberry pastry, Mrs. Weasley, please."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, I need my caffeine or my mind will refuse to function properly. And, I find coffee tastes best with something sweet."

"My, you make that sound appealing, I believe I'll have the same, Molly," said Sirius upon entering the kitchen.

Hermione smiled back at him as he pulled out a chair for her in-between himself and Ron.

"Did everyone sleep well?" asked Sirius.

"Like the dead," mumbled Ron, spluttering flakes of egg on Hermione's arm.

"Good God, that is revolting."

She scowled as Harry started laughing. He laughed even harder when her expression did not change.

"Harry, about what Dumbledore said..."

Harry sobered quickly. "Really, Hermione, you don't need to explain." He made eye contact with Ron as he put his fork down. "I still don't like it. I think it's too dangerous. But I should have, you know, respected your decision last night."

"Thank you," she turned expectantly to her red-headed best friend. "Ron?"

Mouth full of food, he abruptly stopped chewing. Ron did not expect Hermione to make him apologize as well. She should automatically know that Harry spoke for both of them. He smiled before he began to speak.

At the sight of more egg caked across his teeth, Hermione put up her hand. "I accept your apology. Please, do not try to talk again."

Everyone around the table erupted in laughter -- Hermione included.

The next couple of days passed by in pretty much the same fashion. Hermione thoroughly enjoyed the easy going company of her best friends, as well as that of Remus and Sirius. She knew she had to steal as many simple moments as possible with them before returning to Hogwarts in two weeks time. Everything would change when she became more active with her assignment for the Order.

In a way, it already has, she thought.

The only thing Hermione was uneasy about was the encounter she was determined to have with Professor Snape. She knew she had to talk to him, but he never attended dinner. From what Sirius told her, he had his own room and was sleeping here, but she never witnessed his comings or goings.

Stretching her back, Hermione deeply sighed as her lower spine cracked. She loved reading in the Black family library late at night by a powerful fire. Leaning on the arm of the plush settee, she pulled her bare feet off the chilled floor, tucking them under her night robe.

Hermione did not realize that she was reading the same line over and over as her attention kept drifting. As determined as she was to review her school books before the start of term, she was not making much headway this evening.

SLAM!

The page cradled in her fingers ripped forcefully as her body reacted to the irate closing of the front door. Hermione had dropped the damaged book in an attempt to procure her wand before her mind fully comprehended who was screaming in the entrance hall.

"MUDBLOOD LOVING FILTH. DISGUSTING BLOOD TRAITORS. GET OUT OF MY HOUSE..."

"Shut that old hag up!"

"Shh... don't fret yourself, Severus. Here, let me help you up the stairs. Give me your arm."

"Get your hands off me, Minerva. The very last thing I want at this moment is your annoying coddling."

"Albus, get the portrait curtains, please, before she wakes the rest of the house."

Hermione silently cracked open the library door in time to see Professor Dumbledore silence Madame Black. Professor McGonagall stood at the foot of the stairs, propping up a very angry and deathly pale Professor Snape against the banister. He stumbled as he yanked his arm free of her.

"I told you to leave me the bloody hell alone," he hissed before his body shook. It was horrifically evident that he was in much pain.

When she had watched all three of them slowly ascend the stairs, Hermione quietly left the library in the hopes of following them.

She was incredibly surprised that no one in the house woke as Snape was muttering nasty expletives at his two captors all the way to the second landing. Tailing them up the massive staircase, Hermione could hear Minerva's faint shushing sounds fade in the air right behind Snape's deep voice.

As the last of Dumbledore's purple robes vanished into Snape's room, Hermione swiftly seized her chance to press herself against the wall beside Snape's door. She only wanted to listen. She had no hope other than to press her ear against the battered door. But, a long streak of candle-light blazed across the grimy floor. Hermione sneaked a quick glance before returning back to the wall. Identifying that all three seemed tremendously occupied, Hermione steadied her vision along the fracture of space in the door, lowering her body as close to the floor as possible.

Infuriated, Snape sat on the edge of his four-poster while Minerva attempted to remove his soiled robes. Dumbledore busied himself opposite the door, rummaging through a tall cabinet filled with various bottles.

The moment Snape's heavy black cloak fell from his shoulders, Hermione choked down a gasp forced upon her by instinct. She was horrified to see that his white undershirt was soaked in blood.

"Get out."

"Shut up."

Dumbledore gravely walked over to his two trusted friends, handing Snape a vial of Pain Relieving Potion.

Snape gulped it quickly, violently swatting Minerva's hand away from his collar buttons at the same time.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Severus! I need to see where you are hurt."

"I am perfectly capable of mending my own wounds, you meddling cow." He smirked as her face contorted in rage. "Besides, most of this blood is not even mine."

Minerva's eyes widened before she quickly slid two fingers into the neck of his shirt and ripped down forcefully, buttons severing and scattering to the floor.

Hermione sucked in a nervous breath.

Snape reflexively reached for his wand on the duvet. By the rise and fall of his chest, she could see that his breathing was steady yet quick. He sat up straight on the bed, eyes narrowing at the woman before him. By the deathly silence in the room, and Severus' wand jammed into Minerva's left kidney, Hermione knew his patience had finally run out.

"Leave. NOW," he barked.

Dumbledore slowly treaded toward the frightening standoff.

"Severus, we know how much you detest being helped after such... gatherings, but we've never seen you in this state before. If Minerva had not found you --" He stopped speaking when Snape's expression refused to change. "Please. Let her look you over, for my sake at least."

Dumbledore attempted to affectionately rest his hand on Snape's shoulder, but withdrew it when the forbidding figure tensed under his touch. "Please."

Snape did not reply, nor did he intend to. He did, however, lower his wand as he turned his face away from the other two people in the room.

Taking quick advantage of his submission, Minerva hurriedly shoved the sticky shirt off Snape's shoulders.

Hermione felt a slight tickling at the back of her throat as her mouth went dry. Her mind had had difficulty grasping the unfamiliar sight of her brutal Potions master in a white shirt splattered with purple gore, but seeing his bare upper body was far beyond surreal. From the sporadic twitching along his neck and shoulders, Hermione gathered that he was extremely tense. All the same, she could not help but marvel at the distinctive characteristics of his body. His slim neck fell upon strong broad shoulders, which set a contrasting frame for his wiry muscled biceps and forearms.

She did not think it important to note, but during her slow examination of Snape's bare upper body, the idea of attempting to catch a glimpse of his Dark Mark never once crossed her mind. Hermione's psyche, however, was not infantile enough to deny its existence under Snape's stern black robes. Every day in his presence since had she joined the Order, the idea of him bearing the Dark Lord's tattoo seemed no more out of the ordinary than the presence of cruelty in his voice.

Instead, her attention became ensnared by a tattoo of a different sort.

Hermione's eyes swiveled rapidly as she tried to visually take in this captivating enigma. The familiar fuzziness behind her eyebrows returned as the confusion of two very

distinct emotions flooded her senses. Her stomach felt greasy with disgust as she eyed the blotchy streaks of dried blood. Yet, at the same time, she could not help but marvel at the sight of the taut muscles of his slender back. A back which seemed to serve as a perfect canvas for the deep ebony ink work covering it.

Her breath caught in her chest as she eyed the massively large, knotted design that spread from the nape of his neck to the protruding bones of his shoulders. The twisting chains continued down the entire expanse of his back and sides of his ribcage, ending above the waistband of his trousers. She had never seen a Celtic illustration so rich in detail. Endless knots connected with thin chains at the top of his spine, gradually expanded into heavy spikes at his lower back. His whole back was colored in at various links to give the illusion of depth, serving to highlight some chains more than others. Hermione's damp hands began to twitch as the sudden urge to slide her fingers across the massive tattoo burst into her mind.

Her distracted reverie ended at the sound of a hiss.

Muttering, Minerva quickly mended the wound below the right side of Snape's ribs. "I think this is the only serious wound you sustained."

"Obviously," he sneered, lip curling.

Dumbledore tensely watched Minerva's face as hurt and rage battled to overwhelm her.

"I believe Severus is due for some much needed rest, Minerva." Lightly placing both hands on either side of her shoulders, he slowly guided her to the door. "Goodnight, my boy."

Snape quickly seized his chance to flee to the adjoining bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

Hermione could feel her heart beating in her throat at the idea of getting caught snooping where she definitely did not belong. She rose from the floor and quickly descended the stairs to her bedroom on the first-floor landing as quietly as possible.

*** **

Hermione lay still in bed for hours, staring at the spider webs on the roof of her canopy. She truly did not know what to make of tonight's events. Far too many different emotions had run through her mind while she was observing the goings on in Snape's room. She was desperate to know where he had been, what he had done, and who had cast a slicing hex on him.

Does he always retire here late at night like that? There was so much blood.

"... most of this blood is not even mine."

In the same way Hermione had no desire to curiously gawk at Snape's Dark Mark, she also did not question the type of duties he performed as a spy. She could not objectively see the abnormality of her reaction, so Hermione did not question it, but hearing him speak so off-handedly about being drenched in the body fluids of another did not bother her as much as his slicing wound had.

*** **

Severus' nasal passages burned, exhaling the thick smoke with a steady breath, as he sat reclined in the single armchair placed directly in front of the fire. His hair, still wet from his quick shower, stuck to the back of his neck and shoulders. His grey nightshirt hung open at the front, revealing the scarred skin of his slender body.

The large four-poster bed, opposite the fire, lay untouched. The sage-green sheets were as pristine as when Molly had left them days ago. Repulsively stained Death Eater robes lay ignored where Minerva had discarded them, discoloring the already filthy rug with their abhorrent fluids.

Leaning back into the armchair, Snape slid a hand through his damp hair and swallowed another dram of Ogden's. After a final puff, he flicked the hashish and opium reefer into the fire before refilling his tumbler.

Such was the routine after he had performed his faithful duties to the Dark Lord. Tonight was no different from any other night -- except for that damn Slicing Hex. Snape unconsciously fingered his sealed, yet still tender, wound.

Snape recalled the night's events as the euphoria of the various nerve numbing substances surged through him.

Fucking hell, Macnair.

Macnair always grew angry when he was not the first to enjoy the night's entertainment. Like Snape, he hated his playthings used. And, like Snape, he made sure they looked very used by the time he'd finished with them.

Snape could hear the muffled echo of screams the moment he walked into Malfoy Manor. This was normal even on nights when Lucius did not host Death Eater socials. Upon entering the extravagant entrance hall, Snape noticed the he was one of the last to arrive by the number of cloaks on the rack.

The house-elf led him down the customary stairway to the dungeons below the ballroom.

The screams and laughter grew louder.

Snape sneered at the usual sight before him. Expensive armchairs and settees lined the grey stone walls of the large room. A bar counter, littered with booze and narcotics, ran along the wall directly in front of him, opposite the door. Various Chinese rugs blanketed the floor, thick and ready to absorb falling fluids.

"I see you finally made it, Severus."

Severus gracefully turned toward his fellow Death Eater and, once trusted, friend. "Of course. I would never refuse your invitation, Lucius."

Severus was surprised at how well Lucius looked. He would have expected a year in Azkaban to have wreaked havoc on the portentous wizard's good looks and haughty demeanor. Then again, Lucius had never had to experience the torment of the original guards.

The fair man eyed Snape before taking a step toward the other guests.

"I can only assume Dumbledore still has a tight leash on you, otherwise I would have expected you sooner. Your brothers grow impatient for the festivities."

Snape did not reply nor did his face betray any type of emotion. He just wanted Lucius to walk away. Upon the mention of festivities, Snape quickly took notice of the naked figures bound and gagged on the floor.

Five Muggles, distant family members of Muggle-borns in the wizarding community, all well under twenty years of age. Snape made eye contact with both boys and the three girls.

Let's get this over with, he thought.

Snape stalked around the room, making a mental note of its occupants as he attempted to be as conversational as possible. The Dark Lord almost never came to such required social events. He did not care to witness his followers enjoying themselves, since he did not care if they ever experienced any enjoyment in their lives. He only graced them with the honor of his presence when he wished it, and when it served him most.

As Snape leaned against the bar to pour himself a drink, he internally groaned when Macnair appeared by his side.

"Severus," he greeted.

"Walden."

"Nothing better than an old-fashioned celebration to welcome us back into the fold."

"No, indeed," Snape said blankly. He viciously eyed the pompous man through the bottom of his empty glass.

The burly figure turned against the bar to face the assembly. Macnair's dexterous hand rose to trail his thin mustache as he spoke importantly. "The black-eyed brunette has especially caught my fancy."

"Has she now?" Snape's eyebrow arched as he eyed the foul Ministry executioner. As much as he detested being here, Snape was not about to turn down a chance for amusement at the expense of others.

"Yes, I've been trying to spread my intentions around to our brothers. So, be sure to mention it if anyone asks of her."

A smirk graced Snape's mouth. "Of course, Macnair."

As Macnair blended into the crowd, Lucius returned to Snape's side. "I have learned that we are to thank your intelligence for locating the whereabouts of this Muggle filth. Finnigans and Abbotts, very good Severus."

Snape slightly raised his glass as he tipped his head. "As always, I live to please our brothers and to serve our Lord," he said arrogantly.

"Don't we all," Lucius drawled. He raised a finger to his lips before he continued. "As host, I believe I should give you first pick tonight to show you our... appreciation."

Severus eyes flashed with enthusiasm as he quickly decided who he would violate. Predictably, Lucius mistook his expression for pleasure at the thought of ravaging an unwilling body.

"We might as well start now. Take your pick."

Lucius loudly tapped his gaudy rings on his tumbler. Everyone in the room automatically turned their attention to the captives huddled on the floor.

Expectantly, the inner circle members approached the Muggles first. They were always first. A perk, if you will, for dedicated services to the Dark Lord.

Severus reached the eldest girl quickly, yanking her off the floor by firmly gripping the nape of her neck. He never enjoyed this but he did not hate such activities either. As always, he effectively and completely removed himself from his victims. His amusement was found elsewhere. He glanced at Macnair. His eyebrow rose in challenge when the man's striking face tightened with rage.

"Stay where you are, Walden. Severus is the reason we have such entertaining bodies tonight."

"I refuse to be made a fool of, Lucius," he spat.

Malfoy's eyes flared with indignation. "And I refuse to be insulted in my own house by my own guests. Stay in your seat and hold your tongue!"

Severus shot Macnair a self-satisfied glare as he flung the wailing girl onto the nearest settee, shoving her face down into the cushion. He pushed on her head firmly to prevent her upper body from rising off the cushion as he exposed himself.

While he thrust himself into her dry orifice, Severus closed his eyes, schooling his expression to appear satisfied.

In his mind he thought of absolutely nothing. Very easily.

He thrust quickly and mercilessly until blood lubricated her, finally causing ejaculation. Without a pause to catch his breath, Severus yanked the young woman's upper body off the settee and jabbed his wand under her left ear.

When he noticed Lucius raise his voyeur eyes away from the flailing young man beneath him, Severus dramatically smelled her hair as he murmured an incantation.

He effortlessly glided his wand beneath her pale throat in a smooth line to her right ear. Struggling, watery gurgles filled the room, mingling with the pants, cries and cheers of decadence. Severus looked once more at Macnair as thick, warm blood flowed across his hand and down his arm. He held her until she fell limp in his arms, her urine trailing down bruised thighs.

Snape grinned smugly, knowing Macnair would never touch her now.

Not one Death Eater batted an eye as Snape flung the young woman's lifeless body onto the Chinese rug. Afterwards, he stood up straight and readjusted his robes, noticing a new recruit quickly turn over the dead woman so she lay on her back.

"Now, now, Mr. Goyle. Try not to be rude." Silky tones traveled to Macnair's ears.

"I believe Walden wanted her next."

"Son of a Muggle-loving-whore!" Macnair lunged at Snape, grabbing him by the collar of his robes. Macnair's wand thrust into his ribs, eliciting a patronizing chuckle from Snape's mouth.

"Well into your cups, aren't we Macnair?" he mocked. "Such fervor over a Muggle tart."

"You forget your place in the circle, Severus," he rasped, spittle flying against Snape's face. Macnair roared out a Slicing Hex before Snape could find his bearings.

Severus momentarily cringed, his flesh ripping open straight to the bone. Snarling, Snape flung himself away from the wall as he skillfully pushed Macnair's wand away from his wound, his fingers locking around the executioner's strong wrist.

Snape yanked Macnair's wand arm before he could pull away, turning him as he braced his hand between Macnair's shoulder blades. Snape twisted his body in the opposite direction as he brutally pushed against the joint of Macnair's elbow from behind.

A loud scream filled the room after a sickening 'CRACK'.

Large, dilated black pupils stared at the hearth fire, not blinking and glazed.

Too stoned to walk to the tall storage cabinet, Snape gulped down another glass of Ogden's, hoping it would prevent his tremors and numb his mind to those dreams.

Snape knew he should not have assaulted Macnair in front of the other Death Eaters. They both may be in the inner circle, but Macnair still outranked him. His other 'superiors' predictably cast several bouts of the Cruciatus Curse for their amusement and his punishment.

Of course, even in torture, originality would escape such sheep.

But, it was all too tempting to take the opportunity to inflict entertaining torment on Macnair. As for the rest, Snape really did not give a shit.

He lazily closed his eyes as he raised a second spliff up to his lips.

His real problems began when Minerva found him staggering up the drive to number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

*What the bloody hell was she doing here anyway? Overbearing harpy could not wait to send her Patronus to Dumbledore!*He snorted.

Out of everything that had happened tonight, Snape despised seeing Albus and Minerva the most.

How he loathed their pity and concern. Not because he was too proud and he certainly did not possess any ridiculous sentimental notions of not deserving compassion. It was just completely and utterly misplaced.

A waste of time and effort.

For someone to pity him, they would have to live under the misconception that Snape inhabited an unwanted life heavy with self-loathing. Pity, compassion, sympathy; Snape sneered when such idiotic emotions were shown towards him.

No, he lived no life worth pity. He felt neither pleasure in doing good nor remorse when he acted atrociously.

Good... evil... like there is even a fucking difference anymore.

His head fell back against the plush cushion as his mind entered another intoxicated reminiscence. Snape vaguely remembered a time years ago when he actually felt eager to spy for Dumbledore; to prove to the Headmaster that he was no longer a loyal Death Eater and that he would no longer worship the Dark Lord.

The path to Hell is paved with good intentions.

To him, nothing had changed since the first fall of the Dark Lord, nor after his return. Not one damn thing. He still fucked the same at Malfoy Manor. He still hexed the same when he killed Muggles. He still crawled the same when he worshiped the Dark Lord.

The only difference this time was the repeated gratitude of Dumbledore; for dedicated, *good*, service to The Order of Phoenix.

For the past twenty years, Severus had joined in the merciless amusement of the Death Eaters as they tormented the wizarding and Muggle communities from behind the scenes. For the past twenty years he had done it for the good of the Order, effectively leaking information to both sides. And because of this, Severus had lost almost all of his ability to emotionally differentiate between right and wrong.

Now, whenever he made major decisions in his espionage work, his only sense of morale came in the mantra of "Would Dumbledore approve?"

"Your main priority is to maintain your status in the inner circle, Severus. The Order is nothing without your information."

Oh, how lovely.

Twenty years without a firm grasp on a clear conscience, twenty years of doing evil for the greater good had finally taken its toll on Severus.

Sympathy, pity and compassion were definitely useless emotions to feel for a man like him. A man who understood his own state of mind so well that he welcomed the apathy that had completely consumed him. In almost everything, dealing with the Order or the Dark Lord, relating to morality or evil, Severus truly did not give a shit.

Author's Notes: Special thanks to my talented beta, **melusin**.

Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book i. Line 165.

Next up: Information about Sirius' situation is revealed, and Hermione has another fit of night time wanderings.

Chapter Five - Awake, Arise, or Be Forever Fallen

Chapter 6 of 36

With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began. And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. Eventual SS/HG. Alternate Universe, HBP death disregarded.

Nominated for best fic in the 2007 OWL Awards: Fire & Ice Category (SS/HG), Romance Category, Angst Category, and A/U Category

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Note: I send my gratitude to my beta, **melusin**, for giving me so much help with this story.

Numerous candles flickered on the marble counter, dimly lighting the steamy bathroom. Hermione raised both hands out of the lavender scented water, her prune-like fingers reminding her that she had been soaking for well over an hour.

Normally, she would bathe or shower as quickly as possible since there was only one bathroom on this landing. But, it was very late, so there was no harm in indulging oneself. With a relaxed sigh, she sank further into the water, accidentally wetting her hair which was coiled low on the nape of her neck. A slight chill grazed her damp shoulders, causing Hermione to reach for her wand.

"Relashio!"

Goosepimples broke out over her body as she gasped. *Maybe, a little too hot*

She was trying to convince herself that she had purposely chosen to bathe this late so she wouldn't be disturbed, since most of the house was asleep. But, in reality, she knew that the later she stayed up, the greater her chances of catching Professor Snape when he returned in the dead of night.

It's the only way I'll be able to question him. He never makes himself available at a decent hour. It is essential that I obtain his advice before I go back to Hogwarts. Me... spying. She snorted.

She stopped her deliberations and frowned. *I suppose you could describe my actions last night as a form of intelligence gathering. I didn't get caught, after all*

Last night. Since the moment she had woken up, Hermione could not help but repeatedly go over everything she had witnessed in Professor Snape's room. Her mind was totally fascinated by the dauntingly mysterious figure.

In particular, Hermione was notably troubled by the magnitude of her concern over his Slicing Hex. The image of his blood splattered body was ingrained in her mind. She pictured it every time she closed her eyes.

I have always known how much he sacrifices for the Order, but seeing him that way... I suppose I took his position for granted. Oh, gods, what about my responsibilities? I haven't the faintest idea how I'm supposed to spot traitors among the student body! To what extent will I need to go to complete my mission?

*** *** ***

Hermione tugged her large night robe closer to her body as she entered the library. Warmth flooded her when she noticed that the fire was already lit. She scanned the room, hoping to see Professor Snape.

As she eyed the two occupants seated around the ancient writing desk, she hastily tried to shake her perplexing disappointment.

The two men took no notice of Hermione and continued their sombre conversation in hushed tones. Remus sat bent over on his stool, face resting in the palms of his hands. He shook his head vigorously at whatever Sirius was telling him. Hermione could barely make out a few phrases.

"He shouldn't have asked it of you."

"I volunteered," Remus replied quickly. Catching himself, he raised his head to look pointedly at his dearest friend. "I'm fine."

"Bullshit."

"They were much more... coherent this time. Better than I expected." Remus sighed. "Never mind, I think I just need some sleep and I'll feel better."

Hermione noted that he was clothed in his tattered traveling cloak. His worn boots were caked in mud.

"Scourgify!"

Tucking her wand back into her robe pocket, she smiled as the grubby footprints vanished from the stone floor. Both men turned anxious faces in her direction to see who had entered the library.

"Must you dirty the one room that is my refuge, Remus?" she teased.

Looking at her with affectionate eyes, Remus replied, "I apologize, Hermione."

"No harm done. I didn't mean to bother the two of you. Goodnight."

Remus quickly rose from his seat and walked to the door. "No, please don't leave. I was just about to go to bed myself. I wouldn't dream of preventing you from using the library of all places." In his effort to be light-hearted, his sad smile was fairly obvious. "Besides, someone needs to take full advantage of this part of the house." He turned to Sirius. "We both know its owner never does."

"Ha, ha..." Sirius sulked as his two friends laughed at his expense.

"Goodnight, Hermione, Sirius."

Once the door closed behind him, Hermione turned to Sirius. "I really don't mind leaving if I am interrupting you."

"Don't be silly, Hermione, your presence is never an interruption." He smiled as he moved from the writing desk to the settee. "It's well after midnight. What are you doing up so late?"

Knowing the history between him and Professor Snape, Hermione knew it was not prudent to be entirely honest.

"Oh, you know..."

"Studying?" he interrupted her, a playful grin crossing his lips.

Nervously tucking a damp curl behind her ear, she nodded and picked up her pile of books, which were stacked on the end table. She settled herself on the other end of the settee, crossing her legs and opening a Potions book on her lap.

Sirius, on the other hand, had no books or writing material whatsoever. Ever the hot-blooded Gryffindor, he made no attempt to hide how intently he was gazing at her.

Hermione's eyes continued to roam over her textbook. "Don't you know it's not polite to stare?" she cheekily repeated his very own words.

Chastised, he cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Yes."

"Really, Sirius, how are you?"

He could have answered casually. He could have said "fine" or "tired" or something equally trite. But, by the sincere look in her eyes and the crease between her brow, Sirius felt compelled to answer her truthfully. Much to his dismay, the same question was being constantly asked of him since his... return. He had never given a sincere answer.

Sirius shifted hesitantly as he thought of something appropriate to say.

"I'm being intrusive. You don't have to answer that."

"No, no," he looked straight into her eyes and took a breath. "I'm not ready to go into much detail, Hermione, but I think I am ready to discuss it briefly with someone." He paused, then said sincerely, "With you."

An uncomfortable flush covered her throat. "You know I'm here for you. So, really, how have you been these past, what, five months?" It suddenly dawned on her. "My goodness, you mean to tell me you've been... back, for almost half a year and you have never talked to anyone about this?"

He turned away from her to distract himself with the fire. "I suppose not."

"Surely Professor Dumbledore would not have let so much time pass without demanding to know every detail?"

He chuckled indignantly at the mention of the Headmaster. "Come now, Hermione, do you really think that Dumbledore's knowledge of my situation was dependant on my narrative alone?"

Oh, right. This is the almighty, all-knowing Dumbledore we are discussing she thought. "No, you're right."

She hoped he was not trying to change the subject or weasel his way out of telling her something about the veil. She adjusted herself on the settee, turning her body to face him as she tucked her bare feet under her night robe, making it obvious she was waiting for him to speak.

Maybe this was a bad idea, Sirius thought. He raised a hand to his face, stroking his fingers through his bearded chin. His resolve finally returned when he turned to look at her. Her eyes captivated him, calling up some of the most simple human emotions he thought he had lost forever.

"To answer your original question, my current state of being could be summed up as... surviving."

Hermione's eyebrows shot up in surprise; her mouth opened in readiness for a multitude of questions.

"No, please, Hermione. No more interrogations. Surviving is an adequate term and you are free to assume anything it implies. Merlin knows it's all true," he sighed. "And, please don't mention any of this to Harry."

"He's worried about you," Hermione countered.

"Exactly, and I have no comforting truths to tell him."

An immense feeling of sympathy swamped Hermione as she watched Sirius' face fall. She wanted to help him somehow, but she needed to know the problem first. After this little conversation, she had more questions about the veil than ever.

"That's enough of that. How are you this evening, Hermione? Or should I say this morning. I hope this hasn't become a recent habit?"

"All summer actually. I sleep when I sleep, I suppose."

"That won't do at all," he frowned. "As host, I demand that you go to bed at once and catch up on your beauty sleep." Grinning devilishly, his eyes raked over her. "Not that you need it, of course."

Hermione fiddled with the pages of her textbook, nodding her head to accept his compliment.

Hermione was not completely oblivious to Sirius' charming nature. He always playfully complimented his female companions. Ginny was regularly admired by him for her extensive knowledge of jinxes, for example. He also consistently complemented Mrs. Weasley's cooking and proclaimed his want of a dotting wife such as her. And, ever since her third year, Hermione loved to hear him habitually revel in the extent of her intellect. He truly believed her vast knowledge of magic outshone any pureblood alive today.

However, since his return, Sirius' compliments to Hermione had become more frequent and no longer concerned her intelligence or her mind; and it was painfully obvious to her too.

He noticed her uneasiness. "So, are you excited about being Head Girl?"

Her face quickly showed her dismay at Sirius' question. *Am I excited? No, not really. I was determined to hand Professor Dumbledore my badge so I could focus more of my energies for the Order. Now, my one chance to do something significant is in the very position I do not want. I'm definitely not excited, but I am eager to help the Headmaster.*

"Hermione? Are you all right?"

Her head snapped back to attention. "Hmm? Oh, yes, of course I'm excited."

"Don't fret over it to much, love. Dumbledore hasn't even given you any details or directions yet." He smiled warmly at her. "Knowing you, I'm sure you are dissecting this from every angle already."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," she laughed.

"Well, I'm off to bed." Sirius casually rose from the settee to stand by her side. "Try not to stay up too late." Without hesitation, he gently grasped Hermione's hand.

Hermione swallowed thickly as his lips brushed her knuckles.

"Night, Sirius."

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A couple of days later, Hermione found herself seated against the settee, yet again, as she frantically tried to concentrate on her studying. Her Potions book seemed to be the only one she was able to focus on, unlike the Arithmancy text on her lap.

She was starting to get angry, now, by how often her emotions could so easily distract her at times like this. This was not like her. Hermione was studious, precise, always in control. Nothing had ever been able to lessen her control.

She was dismayed by how much she had been thinking about Professor Snape and Sirius Black for the last hour. Hermione may not have been very experienced in the ways of love, but she was not stupid. She knew Sirius was showing more than his typical friendly behavior towards her, but she did not know exactly how she felt about that.

Hermione did have to admit that she was more than flattered that Sirius would show such attentions to her. He acted so very sweet and polite all the time. His controlled flirtations reminded her very much of Viktor.

"But, that didn't end too well." Frankly, Sirius did not light the flame that seemed to spark in her from time to time.

SLAM!

Hermione flinched for the second time at the sound of the front door closing. She waited patiently for the screaming to begin.

But it never came.

She quickly cracked open the library door and was shocked to see Madam Black's portrait curtains still closed. From the corner of her eye, she noticed the tail of some familiar black robes ascend the stairs and out of her view.

Hermione's heart raced rapidly as she flung the library door open. *Follow him*, she told herself. *Follow him!*

He's going to his bedroom. This isn't right.

Another voice popped into her head. *That didn't stop you the other night, though, did it?*

Regardless of what she was thinking, Hermione's traitorous body slowly ascended the stairs leading to the second-floor landing.

She hesitated when she reached the last step.

The granite floor sent a piercing chill through her bare feet. Not a single candle was lit along the dark corridor. She was tempted to draw her wand to light her way, but she did not want to attract unwanted attention to herself.

Hermione dragged her fingertips along the chipped paint of the wall to guide her way down to his room. She tried to be as quiet as possible, but her breaths came out clipped and anxious.

She stopped before she turned the corner at the end of the corridor. Only Snape's room lay around the bend.

She tightened her night robe closer to her body as the chill intensified. Fires were not lit very often on this floor of the house.

Hermione slowly closed and opened her eyes as she attempted to summon up the final nerve. Exhaling a panicked breath, she finally turned down the second corridor.

Her heart jumped into her throat as a strong, cold hand closed tightly around her neck. She was barely able to make more than a terrified squeak due to the lack of air in her lungs. She felt the tip of a wand point at her chest as she was fiercely thrust against the stone wall.

"What the hell are you doing up here?" an angry voice hissed next to her ear.

Hermione attempted to swallow a few times before she tried to speak. She could feel the muscles in her neck ripple against his hand.

Finally, Snape slightly lessened his grip, allowing her to talk.

"I'm... I'm sorry." Her senses were overwhelmed; she could not bring herself to raise her head higher than the view of his collar. He smelled of smoky burnt wood, dry soap and sweat. From the rise and fall of his chest, she detected that his breathing was quick, yet steady. Very much like the other night in his room...

Removing his wand from her chest, she felt him place the tip firmly under her chin. If he hexed her, she did not want to think of where it would cause the most damage.

Ever so slowly, he lifted her head with his wand, guiding her to look at him.

Hermione internally gasped as she stared into two incisive black eyes. She had never looked at him so intently before, nor been so close.

"Why were you following me? Do not make me repeat myself, Miss Granger. "

Standing so close, she could feel his low, furious voice deeply resonate through every bone in her body. She was terrified.

"I wanted to talk to you... sir," she breathed.

He raised an eyebrow in irritation. "Do you have any idea what time it is? I find it extremely hard to believe that you followed me to my bedroom in the hopes of striking up a friendly conversation," he sneered.

"You're never here earlier than this. I've been wanting to talk to you all week..." She stopped speaking when his eyes suddenly narrowed. She wondered if perhaps she had revealed a bit more information than she should have.

"Now, why would you do something like that?" he hissed through clenched teeth. The question sounded more like a threat as he tightened his grip on her throat once more. Snape inched his face closer with every sneered word.

His breath felt hot, burning her chilled face. It smelled of dry wine.

"Professor Dumbledore's assignment for me." She noticed his eyebrow rise again.

"I haven't a clue as to what I am supposed to do." There she had said it; maybe not as eloquently as she had wanted, but well enough under the current conditions. She was dismayed at her erratic breathing while she waited for him to say something. She could feel her chest heaving against his forearm with each intake of air.

"I fail to see how this should concern me," he drawled.

"I thought that maybe... because of your position in the Order... you could..." Hermione sounded like she had in the kitchen a week ago and she loathed herself for it.

Suddenly, he moved his firm grasp from her throat to her chin. "This is not amusing me, Miss Granger. Speak clearly before my patience runs out and I throw you down the stairs." Annoyance dripped from every word.

She unconsciously raised both of her hands to the one on her chin. Firmly placing her palms around his wrist, she said, "Dumbledore wants me to spy on the students and I am clueless about where to begin. I thought that, perhaps, I could benefit from your tutelage." The words quickly spilled out her mouth.

He raised an eyebrow mockingly as the corner of his lip twitched. "What on earth gave you the impression that I would care?"

Hermione opened her mouth to reply.

"No, I do not want to hear it. I DO NOT have any desire to baby-sit you, Miss Granger. I heard your obnoxiously loud breathing and thunderous footsteps from the first-floor landing. Whatever possessed the Headmaster to give such an assignment to a raucous Gryffindor like you is far beyond my comprehension. Do not waste my time again."

To add insult to injury, the large hand under her chin applied a strong shove toward the first corridor, signalling her dismissal.

Hermione watched him walk to his bedroom at the end of the corridor. She stood in the same place against the wall, dumbfounded as his words sunk in. Snape slamming the door closed behind him, with no thought of sending her a backward glance, finally caused tears to trail down her face.

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"So, what do you lot want to do today?" asked Harry as he spread more marmalade on his toast.

"We could go out into the garden and play Quidditch," suggested Ron.

"Ugh, Quidditch!"

"Aw, come on, Hermione, just this once," Ron pleaded as he mockingly batted his eyelids.

"No, Ron. I can't believe you are thick enough to even ask," she said icily.

"Ignore her, she's been in a snit all morning," laughed Ginny.

"I can tell," mumbled Ron.

"And, for Merlin's sake, swallow THEN talk, Ronald! I'm sick of nagging you."

"Oh, really? Not as sick as I am, believe me."

"Calm down, now," said Mrs. Weasley, placing a jug of milk on the table. "I want all of you to stay out of the kitchen this afternoon while I get it ready for the Order meeting tonight."

Forks dropped all across the table, initiating a series of clangs.

"There's a meeting tonight?" gasped Harry. "Why wasn't I told?"

"Calm down, dear, you are being told now, aren't you?"

"My gods, something's happened. What's happened Mrs. Weasley? Who's been attacked?"

Mrs. Weasley sat down gently next to Hermione, attempting to offer the motherly comfort that came naturally to her. "It's nothing like that, dear. School starts on Monday, and Dumbledore just wants to check in with everyone beforehand."

"Oh, thank goodness," Hermione breathed. Another question crossed her mind as she hesitantly poked her eggs with her fork. "Will Professor Snape be here?" she asked.

"Greasy git."

"Ron!"

"Sorry, Mum," he mumbled.

"You know, I'm getting really fed up with you children showing such disrespect towards one of your Professors. I'm sure you wouldn't appreciate it if the Slytherin students said similar things about Professor McGonagall."

"We get it, Mum. We know he's in the Order and all that, but that doesn't change the fact that he treats us horribly."

"You know he has to for..."

"Bollocks!" shouted Harry. He was about to continue with his outburst before he realized who he was talking to.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Weasley," he said, eyes downcast. "Look," Harry continued after a second thought, "you've seen how he acts outside Hogwarts. There's no reason for him to be nasty to us here if his audience isn't around. He's a git because he likes being a git. And, if he doesn't stop goading Sirius, then I swear I will hex him myself!" With Mrs. Weasley in the room, the nasty tirade spilled out of Harry's mouth as calmly as he was able to before he slowly pushed himself away from the table.

"Harry!" Hermione called as he reached the door.

"Just leave it, Hermione," he said in exasperation before finally exiting.

"Why did you bring up the great bat anyway?" moaned Ron.

Mrs. Weasley quickly rose from her seat to leave the kitchen. She did not see the point of disciplining their behavior if they were not even going to be polite for her sake.

"I hope you're not attempting to blame Harry's immature outburst on me?" Hermione hissed.

"You know how he gets. Maybe, if you stopped sticking up for the bastard all the bloody time--"

"Sticking up for him and remaining silent when you two insult him are two very different things, Ron. I wouldn't expect you to have noticed, but I haven't even bothered to ask you lot to give him the minimal amount of respect he deserves in ages. If the both of you are too dim to heed my advice, then I won't waste my time. In the same respect, since I don't expect you two to become friendly with Professor Snape anytime soon, I would appreciate it if you stopped trying to convince me to agree with your assessment of him. Obviously, my insulting him is not going to happen anytime soon either!"

During her outburst, Ron's face had gone from a shade of pink to scarlet red. He quickly stood up from his seat and leaned over the table towards her.

Ginny swiftly placed a firm grasp on his arm. "Calm down, Ron."

He angrily turned to his sister. "ME calm down? Did you hear what she said? She's mental to be sticking up for the greasy bastard!"

Hermione rolled her eyes as she pushed back her chair from the table. "Ugh, don't bother, Ginny. He obviously didn't hear a word I said."

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"I cannot wait for the first day of class!" exclaimed Hermione as she threw herself on her duvet. Even as she tried to relax, she could not stop the anxious shaking of her

left foot which was hanging off the corner of her bed. She needed to get out of this house.

"I can wait. I'm not looking forward to the larger workload very much," sighed Ginny, as she lazily sprawled herself on the dusty window seat.

"It's your sixth year, Ginny! You've passed your OWLs, and your NEWTs are pretty far off. Enjoy the lack of stress while you can."

"I'm sorry," she laughed. "That's not very reassuring coming from you." Ginny leaned further into the window seat, pulling her knees against her chest. Attempting to settle herself, she was distracted by a rustling under the cushion behind her back.

"Hermione, what is this?" she asked, pulling rolls of crumpled parchment from the cushion.

"Oh!" Hermione bolted from the bed and snatched the parchment from her fingers.

She flushed when the redhead's eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"It's just a few letters I've written to my parents."

"A few?" she snorted. "I thought Professor Dumbledore said you couldn't..."

"Obviously, I haven't *Owled* any of them," Hermione snapped, crossing her arms.

Ginny turned her head away, getting up to walk to her four-poster.

What am I doing? "I'm sorry, Ginny. I didn't mean to snap at you." Hermione immediately took the seat vacated by Ginny and slid her hands through the hair at her temples.

"I've been a right hag all day today. I don't know what's got into me lately." Hermione closed her eyes as she pulled at the hair in her fingers. Pain seemed to make the fuzziness behind her eyebrows go away.

"I've noticed," Ginny said blankly, crossing her arms.

Hermione's head quickly rose up to eye the younger girl. Both stared at each other waiting for the other to back down first. Try as they might, neither could stop the smiles that slowly appeared on their faces.

"Don't fret, Hermione. The boys will calm down eventually and understand that you're just worried about your parents."

"Hmm... yes, of course." *How horrid am I? I have not thought of my family all week! I even left my stack of letters there. But, I can't very well tell Ginny the reason for my current temper.* Hermione forced herself to snap out of her selfish musings.

"Look at me, sitting here and worrying only about myself. How are you doing, Ginny?"

Gathering her hair up to pull it into a high ponytail, Ginny shrugged her shoulders dismissively.

"I've noticed that you've stopped ignoring Harry," Hermione continued sympathetically.

"Our rooms are down the hall from each other. We sit at the same table three times a day." Ginny's voice hitched uncontrollably. She coughed, clearing her throat before she continued. "It was just too hard," she said quietly.

"Things will improve," Hermione reassured her.

Seeing Ginny still obviously distraught over her break from Harry shamed Hermione. She'd been so self-absorbed in her own affairs all week; even more so this morning.

Since she had run down the stairs late the previous evening, face wet with humiliation, Hermione could not stop thinking about her Professor. She especially could not stop thinking about his angry words.

She already had far too many reservations of her own when it came to being Dumbledore's eyes and ears within the student population, but to hear Snape, a Hogwarts' Professor and spy for the Headmaster himself dismiss her talents, or lack thereof, was a punch in the gut. His words had hurt her more than his painful grip on her throat or the fact that he had actually pulled his wand on her. When it came to obtaining his acceptance and praise, she hardly ever took offence at his violent attitude towards her.

Hermione figured that as a spy, he had to be exceptionally powerful and menacing. As perverse as it sounded, she almost felt it a privilege for him to show that side of his character to her. He was intense... Terrifying... He made her breath hitch in her throat.

Seeing that quality of Snape's character, his true nature, scared her immensely. But, try as hard as she might, she could not shake the desire to see him like that again.

Ron's right. I am mad

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Tall, chapel sized windows lined the master bedroom on the second-floor landing. The curtains seemed almost petrified, evidence of the lack of air flowing through the room. The midmorning sun illuminated the deteriorating furniture that was haphazardly scattered around the massive four-poster bed.

A jug of contaminated juice sat on the end table beside a dirty glass.

Sirius slept fitfully.

He knew he was asleep. He could tell by the lack of movement of his limbs in his hazed mind. He convinced himself that his eyes were half-open, when in fact his sleep induced brain had perfectly imagined the interior of his bedroom. Anxiously, Sirius tried to kick his legs to make his body rouse out of slumber.

A periodic ticking suddenly caused his left ear to strain. Sirius' body froze as his thoughts concentrated on the rhythmic beat.

These were the worst kind of nightmares. The mind is never meant to be fully conscious while the body sleeps. Such things occasionally happen to normal individuals, but it had not happened to Sirius all year. He had never allowed himself to fall into sleep this deeply. It was too dangerous.

He had slept deeply last night.

Sirius could feel his heart pounding in his ears as an immense terror dulled his thinking. The ticking was getting louder in his mind. He closed his eyes in pain as his heart continued its speedy, irregular beating. A mysterious invisible weight crushed the air from his lungs, preventing his body from drawing oxygen.

For the love of Merlin, I need to wake up. Please, gods, make me wake up!

In his mind, he willed his limbs to flail and thrash against the bed, but his body barely twitched.

To his horror, as the painful weight intensified all around his body, he could hear the ticking slow down, ticking irregularly. He could feel the beating of his heart slowing down, beating irregularly.

Dripping in sweat, Sirius' body finally coordinated with his mind as he sat upright with a petrified wail. He flung his body to the left, knocking the sticky juice all over his legs and the floor.

His shaking fingers desperately grabbed the black pocket-watch from its perch on the end table. Once it was steady in his fingers, Sirius wrenched the latch open, noticing that the ticking continued to slow down as the face-plate began to glow red.

Sirius' breathing heaved while he attempted to wind the pocket-watch. The muscles in his forearms ached with each movement of his fingers. He concentrated on not passing out until the pocket watch was wound twelve times -- one turn for each hour.

The shiny, black metal timepiece began to tick rapidly once more, as the face plate returned to white.

Gasping hysterically, Sirius hurled his fatigued body back against his bed, while his hands cradled the skin directly above his heart.

He concentrated on the steady ticking by his pillow as he willed his emotions to calm down. He could feel his eyes closing involuntarily as he focused on the steady beating below his palm. Sirius did not need sleep, he had had more than enough in his opinion, but his body was no longer under his control as all his limbs sagged unresponsively against the bed. Sirius just could not handle the mental and physical trauma of keeping himself alive. His body slipped into unconsciousness to heal itself.

Author's Notes: Story beta'ed by the brilliant **melusin**.

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's **Paradise Lost**, Book i. Line 330.

-Free pack of Cockroach Clusters for anyone who can guess where I received the inspiration for this last scene.

Next up: Dumbledore catches up with the Order before the first day of school approaches, and shocks all by giving Sirius his own assignment. Hermione still doesn't learn, and Snape has finally lost patience with her. Harry reveals what he has been doing over the summer, leading to a very awful night.

Chapter Six - Before Mine Eyes in Opposition Sits

Chapter 7 of 36

With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began. And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. Eventual SS/HG. Alternate Universe, HBP death disregarded.

Nominated for best fic in the 2007 OWL Awards: Fire & Ice Category (SS/HG), Romance Category, Angst Category, and A/U Category

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: I send all of my gratitude to my dedicated beta, **melusin**

The steamy aroma of Shepherd's Pie hung in the air as all the Order members marched into the stuffy kitchen. Instead of seizing her favorite chair by the dwindling fire, Hermione decided to sit by Harry and Ron at the dinner table. Each of them had arrived downstairs early for dinner, hoping to catch the other two before the meeting began.

After their row during breakfast, the trio had spent the day ignoring each other as much as possible. But, one whole day was more than enough for the three best friends. In years past, they had each possessed the potential to go days, weeks even, sustaining a grudge for the sake of pride. But now, during times like these... everything was different. One day was long enough.

All three smiled as a pink-haired woman flew through the kitchen door, stumbling to prevent herself from falling on the stone floor. Ron quickly leaned back, stretching his arm out to catch her.

"Watcher, Ron," Tonks smiled as she straightened herself up.

"Tripped over the rug again, eh?" He laughed.

"Horrible place to put one, I always said."

Tonks casually took a seat between Ron and Hermione instead of Moody and Shacklebolt since she was able to effortlessly enter into relaxed conversation with them. While Tonks was engaged animatedly talking to Ginny, Hermione smirked, noticing Ron repeatedly cast longing gazes at the female Auror. Hermione attempted to focus on their conversation to distract herself from a separate pair of thoughtful eyes directly across from her.

"You should speak to Dumbledore tonight, Hermione," said Sirius from across the table. "I know he said he would give you the details of his mission when you arrived at Hogwarts on Monday, but you are obviously stressed over this."

"Yes, I suppose you are right."

She really did not want to think about this at the moment. Thinking of her mission made Hermione think of spying. And spying made her think of Professor Snape.

"Sirius, can I ask you something?"

When his head tilted to the side to signal his complete attention, Hermione continued. "I'm worried about Remus. He hasn't been looking too good lately, and the next full moon is still two weeks off."

Both turned their attention to the kind werewolf leaning against the rough kitchen wall. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were taking turns, attempting to draw him into their

conversation, but Remus merely smiled stiffly before returning his stony gaze to the floor. His complexion was far more pasty than usual, and fresh scars were etched on his face and hands. He almost never attended breakfast anymore, owing to the need for sleep in the morning since he retired so late each night.

"He's... uh... doing okay," Sirius dejectedly answered.

"Can I ask what he is doing when--?"

"No, Hermione," he interrupted, whipping his head around to look sternly at her. "And, please, don't ask him either."

"Um, all right." Now Hermione had something else to add to her growing pile of potential research.

Sirius quickly attempted to change the subject. "Why in Merlin's name is Dumbledore always the last one to arrive?" Sirius sighed. He fiddled with the food on his plate while tapping his foot impatiently against the floor.

"What's wrong?" asked Harry.

"Hmm? Oh, you'll see. Dumbledore, in his infinite wisdom," Sirius mocked, "has given me a rather far fetched assignment as well--"

"This doesn't sound too good."

"Don't interrupt, Harry."

Harry briefly scowled at Hermione's instinctual reprimand.

"It's nothing dangerous, Harry. But, just wait. I know it's one of the topics that will be covered tonight."

At that moment, in a flurry of violet robes, Dumbledore swiftly entered the kitchen. He smiled at the assembly before heading straight for the plush armchair by the fire. He began the meeting promptly instead of trying to enter into light conversation with those seated closest to him. The wise old man appeared very much as he had two weeks ago: incredibly exhausted, shoulders hunched with age.

Hermione tried to pay attention to what the Headmaster was saying, but she could not peel her eyes away from the kitchen door. At the previous meeting, Snape had entered immediately behind Dumbledore. She assumed that they had left Hogwarts and traveled together.

"... has been making much headway with the other werewolves." Hermione's eyebrows disappeared behind her short curl, her head snapping towards the Headmaster.

"I just do what I can, Albus," sighed Remus.

She frowned when Dumbledore began discussing the intelligence obtained from within the Ministry of Magic. She had hoped she would get more information about Remus and his dealings with the other werewolves. Hermione stared at him as her mind refused to grasp the details of the new topic the Headmaster was discussing with the Aurors. But, Hermione's worrisome gaze wasn't the only one transfixed on Lupin.

Tonks was staring at him so intently, as if she wished he would look up and meet her eyes.

Hermione's eyes traveled back and forth around the room, taking in the faces of each of her Order companions. A heart-skipping pressure clenched painfully on her gut. Everyone appeared to be so miserable, as if at any moment with the bringing of bad news, all hope would be lost. Hermione could not help but think that the war with Voldemort and his Death Eaters was not looking very hopeful.

Even if we could say we were winning, must it always be at our expense? At what point does a noble sacrifice turn into a suffocating obligation?

Hermione suddenly stiffened. Out of the corner of her eye, she spied the billow of black robes whipping around the kitchen counter. Hers was the only head that turned to glance at the shadowy man as he positioned himself against the wall in the corner furthest from the doors leading to the entrance hall. That is not to say that no one noticed the dark man as he entered the kitchen, just that nobody cared.

Hermione tried to turn her head away from him to face Dumbledore, but her curious light brown eyes stayed firmly glued to his form. Professor Snape was not sitting down this evening nor was he attempting to drink. His sinewy figure tilted back against the kitchen wall, arms crossed. He leaned his head forward to make his long hair cascade over his eyes.

Knowingly, Snape slowly lifted his eyes from the floor to meet Hermione's stare just as Professor Dumbledore requested her attention.

"Yes, Headmaster?"

"Have you changed your mind since the last meeting, my dear?"

"Of course not, Professor." She hesitated a moment, thinking if she should bring this question up now or privately at the end of the meeting.

Now. She wanted Professor Snape to hear.

"Although," Hermione continued, "I must admit that I am a bit apprehensive about what is expected of me. I will do as you ask to the best of my abilities, but I must confess that cunning and stealth are not two of my strongest attributes."

A knowing snort came from the kitchen corner. Her temper flared.

Dumbledore smiled warmly at her while a humming chuckle shook in his throat. "Perhaps, my dear, perhaps. But I think we can safely say that you are especially gifted in cleverness, and that, along with my faith in your incredible magical abilities, would most definitely make up the difference."

"Thank you, Professor."

"As I said before, we will discuss the finer details once you arrive at Hogwarts, but I need to go over a few basics first." Dumbledore smiled as Hermione sat straighter in her seat. By the twitch in her fingers, he could tell she was itching for a quill and some parchment.

"First and foremost, you are not to speak of this to any other student. This is information strictly for Order members. And also, your main purpose is to observe, and to observe only. No matter how much you may suspect someone of being a potential follower of Voldemort, you are NOT to attempt to gain their confidence. Is that clear?"

Her brow furrowed as she made an effort to quickly analyze all this information. Yes, she was relieved that she did not have to go making friends with the likes of Malfoy, but it seemed almost too easy. This was not the secretive, tough mission she assumed it would be.

It was not enough.

The soft hair on the nape of her neck tingled when she noticed that all eyes were on her. But, being the center of attention in a sea of people never bothered Hermione. In fact, she relished such attention at the times when she thought she was performing at her best. But, if everyone was staring at her expectantly, waiting for her answer, then so was *he*.

She attempted to nonchalantly look about the room into everyone's faces, but her gaze did not stop roaming until her vision latched onto a pair of piercing black eyes.

She quickly turned back to Dumbledore.

"I'm sorry, Professor, but I assumed... no... I had hoped that I could be of more use to you. Surely, I would obtain more information for the Order if I could speak personally to suspected followers of Voldemort."

"Are you mental, Hermione? Of course that isn't a good idea!"

"I was talking to Professor Dumbledore, Ron..."

"Although I would not use Mr. Weasley's exact sentiments," Dumbledore interrupted, "I agree that it is not a good idea. This is not up for discussion, Miss Granger. It was an order."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, onto something a bit more light-hearted. We are, once again, in need of a new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, for while Severus performed outstandingly last year, I am afraid he will be far too busy to continue."

"What?" Harry questioned triumphantly.

Hermione's annoyance and irritation went beyond her own comprehension at that moment. Her only reaction to Harry's interruption was a deep groan as she raised her hands to massage her temples.

"Do not worry, Harry. You will still have an equally fascinating substitute for a professor." All heads in the room, save Snape's, quickly followed the Headmaster's line of vision and looked pointedly at Harry's godfather. No one took any notice of the hollow stare Dumbledore exchanged with Sirius.

"It would be prudent if you addressed your godfather as Professor Black among the student body, so I dare say you should start practicing now."

"Brilliant!" shouted Ron.

"Very *brilliant*, indeed," sneered a deep voice from the kitchen corner. "The parents of Hogwarts' students will be ecstatic to have an Azkaban escapee as a professor against the Dark Arts, I'm sure."

Hermione's body quickly tensed as she waited for the expected argument to ensue.

Sirius' chair loudly scrapped against the stone floor as he turned to face Snape.

"Is that so? Some might find *apardoned* Azkaban escapee preferable to a murderous Death Eater," he chided.

"Sirius!" Dumbledore was not in the mood for this tonight. He sighed as the angry men rounded on each other, clearly ignoring him, both with their right hands hidden in their robe pockets.

A vicious smirk danced around the edges of Snape's lips. Even though both men seemed poised, ready to attack one another, Hermione instantly caught sight of a destructive flicker in Snape's eye, filled with anticipation of catching possible prey; a determination which was notably absent in the eyes of Harry's godfather.

"Now that I think about it, maybe the Headmaster did make the right decision," Snape drawled. "After all, we cannot have you moping about this house with too much... *time*... on your hands, now, can we?" He quirked an eyebrow.

Sirius quickly froze, the blood draining from his face. He turned accusing eyes towards the old man seated so omnisciently by the kitchen fire. For a second he hopefully thought to see Dumbledore's expression filled with regret, but the old wizard's face only showed knowing determination.

Sirius suddenly became aware of all the confused faces gaping at him. Questioning him. Expecting a performance from him. *Fuck them*. He could hurl insults and hex Snape whenever he pleased, he didn't need to do it for them.

He needed to get out of the kitchen.

Hermione watched the kitchen door swing on its hinges behind Sirius. An uncomfortable silence filled the room as Sirius pounded up the stairs toward the entrance hall, slamming the front door upon his exit.

She felt sorry for Sirius. It seemed like Snape's nasty criticisms of his uselessness to the Order still got to him.

Noticing Harry turn furious eyes toward Severus, Dumbledore loudly cleared his throat to gain everyone's attention.

"I believe that all the crucial information was covered tonight. Meeting dismissed. I bid you all a night of restful slumber."

Extremely reminiscent of the last meeting, Hermione sorrowfully watched Harry thunder his way through the kitchen door with an apprehensive Ron and Ginny trailing him.

Rising from her seat to clear the dirty plates and cups from the dinner table, Hermione barely noticed those leaving. Expectantly, Molly materialized at her side to shoo her away from tidying up, but was quickly distracted as she followed her sons to the entrance hall.

Hermione deposited the grimy plates in the rusted sink where a bewitched scrubbing brush waited to clean them. With a tired sigh, she brought both hands up to her temples, slowly rubbing in circular motions. She hadn't noticed until now how insistent her headache was. It had slowly grown worse throughout the meeting, and now it was horrendous. The pounding felt like someone was constantly snapping rubber bands against the inside of her skull. Not to mention that unrelenting fuzziness that had returned with a vengeance right behind her brow.

Eyes closed, Hermione lazily turned around to lean her back against the sink. She concentrated on the brisk crackle of the hearth fire, relishing her solitude in the expansive kitchen.

Hearing a rustle of fabric in front of her, Hermione snapped her head up, opening her eyes. She gasped at the sight of her Potions master looming directly in front of her before painfully closing her eyes again at the sudden movement.

She scowled as an amused chuckle filled her ears. Hermione was not in the mood to be laughed at. Nor did she feel like being reprimanded for last night. In her opinion, he had punished her enough.

Hermione was just about to rudely demand what he wanted when she spied his hand reaching into his robes. Her body pressed harder into the granite counter top for very justifiable reasons. Hermione fully expected him to pull his wand out on her.

Snape leaned back languorously against the other kitchen counter directly across from her and gracefully held out a small glass vial towards her.

She merely gaped at him, thoroughly shocked.

Raising an eyebrow in irritation he said, "Come now, Miss Granger. If I wanted to poison you, I would slip the toxicant into your morning tea instead of giving you the option to drink it... or not."

Hermione hesitantly reached out to take the vial from his hands. She almost drew back as the tip of her finger lightly grazed his wrist.

Quickly pulling the cork out of the vial, she brought it up to her nose.

With a smirk dancing on the edges of his lips, Snape watched her visibly sigh in relief as she swallowed every drop.

Instantly, her headache disappeared.

"Thank you, Professor."

His only response was a mere nod as he turned to stalk out of the kitchen.

Hermione was about to call after him, but stopped herself when she realized she couldn't think of a word to say.

*** ** *

A neat pile of ignored school books rested on the floor against the library settee. Hermione glanced at them as she paced back and forth across the hearth rug, nibbling the back of her index finger. She had completely lost track of time, not knowing how long she had paced the library, deliberating over the decision she had made.

The minute Snape had walked out of the kitchen, Hermione had stood against the kitchen sink for a bit as her mind contemplated an outrageous idea. Even now, in the middle of the night, she still thought it mad, although she had had hours to change her mind.

She was going to follow her Professor again.

At first, Hermione had been incredibly embarrassed that Professor Snape had scoffed at her attempt at furtiveness. He had mocked her assignment and thrown her ignorance in her face. It had been humiliating.

But now, after having had all day to think about it, and after the Order meeting, tenacity began to fester within Hermione.

I wasn't caught the first night. I followed all three of them and watched them for at least fifteen minutes. They didn't even hear me leave. I couldn't be that horribly loud.

She was angry. And, that anger fuelled her determination to prove something to herself and to Professor Snape. The more she contemplated, the more she believed she could actually pull off not being caught stalking around Hogwarts in the middle of the night. After all, she'd been doing it for years already; and she had yet to get caught by Professor Snape at school.

The headache potion gradually wore off as she sat anxiously on the settee. In an effort to appease her growing tension, Hermione gathered her school books off the end table and placed a few in her lap. Opening her History of Magic book to chapter seven, she continued where she had left off in the morning.

"... tired of the preachings of Bernard of Clairvaux, Sir Horatius Balder fled the legion in 1150 to pursue his own desires. In a rebellion against the beliefs of his brothers in The Knights Templar, Sir Horatius became known as one of the first supporters of Radical Dualism, a sect of Gnosticism that he combined with the ancient magic found in The Gospel of Matthias..."

Hermione stopped reading. She thought she heard a noise in the entrance hall; her ears strained to listen.

It's probably Ron coming down to nick something from the kitchen.

She could not fully convince herself, however, so she rose from her seat to take a look. Earlier in the evening Hermione knew that she would be attempting to peak through the library door sometime during the night. So, upon entering a few hours ago, she had left it open a crack instead of fully closing it. She figured it was almost impossible to slowly open the library door without making some type of disturbance.

Hermione slyly tip-toed to steady her vision along the waiting crack. The darkness of the entrance hall, compared with the brightness of the library, forced her eyes to take a few moments to adjust to the shadows.

At first, she thought no one was there until she noticed a dark figure resting against the front door.

Professor Snape!

Her heart was pounding incredibly hard in anticipation of what she was about to do. She was almost afraid that he could hear it.

Hermione watched him steady his breathing as he brought his hand up to pinch the bridge between his brow.

After a few uneasy moments, he finally pushed his body away from the door to slowly tread up the dark stairway.

This time, Hermione waited long after Professor Snape's cloak had vanished out of view before she left the library.

Slowly, step by step, Hermione crept up the stairway as quietly as she possibly could. She paused every few moments to see if she could hear any movement above her. Faint creaks loosened the moulded wood panellings directly above her, causing her to cover her mouth to prevent herself from coughing. Her heartbeat throbbed deafeningly in her ears as she finally approached the last steps to the second-floor landing.

Unsurprisingly, the corridor was incredibly dark just as it had been the previous two times she had walked down it. With no other occupant on this landing, Mrs. Weasley hardly ever came up here to clean. Hermione could feel a thick layer of dusty grit sticking to the bottom of her bare feet.

As she approached the end of the corridor, doubt suddenly swallowed up her fortitude. What would she do if he was already in his room? What point would that prove? He would never know she had come. *But, I would know he didn't catch me.*

But what if he did catch her... What on earth could she tell him?

Hermione stared at the darkness shrouding the corner at the end of the corridor. She was scared; she had no shame in admitting that. But, she also knew that no amount of fear was going to prevent her from walking down the corridor that led to Snape's room.

Now, Hermione.

She didn't go.

Ok, NOW.

She still couldn't move.

As her hand firmly grasped the wand in her robe pocket, Hermione's courage finally caught up with her determination. Already knowing it was a horrid idea, she could not stop herself from screwing her eyes shut as she made the two steps it took to walk around the bend.

Her breath caught in her throat when... nothing happened. Hermione opened her eyes to fully take in the corridor. It was completely void of Professor Snape. It wasn't until then that she realized she had fully expected him to catch her.

Hermione slowly took a few timid steps toward Snape's bedroom door. A heavy weight dropped in her stomach as she eyed every dark corner and shadow. Something did not feel right at all, but she couldn't place her finger on it. The hair on the back of her neck and along her forearms prickled as uneasiness washed over her. And yet, she kept walking.

Halfway down the corridor, Hermione's steps slowed as she finally realized what was wrong. Her head whipped towards Professor Snape's door, eyes trailing along the edges before finally settling on the crack below. There was no light coming from his room. He was either asleep or he hadn't entered yet...

Just as the realization hit her, a movement to her left caught her attention. She gasped as a shadow sprang out from a deep alcove in the wall, lunging at her. She raised her wand at the charging body, but all words seemed to escape her.

Desperately trying to prevent herself from hyperventilating, Hermione thought she would lose consciousness the moment ~~this~~ large, cold hand closed around her wrist.

Snape ruthlessly bent her palm back so her wand pointed towards the ceiling and then fell to the stone floor. With lightning-speed reflexes, he spun her body around so her face and chest lay flat against the stone wall and pulled her wand arm behind her back.

Hermione stubbornly swallowed whimpers from the pain he was causing in her wrist and arm. She wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of hearing it. But, as his face lowered to her ear, her breathing hitched as his hot breath and deep voice crushed her bravado.

"Are you intoxicated, Miss Granger?" It was merely a whisper, but sounded much more resonant spoken directly into her ear.

No matter how terrified she was, no matter how she feared the consequences of getting caught, Hermione's resolve steeled. She was not going to turn into a mumbling mess this time.

"No, sir."

He yanked on her wand arm, forcing her to spring away from the stone wall, just to be pressed back against it by her shoulders. She cringed when her hair snared in his finger tips. Her lower spine made contact against the stones, knocking the breath from her lungs.

Finally opening her eyes, she instantly made eye contact so he could see the anger threatening from within.

Snape scoffed at her attempt at self-control.

"You are either pissed, Miss Granger, or insane to do something as idiotic as to follow me. Again."

"I am neither, sir," she replied tersely.

Snape's lip curled at her insolence. He snarled as he threateningly brought his arm up to wrap strong fingers around her pale throat.

An insulted grunt escaped Hermione's mouth. She swiftly raised both arms to swat his hand away.

His eyes widened at her daring move.

Immediately, Snape reached out to capture both her arms, pinning them to the wall above her. A self-satisfied glint flickered in his expression when her eyes finally showed the fear he wanted to see in them.

"One more time. WHY are you following me?"

She repeatedly swallowed the thick thump in her throat before she could answer.

"Just practicing, sir," she murmured innocently.

Her eyes meandered around, taking in everything she could about his face. She finally settled on his black eyes as they narrowed, scrutinizing her. It wasn't until then that she realized how deep and clipped her breathing was growing by the second.

"I daresay you should practice more often if you ever want to rid yourself of that riotously boisterous demeanour. However, I do not appreciate you doing it ~~omy~~ time, Miss Granger," he hissed.

She stared at him for several long, silent moments as she took in his words. Perilously, she kept glancing back and forth between each of Snape's menacing eyes, memorizing everything in front of her. His brow was taut from stress. His lank hair curtained his face, exaggerating the severity of his cheekbones. The bags under his eyes seemed as purple as bruises.

Maybe they were bruises.

She finally rested her vision along his mouth. Where most people have smile lines, Snape actually had frown lines. She had never seen such deep frown lines before.

How old is he? He can't be more than thirty-seven.

Her eyes slowly softened as she studied the skin around his lips. Her heart continued its rapid thudding in her chest, but it was no longer motivated by fear. For the briefest of moments, as she stared at the line by his mouth, random connections started forming in Hermione's thoughts.

Months of solitude and worry over the war, uneasiness over her mission, and months of fretful concern for her parents, her friends, her very life, seemed to hit her all at once.

Wetness pooled around her eyes. These were worries that the man standing over her had never had the horrific luxury to experience.

Every emotion clamoring in her mind manifested itself in that one frown line. It suddenly hit her that she would be hard pressed only to see him as the unfeeling, unaffected machine of Dumbledore. The danger he lived with, his sacrifices he made to give the Headmaster much needed information, it was all there in front of her. What a life one must lead to have the torment of never experiencing true, heart-warming happiness etched so visibly on their face.

Ever so slowly, with her arms still pinned to the stone wall above her, Hermione leaned her upper body as far as she could. Her eyes never strayed from the faint line on the side of Snape's mouth.

All logical thoughts or reason fled her mind as she placed the faintest kiss on his lower cheek. Her eyes were lightly hooded, but never closed.

Snape's eyes widened. He jerked back from her as if burned. But, he never let go of his firm grip on her wrists.

He yanked her arms in front of her. "I stand by my previous assertion. You must be intoxicated, Miss Granger, to do something so reckless."

"No, sir. I am perfectly sober."

"I do not know what little game you are playing, but it ends now. I may not understand this odd change in your behavior, but let it be known that I am not the least bit amused by your actions," he sneered.

His eyes narrowed, watching for any emotions her face might betray. Even she seemed to be as surprised as he was over her incredibly stupid move.

"The next time you are this bored, Miss Granger, I suggest keeping your meddlesome nose in your books, and away from those, like me, who do not appreciate your presence."

He quickly let go of both her wrists as he whirled away from her to stalk back to his bedroom.

Hermione watched his retreating figure, heart heavy with almost unbearable dejection. But this type of emotion did not make her cry.

Defeated, confused, and embarrassed, she turned to walk down the staircase and back to her bedroom. As she turned the corner on her landing, the soft hums of a brisk conversation distracted Hermione from the mess in her head.

Walking up to Harry and Ron's room, she gave a warning knock before entering.

"Look, Harry," Ron continued as he signaled Hermione to sit next to him on the edge of his bed. "You're doing it again, mate. I don't expect you to... you know... get all emotional and share your feelings, but something's up. You've been acting... off."

"I'm NOT touched in the head," Harry barked, glaring up at them through the messy hair covering his eyes.

"No one said you were, Harry," Hermione jumped in immediately. "But, Ron's right." Hermione had the grace to look uncomfortable as those exact words exited her mouth.

Arms crossed, Harry refused to share more information than he had to. He didn't want them to be disappointed in him.

Hermione got up from Ron's bed and crossed the room. "You weren't at your Aunt and Uncle's house this summer," she questioned delicately as she sat next to him. "Were you?"

"I was." Harry lifted his head. "For a little while."

"What happened?" asked Ron.

"I left."

"With Dumbledore," Hermione attempted to finish for him.

Harry fidgeted in his seat, preparing himself for their reactions.

"Uh... no, I just left."

"By yourself!" Hermione gasped. "Why on earth would you do something so foolish?"

Harry growled irritably, jumping up from his seat. "I couldn't just sit there, in my room, when Voldemort -- calm down Ron -- when Voldemort was doing who knows what out there." He finished his sentence by pointing at the night sky outside the high steeped windows.

"Where did you go?" Hermione asked quietly, on the verge of tears.

"To find Nagini," Harry answered softly. "I worked out how to enter her mind," he added loudly, expecting a violent reaction.

Ron paled, his mouth gaping as he attempted to find his words. "Are you mad?"

"Dumbledore seemed to think so," Harry snorted.

"That's so risky, Harry," Hermione added. "What if Voldemort was controlling her when you projected yourself?"

"He was." At the sounds of their gasps, he decided to explain further. "And... he wasn't. She was a Horcrux, so technically she had a bit of Voldemort in her... but... it wasn't Voldemort."

Harry stalked to his four-poster, shooting Ron and Hermione irritated looks as he turned down his bed. "It doesn't matter," he added. "Dumbledore forbade me to search for more Horcruxes alone, anyway."

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"The next time you decide to force sleep on me, I would prefer a Bludger to the head rather than a chemically induced solution," Sirius hissed.

"You are overreacting," Remus sighed.

"You don't know what you could have done!"

Remus stopped suspiciously eyeing the customers entering the pub to stare uneasily at his dearest friend.

"What could I have done, exactly?" he insisted. Frustrated, Remus sighed when Sirius turned his head away to avoid answering the question.

"Dammit, Sirius! You can't keep doing this. It's been long enough. When are you going to tell me what the hell is going on with you?"

"Forget it." Sirius fingered the cool metal of the watch in his pocket, hoping Remus would just drop it.

"If you're so afraid of a chemically induced slumber, I suggest you put that tumbler down."

"I will decide what I can and can't handle. Have you got that?" Sirius barked.

"Yes, all right, calm down."

"When are they expecting you back?"

It was Remus' turn to steer Sirius away from the question. There were so many unspoken questions and answers between the two of them now: years of swallowing up emotions to spare the other unnecessary pain, the pain of watching each other's daily horror.

Remus knew Sirius was staring at him. He could see the whites of his eyes from the corner of his vision. They should not be doing this anymore. If they were going to get through this war, they both needed to know what was going on with the other. Remus desperately wanted to know about the hell Sirius lived with every day. He did not understand it, but he wasn't stupid.

Finally facing him, Remus stared into the eyes of his last childhood friend; the friend for whom he had had to experience the torment of losing, not once, but twice. He couldn't help but wonder if it would happen again. Sirius' eyes were so different now from what they were before he passed through the veil. His fire was gone. It was hard to convince yourself that you wouldn't lose your best friend a third time if his eyes already looked dead.

"Stop it."

"Then tell me what I can do for you?" Remus pleaded.

Sirius scoffed at the predictable question. "Exactly what it seems I can do for you. Not a damn thing."

A long, uncomfortable silence passed between them before Remus finally confessed. "Not all of them have bitten others, you know. So, I'm not as much at risk as you think."

"Have you run into *him* yet?"

Remus' eyes narrowed as he chose to ignore the question. Sirius should know better than to bring *him* up.

"Never mind, then," Sirius sighed. "Look, I know what they are like. They won't give you the time of day once they find out you still haven't bitten anyone since the last time they saw you. And they will know. Your name is as well known among them as mine is among wizards. Especially if they are companions of *him*."

"Fucking hell, if you're going to bring this up then say his name. He doesn't deserve the status of Voldemort."

"Fine," Sirius spat. "Have you run into Greyback yet?"

"No."

"The others won't trust you if he doesn't trust you first."

"DON'T YOU THINK I DON'T KNOW THAT!"

Sirius' only response was to direct his attention to swallowing the contents of the tumbler.

Leaning back in his chair, a surly rumble escaped Remus' throat as he ran both his hands through his hair.

"You transform in two weeks," said Sirius.

"And?"

"Are you going to take your Wolfsbane?"

"Yes," Remus said blankly. He wasn't ready to stalk under the full moon with the others yet. He had barely started to contact them again. But, eventually, very soon, he knew he would have to stop taking his Wolfsbane. How he dreaded it.

And, eventually, very soon, he would have to build *a friendship* with the one man he feared more than Voldemort himself. His mind couldn't wrap itself around the emotional panic his body felt over that future encounter. Every time he thought about it, the glands in his jaw began to salivate.

Sirius continued fingering the cool black metal in his robe pocket as he silently watched Remus flee from the table towards the Gents. He knew better than to follow him or to ask what was wrong, as he, too, had his moments of departing from company because of the absolute need of it; the need of privately coping with the torments of life.

"Life," he snorted disgustingly.

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"No," Harry murmured in his sleep. He didn't want to see this. Not again.

Sweating profusely, Harry's body tangled within his sheets as the same nightmare raged through his mind.

Blank, lifeless eyes were staring at him. He wished the woman would look away, so her eyes could not see his disgust and fear. But, he knew she couldn't because she was dead.

"Because of your stupid pride," screamed a tall, ghastly wizard, "you have ruined everything!"

The enraged wizard forced his wand against a Muggle man's skull. The middle-aged Muggle cowered further into his seat.

"But I've done as you asked!" he screamed. "Even now, the camps are still open. Every name you requested has been put at the top of the list!"

Harry continued to watch from his hidden place against the wall. As both men spoke, he understood them perfectly, even though he could not speak their language.

"You fool!" the wizard rasped. "How would you know? Have you ever visited them, to make sure all under your command are doing as you say? Are you stupid enough to trust your officers so blindly? The furnaces have been cold for weeks! Your orders mean nothing to scared men fighting a blind, losing battle."

The Muggle frantically shook his head. "No, that's not true--"

"SHUT UP! Pick up your gun." His head motioned toward the pistol on the side table.

"I SAID PICK IT UP." Spittle was flying from the wizard's face. "NOW." His mad eyes flashed as the scared Muggle extended a shaky hand towards his pistol.

"Coward. Hiding here as you let others fight a losing battle above you. Your name will have its rightful place in history, believe me." The furious man moved his wand from the Muggle's temple and pointed it between his eyes.

"NO!" the man barked angrily. "Wait, it's not over yet!"

"Imperio!"

Harry watched, breathless as the Muggle's mouth fell slack. He knew what was going to happen; he could have stopped it. He didn't want it to continue, but as he eyed the Muggle who dared to beg for his life, Harry knew that this was no less than what that despicable creature deserved.

Eyes unblinking, the Muggle reached into his coat, removing a small pill from his pocket which he placed in the back of his mouth. Mechanically, he grasped the pistol

firmly, raising it to his own temple. A second later, he pulled the trigger, spraying the back wall with brain matter and hair.

"AGHHH!" Harry jolted at the feel of his bed being violently shaken.

"Harry... Harry! Wake up!"

Heaving, Harry choked as he tried to inhale great gulps of air. Opening his eyes, he panicked at the sight of a tall shadow looming over his four-poster. The shadow descended on him, arms stretched out.

"No!" Harry wheezed. Pulling his arm free of the blankets, he swung recklessly at the figure. His reach missed; knuckles crunching against the wooden head board.

"DAMMIT!"

"Merlin's balls, Harry. Calm the fuck down!"

At the sound of Ron's voice, Harry finally relaxed against his mattress. He looked up at the shadow, finding solace at the slight gleam of red hair illuminated by the faint moonlight.

Ron tentatively reached his hand out again. When Harry failed to react violently, he attempted to untangle him from the sweat drenched bed sheets.

"Bad dream?" Ron questioned quietly.

Harry didn't answer him. With his heart pulsing madly in his throat, Harry didn't think he would be able to find his voice.

"You-Know-Who?" Ron cautiously probed further.

"Not even close," Harry finally wheezed.

Author's Notes: Story beta'ed by the very talented **melusin**.

-Chapter title take from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book ii. Line 803.

Next up: Severus POV as he meets his master, dreading the lasting effects of the visit. The first day of classes has come for Hermione, filled with odd interactions with a certain female student.

Chapter Seven - To Reign is Worth Ambition, Though in Hell

Chapter 8 of 36

With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began. And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. Eventual SS/HG. Alternate Universe, HBP death disregarded.

Nominated for best fic in the 2007 OWL Awards: Fire & Ice Category (SS/HG), Romance Category, Angst Category, and A/U Category

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: My beta, **melusin**, has greatly improved this story.

He felt no hatred for this man. It disturbed him every time he tried to fathom how that was humanly possible. Normal witches and wizards would be revolted and terrified the moment this beast stepped in front of them.

But not Severus. He felt no animosity or spite toward his master.

Because of this, one would assume that he was gladly bowing with reverent submission in front of the Dark Lord every time his knee hit the ground. But, Severus was not like the other Death Eaters.

He felt no respect for this man.

Severus bowed before his master with an elegant sweep of his robes. He possessed his own subtle displays of rebellion within forced acquiescence. Severus refused to surrender himself to anyone, or anything, completely.

He knew the game. Do not make eye contact until the Dark Lord requests it. Do not speak a word until the creature demands it. Severus began the slow process of schooling his thoughts and avoided remembering the time when he had remained on blooded knees for well over an hour. The madman had paced the room, talking to a familiar that no longer existed. The quest for immortality did not seem worth this much energy. What was the point of living forever if your mind was not lucid enough to enjoy it?

Severus attempted to distract himself from these contemplations by staring at the large leak in the corner of the ceiling. The yellowed wood bent heavily in the darkened wet patch, reeking of sweetened rot. Moisture slowly pulled from the crusted rim toward the center before filling a brown water drop in the middle. Snape watched the drop grow large and plump before it finally fell to the mushy wood of the floorboards. He wondered if the same drop would soak through the already damp floor, onto the ceiling of the landing below. He easily imagined how filthy that drop would be before it reached the basement. Before it found rest and stopped falling.

"Severus?"

"Yes, my Lord?"

"Tell me the useful information you have discovered about him."

Permission, Severus thought. Before attempting to make eye contact with the Dark Lord, he promptly disciplined his memories to reflect the information Dumbledore desired him to divulge. Projecting images was far easier than the projection of the emotions he also had to display. Obedience, submission, dedication, faith, fear... Severus did not use Occlumency to hide as much as he needed Occlumency to show.

It never occurred to Severus how unnatural it was for someone to function this way.

Severus' vision remained unfocused as the Dark Lord ripped through his mind. He didn't wish to see the madness reflected in those scarlet eyes. Too much concentration would thrust him into the beast's psyche, completely unnoticed and unguarded. Severus would not make that mistake again.

"Dumbledore shared more with you than he originally intended."

"Yes, my Lord."

"You convinced him well."

He really did.

"Thank you, my Lord."

"Black appeared very... under the weather," Voldemort whispered harshly with a satanic grin. "He is weak, but I am not worried. Have you had a chance to view this keepsake of his, Severus?"

"No, my Lord. Not even Dumbledore has laid eyes on it. Although, I suspect he carries it with him everywhere."

"As do I... the *fool*," he cackled. The Dark Lord began to pace about the empty, dust ridden parlor room once more, mumbling as incoherent thoughts raced through his mind; making connections, insinuating obscene solutions to non-existent problems; always attempting the impossible.

Severus suppressed a shudder as the hearth fire slowly died down. His nerves were too much on edge to be distracted by the draught in the room or the chaffing of his knee.

The Dark Lord suddenly stopped walking and jerked around to face Severus for more questioning. "What are you still doing on the floor? Didn't I already tell you to rise?"

No. "Of course, my Lord. Forgive me."

"I need more information than that which you have supplied me. The archway will be the new avenue for my next division."

Division, Snape scoffed. No amount of euphemisms could disguise those actions for what they really were. Soul splicing. Damnation in the flesh.

Merlin help him. Severus hoped beyond reason that he would not be visited tonight.

They always knew when Severus made great strides to help his Master. Who or what *they* were, Severus could not say. But, his repeated connections with the Headmaster or Lord Voldemort always led to those dreams; past experiences he had no desire to relive; treading through memories that were not his own.

Severus could already feel the tips of the flames of hell licking at the edge of his mind.

"I want you to constantly watch Black. See to it that he does not come to any harm."

Severus' head jerked in surprise, disbelief flowing through him at being giving this task for a second time by an opposing party. Severus risked maintaining eye contact outside the realm of opening his mind, searching Voldemort's face for some logical reason for this request.

Voldemort could see the questions behind Severus' emotionless expression. Arching a hairless eyebrow on the unspoken threat of punishment, he dared Severus to doubt his motives.

"Of course, my Lord. I will not rest until you are satisfied."

The dark creature stared at Severus as he grinned nastily.

"I know."

*** **

A young boy pushed his bruised body up off the mattress by his forearms, his elbows shaking as he struggled to support his own weight. His stringy black hair stuck to his sweaty face. He breathed small shallow breaths so his damaged ribs would not re-puncture his lungs.

"I swear, Headmaster, I'm telling you the truth!" Snape cringed as he attempted to move his sore body.

Professor Dumbledore towered over Severus' hospital bed, speaking in quiet anger. "I wish you could see the consequences of your actions. Why must you be so blinded by the pure-blood ideologies of your friends?"

"What are you talking about?" Severus screamed. "I was the one who was attacked!"

"Silence!" Dumbledore barked.

Snape had never seen him so angry, and fell back against his bed with a defeated sag.

"Sirius told me everything, you foolish boy! Of course you would be attacked. What else did you think might happen when you went into the passageway after Lupin? You saw that it was a full moon! Attempted murder is punishable by a life sentence in Azkaban-- "

"EXACTLY! So, will you finally do something about Bla-- "

"--SO," Dumbledore loudly continued, "you should be thankful that I'm not going to report you to the Aurors."

Severus breathing quickened, throat constricting in despair at the unjust threat. "Not report...me?" he said weakly, his stomach twisted in anger.

"Your hatred for 'half-breeds,' as you call them, is no reason to go to such extremes!"

"You cannot honestly believe that I tried to-- "

"I have no reason to believe anything you say anymore."

Eyes blazing, Severus watched Professor Dumbledore quickly turn to exit the hospital wing. Dumbledore didn't believe him. If Dumbledore was so convinced as to believe the worst, then everyone would. He had spent years trying to convince the Headmaster that he didn't instigate the numerous fights that broke out between him and the Marauders, but to no avail.

It was useless now. He might as well stop trying.

Gasping, Severus choked as he willed himself not to cry. He fiercely raised his hands behind his head to grasp his pillow, pulling it out from under him. Clutching the pillow to his face, Severus screamed into it with all his might.

Severus jerked awake as his head bobbed in the air, his chin slipping from his hand. A frustrated moan escaped his mouth as he looked down at the various uncompleted lesson plans littering his desk.

Even though tomorrow would mark the first day of September, Severus pushed himself away from his desk in search of some much needed sleep.

Entering his dungeon chambers, Severus flicked his wand at the numerous candles, casting his bedroom into complete darkness. He pulled back the thick duvet of his four-poster and reluctantly climbed in.

Raising his palm, he placed the back of his hand over his eyes to force himself to keep them closed.

A small whimper vibrated off the stone walls in his bedroom.

"Stop it," he commanded to his empty room.

Her cries were getting louder, joined by two foreign voices speaking in a quick discussion.

"Go away," Severus growled.

The crying woman began to gasp in shock.

"Shut the fuck up!" Severus jumped out of bed, turning in the direction of the voices in his room. Pointing his wand at the candles he had just extinguished, Severus willed them all to ignite simultaneously.

The light was blinding, sharply reflecting off the white walls and yellow tiles. He stared, wide eyed, as the familiar power hungry wizard turned toward a metal table lined with various medical instruments.

The dark haired woman on the operating table shook her head from side to side, disorientated as her anesthesia quickly wore off. She screamed as she took in her surroundings.

The two men, garbed in protective white coats and face masks, paid her no mind.

The callous wizard turned away from her to rummage through the instrument table again. His gloved hands and white smock were smeared with blood.

Severus slowly approached the operating table. The mad wizard and even madder Muggle blocked the woman from his view. Standing behind the two butchers, Severus wished he could scream at the woman; tell her to stop fighting against her bound limbs.

Didn't she know what part of her they were dissecting?

The Muggle doctor lost all patience, finally showing his 'patient' the attention she screamed for. He pulled back his balled fist, and socked her squarely on the jaw with his filthy hand.

"Untermensch!" he screamed.

The woman kept the side of her face against the metal operating table, weeping hopelessly to herself as the blood from her lower extremities dripped down her cheek and into her mouth.

"UGH!" Severus bellowed as the side of his face collided with the end table. Picking himself up off the floor, he spun around in his bedroom, senses on full alert.

He was alone. He was awake.

Pushing his sweat drenched hair out of his face, Severus fled from his bedroom.

*** ** *

The porcelain felt cool under his forehead. Severus concentrated on this one positive feeling as his body convulsed unwillingly against him.

He knew he should have eaten last night, but he didn't care.

Over the years his body had trained itself against making the noises that conveyed its needs. As many times as he found himself sprawled on the bathroom floor, Severus never quite curbed the nightly appetites that would prevent this morning routine.

If he only ate a little more before he started drinking, he would not be retching uncontrollably at the moment. Still, Severus welcomed the numbing effect alcohol gifted his mind, especially on the nights he did his Dark Lord's bidding. He would gladly retch miserably in the morning rather than face the other ghastly alternative.

*** ** *

"Don't be nervous," Luna Lovegood said dreamily, appearing at Hermione's side on the Hogsmeade platform.

Hermione tugged repeatedly at her school robes which were snagged on a rusted nail of the train.

"Nervous about what?" she asked absently.

The sixth-year Ravenclaw rolled up her copy of *The Quibbler*, tucking it sloppily into the waistband of her school skirt. "Everyone's going to be watching you. It's your seventh year and Harry is constantly in the papers. You being Head Girl wasn't much of a surprise, was it?"

"Well... I wouldn't say that..." Hermione said uncomfortably.

"Oh, so you didn't expect to be made Head Girl?"

I did. A wave of nausea washed over Hermione.

"I would be terrified if I was given that position." Luna's protruding grey eyes widened even further. "But, if anyone could use it wisely, it would be you."

Reaching for their belongings, the two girls headed towards the carriages that waited to take them up to the castle. Hermione took her time getting in as she waited for Ginny to catch up.

"Use what wisely, exactly?" Hermione finally asked.

"Your power of influence."

Hermione directed her attention to helping Ginny into the carriage as she had lost the drive to have Luna explain further.

*** **

"*Heidenheim*," Hermione commanded at her door. At least she could find comfort in deciding her own passwords.

Hermione entered her Head Girl rooms with an irritated flourish and quickly started unpacking. Harry and Ron had really aggravated her at the Welcoming Feast. The more she had snapped, stressing that there was nothing bothering her, the more they were convinced otherwise. Classes started in the morning, and she just wanted to hurry up and get to her rooms to unpack so she could obtain some decent sleep. She had been relieved when her two friends were suddenly distracted by a loud scream. Unfortunately, the ruckus was caused by an hysterical second year, who had burst into tears the moment Sirius had greeted her on his way to the Head Table.

As the last of Hermione's underclothes were tucked neatly into a gorgeous white acid-washed chest of drawers, it occurred to her that she had never taken the time to inspect nor appreciate her spacious rooms. Crookshanks had already found solace in one of the two plush wingback chairs positioned in front of the fireplace. Both chairs were colored a pale blue that intensely complimented the cream colored duvet which was embroidered with small, pale blue lilies. Her four-poster was the same white oak wood as her wardrobe and chest of drawers. She had to admit that it was a lovely room, even if it was a bit girly for her taste.

Hermione grabbed the numerous decorative pillows littered on her bed and stacked them onto the tiny window seat that overlooked part of the lake. She pulled down the thick duvet, eager to crawl in. Hermione really needed to get some sleep, as her body had denied itself the luxury the last couple of days since she... *Never mind, don't think about it.*

Merlin help her. Hermione had the nagging feeling in the pit of her stomach that came with the anticipation of receiving her class timetable in the morning. She just knew that she would have Potions first period.

Just as she was about to crawl into the lush bed, Hermione's head snapped up at the sound of insistent knocking on her door.

What now? Merlin help those boys if they think I'm going to sit up all night discussing...

She swung the heavy door inward, jumping back slightly as she was bombarded with an overenthusiastic greeting.

"Hermione! I missed you on the train!" squealed Lavender Brown a bit too loudly.

Hermione stared at her, confusion written all over her face.

"Here, you left this at the Gryffindor table." A tanned hand with long shocking pink fingernails thrust up into Hermione's face. Within it was her Head Girl's badge.

"Merlin! I didn't even know I'd lost it." Hermione was too much in shock at her own carelessness to catch the slight grin on the blonde girl's face as she edged herself into the room.

Whatever caused the plastic grin on Lavender's face, it was soon forgotten as she paused to gape around, slack-jawed, at the Head Girl's bedroom.

"It's gorgeous."

"Hmm?" Hermione hummed distractedly as she went to pin the badge on her school robes.

"Here. I thought the castle would repeat its abysmal habit of choosing severe house colors for decor," Lavender continued without a beat, quickly sticking her head into the adjoining bathroom.

Hermione glanced impatiently at the back of her irritating classmate. Lavender seemed to change more drastically every summer. Her hair was much paler and processed, unlike the natural light brown tones that used to litter it. Hermione had to admit that the lively girl used to look much more beautiful. Maybe she was just prejudiced against cosmetics, but the shocking colors of eye shadow, blusher, lipstick, eye charcoal... *What is she trying to hide?*

Wait a minute... Hermione didn't remember inviting the girl into her room.

"Thanks for finding the badge and bringing it to me Lavender, but I really need some sleep before classes tomorrow."

Lavender's eyes darkened slightly at her dismissal before she became suddenly pert again. "Sure, no problem," her high girly voice sang.

Before fully exiting Hermione's room, Lavender turned to her with a big grin on her face.

"You know, it being our last year and all that, it would be great if we tried to enjoy it the best we can. Parvati and I are really going to miss having you share a room with us," she whined, combing her sharp nails through her hair. "It's still your room, too, you know. You can study or even sleep there whenever you want."

No!

"Uh, yeah thanks, sometime. Maybe." Hermione didn't even bother to try to hide the skeptical crease in her brow before quickly closing the door.

*** **

The strap of her bag cut deeply into her shoulder as she ran through the halls.

Late.

Hermione Granger was never late. But, of course, as the fates would have it, she was about to be late for her first class. And, to make the situation almost comical, her first class just happened to be Advanced Potions. Maybe, if she had been a bit less flustered, she wouldn't have let the door slam behind her as she entered the room. Only the Potions master himself is allowed such an entrance.

"I must be dreaming," Ron muttered under his breath, pinching himself as Hermione sat at the empty table in front of him and Harry. The two front worktables closest to Snape's desk were almost always unoccupied.

"Well, well... Miss Granger." Hermione's hand stilled from emptying the contents of her bag, her only display that he had gained her full attention. She refused to look up.

"I do believe that in the many number of years I have been teaching, the Head Girl or Boy has never been late for the first Potions class of their final year."

She could hear the sneer so evidently plastered across his mouth, yet she still didn't look up.

"I must congratulate you on achieving such a memorable... honor." Growing clearly impatient with her behavior, Snape glided down to the front of her table and slammed his hand on the desk to make her look up. "If you plan on being late again, please save me the displeasure of interrupting my lectures and do not bother entering at all."

Black eyes framed by straight curtains of lank hair scowled at her. Hermione had wanted to do anything but look at him, and now she couldn't look away. Snape found this far more unsettling.

He straightened himself to address the rest of the class. "This goes for all of you. You are in NEWT level Potions now, and I refuse to tolerate laziness of any sort."

Hermione silently cleared her throat as he walked past her to stalk around the room. Ducking her head so her thick hair fell forward, Hermione's face burned and she prayed that it was not noticeable to anyone.

In her attempt to appear composed and impassive, the complete silence of the Potions classroom alarmed her. It was so quiet. Unusually quiet after a Gryffindor, and the Head Girl no less, had just been brutally reprimanded and insulted by the Potions master himself. Hermione dared to turn her head, eyeing the Slytherin students who were usually eager to laugh and jeer along with Professor Snape. She eyed Pansy Parkinson first, whose high-pitched cackle always stood out in the loudest of crowds.

Hermione almost did not recognize her. Her face was sunken, wrists skinny from weight loss. Pansy worked on her potion mechanically, not really hearing or seeing the environment around her as her eyes remained wide and unblinking. Hermione frowned when she noticed the empty chair next to her.

"Not much of a surprise, is it?" Harry said, leaning across his worktable to whisper in her ear.

"You mean Malfoy?" Hermione asked.

"Yup. Didn't return to finish his seventh year. Went on the run the same night Dumbledore got sick," Harry replied.

"The night the both of you found the fake locket?" Hermione whispered urgently.

"Hold on," Harry leaned back into his seat, signaling Professor Snape's presence with a jerk of his head.

*** **

"I heard an Auror found him attempting to break into the Headmaster's office," Hermione continued the moment the three of them exited the Potions classroom.

"Yeah," Harry said blankly. "Couldn't wait for me and Dumbledore to leave the castle."

Hermione and Ron were silent as they walked to their next class. Harry kept his body facing forward as he waited for one of them to say something. Glancing at them, he couldn't help but smirk in righteous satisfaction to see the uncomfortable grimaces on their faces.

"Rotten luck," Ron finally added after taking their favored seats at the back of the Transfiguration classroom, "Malfoy getting away and all *And*, crazy old Lucius escaping from Azkaban. Do you think they're on the run together?"

Harry paused from pulling books out of his bag before answering. "No, I doubt Lucius would be so dumb, especially when Voldemort has who knows how many people looking for Draco. I wouldn't be surprised if the twitchy ferret was disowned."

"So, no Quidditch this year, eh?" Ron asked morosely.

"There'll still be teams, I just won't be on ours," Harry said determinedly.

"Yeah, I supposed we'll be to busy with NEWTs and finding the missing --"

"Shh!" Hermione hissed, shooting Ron a death glare for almost discussing the Horcruxes aloud.

"Look, Ron, just because I'm not going to be in the team doesn't mean that I expect you.... "

Predictably, Hermione's attention quickly drifted from their obsessive conversations about that ridiculous sport. Sitting straighter in her seat, she took notice of Pansy entering the class, walking stiffly with Nott at her side. Hermione's eyes narrowed when the broad shouldered boy eased his hand into the small of Pansy's back, directing her to sit beside him.

"Wands away," McGonagall commanded. "Turn to Chapter four, page thirty."

Even though the day had started abysmally, overall Hermione was content with the first day of classes. Her giddiness was finally starting to calm down. The first lessons were always a treasure for her. She listened to her enthralling professors as they briefly introduced all the new material that would be covered this school year, finally ending in the taking of the much dreaded, or if you were Hermione Granger, much anticipated NEWT exams.

"You boys need to hurry up or we're going to be late for dinner!" Hermione stood by the door to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom wishing that Harry and Ron would hurry up and say goodbye.

"Why? We can just order food from the kitchens through the Floo," said Ron excitedly as he walked up toward Sirius' office door.

"But we're *supposed* to attend every meal in the Great Hall." Hermione hoisted the heavy bag onto her shoulder, giving them every indication that she was not about to put it down and get comfortable.

"Honestly, Hermione," Sirius smirked as he tilted his head, "you make it seem like I'm going to get into trouble, too. I am a professor here, you know, and I have the authority to allow you three to eat dinner in my office."

"Exactly," finished Harry as he opened the office door and walked right in.

Hermione didn't feel at ease about starting the year on such friendly terms with a professor whose true intentions were very evident.

"Fine, but I'm still going down to dinner. It's the first one after classes and it just doesn't seem right for the Head Girl not to be present."

Harry and Ron both rolled their eyes as she turned and walked through the door. She tried not to make eye contact with Sirius, but her peripheral vision caught the disappointed frown on his face.

She hurried as fast as she could to the Great Hall to force down some food. Aware that her first meeting with Dumbledore was scheduled right after dinner, her nervous stomach had been gnawing at her all day.

Hermione was stopped from her determined walk through the Great Hall when a hand shot out, gripping her around the wrist.

"Hermione!" squealed Lavender. "Sit with us."

Hermione looked down at the unwelcome grip on her wrist. An uncontrollable slight flicker of disgust crossed her features before Hermione realized what she was doing. She took one look at Lavender and Parvati's overenthusiastic smiles. "No, uh, thanks, but I'm going to sit with Ginny."

"What was that all about?" whispered Ginny as Hermione sat down beside her.

"I honestly have no idea."

"You know, those two have been acting really weird around me too. At breakfast, Lavender sat next to me, combing her fingers through my hair and asking what shampoo I use."

Hermione looked thoughtfully at Ginny before glancing down the table towards Lavender and Parvati. Both girls turned their heads toward their food, obviously trying to hide the fact that they had just been staring at Hermione and Ginny.

"Something odd is definitely going on here," Hermione whispered.

"Hermione, dear," her Head of House called behind her. She continued after Hermione turned in her seat, "Professor Dumbledore is waiting in his office for you now to discuss your Head Girl duties."

Hermione nodded in understanding and silently followed Professor McGonagall out of the Great Hall. They walked side by side, comfortable in their silence. Hermione swallowed a lump in her throat, but kept her face constantly facing forward during the healthy walk to the Headmaster's office on the seventh floor. She could feel Minerva's agitation resonate in waves, yet didn't give any indication that she noticed. If McGonagall had had her way, Hermione would not have been assigned this mission.

"This is as far as I go," the staunch figure announced at the foot of the winding stairs. Such a remark really need not have been said for an instance so trivial as walking to an office door, but to both women it meant so much more. The second Hermione set foot into the Headmaster's office, her Head of House would no longer have a persuasive authority to allow Hermione to do as she pleased.

"Enter," a somewhat hollow voice commanded on the other side of the polished door.

"Good evening, Professor."

"Good evening, my dear. I trust you ate well? Sherbet lemon?"

"Uh... no thanks. Yes, dinner was lovely," Hermione replied dismissively as she obeyed his hand gesture to sit in the large chair in front of his desk.

The elderly man sat back in his seat as his functional hand played with the whiskers on his chin. Hermione glanced here and there about his office, entranced by so many glittering and moving objects. Her eyes fell on a number of bookcases that she would have loved to have been left alone with. There was something very ancient and mysterious about the Headmaster's office. He loved to surround himself with so many valuable items that he never seemed to use.

"Shall I continue to ask you half-hearted questions about your day, or get straight to business?"

"Straight to business, please," Hermione replied immediately.

Dumbledore smiled warmly at her, expecting such a reaction.

"There is really not much more I can tell you that I haven't already. You will undertake the duties that are expected of you as Head Girl, plus so much more. As Head Girl, you are allowed to choose what time you wish to patrol the corridors, as well as setting patrol schedules for all the prefects. This is where I must urge you to take the night patrol. Surely, you must see the added benefits?"

"Of course. I can get around the castle much more easily unnoticed at night. And, if I am noticed, I have a very credible reason to be about."

"Exactly. My expectations for you are very simple, I believe. I meant what I said. I want you to watch and listen, and only to watch and listen. At no point do I want you to take an *independent* proactive role in whatever I ask of you, do you understand me? I'd ask for a written declaration or a wand oath, but I trust your honor in itself."

Hermione almost felt ashamed for asking, "May I ask why you do not wish me to do more? You know I would."

"Oh, I know you would -- you probably still will unintentionally. But, I already have enough members of the Order ready to sacrifice their lives in this war. If you are willing, believe me when I say that I appreciate the dedication, but understand also how hard I have worked for it to not come to this. I never in my dreams wished to bring the war within these very walls. Simply asking of you what I have thus far kills me a little inside. No student should have to feel responsible for so much more than their studies, but I cannot deny how much I need you."

During his speech, Dumbledore had risen from his seat to slowly pace around his large desk. Lost in thought, he turned his back on Hermione as he walked towards his office window.

"This could all have been prevented if I had been more patient. If I had simply waited to read the clues laid out before my very eyes in the first war, we would not be where we are now. But, even now, I feel my patience has led to wasted time and effort."

His eyes looked so watery. If he cried, there would be no stopping her own tears. "I understand, sir."

"Very good," he answered brightly, slightly taken off guard by her forgotten presence. "It is getting late and I am sure you have much to prepare for the coming week. If you have any questions, do not be afraid to stop by my office at any time, day or night. I will contact you further to tell you, specifically, what I want you to look for."

"Thank you, sir," Hermione said as the Headmaster opened the door for her. Gripping the frame, she steeled her nerves as she turned to face him, "You know, I truly am grateful that you have trusted me enough to help in this way."

Dumbledore watched her race down the spiral staircase with a cheery bounce in her step. He slowly closed his eyes as he always did when questioning his motives.

"I know."

*** **

Just as she expected, the halls were clear and silent as Hermione treaded her way back to her rooms. All for the better, she thought, since she was lost in reflection the moment she exited the spiral staircase. Dumbledore had hardly given her any direction, though she had a feeling that many more meetings were to come. First things first, she had to get back to her room and think out a set schedule for patrols for herself and the prefects. She only hoped the Head Boy would not put up much of an argument.

Hermione quickly froze in her tracks and stared hollowly at the moist brick wall beside her. *Head Boy... I don't even know who he is. I never cared enough to ask.* It was so silly and stupid she raised a hand to her mouth to stifle a laugh. Her voice echoed loudly, causing her to finally take notice her surroundings.

Gaining sense after a moment of disorientation, Hermione gasped, "What on earth am I doing in the dungeons?"

"Funny," replied a smooth deep voice hidden thick in the shadows, "I found myself wondering the same thing." Stepping into the light, Snape pulled the collar of his cloak

higher on his neck as he rounded on her. "A little late for a walk, don't you think, Miss Granger? It is, after all, past curfew."

Hermione used the time it took for him to speak to square her shoulders. His hair hung heavily against his face, preventing the light from reaching his eyes. It gave her confidence to look him directly in the face. "Just out on patrol, Professor, being as I am Head Girl."

He stopped right in front of her and returned the brave stare, allowing his full face to be covered in candlelight. "Ah, of course. How convenient."

She was doing it again; looking at him too long and too hard, questions and concern written all over her face. She made a public display of inspecting him from head to toe.

"Anything of interest you would like to share?" he sneered.

Hermione glimpsed at his left hand hidden away under his cloak. "Be careful tonight, Professor."

Snape's eyes narrowed shrewdly at her gall. Catching himself, he grunted dismissively before continuing on his trek through the castle.

*** **

In a dark corridor on the third floor, a young woman with shocking blonde hair squealed as she ran from her pursuer.

"No, Anthony," Lavender protested half-heartily. "We mustn't!"

Anthony cornered her at the end of the hallway; a rueful smile gracing his lips.

"Don't worry, I'm a prefect remember?" he purred, finally grasping her by the arms. "I'm delegated to patrol this floor." His left hand reached around the small of her back as he traced her lips with his other hand. "No one will catch us."

Lavender smiled seductively up at him, extending her arms around his neck.

"Tell me you missed me," she pouted.

Anthony smiled devilishly, lowering his head to kiss the skin of her neck.

"I want to finish what we started last year," he whispered into her ear. "I couldn't think of anything else all summer."

A slight moan escaped her mouth. Eyes closed, she reached for his face to kiss him. He sucked hard on her lips, pulling her closer as he thrust against her hip.

"Come on," he said, pulling away and grasping Lavender by the wrist. She squealed as he led her down to the other end of the corridor and opened a small door.

"In here?" Lavender questioned skeptically.

"It's all right," he said, kissing her affectionately on the forehead. "Trust me."

With a flattered smile, Lavender followed the tug on her wrist and entered the dark broom cupboard.

The moment the door closed, Anthony pushed Lavender against it, resuming his attack on her mouth. He edged his right foot between hers, pushing her legs apart. Lavender gasped as his cold hands yanked up her skirt to grasp her by the bum. With lustful eyes, she pulled her arms down from his neck to undo the top buttons on her blouse.

Anthony eyed her chest hungrily. He brought his hands up from under her skirt to pull her bra up and expose her full breasts. His tongue closed around a nipple as his other hand pulled up her skirt again to push her knickers down.

Anthony stopped lavishing his attention on her breasts to kneel on the floor, pulling her knickers down as he went.

Lavender giggled playfully, picking up each leg to free herself of the garment.

"Wait, don't get up," she whispered as she knelt on the floor next to him.

She tilted her head up, searching his face for another kiss, but Anthony turned his head down to undo the belt and buttons of his trousers. Straightening back up, Anthony motioned for Lavender to lie back.

"Just take them off," Lavender insisted.

"No need," Anthony said as he pulled his erect penis out through the small opening in his underpants. "Lie down."

"Um, all right." Lavender straightened her legs out, placing them on either side of Anthony's thighs as she leaned back on her elbows. Her pulse began to race when she realized she was wantonly spread open for him to see. She watched Anthony, kneeling above her, stroking himself as he eyed her wet clit. Reaching for both of her thighs, he wrapped her legs around him as he guided his erection into her.

The moment he felt fully engulfed, his hands clutched at her hips and he began to pump hard and fast.

"Wait," Lavender breathed, her head banging on the wall behind her. "Hold on, I think there's something under by back."

"Shh," Anthony huffed, as he continued to thrust into her, increasing to a frenzied speed. "I don't... want anyone... to hear us."

Lavender pushed at his arms. "But, I thought you said--"

"Ah, shit," he moaned, pulling her hands away from his shoulders and pinning them to the floor on either side of her. "I'm gonna come."

Eyes closed, Anthony erratically thrust a few more times into her, moaning and ignoring her whimpers of discomfort.

"Merlin!" He released her legs, collapsing on the balls of his feet. He took no notice of Lavender examining the cuts on her wrists as he tucked his flaccid penis into his underpants. Gasping for breath, Anthony stood up to button his trousers.

Pulling his hands through his hair, Anthony opened the door without a backward glance at the half-naked girl huddled on the floor.

"See you around."

Fighting back tears, Lavender's throat burned as she fished around on the floor for her discarded knickers.

*** **

Lupin pulled his thin traveling cloak further up on his neck as he walked hurriedly down the cobblestone street. Eager for rest and a simple moment to catch his breath, he ignored the sharp stitch of pain jabbing his ribs. He needed to get to the hotel room as soon as possible.

Various witches and wizards looked back at him, irritated since he did not care if he nudged them in his hurry. The night was passing fast; precious time he did not have the luxury to waste. By habit, he turned left and right down several alleyways, between book shops and restaurants, only to turn back onto the main street again. Lupin never really knew if someone was following him, but fear of such an occurrence never left his mind. Far too many people knew of his monthly situation since his teaching stint at Hogwarts, and he had made far too many fanatical enemies along the way.

It always awed him that his current lover never cared.

Lupin may have earned a healthy sum teaching at Hogwarts which he had quickly put into savings, but it was still not enough to invest in a proper place to live for an extended period of time. He avoided buying new clothes as much as possible, since they would only be ripped during his transformations, and he didn't have the money to keep sending them to the tailor.

Almost everywhere he went, he was looked down upon. "Half-breed," wizards called him with disgust in their eyes and a sneer on their lips. Others thought him a beggar because of his attire, even though he never asked for a Knut. No matter, he had been used to living like this almost his whole life. He'd been alone for so long, abandoned by his family at a young age and losing all three of his closest friends before his twenty-third birthday. Lupin was a survivor in the lowest sense of the word and very good at it, too.

It amazed him how much his lover knew all this, understanding what made him insecure, without concentrating on the reactions of others.

"My room key, please," Lupin said to the barman as he blew hot air into his chilled fists. Lupin waited patiently as the greasy haired owner lazily finished polishing a cracked mug before reluctantly reaching under the counter for the key. He sniffed disdainfully at Lupin's outstretched hand and released the key a significant distance away so it fell with a thud on the moisture stained wood. Such treatment failed to register in Lupin's mind. Used to it for far too long, Lupin gave up on the natural instinct to expect, let alone demand, human respect of any sort.

That had been the hardest thing about his relationship with Tonks. Her fiery soul and exuberant personality made him feel ten years younger when he first started his relationship with her. But, she had always refused to accept his lower status in society. Lupin's naturally quiet and kind demeanor prevented him from seeking out attention of any sort, but that was a little difficult when your girlfriend had flaming pink hair and caused a ruckus wherever she went. The hardest part, however, was her stubborn unwillingness to allow anyone to show even the slightest disrespect to Lupin, either because he was a werewolf or because of his overall shabbiness. He got kicked out of more eateries and shops due to her angry outbursts than because of his status towards the end of their relationship, which had caused some pretty nasty arguments. She was unwilling to accept such treatment, and he was unwilling to draw attention to himself, so Lupin had to end the relationship for his own sanity.

Unlocking the door to his small room, Lupin quickly went about unpacking the small amount of belongings he had brought along. Expecting much worse, he was thankful that this place was at least somewhat clean. It may still be in Diagon Alley, but he had a clear view of Knockturn Alley from his dirty window.

After taking a quick shower, Lupin finally collapsed onto a small sofa by the fire as he waited for his guest. It still confounded him every time he thought of how they had come to be together, as different as they were, but he cherished it all the same. He didn't know how he could have survived these past six months without her unyielding and unquestioning devotion. When the whole world made him feel too unworthy to clean their shoes, she never expected him to do or say anything more than he wanted to, and he loved her for it.

Lupin's heart jerked up in his throat at the sound of light tapping on the door.

"Lupin? It's me..."

Author's Notes: Ending with another mystery. You want to hurt me, I know...

-I'd like to thank my beta, **melusin** for all the hours she has put into this story.

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book i. Line 261.

-Next up: Lavender continues with her odd behavior and is noticed by someone other than Hermione. Dumbledore has another troubling conversation with the portrait in his bedroom chambers, causing him to place a burden on Hermione's shoulders. Sirius has a question he has been dying to ask Hermione. His chance comes when they are both alone... or are they?

Chapter Eight - Ease Would Recant Vows Made in Pain

Chapter 9 of 36

With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began. And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. Eventual SS/HG. Alternate Universe, HBP death disregarded.

Nominated for best fic in the 2007 OWL Awards: Fire & Ice Category (SS/HG), Romance Category, Angst Category, and A/U Category

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: My beta, **melusin**, has helped me greatly with this story and the writing.

Dolohov jumped back in alarm, grasping his chest, when a body suddenly appeared by his side.

"Bloody Christ, Snape!"

Severus Snape did not require more than a fraction of a second to recover from his lengthy Apparation.

"What is taking so long?" His low voice warned Dolohov to tread very carefully.

"Macnair," Dolohov said, fidgeting uncomfortably and turning away from Snape to look up at the small Muggle house. "He, uh, decided to take Bellatrix with him and the

new recruits." Lifting the edge of his mask, Dolohov scratched at the stubby skin of his chin as he waited for Severus to make a move. "If anyone can get their feet wet, she can," he laughed timidly.

Temper flaring, Snape turned to Dolohov with a disgusted expression on his face. The older man hadn't changed. He was too much of a coward to enter the Creevey house, preferring his crouched position amidst the shrubbery.

"Imbecile!" Snape snarled. "If you knew they were going to take their time, you should have waited until they left the house before you cast the Dark Mark! Aurors will be here at any moment!"

Snape sped up the winding driveway toward the house.

Knowing that the door would be open, he pushed aside the spell damaged wood and quickly entered the small living room. His foot slipped against the wet tiles, forcing him to grasp the stair banister to maintain his balance.

A wide trail of smeared blood streaked across the tiled floor leading into the kitchen. Wand raised, Severus followed the grotesque path. Just behind the granite counter, he spied the mangled body of a young woman lying face down in a pool of her own gore. Snape turned toward a second set of stairs next to the kitchen, but paused as a small gurgle echoed against the white walls. Snape could hardly believe that the woman could have survived such a deep laceration to her skull. He walked around the counter to get a better look.

It was his duty to ensure there were no survivors.

But, it wasn't the woman that made the noise. There was no question that she was dead. Severus emotionlessly watched as a small toddler yanked the woman by the ear, grunting angrily when she refused to respond. When the very tiny child finally noticed Severus' presence, he raised his hands up in the air towards him. He was too small to push himself away from his seated position underneath his mother's embrace.

Snape's face barely twitched in reaction.

The baby whined when the tall, dark man turned away from him and left the room, accepting that he was there to stay. The baby placed his chubby fists on either side of the woman's mangled skull and nuzzled his confused face in the hollow of her wet neck.

"One more time... " Snape heard Bellatrix's hoarse voice the moment he entered the narrow stairway.

Sobbing, laughing, gagging, shrieking, no other words were distinguishable. The various voices mingled together to form a single morbid hum.

Snape ran down the hallway toward the bedroom that held the most noise. Lifting his leg, he kicked the base of the door harshly, forcing it off its hinges.

"We're leaving. Now," he commanded to all in the room.

Zabini immediately rose from his seated position on the bed. Goyle looked from side to side, unsure if he should stay with Bellatrix or obey his Head of House.

"No," Bellatrix hummed with a deranged smile on her face. "Hit him again," she commanded a middle-aged Muggle standing in the center of the bedroom.

Face swollen from despair, the older Muggle looked down at his teenage son lying on the floor. Body bent into the fetal position, the young boy tensed, pressing his knees harder against his chest. His right hand clutched at the burnt remains of what should have been his left foot.

"No more," the man wheezed as he fearfully looked down at the belt in his hand.

"DO IT OR I'LL TAKE THE OTHER ONE!" Bellatrix shrieked.

The young boy cried anew as the Muggle man shakily raised the belt above his head.

"We don't have time for this shite!" Severus barked, pointing his wand at the boy on the floor.

"Avada Kedavra!"

"NO!" Bellatrix shouted, fists clenching in the air.

Severus gave Zabini a deathly glare. Zabini slowly raised his wand to point it at the gasping Muggle.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Severus stepped aside from the door, extending his arm to point towards the staircase as he eyed Zabini and Goyle.

Both boys did not hesitate to leave.

With a rueful smile upon her lips, Bellatrix slowly walked up to Severus and placed the back of her hand against his face. He emotionlessly stood in place.

"What's wrong?" she cooed. "Still carrying a soft spot for these creatures? Did he remind you of your filthy Muggle father?"

With a sneer on his face, Severus yanked at Bellatrix's hand and held it in his crushing grip in front of her vision.

"Where's Macnair?" he said in quiet frustration.

A sadistic smile spread across her face. "In the girls' room. They've stopped screaming, did you notice?"

"Get him."

Severus harshly pushed her away from him, sending her stumbling to the floor, and headed for the stairway.

Bellatrix looked down at her index finger, which was bent at an odd angle, and cackled madly to herself.

*** **

The teacup in Sirius' palm rattled against the saucer as his hands shook uncontrollably. He had chosen to skip breakfast and arrive in class early to clear all the desks for today's practical lesson, even though it could have been accomplished in a matter seconds with magic.

I'm fooling myself. I just can't bear to sit still at the Head Table with Hermione there.

He had made up his mind; he was going to ask her the one question that had been nagging him for the past two weeks. He was not sure how she would react to it, but he trusted Hermione enough to know that she would not laugh at him or get angry. There was something in the way she looked at him when they talked that made him believe she could care about him. Maybe even love him.

She's too young for me, he thought insecurely.

Not really, in fact she might even be too mature for you another voice interjected.

But, there was yet another voice in his head that he wished would just go away. A voice that spoke such an honest truth that it pained him to listen. *How can you be so selfish?* it said. *How can you expect to have any type of real relationship with your condition? You would be lucky if she didn't run away screaming*

"No," he grunted under his breath. Tea splattered across his hands and robes as his anger got the better of him. She would understand; he could make Hermione understand. Before he could comfort himself further, a dull sensation of growing heat pierced through his trouser pocket.

"Bloody hell!" In his irritation, he flung the cup across the room, sending fragments of broken china across the classroom floor before reaching into his pocket.

*** **

"Who are you looking for?" Ginny whispered in Hermione's ear.

Startled, Hermione's lost her grip on her fork, sending her under the House Table to retrieve it. "Um, no one."

Arching her eyebrow, Ginny said, "Uh huh, no one? All right. You haven't even touched your breakfast yet."

Hermione looked down at her plate as if she couldn't believe it was true. With a heavy sigh, she rested her elbow on the table and pushed the eggs around. Immediately upon entering the Great Hall, Hermione had noticed that Professor Snape was not present at the High Table. The second she caught herself wondering where he was, she also wondered why she suddenly cared. Of the hundreds of faces littered about the Great Hall, why did she seek out that one? When she couldn't find that face, why did it trouble her so much?

"I flunked an Ancient Runes test," Ginny said casually.

Hermione's fork was under the table again. "WHAT? Oh, Merlin, Ginny, why haven't you been studying? It's all that sneaking around you've been doing late at night, isn't it? Don't think I haven't noticed. I knew you were somewhat boy crazy, but this is ridiculous. As soon as I have a free period, I'm going to work out a study schedule for you, and I'll tutor twice a week and -- this isn't funny! What... STOP LAUGHING!"

Hermione's tirade was cut short when Ginny lowered her head onto her shoulder and enveloped the indignant Head Girl in a fierce hug. Dumbfounded, Hermione lightly placed her hand on Ginny's shaking back until her giggles died down.

Head still on Hermione's shoulder, Ginny looked up, smiling, "I missed you."

Hermione returned the hug with equal energy.

"How can girls run on such high emotions all the time without passing out? I'll never understand it."

"Shut up, Ron," said Ginny shakily.

Ron rushed to shovel more food into his mouth, rivaling Harry's frenzy of packing books into his bag.

Harry was the first to stand, sending the others an irritated glare. "Come on, you lot. We're going to be late!" He gave them one more glance before sprinting out of the Great Hall.

Hermione, Ron and Ginny sprinted after him, dodging various groups of students who weren't as eager to arrive early for class. Hermione waved Ginny goodbye as she turned down the corridor leading to their first class.

"You know, Harry," Hermione panted when she finally caught up with him, "if you put as much energy into your other subjects as you do into Defense Against the Dark Arts, you could be at the top of your class."

"It's a lot easier to do well in one class when you procrastinate in three others."

"That's a terrible approach to school work! We're taking our NEWTs in less than eight months. You need to take all your subjects seriously. Stop rolling your eyes, Ron!"

"Must you talk like that during the one class we actually have fun in? Can't you at least pretend this isn't a life or death situation? Oh look!" Ron quickly added before Hermione could retort. "The desks are cleared. This is going to be good."

*** **

"Well, that's it for today. Uh, just read chapter six to prepare yourselves for the next lesson. Oh no, Neville, no, no don't pick at it! You won't need to visit Madam Pomfrey. I assure you it will scab over and fall off by the end of the day."

"Yeah, great," Neville mumbled thickly as he exited the room, his palm shielding the center of his forehead.

"Um, Hermione. Excuse me, Miss Granger," Sirius called nervously.

"Yes, sir?" She paused from loading her bag.

"Could you stay after class a few moments?"

"Of course," she answered half-heartedly. Hermione didn't like the idea of being late for her next class.

Ron sat back down next to her, kicking his feet up on the desk as he pulled an apple from his bag. He was halfway through devouring the fruit before he realized Sirius, Harry and Hermione were staring at him with perplexed expressions.

"Whaf?"

"Sirius asked to see Hermione, Ron!"

"So?"

Sirius growled under his breath, briefly closing his eyes to keep from snapping. Merlin help him, the boy was still sitting there. Sirius stormed around the desk, lunging at Ron to grab hold of him by the ear.

"Ow, ow, OW!"

"Go to class!" Sirius bellowed, dragging a hunched Ron by the ear. "You're going to be late." Sirius yanked open the classroom door and flung Ron out into the corridor.

Harry tried to maintain a pinched face as he walked through the door after him. But the moment he noticed Ron's scarlet ear, he could no longer contain his laughter. He

shut the door behind them.

Hermione sat expectantly in front of Sirius, who stared at the classroom door as Ron and Harry's voices echoed down the corridor.

"What did he go and do that for?"

Harry laughed harder.

"Shut up, Harry!"

Sirius continued to blankly stare at the door as the voices faded into an inaudible hum. Instead of interrupting his musings, Hermione decided to take the opportunity to study him. She couldn't remember the last time she had taken a good look at Sirius. He had improved a bit since his stay at the Black family house; his face no longer looked skeletal and sunken in. He trimmed his light beard regularly now, and there was a faint color about his face. He tied his long hair back into a low ponytail and wore robes that actually fit his small frame.

Hermione raised her vision to his grey eyes and found them no longer staring at the door. They were looking at her, looking at him, with an almost wistful expression that he should have had the sense to mask.

"Don't worry," he lowered his eyes with a smile. "I'll write you a note for being late."

"Would you do that for any other student?" Hermione asked seriously.

"Excuse me?"

"If you held back another student, other than Harry, Ron or I, would you excuse them as well?"

"Well... I... It would depend on why I was holding them after class."

"Under what conditions would you refrain from giving me a note?"

He nervously watched her scrutinize him before answering. He hated loaded questions. "If a student were being reprimanded for bad behavior or poor work, I would not excuse him. But, I would always give you a note, Hermione."

"Oh, Sirius, that's terrible."

"Come again?"

Hermione rose from her seat to stand directly across from him. The disappointed look in her eyes gnawed at the fluttering in his stomach.

"Sirius, I really care about you," she lightly placed her hand on his tense arm, "but you need to learn to separate Sirius from Professor Black. I have worked hard all six years I've been here, and I would hate to think that my grades were even slightly based on favoritism. That's why I haven't been in here after classes and on weekends like Harry and Ron. There's a conflict of interest here, which is more obvious when you openly try to show favoritism to us. You'd get more respect from your students if you stopped trying to be their friend."

Sirius' eyebrows remained arched as her words sunk in. "I may act more like a friend than an authority figure, but I get respect none the less."

"Well, of course you get respect; the class loves you. But, as a friend you are an equal, and it gives them the idea that they have a right to argue with you -- to question your authority. Just look at Ron!"

"Yeah, well, he's a special case."

Hermione genuinely laughed. "Yeah, he always has been, too."

Hermione and Sirius both shared a laugh, each remembering their crazy redheaded friend's various antics. As the laughter died down, an uncomfortable silence pressed down on them. It pressed the most on Sirius since he had asked her to stay. His every nerve throbbed to the pulse of his blood flow when Hermione stepped closer.

"How are you?"

Such a simple question had been asked of him a hundred times over, each in passing without a genuine want of a response. She was the only one who looked him straight in the eye and paused sincerely, waiting for an answer.

"Much better, I suppose."

"Good, I'm glad." Hermione smiled warmly. She flashed him one more genuine smile before picking up her book bag and heading towards the door.

Sirius stood there watching her, knowing that with each step she took he was losing his chance.

"Hermione, wait a moment!" Sirius ran out into the corridor just outside his classroom door. "There was one thing that I wanted to ask you. Will the Headmaster be allowing trips this year to Hogsmeade?"

"Yes. That is, they haven't been cancelled yet. If that's what you mean."

"Is it still customary for the Head Girl and Boy to patrol to make sure all the students get back safely?"

"It is," Hermione answered slowly. "I mean, I haven't discussed it with Ernie Macmillan yet, but both of us are expected to walk with the rest of the students."

"Well, I was wondering... I mean, if you wouldn't mind the company... If I could escort you."

Hermione tilted her head to the side, biting her upper lip in thought. "I don't know if that would be such a good idea, Sirius, bearing in mind the reservations I have about our relationship at school."

"Trust me, Hermione, your advice means the world to me. I will try to stop and think to ensure I don't show you such favoritism. I've been in the castle almost three weeks now, and I need to get some fresh air, so I'll be going regardless. But, I would much rather have some company." Sirius waited, his nerves on edge as she visibly pondered all this information.

"Well... all right, then." Hermione smirked at Sirius' attempt to hide his satisfaction.

"I do think some fresh air will be good for you," she playfully reached behind his head to tug at his neat hair. "You've been looking much better since you've been here."

Walking down the corridor to her next class, Hermione had the oddest sensation of someone watching her. Classes were well underway, so there was no reason for someone to be wandering about. Looking behind her one more time, Hermione intentionally turned down the wrong corridor, extending the trek to her next class.

A silent figure pressed himself behind a large stone pillar, eyeing the curly haired female as she walked by. A few moments ago, Snape had possessed no other thought

than to walk straight into the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom to inform Black of Lupin's next visit. But the moment the classroom door opened and a smiling Hermione Granger walked out, his first instinct was to hide. Seeing a distressed Sirius running after her further prevented him from moving.

Snape knew full well that she was walking the wrong way to her next class and decided against following her. He was irritated at himself for allowing Sirius to annoy him in every possible way. If he had any influence on the situation, the first Hogsmeade visit would not be as perfect as Sirius hoped it would be.

*** **

Frustrated, Harry crossed out the same word, misspelling it for the third time.

"Almost done, then?" said Ron from the other side of the table.

"Not even close. This year is going to be a disaster without Hermione here all the time."

"Tell me about it."

Dipping his quill in the ink, Harry was relieved that Ron couldn't tell why he was so distracted. His hand paused above the paper as a loud laugh filled the Gryffindor common room. *Her laugh.*

Lowering his head, Harry let his messy hair fall over his face as he looked at Ginny once more. She was sprawled on the floor with her back resting against an armchair. Every few moments, she would giggle and laugh as Seamus joked around with her. Harry guessed that they were a new item. Why else would Seamus reach out and tickle her from time to time?

It was almost an obsession to look at her now, and it made Harry nauseous every time he enjoyed it. Her fiery, straight hair stood out in the largest of crowds. He wished he could kiss the soft skin on her face again and be the object of the intoxicating glow she always had in her eyes. It was hard enough to tear his eyes away from her at meals and walks in the corridors, but it was almost impossible when she was being happy with someone else.

He loved her. He missed what they had started last year. He wanted her so desperately but he knew that he had to let her go.

Harry knew Ginny. He knew her as well as he knew Ron or Hermione. As long as Ginny fancied herself in love with Harry, she would follow him anywhere he went; to the very edge of hell, if necessary. Harry couldn't bear the idea of his friends gladly giving up their lives to help and protect him. So he convinced himself; the less they knew, the better off everyone would be.

"Hello, Harry."

A female body stepped in front of his vision, blocking Ginny from his view. A full chest in a tight shirt was all that he could see, distracting him from looking up. She giggled, leaning to one side and placing her hand on her hip.

"Mind if I join you?" asked Lavender.

"Sure, all right," Harry agreed without really knowing what she was talking about.

Lavender carried her books to sit beside Harry, grinning prettily without breaking eye contact. She made a show of opening her Transfiguration book to the same page as Harry's and placing it on the table in front of her. With a quizzical look on her face, she eyed her book once more before picking it up, closing it, and moving it to the side.

"Hello, Ron, hope you are well," she said coolly.

Harry noticed that she never looked up from the textbook, so she didn't catch the sickened expression on her ex-boyfriend's face.

Ron immediately rose from the table. "It's a bit noisy in here, don't ya think," he said between uncomfortable coughs. "I'll concentrate better in our room."

Lavender watched Ron take a few steps towards the stairs leading to the boys' dormitory. Just as Ron was about to turn around, she leaned over Harry to reach for his Transfiguration book, bracing her hand on his thigh.

"No point in wasting table space." She smiled as she set the book between them.

"Coming?" shouted Ron from the stairs.

Harry was so confused. He hadn't a clue what was going on or why Lavender's hand still rested on his thigh. "No, go ahead," he said with a defeated tone in his voice. "I really need to finish this essay."

Harry watched Ron roll his eyes dramatically and run up the stairs. The moment Ron was out of sight, Lavender removed her hand and got to work on her essay.

Both of them sat in silence as they worked, Lavender writing away casually, smiling to herself now and again. Harry continued to scratch out various mistakes, send wistful glimpses toward Ginny, and look nervously at Lavender. After a good twenty minutes, her presence finally got to him.

From the corner of her eye, Lavender watched Harry turn toward her and open his mouth to speak. "You know, Harry," she turned to face him, "I've always wanted to tell you how much I admire you."

Caught off guard, Harry only had enough time to blink before she continued.

"With everything, you know? All the crap you've had to put up with -- the reporters, the Ministry, and... You-Know-Who."

Lavender's eyes softened slightly before she finished.

"Wow," Harry breathed. "I never knew you... um, thanks, Lavender."

"No problem! Let's get this essay done, eh?"

"All right."

Both continued in silence once again. Harry still repeatedly glanced at Ginny, but he did not feel quite as awkward about sharing a book with Lavender. This did not go unnoticed by Lavender. Every now and then she would flip her hair to cover her smile from Harry's sight.

*** **

A couple of days later, two girls sat by the fire in the Gryffindor common room as the evening passed by. Heads close together, they spoke in hushed tones until the room slowly emptied.

"You're just going to mess it up again," said Parvati. She whipped her long pony tail behind her back and reached for the copy of *Witch Weekly* on the end table.

Lavender leaned across to her, yanking the magazine from her grasp.

"No, I won't," she said icily.

The sudden sound of footsteps scrabbling through the portrait hole caught their attention. Ron was the first to enter the common room with a laughing Harry close behind. Harry kicked out his foot, catching Ron's shoe in mid step. The lanky redhead's legs tripped underneath him, and he crashed to the floor.

"Bugger... " Ron turned over onto his back and kicked out his leg, catching an hysterical Harry by the ankle.

Lavender couldn't help but smile as she watched the two boys wrestle on the floor.

Ginny entered shortly behind them, rolling her eyes at the sight of their flailing limbs and feet.

"Ginny!" Ron called after her. "Hurry, go and get Hermione!"

Ginny smiled knowingly and sprinted to the Head Girl's room.

"What's going on?" Lavender asked her as she passed.

"Can't tell you. Surprise." Ginny answered dismissively.

Lavender glared at the redhead as she knocked urgently on an adjoining door.

"Hermione! Hurry up," Ginny moaned dramatically, shooting Ron and Harry a devious smile. "Someone tied a Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes firework to one of the house-elves, and it won't stop flying around the... "

"WHAT!" came a scream from inside the Head Girl's room.

The second Hermione yanked open her door, Ginny latched onto her arm, pulling her toward the portrait hole.

Lavender's wide smile went unnoticed by the two girls as they breezed by.

"Neville, where are you!" Ron yelled as he raced out of the common room ahead of them.

"Where on earth are we going?" Hermione questioned skeptically.

"You'll see." Harry smiled.

"But it's almost curfew!"

Lavender watched the group scramble back through the portrait hole. A flustered Neville ran down the dormitory stairs after them, slamming into the portrait as it closed unexpectedly against his face.

Parvati sat silently, arms crossed as she shot Lavender an 'I told you so' gaze.

"Shut up," Lavender hissed, throwing the magazine at Parvati's face. Incensed, she rose from the armchair and marched to one of the windows that had a clear view over Hogwarts' grounds. Catching sight of Hagrid's hut, Lavender waited, watching the thick smoke steadily rise out of the small chimney.

"See them yet?" Parvati asked in mocked sincerity.

"Yeah," Lavender answered. She watched the happy group as they marched towards Hagrid's hut, scarves and cloaks fluttering behind them in the steady wind.

Lavender scowled down at the scene. "Loony's with them, can you believe that?"

Her eyes narrowed as she watched the group place Hermione directly in front of the door before pounding on it with their fists. The shadow of the massive gamekeeper appeared in the doorframe, holding out a large platter with a number of glowing candles. The group of friends turned towards Hermione, raising their hands in excitement and enveloping her in their arms.

Seething, Lavender jealously watched the scene, eyeing Hermione as she emotionally clutched at a smiling Harry. When Hermione grasped him by the face to place a loving kiss on his cheek, Lavender finally tore herself away from the window.

*** **

Up in the Headmaster's rooms, a faint blue mist slowly rose out of a large mug sitting on the end table.

Albus Dumbledore's hand hesitated in the air for a few moments before he finally reached out and firmly grasped the cool ceramic beaker. He carefully raised the mug to his mouth, and began to take in small sips of the frothy liquid.

Taking a quick moment to catch his breath, Dumbledore turned to eye the portrait which he knew was staring at him.

"Don't let me interrupt," the portrait ridiculed with an insulted look on its face.

"That would be a first, Godric, now, wouldn't it?"

Godric shrugged his shoulders indifferently, but still eyed the mug with disgust. "You've never heeded my warning before, why should you start now?"

"Precisely."

"You overvalue your importance, old man!" Godric barked.

Dumbledore sighed in defeat and raised the mug to his lips once more.

"You need to speak to him."

"Please, Godric, not this again."

Godric's eyebrows pinched in frustration. "If you don't tell the boy everything soon, nothing will fall into place like you think it will!"

"Harry is hardly a boy anymore."

"Then stop protecting him from forces you cannot control." Godric's voice rang low and serious through the bed chambers.

Dumbledore merely sighed again, finally finishing the contents of his cup.

"How did you convince him to return to school?" Godric asked.

"It wasn't as difficult as you think. Harry just needed to be reminded that life should go on, now and once the battle is fought and won. Voldemort has taken so much from him, Harry refused to give him the power to impede his education as well."

"Clever," Godric sneered.

"I did not lie to him!"

A loud, thunderous laugh vibrated against the tapestry covered walls. Sitting in his magnificent diamond-studded chair, Godric grasped his side as he laughed sardonically. Finally calming down, he eyed the enraged old wizard. "And just, if I may ask, what do you think you have been doing this whole time? What have you been repeatedly doing every time he has left your office thinking he was finally being told the truth!"

"It should not matter," Dumbledore spoke quietly. "None of this changes the outcome of the prophesy."

Godric nodded knowingly. "Perhaps, but there is still the other factor you have added to that fate. You will be lucky if Harry doesn't kill you himself when he discovers who else he must destroy -- if he listens to your scheming."

"Then," Albus answered in a desperate and tired voice, "I hope I am not so lucky."

Godric looked down at the older man and was reluctant to admit that he found a proud satisfaction in seeing the Headmaster's shoulders slump as he finally accepted the harsh truth. But the school founder wasn't finished yet.

"You know," Godric continued, "there *is* always the chance that Harry will choose to ignore your wishes. He could very well decide to kill Voldemort in the same fashion he has been planning all along."

"Yes," Dumbledore sadly admitted, "yes, he could."

*** **

Hermione rose very early the morning of the Hogsmeade trip. After making her bed, she drew back the curtains in her window seat to let the light into her room. Hermione groaned at the sight of a deep purple sky. She longingly eyed her lush bed before finally dragging herself into the bathroom.

She wanted to go back to sleep but she had too much to do. Professor Dumbledore wanted to see her before breakfast, and Professor McGonagall wanted to see her before the trip so she could help with the permission slips.

As Hermione dressed, she tried to ignore the nervous fluttering in her stomach.

"What am I so edgy about?" she asked herself.

You're going on a date her mind answered.

"No, no, it's not a date."

Sirius asked you to escort him

"Yes, but just as friends."

Neither of you made that distinction.

Her stomach dropped.

Look at the dress robes you've put on.

Hermione's face fell into her hands. "Oh, Merlin, what am I doing?"

The walk to Dumbledore's office seemed longer than usual. Her every footstep echoed loudly in the corridors, immediately making her wonder how effective she would be as a spy. Four weeks had passed without any word from Dumbledore. Disappointed, she had wondered if he had given up on the idea of using her for inside information. But, her spirits had been raised once more when she found his note on her dresser the previous night.

"Swedish Fish."

Hermione squared her shoulders as she ascended the spiral staircase. Pausing at the top step, Hermione hesitated in approaching Dumbledore's large office door as the sound of raised voices drifted toward her. Slowly approaching it, she was about to interrupt the argument with a knock when the voices became clear.

"Tell me once and for all. Is Black here for the Dark Lord's protection or yours?"

Recognizing Professor Snape's harsh tone, Hermione lowered her arm and pressed her ear to the door.

"You do not need to know that information," Dumbledore breathed tiredly.

She jerked at the sound of two hands slamming down on hard wood.

"What I need *is* more information! The Dark Lord is growing impatient. This would be easily solved if I simply looked into Black's mind..."

"No, you will stay out of his thoughts. That is *anorder*, do you understand me?"

"As if I have a choice," Snape sneered sarcastically.

"Just continue watching Sirius' every move from an unseen vantage point. I do not want him aware of your presence. I already have someone in mind for a more personal interaction with him."

"Please do not tell me you are relying on the adolescent magic of an eighteen-year-old girl--"

"We are not alone," Dumbledore interrupted loudly. "Please enter, my dear."

Hermione winced at Dumbledore's instruction. Exhaling deeply, she straightened her back before opening the door.

"I apologize, Headmaster," she said confidently. "I didn't want to interrupt."

Professor Snape snorted disbelievingly and turned to exit the office.

"If it's all right with you, Professor Snape, I would like to finish our meeting before dinner."

"As you wish, Headmaster."

Walking toward each other, Hermione entering the office and Professor Snape exiting, she fought the impulse to look at him, keeping her vision on the armchair.

Determined to appear indifferent, she slightly moved aside to allow Professor Snape room to pass.

Without a pause in his step, Snape brushed past her. His arm grazed her elbow as his robes billowed against her legs. She turned to watch him close the door as a flush crept up her neck.

"Good morning, my dear." Dumbledore gestured for her to take a seat in front of his desk.

"Good morning, Headmaster," Hermione said as she sat down. "I really do apologize for the interruption. I did not mean to pry."

"No harm done." He smiled serenely at her. "This wouldn't be the first time you have harmlessly listened outside closed doors, now, would it?"

"I... when did I... ?" *Did he know? There could be no way he could know, could there?*

"Now," he continued. "When will Professor McGonagall be expecting you?"

Hermione sat straighter in her chair. If he was going to let her get away with that night in number twelve, Grimmauld Place then she wasn't going to argue.

"I need to be in the Entrance Hall in about thirty minutes."

"Very good, that's more than enough time." Dumbledore leaned back in his chair as he arched his fingers under his chin.

"I understand that you will be spending your Hogsmeade patrol with Professor Black?"

"Um, yes, if that is all right with you, sir." Hermione had the oddest sensation one gets when waiting in anticipation to be scolded for misbehavior.

"Yes, of course. Professor Black came to me a few days ago to inform me of his intentions toward you."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. She leaned forward slightly in her chair. "I'm sorry, I do not follow. What intentions?"

"You do remember, on the night of the Welcoming Feast, my telling you of your expectations as an Order Member?"

Blind, unquestioning faith. "Yes, sir, I do."

"Very good. Let's just say that I am ecstatic that you have accepted Professor Black's invitation."

Hermione could physically feel her body sinking into the soft cushion of her chair. She did not understand why Professor Dumbledore was talking in circles instead of giving her a direct order. A direct order would feel much less problematic and sacrificial than insinuated expectations.

The Headmaster gave a small smile as he rose from his seat behind his large office desk. He slowly began his usual obsessive pacing around the room.

"Do not fret, my dear, or worry over other people's talk."

"Talk, sir?"

"Your outing with Professor Black is perfectly innocent, so I doubt it would spark rumors of the relationship you have with him."

Relationship! her mind screamed.

"And if gossip should develop, or a relationship for that matter, you are of age in the Wizarding world and therefore seen as perfectly capable of making your own logical decisions -- with previous thought of potential consequences. No laws will be broken here."

Irritated, Hermione's hands clenched at her robes on either side of her thighs to prevent herself from interrupting.

"I think you misunderstand, *sir*. Professor Black and I are merely enjoying the afternoon together as the friends we have always... "

"Before you say anything further, Miss Granger," Dumbledore interrupted, ending his pacing behind his desk. "I first must express to you my gratitude." Dumbledore continued to maintain eye contact with her to ensure she would not interject.

He pulled out his chair to take a seat once more. "It certainly means the world to Professor Black to finally get out of the castle. There are darker forces at work here. Had he wanted to go alone, unattended, I would not have let him leave school grounds. Your interaction with him this afternoon will be the highlight since his coming here."

"Why wouldn't you let Professor Black go alone?"

"As one of the most intelligent students to have walked these halls, you must have noticed Professor Black's difficulty adapting to the role of Professor. Let's just say that I need him here more for precautionary measures than I need an adequate instructor."

"So, Voldemort is after Sirius?" Hermione questioned hungrily.

"As I said, there are darker forces at work here -- outside the castle mostly, but also within these very walls. Hidden characters that I fear wish harm on those under my protection. You have no idea how much I will value your *continued* interaction with him. As vastly intelligent as you are, I am positive that if anyone could detect possible enemies of Sirius Black, it would be you."

Hermione opened her mouth to argue, but the stony command in Dumbledore's expressionless face kept her silent. So, her mission was laid before her feet now, as unclear as the October sky that waited for her.

"I understand, Professor," she said emotionlessly.

"Thank you, my dear. I knew you would."

*** **

"Well, that was quicker than I expected," Professor McGonagall said at the Entrance Hall. She stood just outside the large oak doors, looking straight out towards the Forbidden Forest. McGonagall did not turn around as Hermione walked up, but spoke to her the moment she was at her side.

"Yes," Hermione replied as she accepted the pile of permission slips. "There wasn't much to *discuss*."

Minerva's face quickly turned toward her young friend. Afraid to look into Hermione's eyes, she stared at a point beyond her. Hermione could see Minerva's internal battle between pretending everything was all right and her need to discover what was said in the Headmaster's office. But, all she would be able to do would be to find

disapproval in the ambiguous expectations laid out at the young Gryffindor's feet, and Hermione did not think she could handle that at the moment.

"Look into the forest, Hermione," McGonagall instructed as she staunchly folded her hands in front of her.

Hermione turned to face the expanse of twisted, dark trees on the opposite side of the school grounds.

"Tell me what you see."

Trees. "Professor?"

"Minerva, when we are alone. Tell me what you see."

"Brush, grass, trees, roots--"

"You've been deep into the forest before, haven't you?" McGonagall interrupted.

Hermione paused in thought before answering. "Yes."

"The deeper you went in, what immediately caught your attention?"

"The difficulty of simply walking," Hermione answered instantly.

"Why?"

"We strayed off the path. The brush was wild."

"Why? Why was the brush wild? What about it slowed you down?" McGonagall continued at her blank stare. "Think, Hermione."

"It grew darker and darker the further we went in. The trees grew smaller and closer together -- suffocating almost, as if they were fighting for the tiniest amount of available sunlight. The branches were so thin and sickly. It felt like walking through a massive spider's web."

"Exactly." Minerva finished, turning away from Hermione at the first sounds of approaching students thundering down the marble staircase.

Hermione waited for the wiser woman to say something more, but Minerva seemed to have finished.

With her back still facing the young Gryffindor, Minerva continued as if she never stopped talking. "One thing I have noticed, in the many years I have served this school, assisted Professor Dumbledore, and fought a never-ending threat--" She paused in contemplation before continuing. "Never mind. Just be observant, my dear. Our cause... our fight... It is with the greatest of hopes that goodness will prevail. But, the path we take to accomplish this goal is the ultimate trial. That is the real struggle before the battle."

Minerva finally turned around to exchange a hard, pressing look with Hermione before she walked into the Great Hall for breakfast. A reply was not necessary as Hermione perfectly understood her Head of House's warning.

"Oh, good. You're here already."

A stiff grin automatically forming on her face, Hermione turned toward the sound of Sirius' voice.

"I woke up early and couldn't stand sitting in my office any longer," he continued. "You look lovely, Hermione."

As Sirius placed his hand in the small of her back, Hermione allowed him to direct her into the Great Hall for breakfast.

Author's Notes: Story beta'ed by the dedicated **melusin**.

-Chapter title take from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book iv. Line 96.

-Next up: The Hogsmeade visit a day littered with mishaps and surprise meetings. Sirius attempts to take his *relationship* with Hermione one step further. But most importantly, the slow dance between Severus and Hermione finally comes to a head.

Chapter Nine - Execute Their Airy Purposes

Chapter 10 of 36

With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began. And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. Eventual SS/HG. Alternate Universe, HBP death disregarded.

Nominated for best fic in the 2007 OWL Awards: Fire & Ice Category (SS/HG), Romance Category, Angst Category, and A/U Category

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: My beta, melusin, has helped me greatly with this story and the writing.

The walk to Hogsmeade felt comfortable; slow and steady in the crisp October chill. Hermione purposefully trailed behind the eager groups of students as a means of keeping them in her vision. As Ron and Harry passed, Hermione suppressed a frown at the sight of Harry shooting his godfather a goofy and surprised grin. Ron, on the other hand, merely looked perplexed. After a while, the typically unobservant redhead turned around to eye Sirius and Hermione once more with an uncomfortable grimace etched on his face.

Oddly, since her meeting with Professor Dumbledore, much of the apprehension Hermione had held with accompanying Sirius to Hogsmeade gradually evaporated while they walked side by side. His talk was casual and a bit tentative, yet Hermione did not feel the awkwardness she expected. At first, she thought that it might be a positive sign, that maybe the visit would not be as uncomfortable as she had originally assumed. But there was something concealed beneath their conversation -- almost a pretence in her manner. Whether or not she genuinely wanted to be here with Sirius was of no consequence.

"I'm not one for too much window shopping," Sirius declared as they walked down the main street. "How about we pop into the Three Broomsticks?"

"All right."

The moment Hermione entered the Three Broomsticks with Sirius at her side, several students turned to look at them. Some held gazes of complete confusion, while others put their heads together to whisper through giggles.

A few years ago, Hermione's ears would have burned at the sight of a room full of people laughing and staring at her, but such a worry seemed so unimportant now.

"Why don't you find us a table while I get some drinks," said Sirius.

Hermione walked straight towards the first secluded booth that did not have neighboring occupants. Sitting down, she glared at the younger students that dared to continue gawking at her, forcing them to turn away.

"Thank you," Hermione said, accepting the Butterbeer Sirius had bought for her. He sat down opposite her and smiled arrogantly.

For a few minutes, both slowly sipped their drinks as they gazed around the pub in timid silence.

Sirius finally turned in his seat, daring to watch her face for a few long moments. Her head was down, steady in concentration while she tried to peel the label off her bottle.

"Thank you, Hermione." He waited for her to look up before he continued. "You have no idea how much I enjoy the simple pleasure of your company."

"Is that all this is?" Hermione lightly questioned, pressing the weight of her forearms against the polished wood.

"What do you mean?"

"Us being here. Your asking me to spend the day with you. Is it merely 'simple company'?"

"I... " Sirius cleared his throat as he leaned back into his chair. "I don't know exactly. I will admit, some of the few peaceful moments I've had... you were always in the same room. But honestly, your company is anything but simple."

"About what I said-- "

"Trust me, Hermione," Sirius interrupted her, "I haven't forgotten it. I will try to keep our... interactions... professional in the classroom."

Hermione's body visibly relaxed in her seat. She decided it would be all right to begin a real conversation.

"I don't believe I ever got around to telling you," she said genuinely, "how delighted I am for you -- finally being pardoned by the Wizengamot, and after all these years."

Sirius nodded at her enthusiasm. "I'm still not used to going out and sitting in public like this. It's a change, but a good one, I think."

"Was the pardon willingly offered or did Dumbledore request it?"

Sirius snorted at her ignorance. "Dumbledore requested it. He couldn't very well employ me as a professor unless my background was cleared," he answered impassively.

"That was kind of him."

"You would think so, wouldn't you?" Sirius responded bitterly.

*** **

"She fancies you," Ron declared.

"Rubbish," Harry answered over his shoulder. Gaining the attention of a shop assistant, he pointed at a large glass bowl filled with honey-colored toffees behind the counter.

"Either she fancies you, or she's trying to get back with me. And honestly, mate, I pray it's you."

"I don't fancy Lavender, Ron," Harry breathed, reaching into his pocket for some money.

Ron rolled his eyes, tailing behind Harry as they exited Honeydukes. "Honestly though, I don't care. Just don't go sucking her face in front of Ginny." Ron was too busy stuffing his mouth full of Chocolate Frogs to notice Harry suddenly stop walking.

Harry stumbled slightly when Ron collided with him, but seemed otherwise unaffected. "I would never do that," Harry spoke softly.

"I know, mate. Have you talked to her yet?"

He continued walking, face lost in concentration. "No," Harry answered slowly. "Not exactly. There's no bitterness, but there's no friendship either."

"Tough luck."

When Dean and Seamus ran across the street to join them, Harry lightly increased his pace to keep the pack of boys behind him. He tried not to appear irritated with Seamus, but at the back of his mind, Harry was imagining him on the floor of the Gryffindor common room, tickling a laughing Ginny.

Harry had hoped that coming to Hogsmeade would distract him from the stress and worries that constantly gnawed at him, but his mind refused to abandon its constant feverish musings. All summer, Harry had been so tempted to pull a 'Fred and George' and spend his available time searching for the remaining Horcruxes. His blood boiled every time he remembered the shock of opening the locket he and Dumbledore had recovered from the cave. All that hard work for naught, and Dumbledore was half his former self since drinking that horrifying potion.

Before classes ended, Harry had shown Sirius the contents of the locket for advice. The two of them had then searched Grimmauld Place for a locket that looked similar to the one Harry had seen in Dumbledore's memories. Harry was positive that one had been found amid the dusty collection of Black possessions. Maybe Sirius' brother, Regulus, might have hidden it there. But nothing was found, as most of the Black family heirlooms seemed to have disappeared at the same time in one day; all the cupboards and drawers were now empty. Sirius interrogated Kreacher, quite angrily in fact, but the magnitude of Kreacher's despair over his Mistress' missing possessions made it clear that the house-elf was not the perpetrator.

"Filthy thief," Harry murmured to himself.

The only obvious explanation was that the locket had been stolen by Mundungus Fletcher when he ransacked the place after Sirius first died.

Harry's face contorted disturbingly as that phrase passed through his mind.

First died... As if anyone can die a second time.

But, for some unexplainable reason, Sirius could. Harry prayed, by the grace of Merlin, that he could keep Sirius a little while longer, but something about Sirius seemed a bit off. Harry trusted Sirius enough to confide in him, but his godfather remained oddly quiet about his own troubles. Anyone that truly knew Sirius, like Harry and Lupin did, could easily sense that a traumatic event had occurred in order for him to return.

"Ready?" Ron's voice vaguely registered in Harry's mind.

"For?"

"We're going to the Three Broomsticks."

Harry truly wasn't in the mood to sit at the same table with Seamus.

"Go ahead, I think I'll go for a walk or something."

Ron paused, eyeing Harry curiously. "You sure?"

"Yeah, go on."

"Okay," Ron conceded. "Try to meet up with us later, all right?"

*** **

"No, I'm all right." Hermione waved at her three empty bottles of Butterbeer when Sirius offered to get her another.

"I'll be right back," he said to her, heading for the bar.

Hermione sat back in her seat and tried not to look as bored as she was starting to feel.

The door to the pub opened loudly. A group of seventh year Slytherins entered and slowly edged their way around the large number of excited students, suspiciously eyeing anyone who dared to look at them too long. Zabini and Goyle walked straight up to the bar. They stood unusually close to Sirius when there was plenty of room to spread out. Nott and Pansy walked to the back of the pub near Hermione. Both sat at a table directly in front of the small corridor that lead to the loos and back door.

Leaning back with his right leg crossed over his left knee, Nott raised an arm and placed it on the back of Pansy's chair.

Hermione eyed Pansy warily. The sight of Pansy out of school uniform appeared unusually foreign to Hermione. Her grey dress robes exaggerated the extent of her weight loss; her entire body language emanated a distressed frame of mind. Eyes downcast, the normally arrogant Slytherin showed every indication that, if given the choice, she would gladly be anywhere else but here.

The sound of breaking glass and wooden stools scraping against the floor caught Hermione's attention. Back at the bar, an apologetic Goyle reached for a fallen stool as Zabini helped Sirius stand up from his seated position on the floor.

"I apologize, Professor," said Zabini with a stony expression on his face. "Here, let me buy you another."

Flustered, Sirius removed his cloak as he brushed a few stray strands of his long hair out of his face. "No, no need for that." He noticed Goyle behind him. "Ah, yes. Thank you, Goyle. Just put it right there."

"Please, Professor," Zabini continued, "I insist." He quickly attained Madam Rosmerta's attention and ordered two more drinks.

"Well... uh... thanks," Sirius stuttered as he accepted the drinks.

As Sirius turned to walk back to their table, Hermione noticed the two seventh year boys immediately head straight toward Nott. But instead of sitting down, both boys raised a hand to scratch their noses and quickly exited the pub by the back door.

"What was that?" Hermione asked, accepting her unwanted drink.

"Ah, nothing. Just some boys horsing around."

Nott continued sitting there bone straight, his leg bouncing restlessly against his knee. Pansy, on the other hand, was on the verge of tears.

Nervously scratching at the whiskers on his chin, Sirius leaned toward Hermione with a determined expression on his face.

"Hermione," he called to her.

"Yes?" she answered passively without looking at him. She knew she was being rude, but her every nerve throbbed as adrenaline coursed through her. Something wasn't right about that group and she was determined to find out what.

"I think I should be perfectly honest with you-- "

Hermione stood up from her seat the second she spied Nott flee out the same back door.

"Excuse me," she said to Sirius without truly looking at him, "I need to go to the loo."

Hermione swiftly dodged various students as she edged her way through the maze of tables and chairs in the pub. Approaching the small corridor that led to the toilets, Hermione couldn't help but pause at the sight of an emotional Pansy.

Gnawing obsessively at her fingernails, Pansy blankly stared off into nothingness as light tears etched down her pale white face.

Hermione felt compelled to say something; but she knew she was wasting precious time.

Finally reaching the back door, Hermione pushed open the heavy wood and stepped into the damp alleyway behind the Three Broomsticks.

Lightly closing the door behind her, the putrid stench of stale urine and overripe vegetables filled her nostrils. She leaned against it, trying to discern the sound of footsteps on the uneven cobblestone passageway.

Looking both left and right, she felt clueless as to which way she should go.

Finally pushing herself away from the door, Hermione cautiously edged her way down the vacant alley, stopping periodically to peer down the intersecting streets.

*** ** *

"Look at my dress!" a seventh-year Ravenclaw girl screamed.

"Awful, isn't it?" Luna answered dreamily. "But at least you are still alive."

"Alive!" the girl shrieked, brushing off globs of mud from her robes.

"Oh, yes, thankfully the Lethifold passed right over you."

"What in Merlin's name is a Lethifold?" the girl hissed angrily.

"Well, obviously, *that* is a Lethifold."

From his vantage point across the street, Harry followed Luna's outstretched hand as she pointed to a long, dark cloak flying oddly against the wind.

"You would have been suffocated in seconds if it had got a hold of you. They're mostly attracted to gaudy robes with loads of clashing colors."

"That," the Ravenclaw hissed, "is just a lost cloak!"

"Yes, that is what they usually look like to materialistic witches."

The frustrated Ravenclaw screeched in anger, pointing her wand at Luna's legs. Ankles bound, Luna toppled over into the same pile of mud she had pushed the Ravenclaw girl into.

"Hey!"

Harry heard a female voice scream behind him the moment he took off running to help Luna. Lavender Brown quickly passed Harry, stopping to stand in the space separating the two Ravenclaw girls.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Lavender screamed, undoing Luna's bound legs with a flick of her wand.

"The crazy bitch pushed me."

"Oh, please, she's in your house. You of all people should know Luna would never do something like that without good reason. It would have taken you two seconds to Scourgify the mud."

Picking Luna up out of the mud, Harry smirked when the indignant Ravenclaw seethed at the sight of Lavender's pointed wand and reluctantly turned away.

"Thank you," Luna said to them, finally on her feet. Oblivious to their concerned stares, Luna wildly shook her wand in the air to rid it of the thick mud.

Harry flinched when flecks of dirt sputtered onto his glasses.

"*Scourgify!*"

"Oh, I could have done that myself," Luna said to Lavender.

Ignoring her, Lavender turned to Harry to repeat the same spell on his glasses.

"Thanks," he mumbled.

"What was up with her?" Harry asked Luna as the three of them watched the Ravenclaw march up the street.

Luna nodded knowingly at Harry's statement. "Sad, isn't it? That robe must have cost a fortune, too. She would have been safe if she hadn't worn that horrid lime-green dress."

Shaking his head, Harry laughed at Luna's typically insensible nature.

"Let me buy you a drink, Luna," Harry beamed at her.

"Why?" Luna asked, eyes wide.

"Um, because I want to?" Harry said. "I do tend to buy my friends drinks, you know."

"That's nice of you. I'm sure I would have loved it," Luna spoke in a monotone voice. "But, I think I'd rather owl my father."

And with that, the dreamy sixth-year Ravenclaw slowly paced up the street toward the Post Office.

"Does the offer still stand?"

Harry started, forgetting that Lavender was still standing next to him.

"What?"

"The drink?" She questioned playfully. "Except, I'd like to buy you one."

"Um, all right. But I'm really not in the mood for the Three Broomsticks."

"Oh, that's all right." Lavender smiled, reaching out to touch his arm. "It'll probably be too crowded, anyway."

"Yeah."

*** ** *

As she passed the numerous back doors to the various shops in Hogsmeade, it finally occurred to Hermione that Sirius would still be waiting for her. She hoped that as time passed he would not grow concerned and attempt to come looking for her.

A couple of streets south of the Three Broomsticks, Hermione finally heard the noise she had been hoping for. Just around the corner from where she was standing, the soles of thick boots scrambled against the cobblestone alleyway. Hermione heard the harsh argument of more than one voice echo down the street, yet was unable to decipher what they were saying.

Walking backwards to the nearest shop, Hermione edged her body into a dark doorway. She listened to the voices drawing closer, debating whether or not it would be logical to attempt to get nearer.

A surge of bravery coursed through her. But, the moment she took a step toward the street, strong arms closed around her. A cold hand with long fingers pressed tightly against her mouth.

"Scream, and I promise you will regret it," a deep voice whispered.

Hermione's moment of sheer panic instantly vanished as the recognizable voice breathed against her ear.

"Stupid girl," the voice hissed. "How typically Gryffindor of you to be sneaking around where you don't belong."

Hermione raised her arm to her face, trying to pull his hand away from her mouth.

Professor Snape's other hand tightened around her waist, crushing her against his chest.

"Stop your fussing this instant," he whispered harshly. "Before I choose to let you go, I want you to promise me that you will ~~d~~exactly as I say, is that clear?"

He continued when she showed no sign of acceptance. "I said, is that clear, Miss Granger?"

Hermione nodded mutely against his hand.

Without making a sound, Professor Snape swiftly rounded Hermione so her back pressed flush against the wooden door. Towering over her, Snape lowered his upper body to align his eyes with hers. He placed his arms on either side of her head so she couldn't run away.

"Listen to me," he said urgently. "You are to stay here and be quiet until I come back for you."

The voices on the other side of the street grew louder as the seventh-year Slytherins approached their corner of the alley. Hermione couldn't resist the temptation to divert her eyes towards the escalating argument. Professor Snape grasped her chin with his thumb and index finger, forcing her to look back at him.

"You *will* stay here."

Hermione did not hesitate to nod mutely against his hand.

In an instant, Snape turned from her and stepped out onto the alleyway, heading straight for the heated voices. This time, their words were much clearer.

"Shite! Snape!" Goyle yelled.

"Well, well, what have we here?" Professor Snape drawled. "A lover's quarrel? Although, the presence of a third party is a tad unorthodox."

"Piss off, Snape."

Hermione was shocked to hear a member of Professor Snape's own house speak to him so rudely.

"Not until I get what I came for, Mr. Nott."

"Jealous?" Zabini hissed.

"Of overzealous and reckless adolescent wizards?" Snape scoffed. "Hardly. I enjoyed that little scene you caused, though. I'm sure the twenty-odd witches and wizards in the pub enjoyed it as well."

"None of those idiots knew what we were doing," Nott pressed on.

"Perhaps... but I did. Now, hand it over," Snape said icily.

"Why?" Zabini barked. "So you can take all the credit for yourself? You're just as Malfoy described you."

"Ah, yes, continue to listen to the advice of my beloved godson. He didn't heed my warning, and look what happened to him."

Hermione stayed rooted in place, ears straining during the long, deafening moments of silence.

"What's the matter?" Snape finally spoke. "Kneazle got your tongue? Now, I know for a fact that the Dark Lord did not order any of you to do this, which leads me to believe that you have obtained some information that was not intended for your ears. Why the three of you were foolhardy enough to take it upon yourselves to steal that timepiece is beyond me."

"Ad-admit it," Nott stuttered. "You're just angry that we've succeeded where you haven't."

Suppressing a mocking laugh, Snape's voice rumbled deeply in his throat. "Please, do not tell me you are under the impression that I have been ordered to steal that?"

Another pause of lingering silence flooded the alleyway.

"Your father must be very desperate indeed to get back into the Dark Lord's favor, Mr. Nott. Pity, really, he didn't assist Lucius or Macnair when they attacked members of the Muggle government."

"YOU KEPT THAT ASSIGNMENT HIDDEN FROM HIM! BECAUSE OF YOU HE IS LAUGHED ABOUT LIKE A MISERABLE COWARD!"

"Manners, Mr. Nott," Snape said silkily. "So, now you've decided to take it upon yourself to... surprise... your master with this risky feat? Oh, we all know how much he loves surprises. Draco had the same idea in mind when the Dark Lord ordered him to break into the Headmaster's office. Instead, he decided to please his master by attempting to kill Dumbledore in the process. Tell me, Mr. Nott, when was the last time you saw your dear friend, Draco, let alone talked to him?"

"Fucking hell, Theodore--" Terror rang in Zabini's voice.

"SHUT UP! Don't listen to him!" Nott screamed.

"By now, the three of you should know that that isn't the wisest thing to do."

"Just give it to him," Goyle pleaded.

Nott released a frustrated bellow that bounced off every window and stone in the alley.

"*PETRIFICUS TOTALUS!*" Snape snarled.

Sucking in a nervous breath, Hermione pressed her back against the wooden door as she waited for the outcome of his attack.

A large solid weight fell on the damp street with a heavy thud.

"Now," Snape menacingly purred. "If the two of you know what is good for you, you will desist in listening to any more of Nott's foolish scheming before you get yourselves killed. Do I make self clear?"

"Y-y-yes, sir," Zabini and Goyle murmured.

"I want the three of you to walk back to the castle, and try not to do anything further to draw unnecessary attention to yourselves *Finite Incantatem!*"

More uneasy silence.

"I SAID MOVE!" Snape barked.

The heavy soles of boots quickly scabbled up the street, heading away from Hermione's hiding place in the doorframe. She quickly prepared herself when the sound of footsteps approached her from the left.

Snape elegantly stepped in front of the doorway, a bemused expression crossing his face at the sight of the haughty Gryffindor with her wand raised. Expecting her to lower it, his expression soured when she raised it higher at the sight of him.

"Haven't we played enough of this game, Miss Granger?" Severus sneered.

As Snape entered the doorway, Hermione briefly caught sight of a glimmer of black metal disappearing into one of his pockets.

"Don't come any closer," Hermione warned.

"Why ever not?" Snape mocked, taking a step toward her.

"You can't do it. You're a professor... I won't let you do it..."

"Stop your babbling, girl. What is it you think I will do?"

"You're going to Oblivate me," Hermione breathed, her fear escalating as the words left her mouth.

Snape stopped advancing on her. His lip twitched in amusement. "Am I?"

"Aren't you?"

"Never crossed my mind. If I wanted you to remain ignorant I would have been mindful of the volume of my voice."

"Oh." Hermione allowed her wand arm to fall limp in the air.

Seeing his opportunity, Snape lunged at her. Grasping her by the wrist, he pushed her further into the darkness until her back pressed against the door.

"Why do I have the feeling that you *do* enjoy this game, Miss Granger," Snape purred.

"I-I don't."

"Are you scared?" Severus asked quietly. His graceful hand grasped her smoothly by the jaw.

"Yes," Hermione breathed. "But, not in the way that you think."

A triumphant bell rang loudly in the back of Severus' mind as Hermione willingly raised her face to look at him. The small hand enclosed in his firm grasp fell limp, and her warm body relaxed against the door he had her pinned to.

His skillful fingers still holding her by the chin, Severus raised his thumb and slowly slid it along her bottom lip. Lightly panting, her hot breath burned his chilled skin.

"You are treading on very dangerous ground, Miss Granger."

"So are you." With hooded eyes, Hermione spoke against his hand, willing her lips to brush against the skin of his finger.

"Indeed," Snape purred, smoothly pulling away from her. "Five points from Gryffindor."

Hermione slowly opened and closed her eyes before she finally comprehended what he had just said.

"Excuse me?"

"For raising your wand to a Hogwarts' teacher," Snape continued.

Backing up, he stood straight with his arms crossed, waiting for her to step out into the alleyway.

Hermione didn't know if she should hex him or laugh at his audacity. With the loss of contact, goosepimples rose along her arms and back. The sun would be setting soon and Hermione still needed to walk the students back to the castle.

Stepping out onto the alleyway, Hermione flushed as she made eye contact with her Potions master.

"I need to hurry," she said timidly. "Sirius must be looking for me."

Snape's eyes narrowed at the mention of that loathsome name. "Very well, I trust you can find your way back?"

Tightening his cloak against himself, Snape marched down the alley in the opposite direction, robes billowing behind him in the wind.

*** **

Odd, really, how one can easily tolerate the reek of goat mess and stale mead the longer you wallow in it.

For once in a very long time, the unworldly weight that had precariously rested on Harry's shoulders for the last two years lifted a fraction. She was... different. Completely strange to have a conversation with, alone, for longer than a quick greeting. Yet, Harry had to admit that it was abnormally refreshing.

"Oh, eww..." Lavender grimaced, sliding her manicured finger down into her mug. With a disgusted frown on her lips, she pulled out her hand. Hanging by the tip of her bright nail, a rather long-legged spider swayed in the air before finally slipping back into her Butterbeer.

Harry quickly pressed his hand against his mouth, hoping he wouldn't spray the blonde girl with saliva and mead.

A shocked smile graced her face. "Are you laughing at me?" she said through indignant giggles. In mock anger, Lavender flicked her wet fingers in Harry's direction.

"No."

"Then stop grinning!"

"I'm not grinning."

Harry stared at Lavender's scowl, determined to keep a straight face.

It didn't work.

"I hope you find something hairy in your mug," she teased, throwing a peanut shell at his messy hair.

"Look at it this way," Harry smiled, pushing his hair out of his face, "at least you drank most of it before you noticed."

"Ugh... "

A light-hearted pause passed between them. Harry took the moment to gaze around the Hog's Head, wondering if there was anyone in here he might know. But the lightest touch on his hand caught his attention.

Eyes bashfully downcast, Lavender grazed the back of Harry's hand with her thumb before she spoke. "Was this a pity drink?"

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't have to buy me one just because I invited you here with me."

Harry's expression hardened. "If I had wanted to leave after your drink, I would have."

Lavender removed her hand from his and leaned back into her seat. For once, her face was void of the confident and flirtatious expression she had held since they arrived.

"I know. You're very different, Harry."

Harry uncrossed his legs, sitting straighter in his seat, and sent her a quizzical frown.

"Than the other boys, I mean."

Harry would have laughed or scoffed at such a clichéd comment if she hadn't looked so uncomfortable saying it. He raised his mug to his mouth, giving himself time to think of an adequate reply.

"This wasn't too bad, was it?" she questioned shyly.

"Honestly, no, it wasn't." Harry admitted.

*** **

"Hermione!" Ron called to her as she entered through the back door of the Three Broomsticks. "What were you doing out there?"

"Drank too much," she said matter-of-factly. "I needed some air."

Hermione pulled out a chair next to Ginny. Catching the fiery redhead's attention, Hermione raised her eyebrows in question at the sight of Seamus' chair so close to hers.

"Have any of you seen Professor Black?"

It was Ginny's turn to raise a knowing eyebrow. "He went looking for you."

The door loudly banged open, and the table turned their attention towards a slightly flustered Harry.

"Perhaps we should start heading back," Seamus said to Dean. "It'll be dark soon."

"I think I'll walk back with you," said Ginny, rising from the table to stand by Seamus' side.

Chin pointed in the air, Ginny avoided Harry's furious gaze as she passed him and walked determinedly out the door.

"What've you been up to?" Ron questioned, his eyebrow arched accusingly.

"Hog's Head."

"With whom?" Hermione asked.

"Lavender Brown."

Ron jolted, his legs falling off the chair they rested on. "I knew it!" he cried, smiling arrogantly.

"It's not like that, Ron. We were helping Luna see off a bully, and it just went from there."

"Uh, huh. Right."

"Never mind that, now," Hermione said irritably, wanting to take advantage of finally having the two of them alone. "Harry, when did you start having odd dreams again?"

Caught off guard, his eyes widened before he shot Ron an accusing glare. "Couldn't keep your mouth shut, could you?"

"So, you would really want to keep that from me?" Hurt rang heavily in Hermione's small voice.

Harry adjusted himself in his seat. "Well, no. Not like that."

"When did they start?" she delicately probed.

Harry reached for a stray cork on the wet table. Spinning it in his fingers, he swallowed a few times before he thought of what to say next.

"Since the summer. After... Nagini."

"Who's in them?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know," he lied.

"How strange. Do you think there's a connection?" Hermione asked.

Both boys sent her perplexing looks, unsure of where she was going with this.

Hermione sighed irritably. Turing around in her seat, she eyed anyone who stood within hearing distance of their table. "With the Horcruxes!" she whispered harshly. "You attempted to spend the summer looking for the rest of them, didn't you?"

"Yeah. I wish I still could, now."

"What's stopping you?" Ron asked.

"Dumbledore. He wants me to wait."

Hermione leaned closer to him. The tips of her curly hair grazed the numerous mugs on the table. "In heaven's name, why?"

"He told me about the ring. Marvolo Gaunt's ring. When he destroyed it, it left him injured and he's afraid the same thing will happen to me. He says that I might be afflicted by the ancient curses protecting the Horcruxes."

"No," said Hermione in a monotone voice, leaning back into her chair.

Ron lifted his head out of his hands. "What do you mean, 'No.'"

Shaking her head from side to side, Hermione chewed madly at her bottom lip. "He couldn't possibly believe that. Not after everything. You've already destroyed two Horcruxes, Harry. Riddle's diary, effortlessly I might add. You were twelve and clueless as to its true nature. And Nagini. And, since you are sitting here live and well, I can only assume you left that act moderately unharmed."

Harry's breathing quickened as he sat there. A loud rushing sound filled his ears.

"AND, you were alone both times."

She was right. None of this added up. Either Dumbledore truly believed what he had said or he had been deceiving Harry this whole time. Again.

A suffocating heat spread across Harry's face and chest. He was sick of this. Always being left in the dark; always having to guess and to speculate and being informed of crucial information by other parties. If only someone would tell him exactly what was going on without worrying about his feelings or trying to protect him, he would feel much less useless with his own destiny.

*** **

Hermione sped up the main street toward the castle, unconcerned if she nudged the other students as she passed. She had grown weary of waiting for Harry and Ron as they took their time in the Three Broomsticks. She had hoped that Sirius would return there if he couldn't find her in any of the other shops, but she couldn't sit around any longer. If Dumbledore saw him return to the castle unattended, he would regret giving Hermione the responsibility and probably take the task away from her.

Not that Hermione was eager to do it, but at least it was something.

"Sirius!" He was a few hundred yards ahead of her and just outside the gates to the school grounds. Pulling up the tail of her dress robes, Hermione sprinted faster to catch up with him.

"Sirius!" she called again. Sirius turned around to make eye contact with her, only to turn back towards the castle. He did not stop walking, but he did slow his pace.

"I'm sorry," Hermione panted when she finally reached him.

"Are you ill?" Sirius asked emotionlessly.

"What?" Hermione pushed her sweaty curls out of her face, thankful that he didn't want to walk faster.

"You were rather a long time in the Ladies." He still refused to look at her.

"Sirius," Hermione said earnestly, grasping him by the arm to make him stop walking, "I'm sorry. Truly I am. There was a tussle in the alley, and I couldn't hear it and not do anything about it. It's my duty to take care of the students."

Sirius' grey eyes softened a bit at her apology. He looked down at her grasp on his arm and pulled away lightly. "Lucky them," he said dramatically, walking past her.

"Please," Hermione continued as she ran to stand in front of him. "Please don't stay angry with me."

Hermione was desperate to remain on good speaking terms with Sirius. Her task would be almost impossible if he remained livid enough to stop talking to her.

Frozen in place, Sirius could not ignore the agitated fear in her eyes.

Finally smiling, Sirius reached his arm around her neck to pull her into a tight embrace. "I could never stay angry with you, Hermione."

Hermione tried not to stiffen in his arms.

"Oy!" Ron yelled from across the lawn. He looked at the two of them with an insulted scowl on his face. "None of that, there are first years around!"

Harry quickly ran by Ron, smacking him on the back of the head as he passed.

"Bugger," Ron breathed. He finally tore his eyes away from Sirius and Hermione to chase a laughing Harry up towards the castle.

Laughing, Sirius lowered his arms and motioned for them to continue walking. "I didn't get to spend nearly as much time with you as I wanted," Sirius spoke to her with an arrogant smile across his mouth. "You must make it up to me."

Hermione tried to answer in good humor. "How am I supposed to do that?"

"Dinner. This instant. My office."

With an uneasy frown on her face, Hermione apprehensively eyed the yellowing grass at her feet, weighing the consequences of this request. Didn't he listen to anything she said?

She sensed Sirius turn towards her, and immediately met his eyes. "All right."

"Excellent."

*** **

"More pudding?" Sirius asked Hermione lightly. Both sat at a small table in the corner of the Defense Against the Dark Arts office in front of a crackling fire.

"No, thank you, I'm stuffed," Hermione answered.

This was an awful mistake, Hermione thought. If Sirius invited her to his office sometime in the near future for another meal, she would quickly decline. He interpreted everything she said or did as evidence of her growing attachment toward him. Hermione was disturbed by the number of times she needed to remove her hand from the surface of the table whenever he edged a little closer. Nothing should change between them. He should be satisfied to have her friendship alone.

"I should be going," Hermione spoke softly, placing her napkin on her plate.

"So soon," Sirius whined as he watched her rise from the table.

"It's almost ten!" Hermione laughed.

Sirius refused to stand up from his seat. "But, you don't have a curfew."

She crossed her arms in slight annoyance. "Yes, but I still have a bedtime that I like to adhere to."

"All right," Sirius sighed, reluctantly rising from the table.

After exiting his office, Hermione intentionally walked a few feet in front of him towards the classroom door. Earlier in the evening, when he had escorted her to this very dinner, Sirius had kept placing his hand in the small of her back.

Once outside the classroom door, Hermione abruptly turned to face him.

"Thank you for dinner," she said.

"The pleasure was all mine, but let me walk you back to your rooms." Sirius attempted to close the door behind him.

"NO!" Hermione caught herself at his perplexed expression. "Thank you," she said more calmly, "but there is no need. I would enjoy the time to myself."

Sirius' eyebrows pinched in disappointment. "Very well. I did have a really good time today, Hermione," Sirius said honestly. Gazing down at her, Sirius leaned into her as his hands gripped her firmly by the waist.

Hermione quickly turned her head, his lips making contact with the flesh of her cheek.

She quickly smiled shyly at him to head off any embarrassment. "Please, slow down, Sirius."

Sirius nodded reluctantly as he watched her turn away from the door and walk down the corridor. "Good night."

"Night."

Oh, Merlin! An uneasy flush spread from the nape of her neck down her whole chest He tried to kiss me!

Hermione still believed that Sirius meant well, he was just hopelessly conceited where his own charms were concerned. She would have to be extremely careful in their further interactions. She would hate for him to think that the feelings were mutual.

"Have a pleasant time?" a rumbling voice sneered sarcastically from deep in an alcove.

Hermione jerked slightly at the surprise, but quickly turned her attention towards her Professor.

"Somewhat," she answered confidently, chin raised.

Arms crossed, Professor Snape remained leaning against the wall, the heel of his left foot pressed casually against the stone. He smirked as he watched her poise slowly wane.

"Not the fairy tale you expected?"

"I've learned that there is little I can expect anymore, so I might as well accept what comes my way." Her heartbeat increased when his eyes suddenly narrowed.

"Indeed."

"Were you following me?" Hermione asked.

"Why would I want to do something like that?" Snape sneered.

"Well, you're here, aren't you," Hermione replied haughtily.

"I still fail to see what that has to do with you? Typical supercilious female assumptions. Black may enjoy the warm company of young witches with such flaws," he leered at her, satisfied at her shocked expression, "however, I do not."

"As if I give a damn what you think about me!" Hermione hissed, turning her entire body to face him head on.

"All for the better," Snape drawled. "No need for a Mudblood to fight a losing battle."

"I am NOT a Mudblood," Hermione shrieked, closing the few feet that separated them in her angry outburst.

As Hermione's loud voice echoed down the empty stone corridor, Professor Snape swiftly reached out to pull her into the alcove. Ignoring her shocked expression, Snape pushed her against the stone wall and quickly pressed his chilled lips against hers, forcefully kissing her.

Instantly, all fight left Hermione as her body melted against his vigorous kiss. His warm tongue was a delightful contrast to his chilled lips and even colder nose. His arm reached around her, grasping her robes in the small of her back. Hermione hummed at the welcome contact and raised both of her arms to his shoulders. Opening her mouth in welcome, she whimpered when he bit her lip.

Languidly pulling away from her, Snape's face hovered mere inches in front of hers. The edges of his shoulder-length black hair brushed against her face. "You really *do* need to adjust your riotous behavior, Miss Granger."

Slowly opening her eyes, Hermione nodded mutely as she gazed into the black pupils dissecting her. Her heart was beating maddeningly in her throat as his eyes drifted back to her full lips. He slowly raised his left hand to her face, stroking the soft skin of her cheek.

The same cheek where Sirius had kissed her.

"What is *this*?" Her hands still on his shoulders, Hermione clenched at his robes to stress who she was talking about.

"What was *that*?" Snape asked as he continued lightly touching the skin of her face.

"I don't want him," Hermione breathed.

Severus quickly met her eyes, a stony expression on his face. He descended on her again, but paused mere inches before their lips met. He watched her in deep concentration as she raised her face toward his. Severus slightly pulled back, only to have her reach toward him again.

"Good." He tightened his firm grip on her waist, and roughly pressed his mouth against hers.

Author's Notes: Snape has *finally* taken some initiative. From here on in, there will be many more scenes/interactions between Hermione and Severus.

-My beta, **melusin** has spent a good amount of her available time going over my story with a fine tooth comb.

-Chapter title take from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book i, Line 430.

-Next up: After another horrible visit with the werewolves, Remus attempts to relax with the help of his lover. Hermione spends her Sunday afternoon in the company of her severe Potions master. Harry reads a startling article in *The Daily Prophet*, finally prompting him to demand answers from Dumbledore. And Sirius unintentionally falls asleep, forcing him to confront his own demons.

Chapter Ten - Amidst the Noise of Endless Wars

Chapter 11 of 36

With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began. And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. Eventual SS/HG. Alternate Universe, HBP death disregarded.

Nominated for best fic in the 2007 OWL Awards: Fire & Ice Category (SS/HG), Romance Category, Angst Category, and A/U Category

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: My beta, **melusin**, has helped me greatly with this story and the writing.

Gently removing his thin traveling cloak, Remus groaned as a sharp pain shot up his back. At moments like these, when he attempted to relax after a long evening, Remus felt much older than his years.

Remus sighed tiredly to himself and hungrily crawled into the inviting bed. Tonight hadn't been too bad. One of the werewolves had actually held a very engaging conversation with him.

He must have been new, Remus thought.

But that was it, unfortunately. None of the others would have anything to do with him. Remus hoped that his labors would eventually improve matters, but at the moment, the odds weren't in his favor.

Very much like before.

Regardless of his efforts to clear his mind, Remus could not prevent his thoughts from running through memories of *that* night, months ago, when he had abandoned his post underground, believing his labors to be in vain.

The sharp chill in the night air burned his lungs as Remus clumsily ran through the forest outside Hogsmeade. His shaky hand clutched at his stomach; warm wetness seeped through the creases in his fingers. Glancing down at his midriff, Remus gasped at the amount of blood he was quickly losing.

He couldn't do it. No way in hell could he do that. The moment one of those mad creatures had raised the severed limb of a Muggle, expecting him to hungrily take it, Lupin had involuntarily retched on the filthy floor of the cave. Angered and insulted, the pack turned on him.

They had attacked him for wanting to be the pet of wizards.

They weren't even transformed! *Remus' mind screamed.* What type of creature enjoys the taste of human flesh when they are still human themselves?

Greyback had obviously got to them, which meant that Greyback had visited that cave, probably on numerous occasions, too. Remus had tried to flee the moment that thought had crossed his mind.

He might be safe, somewhat, at the moment, but Remus hadn't fled from the werewolves completely unharmed. He gasped as the pain from his wounds hitched his troubled breathing.

Finally staggering onto the stone pavement of Hogsmeade, Remus swayed from side to side as he ran down the street. The night was quickly bearing down on him. As the orange sunset cast the tiny village into darkness, the soft glow of the street lanterns illuminated the candle wicks, one by one.

Stumbling, Remus' wounded body lunged through the air. A wizard in his path quickly dashed to the side. With a disgusted sneer on his face, the wizard did not hesitate in letting Remus fall harshly to the floor. The side of his head cracked sickeningly against the stone walkway.

Holding his new wound, Remus braced his hand against the side of his head and turned a corner down one of the numerous alleyways that trailed behind the shops.

The sound of agitated voices alarmed him. He quickly ducked behind a cluster of rubbish bins, willing his eyes and mind to focus, to be aware of his surroundings.

Blinking furiously, Remus' hazy vision caught sight of a small brunette pulling at the arm of a tall, blond wizard.

"What do you mean you're leaving?" she screeched. "Where the bloody hell do you think you can go?"

"Lower your voice, Pansy," the blond boy hissed through clenched teeth.

"NO! What happened last night? Why were the Aurors trying to arrest you? I demand you tell me what is going on this instant! You couldn't be mad enough to think that you could kill..."

"You what?" Draco asked in quiet anger, scratching his chin as he stepped closer.

Pansy instantly backed away from him. "No... I... didn't mean-- "

The hand at Draco's chin instantly flew through the air. The back of his palm collided excruciatingly against the side of Pansy's face. She whimpered to herself as her hand reached up to shield her swelling lip.

"Don't you ever," Draco barked, towering over her, "EVER, demand anything of me!"

"I'm sorry," she said miserably.

Eyes blazing, Draco laughed in disgust when she started to cry. "You're pathetic. I have no reason to explain anything to you. You mean nothing to me."

"Then leave!" she screamed through her sobs. "The sooner you stop toying with me, the better I'll be." She glared up at him, face contorted in fury.

Draco stood stock still, evidently shocked at seeing such an unfamiliar response from her.

Emboldened, Pansy pushed herself away from the wall. A growl rumbled in her throat. "Go!" She clutched at the robes of his chest, pushing him with all her might. "LEAVE!"

Draco tripped over a stray bottle, stumbling until he collided with the brick wall opposite Pansy. Straightening himself up, he glared madly at her.

"You fucking bitch!"

"Stupefy!" Remus screamed, rising from his crouched position amidst the rubbish bins.

Draco quickly ducked. The hex breezed over his head. Without a backward glance toward Pansy, he hastily scampered away from whomever had aimed the spell at him.

Pansy stood against the wall, unsure of what to do.

Groaning in pain, Remus dragged his tired legs toward the frightened student.

"Are you all right?" he asked sincerely.

Pansy gazed up at the filthy wizard, fear and gratitude showing clearly on her shocked face.

"Y-Yes," she stammered.

Remus raised his gentle hands to her face. "Here. Let me see." Her eyes momentarily closed when he softly held her chin in his palm.

He raised his wand to her split lip. Pansy eyed his disheveled state in alarm.

"Are you sure you can...?"

"Yes."

Finally breathing relaxed breaths, Pansy sighed contentedly when the burning pain of her open wound abated.

She gazed up at her ex-Professor. "Thank you."

A small smile formed on the edges of Remus' bloody face. "No problem..."

Remus did not finish his sentence. A dizzy spell quickly took hold of his mind and body. The last thing he remembered, he was falling to the floor, his legs buckling underneath him just as a pair of thin arms instinctively encircled his back.

"Come back.... "

A woman's delicate voice echoed hollowly in the deep recesses of his mind.

"Remus," she cooed. "Come back to me.... " Two soft hands glided through the fine hair at his temples.

Snapping out of his musing, Remus focused his hazy vision and gazed into the pair of chocolate brown eyes beneath him.

Smiling sadly at her, Remus pressed his weight against her, lowering his head to nuzzle the hollow of her neck. Shifting his naked body until he found a comfortable position on top of her, Remus sighed and inhaled the welcoming scent of her dark hair.

"What were you thinking about?" she asked the side of his face, her hands scratching at the light brown hair at back of his head.

"How this started," he whispered.

"This?"

"Us," he clarified.

Pansy moved her thin arms down his scarred back, scratching wherever they rested. She smiled when Remus hummed in pleasure.

"You were dying," she said quietly. "You used the last of your strength to heal me."

Remus picked up his head, lifting his chest off her bare breasts. He ignored her protesting whimpers and met her eyes with a determined fire. "I'd do it again. No question."

A frightened sadness overwhelmed Pansy's face. Wetness pooled around her dark eyes. Grasping the hair at Remus' temples, she pulled his face down to hers, clutching at him as their lips met for a passionate kiss.

Moaning in pleasure, Pansy opened her legs, cradling his hips as he pressed his body against her. Remus slightly raised his head, peppering her jaw and neck with kisses and nips until her breathing quickened. She whimpered again in disappointment at the feel of Lupin's welcome weight rising off her body. Gazing up at him, eyes hooded with desire, Pansy mewled in pleasure when Remus finally thrust into her building wetness.

*** ** *

Hermione awoke the Sunday morning after the Hogsmeade trip instantly aware of a heavy weight pressing down in the pit of her stomach. It had been there before she fell asleep, and seemed hell bent on staying throughout the night.

He kissed me, she thought, stomach fluttering.

'They' kissed you, her mind corrected.

Hermione was thankful she had been observant enough to turn her face away from Sirius' attempt to snog her. She couldn't prevent the cringe that wracked her body over the thought, though. She just didn't see Sirius that way -- at all.

But Professor Snape... Her face flushed. *Severus*, she corrected herself. Her lips rose into an unconscious smile. He had practically devoured her in the dark corridor. She knew that, from an objective standpoint, anyone else would find the idea frightening.

But, Hermione would gladly do it again. *Merlin help me. I fancy him.*

The weight in her stomach pressed back with a vengeance.

They hadn't really discussed anything. She had fled, at his request, when the sounds of Sirius exiting his classroom echoed down the empty corridor.

A dread iced down her back when she realized she had Potions first thing Monday morning.

On second thought, she could quite possibly be seeing Professor Snape in a couple of minutes, in the Great Hall for breakfast.

*** ** *

Timidly tucking a stray curl behind her ear, Hermione marched into the Great Hall for breakfast. Keeping her eyes focused on the Gryffindor table, her palms began to sweat while she tried to appear cool and collected.

Taking her usual seat next to Ginny, Hermione finally lifted her light brown eyes toward the High Table.

Professor Snape wasn't there.

Unable to control her emotions, the edges of her mouth drooped in faint disappointment. Hermione's eyes remained fixed on the Potions master's empty place until a movement in the next chair caught her attention.

Sirius Black gazed questioningly towards the empty seat at his side before suspiciously narrowing his eyes at Hermione.

She swallowed hesitantly then nodded at Professor Black in greeting.

"Look at her," Ginny hissed in her ear.

Startled, Hermione quickly turned in her seat following Ginny's scathing glance to the other end of the Gryffindor table. Hermione sighed when she realized that the object of Ginny's scorn was Lavender Brown herself. Lavender was completely twisted around in her seat. Her long nailed fingers were lightly wrapped around Harry's wrist, who was standing chatting by her side.

"If he dates Ron's ex-girlfriend, I swear I'll never talk to him again."

Hermione made an insulted noise under her breath. "Excuse me?" she asked, leaning past Ginny to look pointedly at Seamus sitting by the redhead's side.

Sitting up straight, a scarlet flush crept to Ginny's cheeks. She nervously played with a strand of her long straight hair.

"But... you said you didn't care."

"I don't," Hermione said seriously. "But don't you dare be a hypocrite."

Their building argument was interrupted when Harry and Ron settled themselves in the empty seats across from them. Ron immediately pulled every available platter of food to his side.

Focusing on eating her meal, Hermione's attention drifted back to her original contemplations before she had entered the Great Hall.

Professor Snape.

There was no possible way she could wait until tomorrow morning to see him again. She needed to talk to him as soon as possible.

Today.

"Post," Ron mumbled thickly.

Hermione looked up the instant she heard the usual screeches and cries of the morning Owl Post. Lightly placing a hand over her cup of pumpkin juice, Hermione reached into her pocket to pay for her daily paper.

"Anyone we know die?" Ron asked dismissively, covering his full mouth in protection of Hermione's wrath.

Hermione unrolled the *Daily Prophet* across her plate. She quickly eyed the front page and gasped.

"What?" Harry questioned gravely, yanking the paper from her. He looked down at the bold heading across the front page.

"RETIRED HOGWARTS PROFESSOR MURDERED!"

"Who?" Ron breathed in morose curiosity.

A stony glare in his eye, Harry briefly scanned the article as connections formed in his mind.

"Slughorn," answered Hermione quietly. "What does it say?"

Harry immediately started reading aloud, "...many wondered why the talented Potions professor quickly put in his notice to Professor Dumbledore some twenty years ago, but now our sources have given us the inside scoop. There were rumors rampant among Death Eater camps that Professor Slughorn possessed damaging inside knowledge for the reason He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named reached such a quick demise at the hands of The-Boy-Who-Lived. In fear of his very life, Slughorn abandoned his position at the controversial school and to this day claimed ignorance of any supposed inside intelligence. However, when our reporters asked Slughorn the extent of his favoritism toward the young You-Know-Who during his long teaching career at Hogwarts, he denied ever giving the youth personal confidences.

Similarly, last year, many wizards and witches in the magical community were equally shocked at his sudden and random reappointment as Potions professor. Unfortunately for Slughorn, our inside sources strongly believe that he made many new enemies, and rekindled old animosities, by physically showing his support for Dumbledore in taking up his old position. It is also believed that Harry Potter himself, the very boy who caused the demise of You-Know-Who, quickly became his favorite pupil. More than one eye-witness and some acquaintances of Slughorn himself have heard him praise The-Boy-Who-Lived as the 'The Chosen One,' thus aligning himself with the belief that Harry Potter is destined to kill You-Know-Who... "

Harry grunted in disgust, losing all interest in reading further, and returned the paper to Hermione's hungry grasp. He let his face fall in his outstretched hands.

Harry shook his head from side to side. "Voldemort found out," he said morosely.

Hermione eyed Ginny from the corner of her vision. After spying the girl flirting shamelessly with Seamus, Hermione finally leaned across the table. "The memory, you mean?" she whispered.

"Yeah," Harry said quietly, pushing his plate away. "I need to speak to Dumbledore. This has gone far enough."

The moment Harry rose from his seat, Hermione lunged over the table to grasp him by the wrist. She ignored the sudden head turns and curious stares.

"Go outside, Harry. Go for a walk. Fly on your broom -- something. Please, do not storm into his office with anger at the forefront of your mind."

Harry willed himself not to yank his hand away.

"Please, Harry," she begged softly.

"Yeah, all right."

The second Hermione slackened her grip, Harry immediately turned to exit the Great Hall.

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"It's not that cold out. Are you sure you wouldn't rather go out for a bit with us?" Ginny questioned Hermione the moment they left the Great Hall.

"No, I'm all right. I need to finish my lengthy Transfiguration essay anyway."

"Very well," Ginny said disappointedly, turning toward the heavy front doors.

Hermione stood in place in the middle of the Entrance Hall, watching Ginny, Seamus and Dean walk down the front steps of the school. She didn't lie, per se, she really did have a Transfiguration essay that she needed to finish. She just wasn't planning on marching up to her rooms this very second.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at a few straggling students. "Well?" she questioned them. "Make up your minds! You know there's no loitering allowed in the halls!"

Ignoring the few scandalized glares, Hermione waited for the Entrance Hall to clear before she headed for the stairs that led down to the dungeons.

Palms sweating, Hermione prayed she would not run across any students down here, especially seventh years. The second her foot touched the last step, the moist chill of the damp walls iced down her back. Tightening her cloak around her, Hermione headed straight for Professor Snape's office, hoping that he would be present.

Standing outside his door, Hermione's hand hovered in the air as she willed her breathing to calm. Forcing herself to stand up straight, Hermione loudly knocked against the wood.

"Enter!" Professor Snape barked.

Arms crossed, Professor Snape stood behind his office desk waiting to glare reproachfully at whichever person was about to enter.

Alarmed, Hermione avoided meeting his eyes. Instead, she focused on Goyle and Zabini's agitated glances in her direction.

To Hermione's despair, everyone stood gawking awkwardly at each other.

Hermione swallowed her excess saliva and cleared her throat. "You asked to see me about my uncompleted potion, sir?"

Professor Snape arched his eyebrow in question. The edge of his lips twitched, threatening to rise into a smirk.

"You're annoyingly early," Severus drawled, "but very well." He then turned his attention toward the two young men seated in front of his desk. "Keep in mind what I have told you, and don't even think about disobeying me. You should know what would come of it."

"Yes, sir," both boys murmured.

"Very well. Get out," Snape commanded smoothly.

As Goyle and Zabini headed toward the door, Hermione walked to stand between their empty seats. She tried not to fidget under their disgusted leers. Turning around, Hermione watched them leave, making sure the door was securely closed behind them. Raising her wand, she immediately sent a Silencing Charm against it.

An amused chuckle vibrated behind her.

Hermione jerked around, facing her professor. Uncrossing his arms, Hermione watched him smoothly flip his long cloak over his shoulder and turn toward a blank stone wall to his left. Retrieving his wand from within his robes, Snape flicked it at the wall.

In extreme curiosity, Hermione observed a large brass handle suddenly appear on one of the stones. Snape grasped the cool metal and pushed against the wall. A door immediately appeared, leading into another room.

"Well?" Snape drawled as he stepped beyond the door. "If you merely wanted to sit in my office, alone, then by all means do not let me interrupt you. But I do have tasks I need to complete, and since you so rudely barged into my office unannounced..."

"I knocked!" Hermione huffed. "That's hardly barging in."

"Regardless," Professor Snape said lazily. "I have a potion I need to complete, so either come in here now or go back out the way you came."

Hermione eyed his office door behind her once more before walking to the odd door in the wall. She placed her hands on the stone and poked her head into the mysterious room.

She was pleasantly surprised at what she saw. Somewhat similar to his office, shelves and shelves of different ingredients and pickled specimens aligned every wall from top to bottom. Three long worktables took up most of the available space in the center of the room.

Professor Snape summoned a medium size cauldron to the center worktable. A fire lit the very moment the cauldron rested above the burner.

"In or out, Miss Granger." His back facing her, he skillfully plucked various ingredients from the shelves.

Stepping fully into the room, Hermione jerked as the door quickly shut behind her.

The handle vanished, as did any evidence that there had been a door.

Tilting her head, Hermione curiously watched Professor Snape begin slicing at one of the pickled specimens. Against the far wall directly behind him, she immediately caught sight of a narrow shelf packed with a variety of Potions texts.

Smiling to herself, she walked right by him to the shelf and stood gazing in awe at the collection of books. Plucking one of the older looking ones, Hermione raised the text to her nose, reveling in the ancient smell of aged leather.

"They don't make books like this in the Muggle world anymore." Sheer pleasure rang in her voice.

Snape paused in his slicing. Elegantly turning in place, he silently watched the curly headed female slide her small hand along the surface of his book. Not too many people found pleasure in reading Potions texts for leisure, and they certainly didn't stop to appreciate something as simple as the binding.

Hermione cautiously placed the book on the closest worktable behind Professor Snape and pulled out a stool. She read a full two pages before she remembered her surroundings. Taking the opportunity to eye his back, she appreciated the view of his tall and slim figure bent over the cauldron.

"Hermione," she said suddenly, biting her lip.

"Talking to yourself, Miss Granger?"

"No, *Hermione*."

He turned toward her and raised an eyebrow in irritation.

"Call me 'Hermione' when..."

Snape noticed her sudden pause. He knew she was carefully considering her words as a rosy flush had spread on the apples of her cheeks.

"Yes?" he purred curiously. "Call you 'Hermione' when...?" He tilted his head to the side, willing for her to finish her original thought.

Hermione flushed even deeper, nervously chewing at her top lip. "When we're... alone."

His lips twitched again, fighting against a smirk. He maintained eye contact with her, appearing to mull over the request.

"Very well," he said with a nod of his head, "Hermione." He turned back toward his potion.

Hermione grinned warmly, knowing full well what else he was agreeing to.

After a few more minutes of silent reading, Hermione extended her index finger against the ancient book, marking her place on the yellowed page.

"Did you ever return to Sirius the personal item that was taken from him?"

Snape's body quickly froze in response. Eyes narrowed, he finally turned toward Hermione.

"Yes," he hissed. "I happened upon *Professor Black* not long after I left you."

"What was stolen from him?"

Severus emotionlessly stared at her. "A pocket watch," he answered slowly.

Her eyebrows disappeared behind her short curls. "That's it?"

"Yes."

"It sounded much more important than that," she hummed in disbelief.

Snape turned back toward his potion and shook his head. "Most likely to Black, it is."

"*Professor Black*," she mocked.

He snorted in response.

Hermione watched Professor Snape as he added the remaining ingredients to the potion. A light blue mist slowly began to float out of the cauldron. Professor Snape raised his wand to the surface of the potion and bent over very close as if he were about to drink it. Holding her breath, Hermione could have sworn he was speaking an incantation. His voice was soft, almost a whispered caress, so his words were completely undistinguishable. Finally taking a few steps back, Professor Snape pointed his wand at the burner, lowering the heat to a steady simmer.

"How long?" Hermione asked, returning her eyes to the complicated text.

"About fifteen minutes," he answered mechanically.

Arms crossed, Snape turned away from his worktable, facing Hermione head on. She was so absorbed in the text she was reading, she took no notice of him standing there, studying her.

Eyes glued to the book, Hermione spoke the first thing that came to mind. "Professor, may I ask--"

"Severus," he purred in interruption.

Hermione's head snapped up, startled at his sudden looming stance over the worktable she was sitting at. "Pardon?"

Pulling his coat tighter against himself, Professor Snape smoothly walked around the worktable, edging himself closer to her stool. Bending over slightly, his elegant hand grasped the rim of her seat, his wrist pressed against her thigh.

Hermione lowered her head, wanting to see what he was doing.

Snape languidly pulled her stool away from the work table, turning it so her knees pointed at him.

"It would seem logical, *Hermione*, for you to call me by my first name when we are..." his voice trailed off in a high note, expecting her to finish.

Raising her chin to look up at him, Hermione swallowed before answering. "Alone," she breathed.

"Exactly," Snape purred. Bracing his other hand on the table, he took a few more steps toward her until her knees brushed against his slim thighs.

"Thank you, by the way," Hermione said softly, continuing to gaze up at him.

"For?"

"Trying to protect me, in Hogsmeade," she said sincerely, glancing down shyly toward her lap. But the next moment, her head snapped back toward him, her eyebrows pinched in indignation. "Although, I would have listened to your request, so you didn't need to get so physical!"

Snape quickly leaned into her, turning his head toward her ear. "Be careful what you wish for," he whispered. He followed the tantalizing scent of her soft curly hair, nudging his nose against her neck. Enjoying the feel of her supple flesh, Snape leaned further against her, smiling to himself when her breathing hitched.

Hermione tilted her head to the side, extending more of the flesh of her neck. Without thinking, she raised her right hand, lightly placing it on the back of his thigh.

"You never really answered my question," she breathed.

Severus brushed his lips along her neck. "What question was that?"

"What is *this*?" she asked timidly.

An amused chuckle shook in his throat, vibrating against Hermione's sensitive skin.

"Have you mentioned our... interactions to any of your dunderheaded friends?" Snape asked seriously, leaning away to meet her eyes.

"Of course not," Hermione answered, sitting up straighter in an effort to close the gap between their faces.

The side of Snape's lip rose in a triumphant smirk. He leaned down toward her, but paused mere inches above her face. His eyes never strayed from hers.

"Do ensure that our *continued* liaisons remain private, Miss Granger," he said smoothly.

"Hermio--"

He silenced her by pressing his smooth lips against hers. Hermione's eyebrows rose in welcomed surprise, but she immediately closed her eyes at the long-awaited contact. A satisfied hum rose in her throat when Snape trailed his warm tongue against her bottom lip, deepening the kiss.

Snape lightly placed his palm under her chin as he slowly dragged his lips away from hers.

"You do realize that this is foolish of us?" he whispered harshly.

"Yes, but I don't care. I don't fully understand it, but I do know that I want you." Closing her eyes, Hermione pressed her face into the palm of his hand.

"Indeed."

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"Mind if I join you?"

Pulling his eyes away from the dark waters of the Hogwarts' lake, Harry looked up at Lavender standing not too far behind him. Her confident smile quickly disappeared at the sight of his impatient scowl.

"I don't care," he said emotionlessly.

Turning back towards the still waters, Harry closed his eyes as a chilly breeze ruffled through his messy black hair. He listened to the faint ruffle of fabric as Lavender adjusted herself on the crisp grass by his side.

"What's on your mind, Harry?" Lavender lightly asked.

"Everything."

"Is that all?" she laughed.

A frustrated growl rumbled in Harry's throat. Eyes blazing, he angrily turned toward her. "Why are you here?"

Lavender quickly looked down, nervously pulling at the yellowed blades of grass.

"Well... I... "

"What do you want from me?" Harry demanded, looking her up and down.

Lavender snapped her head away from him, pulling her knees against her chest. Tightening her robes around her legs, she swallowed a few times before deciding what to say.

"I just want... you."

"Why?" Harry snorted.

"I don't know, honestly." Raising her head, she turned toward Harry and attempted to flash him a warm smile. "But I do know that I would like to get to know you better."

"You've had six years to do that," Harry scoffed. "Why start now?"

"I know I haven't been very... nice, but-- "

"Nice?" Harry interrupted. "Honestly, Lavender, we've been in the same House, shared the same common room, and I can truthfully say that I know next to nothing about you. But I do know what I see. And so far, based on your actions, you are the leader amongst all of the mean, stuck up little shrews that walk around the school thinking they are too good for everyone. You laugh at any boy who likes you, unless he's on the Quidditch team, a prefect, or the Head Boy himself. I can't honestly say you have any *real* friends since most of the girls you hang out with are too afraid to tell you what they really think!"

Harry was angry and irritated at Dumbledore and what he had just read in the *Daily Prophet*, but he knew he was unjustly taking out that frustration on her. It felt good, and yet sickened him at the same time. "I don't know if you've heard, but I've dropped out of the Quidditch team this year. I hate to disappoint you, but your dreams of dating a Captain have flown out the window. So, if you want to be known as The-Slut-Who-Shagged-The-Boy-Who-Lived, then you're just wasting your time."

Harry turned toward her, disgust at the forefront of his mind. When Lavender raised her face to meet his eyes, a knot formed in the pit of his stomach.

She was crying.

Lavender opened her mouth, ready to reply, but no words seemed to escape her mouth. Placing her hands on either side of her, she pushed herself off the ground.

"Wait, Lavender..."

Lavender quickly turned away from him and ran up toward the castle.

"Fucking hell," Harry moaned.

Pushing himself off the cold ground, Harry headed toward the castle.

He felt guilty for being cruel, so his first instinct was to find Lavender. But that thought quickly left his mind when he remembered why he was so short with her to begin with.

He was going to talk to Professor Dumbledore instead.

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No more, Harry told himself as he raced up the spiral staircase. He'd been repeating that mantra to himself over and over since he fled the school grounds. No more lies. No more half-truths. No more feeling useless.

"YOU LIED TO ME," Harry barked as he stormed into the Headmaster's office without warning.

In a matter of seconds, all of his anger and fight left at the sight before him.

Professor Snape stood by the Headmaster, who was sitting in the chair behind his desk. The loose sleeve of the Headmaster's robe was completely rolled up onto his shoulder. Harry stood in place by the door, dumbfounded as he stared at the blackened and scaly flesh held carefully in Snape's experienced grasp.

"Potter," Snape sneered in greeting. At Harry's speechless stare, Snape quickly rolled down the Headmaster's sleeve so his damaged skin would no longer be on display.

"What's going on?" Harry finally demanded.

A scowl on his face, Snape reached for the large ceramic mug on the Headmaster's desk. The bubbling blue mist slowly trailed out of the mug and into the air as he carefully placed the mug in the Headmaster's waiting hand.

"What are you giving him?" Harry barked, demanding attention.

"As long as you continue to speak in such an abominably disrespectful tone, I can only presume that you are not addressing me."

Eyebrows furrowed, Harry sent Snape the deathliest glare imaginable, willing him to look up and see it. When his wish was finally met, his temper flared when the dark man merely smirked in satisfaction.

"Thank you, Professor Snape. I believe I have some matters to discuss with Harry."

"Yes, you do," Harry spoke in quiet anger.

Walking to the door, Snape scoffed in appalled annoyance at the manner in which Harry spoke to the Headmaster.

Harry couldn't have cared less.

As the door closed behind Professor Snape, Harry stormed across the office, standing in front of the large wooden desk. He tried to maintain his original indignant anger, but found it difficult as he watched Professor Dumbledore slowly raise the misty potion to his lips with an almost defeated expression upon his face.

Harry had the distinct impression that the older man was reluctant to drink it.

He forced himself to silently wait, in hesitant patience, while Professor Dumbledore gradually drank the mug's contents. Harry wanted him to completely finish it, and then focus his entire attention on himself.

Professor Dumbledore slowly placed the empty mug on the corner of his desk and apprehensively looked up toward Harry. He knew that there would be no easy way around this crucial conversation, but that wouldn't prevent him from trying to speak as calmly as possible.

"Harry, please listen to me."

Snarling, Harry raised his hand, finger pointing accusingly at the *wise* older man. "Do not speak unless you intend to tell me the truth! The whole truth! Why did you make me promise you that I wouldn't go looking for the Horcruxes alone? Why did you tell me that you were afraid that I would get harmed like you? I wouldn't, would I? I've already destroyed two of them on my own, unharmed. You didn't truly believe that I would be wounded, did you? DID YOU?"

"No," Dumbledore said quietly. "I knew that the protective curses would not harm you."

"So, you lied about how you sustained your injuries. What else have you been doing? Your arm did not look that bad last year!"

"No, no that I did not lie about. My hand was initially damaged the night I destroyed the Perverell Ring. And my entire arm was rendered useless that night in the cave."

"I don't understand," Harry said quietly, willing his anger to calm.

"You cannot be harmed destroying the Horcruxes. Only you, Harry."

Harry's chest heaved as his breathing quickened. He didn't know what to say, so he looked expectantly at the Headmaster, willing him to speak further.

"What do you know about Sirius' brother?" Dumbledore asked tiredly.

Harry sighed in exasperation. Where was he going? "He was a Death Eater. Sirius said he got in over his head and decided to abandon it. And *you* told me he stole the locket in revenge against Voldemort."

"Do you know how he died, Harry?"

"Voldemort killed him because of his betrayal," Harry said matter-of-factly, crossing his arms.

"Yes... and... no. Regulus reached his demise because of Voldemort, but Voldemort did not kill him himself."

Harry's attention was piqued. "Then, who did?"

"Not who. The question is *what*."

His hands slamming down on the table, Harry willed himself not to scream in frustration. "FOR CHRIST'S SAKE, would you cut that out! I'm sorry, Headmaster, but if you want to tell me something, say it. You're driving me insane."

"The locket killed Regulus," Dumbledore added quickly. Gone was the time he could reprimand Harry for his behavior, and they both knew it.

"When he destroyed it, he, in turn, was destroyed as well. A life was taken to create the Horcrux, Harry. So, under normal circumstances, a life must be given in order to destroy it. The protective curse killed him -- the same one that damaged my hand and spread up my arm."

This is so important, Harry's mind screamed. Instead of focusing on the indignant anger festering inside him at being ignorant of this information, Harry thought it better to feign calm. As long as the Headmaster continued talking, he would get as much informative knowledge out of him as he could. Sighing deeply, Harry finally sat at the empty seat across from Dumbledore.

"Why?" He knew the Headmaster was one of the greatest wizards to have lived in the last two centuries, but this was a little extreme.

"Because, I wasn't born to destroy them. You were, Harry."

"Yeah, the prophecy, 'neither can live while the other survives', I get all that."

"No, Harry, you don't. Only you have the *power* to destroy him. As with the Locket, if Regulus raised his wand to cast the Killing Curse on Voldemort, he would not only fail, but be destroyed in the process."

Harry slowly closed his eyes. "You're avoiding my question. Why did it merely injure you? Why weren't you killed like Regulus?"

Here it is, finally, Dumbledore thought. He raised his wrinkled, but only functional hand to his tired face and massaged his closed eyes.

"I am not as fragile as Regulus was -- or any wizard or witch for the matter. Voldemort may not be my opponent, but I came before you; therefore, I have some protection."

Harry quickly narrowed his eyes. "Before me?"

Dumbledore was silent. Chin in his hand, he stared, unblinking at one of the numerous twittering silver instruments on his desk. Harry would have interrupted his musing, but it looked like the Headmaster was choosing his words very wisely.

"How have you been sleeping?" the Headmaster asked quietly.

The hairs on the back of Harry's neck and forearm raised in alarm. He looked at the Headmaster, wide eyed, shocked at the implication of that question.

"I was worried as much. The past always comes back to haunt you."

"Those dreams aren't my past," Harry said wearily.

Dumbledore sighed, leaning back into his chair. "No, they're mine. Surely you recognize the sadistic wizard in those dreams?"

"Grindelwald," Harry breathed. "What does that have to do with this -- with me and Voldemort?"

"Almost nothing... and everything. He was my opposite, Harry. Just like Voldemort is yours."

Harry gazed back at the Headmaster, shaking his head in confusion and anger for being left in the dark. Albus leaned back in his seat and sighed deeply.

"In the early 1940s, I realized what was happening in Nazi occupied territory. There is a reason that the beginning of the war developed so smoothly and quickly in the Nazi's favor, and that reason was Grindelwald. He was... disgusting. He found favor in the genocidal actions of the Germans and sought to replicate similar mass killings among the Muggle-born community. From the beginning, there was a fire that festered within my very core, appalled at these beliefs and actions. It had to be stopped, no matter what the cost. I don't know how, really, but I knew I was the only one who could stop him, and Grindelwald knew I was the only thing in his way from his attempt to control the entire world."

Leaning forward in his seat, Harry narrowed his eyes at the Headmaster. "What does this have to do with Voldemort?"

"Everything. Listen carefully, Harry. Forgive my boastfulness, but Grindelwald and I were two of the strongest and most powerful wizards to have lived for the last eighty years... and I succeeded. I killed the Dark Lord *of that time*. I killed Grindelwald the same year Voldemort sat down for his NEWTs. Mere months after Grindelwald's ashes were spread unceremoniously into a fire pit, Tom had already accumulated a legion of hopeless followers who viewed him as their leader, as their Dark Lord, and everything fell exactly into place for him after that. Some thirty-five years later, just when he was reaching the peak of his power... when it seemed clear to everyone, including myself unfortunately, that there was absolutely no possible way to stop him, he attempted to kill you. And we know what happened after that."

"Now he's trying to reach his previous glory," Harry breathed. "That seems like an awful lot of coincidences."

"It would seem that way, wouldn't it? They aren't coincidences, Harry. It's a... balance."

"A balance between what?" Harry asked immediately.

"That, I'm not even sure of myself. But from the looks of it, from the examples given to us throughout history, it's a balance of good and evil. Light versus Dark. Morality set against evil. Even the most beloved, peaceful leaders throughout history were forced to fight battles against whomever opposed them. I did not want to become a part of the Second World War, but I couldn't watch the atrocities taking place and not do anything. I felt compelled, from the very recesses of my soul, to stop the evil that was Grindelwald, just like he felt, from the dark cavern within him, to abuse and destroy innocents for his own sick experimentation."

Harry stared, unblinking, at one of the moving objects on the Headmaster's desk. "Just like I would want to kill Voldemort -- even if I had never heard the Prophecy."

"Exactly! There are forces at work here, that drive us, live within us, but keep the rules out of our grasp. Only you can destroy the Horcrux completely unharmed. Only you can cast the final blow against Voldemort completely unharmed. Haven't you ever wondered why I've never just Apparated myself to Voldemort's hide-out and hexed him in his sleep? Haven't you ever wondered why he doesn't just storm in here, wand raised and kill me himself?"

"He's afraid of you."

"No, he's afraid of my death coming to soon, believe it or not. Didn't you wonder why he was so furious to discover Draco's failed attempts against my life?"

Harry impatiently massaged his tired face with his hands. "I assumed Voldemort did not want to share the glory of your death."

"No, not at all. As glorious as Draco thought it would be to have killed me for his master, Draco did not know that that was what the Dark Lord feared. ~~He~~*He* knows that in my death, *you* will reach your full potential as a wizard, and he hopes to destroy you before that time."

"What do you mean the full potential of my power? What the hell does that have to do with your death?"

"I'm not positive of the extent of Voldemort's knowledge, but he is at least aware of the close timing of his swift and steady rise to power mere months after the death of Grindelwald -- and his quick demise not long after you were born. He knows that the same swift amount of *luck* will happen to you once I am no longer part of this world." Pausing in contemplation, Dumbledore stretched his neck, sighing to himself in defeat. "I have so much to give you in my death."

"Don't say that," Harry glared up at the old man.

But Dumbledore wasn't looking at him. Eyes unblinking, the older man stared at a point beyond Harry, his wrinkled face lit with worry.

"One day when I was around the same age as you, Harry, I awoke from a fitful sleep with a completely new outlook on life. I could speak languages I had never studied. I could cast magic I had never practiced. I knew history I had never read. Yet, at the same time, it was as if I had always known it, like a closed door in the back of my mind just waiting to be opened. At the time I was completely clueless, but now I know that the One before me must have died that same night. The greatest gift I can give you... is my death."

"STOP SAYING THAT!" Harry pushed himself out of his chair and turned away from the Headmaster. He knew something had been kept from him, but this was too much. Harry did not expect his war with Voldemort to have so much history behind it. In a sick way, it almost made his fight seem insignificant; just another war to put down in the history books with the names of those who die as endnotes. Nothing more.

Dumbledore sighed deeply. "There's another pattern here that you haven't noticed yet."

"What pattern?" Harry asked dejectedly.

"That this Balance never seems to end. Think, Harry! Mere months after I defeated Grindelwald, Voldemort began his steady rise to power. Mere months after you were born, a time of peace finally fell upon the wizarding world. I must admit, I am weary of the outcome of your own battle, Harry."

He's right, Harry's mind screamed. *Is there never an end?*

Harry turned towards the Headmaster, a determined fire etched on his young face. "After I kill Voldemort... and I will kill him, you're afraid that the next Dark Lord might rise?"

"Not might. The next Dark Lord *will* arise. When? I don't know...."

"*Who* is what I'm more interested in," Harry interrupted.

Dumbledore's head snapped up. He locked eyes with Harry and emotionlessly stared at the younger man in front of him.

"Yes. Who indeed?"

*** *** ***

The first whole month of classes had finally caught up with Sirius. He might have done very well in school when he himself attended Hogwarts, but taking tests and writing essays is a far cry from correcting them. He was forced to manage his time wisely if he wanted to get through seven years worth of lessons plans, and time management and organization were not in his vocabulary.

Sirius was falling asleep so quickly now. He was finding it harder and harder to force himself awake after only a few hours of rest. At least once a week, like clockwork, he would have one *good* night's worth of deep sleep. Where exactly his mind traveled away to during those nights, he could not say; just as he could not say what exactly lay behind the veil.

But it was always the same place. Clutching at his tangled sheets, Sirius' sleeping body thrashed against his bed.

A grave foreboding pressed down in the pit of Sirius' stomach when a strong, odd breeze upset his plaited hair. He didn't want to open his eyes. Looking at his surroundings would force him to fight the temptation to look down; to see where he was falling.

Regardless of his fears, Sirius slowly opened his right eye, followed by the left. The loud sound of rushing wind continued its steady beat against his ears as his body continued falling into the bottomless pit. All around him, almost in a perfect circle, the sharp peaks of molten rocks surrounded him. Finally looking down, he eyed the black nothingness that had no destination.

When Sirius first fell in here, back in The Department of Mysteries, he prayed for death. He fell for hours, days, without knowing where he was or how he had got here. Was he dead? He didn't know. But if he was, this couldn't be the outcome, could it? Was he going to keep falling for the rest of eternity, praying to reach the bottom so there would be an end to this misery?

"I don't deserve this," he screamed constantly the first few days. "So much time has been unjustly taken from me, this isn't fair!"

"Feeling sorry for yourself again, Sirius?" a deep female voice rasped.

Sirius jerked toward the familiar voice. She, he assumed it was a she, had been the first to contact him when he first fell in here. He almost wanted to call her a ghost, but he'd never seen a ghost like her. Her mist wasn't a pearly white, but a murky, putrid green. She had no definition of a body as she moved, but her face was strikingly beautiful. Sirius felt mesmerized every time he gazed at her for too long, all thought of waking up soon forgotten.

"What now?" Sirius finally asked.

The green mist with the beautiful face elegantly circled Sirius.

"You've done very well so far," she deeply cooed. "I did not expect you to last this long. Living like this must be so... tormenting."

"What the fuck do you think?" Sirius barked.

The ghostly woman floated toward Sirius, pausing mere inches from his robes.

"What? Wait... what are you doing!"

Heart racing, Sirius watched in alarm as putrid green mist enclosed him. The sensation of numerous tiny hands surrounded him, poking through his robes, searching his pockets. Reaching down, he tried to swat the woman away from him, but his hands could not touch, nor move the green mist. Beads of sweat rolled down his forehead as he watched his pocket watch float out of his robes and out of his reach.

"Give that back!" he screeched.

"Why? Aren't you tired of carrying it? Aren't you tired of constantly winding it? Winding it to ensure your pitiful soul remains trapped inside."

Frustrated tears escaped from the edges of his eyes. "Tired? OF COURSE I'M FUCKING TIRED! Do you think I want to live like this?"

"Then get rid of it," her voice rasped.

Sirius watched in horror as the watch edged further away from the floating green mist. "NO! No, please, I need it," he moaned miserably. "I don't want to die."

"You could rid yourself of this burden. You know you can. Once simple act, and you would never have to worry about dying ever again."

Sirius vigorously shook his head, raising his hands to shield his eyes. "No, I could never do that."

"Why not! You deserve as much. Time has been unjustly snatched from you, Sirius Black! Twelve years serving a sentence for a crime you never committed, only to escape and be locked away again in hiding. You DESERVE to take time back."

"Stop it."

"You know what you must do to rid yourself of this burden forever."

"STOP IT!" Sirius lunged toward the green woman, barely grasping the watch's chain with his smallest finger, toppling over so he fell, face first, down the bottomless rock pit.

Gasping uncontrollably, Sirius rolled himself across the bed until he reached the edge. Flinging the heavy duvet off him, Sirius flew toward the bathroom, in need of cool water to splash against his sweat drenched face.

Author's Notes: Finally, *some* answers. Compare this Harry/Dumbledore scene with the prologue!

-My beta, **melusin** has spent a good amount of her available time going over my story with a fine tooth comb.

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book ii. Line 894.

-Next up: Severus steals a very valuable item for the Dark Lord. Hermione attempts to put Sirius in his place... will she succeed? Severus POV and his second thoughts about his new *relationship* with Miss Granger. Harry attempts to set things right with Lavender, but gets more from her than he bargained for.

-This chapter is over 8,000 words long! I almost split it into two chapters, since I didn't want to get in the habit of them being this long. But, alas, Chapter 11 is over 10,000 words, so there you go!

Chapter Eleven - Of Providence, Foreknowledge, Will, and Fate (Part 1)

Chapter 12 of 36

With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began. And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. Eventual SS/HG. Alternate Universe, HBP death disregarded.

Nominated for best fic in the 2007 OWL Awards: Fire & Ice Category (SS/HG), Romance Category, Angst Category, and A/U Category

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: My beta, **melusin**, has done some wonderful things with this story.

Severus Snape stepped back, pushing himself further into the dark alley while he waited for the signal that would tell him the coast was clear.

"Fucking pigs," he muttered under his breath.

It was almost impossible to freely move about Knockturn Alley, regardless of the typical black cloaks that almost everyone seemed to wear come midnight. The Ministry of Magic was now on full alert, oblivious of the fact that the wizarding world remained clueless as to the true threat lying before their very eyes.

Severus was honestly surprised at the number of raids the Ministry was able to keep out of the papers; he himself had attended at least one a week since the beginning of

the summer.

Scrimgeour was doing things very differently indeed. During the previous war, panic was everywhere. One could smell it in every restaurant and café -- be it in the Muggle or Magical world. It was apparent in the hollow stares of every grief stricken mother walking aimlessly down the street, burdened with burial plans for their lost sons or daughters. But this time around, everyone appeared afraid to speak the name of evil. To speak of it would acknowledge it and somehow make the pain seem much more realistic.

Before the Dark Lord's... demise, Severus did not have to scurry about Knockturn Alley in fear of crossing an Auror on patrol.

Bloody patrols! Like they make a shite of difference.

If the Ministry wanted to observe true Death Eater activity, they would be better off guarding the homes of prominent Muggle-born families rather than trudging through the filth of these streets. Severus could not say for sure if the Dark Lord's agenda would actually make any difference in the numbers of the Muggle-born population. No one could discover for certain how or why Muggles gave birth to magical children each and every year, nor why half-bloods and purebloods did not produce similar high numbers of offspring. But whatever the rationale was, it only seemed to make perfect sense in the Dark Lord's mind.

According to Severus' master, the Death Eaters were not to waste their time trying to rid the magical community of each and every Muggle-born.

Attack the problem at its source! the Dark Lord would rasp repeatedly.

Instead, all of Severus' efforts were spent hunting down the Muggle families they came from, completely eradicating their family line, down to every third cousin twice removed.

"Is it a quick fuck you fancy?"

Instantly snapping out of his musings, Snape whirled around, turning towards the obscurity that was offered by the dim alleys. A frail, wrinkled wizard huddled behind him, shifting his legs from side to side in agitation. The small man turned away from Severus, whistling a command to the shadowed outline of a feminine body behind him.

"She's not very bright," the old man rambled. His voice whistled through the odd gaps in his teeth. "Not much to look at, either. But she was born dumb -- doesn't fight, so you can pretty much get what you want out of her."

A surge of pure loathing coursed through Snape as he eyed the aged man's toothless grin. His daughter couldn't be more than thirteen years old.

"No," Snape said, voice heavy with disgust. Ignoring the both of them, he turned back toward the main street. Tightening the collar of his thick black cloak around his neck, Severus' back straightened in attention.

The signal.

He watched attentively as a stumpy wizard in too small navy blue robes loitered in front of a dingy pub. He raised a fag to his lips, lighting it with the tip of his wand. Taking a smooth, long drag, the overweight wizard exhaled deeply, face pointing into the air. The dark smoke of bitter cloves floated bizarrely in the wind, seeming to form the twisted spine of a large snake.

Severus knew that this man was an Auror. As fat and grotesque as this Ministry official was, Severus did not understand how that was possible, but then again he wasn't a very good Auror, regardless. Setting the Knockturn Alley patrols, this wizard would be on 'guard' for the next three hours, giving Death Eaters, and all shifty people alike, time to go about their business free from harassment from Ministry officials.

Snape immediately stepped out of the stinking alley into the dim-lighted streets of this unsavory part of town. Quickly dodging the number of other dubious individuals that gradually appeared in front of his path, Severus sped toward Borgin and Burkes.

It was late -- well after normal shopping hours. For, even in such a sinister area, these shops still had standard hours of business. Snape knew this, but he did not care. He was on a mission for his master. Passing right by the front door of Borgin and Burkes, Snape rounded the corner of the street and approached the shop from the rear.

If any door had to be excessively warded, it would be this one, due to the vast amount of valuable possessions inside.

Severus repeatedly flicked his raised wand at the door, removing each and every ward he knew would be cast upon it. Mere minutes after his first attempts, the battered wood finally gave a loud click and pushed open with a faint creak. Not wasting any time, Snape smoothly pulled his mask out from within his robes as he quickly entered the dusty shop. Mindful of the lock, Snape turned the handle of the door before slowly closing it behind him.

Turning towards the narrow set of stairs to his left, Snape silently ascended them, wand raised with his back pressed against the wall. Once on the first-floor landing, Severus paused for a few seconds to listen for the rhythmic sounds of sleeping bodies.

There were none.

Senses on full alert, he immediately stormed towards the only door that was not completely closed, kicking it open with his foot. A frightened gasp on the other side caught his attention. Firmly gripping his wand, Snape thundered into the room, seizing the bedroom door and slamming it shut behind him.

Mr. Borgin lay hunched on the filthy floor against the wall by the door, fumbling to get a steady grasp on his wand.

"*Accio Wand!*" Snape barked.

Additional wand in his hand, Severus stalked toward the crouched man.

The older man raised his hand in protection of his face, but otherwise seemed unafraid.

"What is this?" Mr. Borgin snarled. "If you wanted to buy something -- I would have answered the fucking door if you'd knocked!"

Snape paused. Looming over the agitated man, he stared at him for some lingering moments to throw him off guard.

"Who said I am here to make a purchase?" Snape sneered, his deep voice echoing dangerously.

"Well, I know fer' a fact that you ain't here to kill me... "

"Don't sound so assured," Snape interrupted.

"Bullshit."

"Give me what I came for, and there will be no need to harm you." Severus spoke emotionlessly.

"Eh! Just as I thought! Wanting to make a purchase. Couldn't knock could you? Wanted to make a dramatic entrance."

Snarling in frustration, Snape lunged toward Mr. Borgin, yanking him off the floor by a firm grip about the neck. He slammed the frail shop-owner against the wall, tightening his hand against his windpipe.

Mr. Borgin stared back at the Death Eater, bulging eyes silently begging for breath.

"Let me make myself very clear," Snape said in quiet anger. "I am not here for my health. You have something that my master believes belongs to him, and I have no intention of paying for it. You can give it to me, and I will leave you moderately unharmed, or we can continue to... discuss matters difficultly. Do I make myself clear?"

Gagging on his own saliva, Mr. Borgin gurgled in an attempt to show agreement. Finally released, he fell back to the floor in a huddle, holding his throat and gasping for breath.

"What?" he wheezed. "What the hell do you want?"

"I want *the book*."

"What book?"

"Are you fucking blind? Can you not see what is standing before you? Obviously, I am here at the request of the Dark Lord. So give me the book that only he would want, that only he knows you have!"

Despite his dumb anger and pain, Mr. Borgin's head snapped up in alarm.

"How does the Dark Lord know I have... ?"

Snape lunged back to the floor, gripping the older man by the pitiful amount of hair on his head, yanking it back and forcing him to stare into his piercing black eyes glaring behind his Death Eater mask. Placing his wand beneath his throat, Snape guided him to start moving towards the door.

"That information is inconsequential. Where do you keep it?"

Clenching his eyes shut, Mr. Borgin moaned in agony, loathe to hand over such a rare and very dangerous possession.

"Very well," Snape said slowly.

Kicking his leg out, Snape swept his foot behind the old man, kicking both feet from underneath him. Mr. Borgin quickly slammed to the floor, landing solidly on his knees. At the sound of a hollow pop, Mr. Borgin screamed in pain, erratically flailing his arms and begging to remove his body weight off his legs.

Hand still gripping his wiry grey hair, Snape yanked his head back and met his eyes.

Legilimens! Snape said silently.

The first thought Severus distinguished in the old man's mind was a maze of endless brick walls surrounded by a steady fog. Obviously, Mr. Borgin had some knowledge of adequate methods to shield his mind.

Still completely entrenched within the shop-owner's psyche, Snape effortlessly issued a non-verbal warning.

"The harder you fight, the more damage I will do."

A hair-line fracture split down the center of the brick wall. A surge of fear replaced the fog.

Smiling to himself, Severus focused on the crack, battering the older man's mind with his superior skill.

Bricks crumbling, Snape instantly entered a sizeable glass room crammed with bizarre trinkets and grotesque figurines. The old man possessed many secrets he did not want to reveal.

Snape hungrily followed the trail of trepidation in the maze of objects. This element of the hunt was intoxicating, better than any whisky he had every tasted. There was something very addictive about the art of Legilimency. The energy, the *power*, that flooded through him each and every time he dismantled the armor of minds watered his mouth with satiated saliva.

He relished this part of his job.

Mr. Borgin's frantic and hysterical thoughts finally rested on the floor of the glass room. Narrowing his eyes, Snape attempted to see what was not there. The only thing visible was an odd patch of paneled wooden floor.

He would have thought this useless if Mr. Borgin hadn't been shrieking in frustrated failure.

Pulling himself out of the shop-owner's reflections, Snape immediately released his grip on the older man's hair.

Gasping in agony, Mr. Borgin braced his hands on the floor and slowly attempted to push his useless legs out from under him.

"Petrificus Totalus!" Snape hissed.

The kneeling man's face contorted in horror before he was rendered completely immobile.

"Painful?" Snape asked smugly.

Tapping the tip of his wand on his chin, Snape rounded the shop-owner, reveling at the sight of him kneeling on damaged knees.

"This might give you some time to think how you could have avoided all of this tonight," Snape said over his shoulder as he finally walked out of the bedroom and dashed down the narrow staircase.

The moment his boot hit the last step, Snape sped through the shadowy corridor that led into the main shop.

Raising his wand toward the front door and windows, Snape sent Silencing and Strengthening Charms against the front of the building.

As he moved to stand behind the counter, Snape pointed his wand at the panel floorboards in the middle of the shop, blasting the wood into fine sawdust. Calmly approaching the open hole in the floor, Snape knelt down, reaching for the heavy, locked case that he knew he would find there.

Tucking the valuable object into his generous black cloak, Snape turned on the spot and vanished from the destroyed shop.

*** **

"Ah, Severus," a raspy voiced hissed the moment Snape Apparated into the abandoned house.

"My Lord," Snape answered immediately, at once kneeling before the Dark Lord. Severus' robes billowed about his legs, sending a cloud of ash and dust into the air.

"I trust everything went well?" The dark creature asked importantly.

"Of course, my Lord."

"And the book?"

"Here, my Lord." Snape made to reach into his pocket to retrieve it.

"I do not need it at the moment. I trust you are able enough to keep it safe?"

"Yes, my Lord," Severus replied, instantaneously tucking the locked case back into the hidden pockets of his voluminous Death Eater cloak.

"Very good."

The usual long, deafening moments of silence passed as the dark creature treaded the floorboards of the parlor room, humming oddly to himself. Spotting patches of cleared dust on the battered floorboards, Snape vaguely wondered who else had knelt in this parlor room tonight.

Absorbing particular details of his surroundings adequately served to divert Snape from wondering how long this madness would last. He would not be surprised if his master overlooked his continued reverent kneeling.

All Snape could envision was going back to his dungeon chambers and reading the abysmal text that now lay in his possession. He knew what was in this book. Everyone amidst political circles discussed this text as a myth; no one believed that a human would be brave or malevolent enough to inscribe the words on the ancient pages.

Pages that the Dark Lord had studied himself in depth when he was a young wizard.

Horcruxes, Severus' mind whispered in morose curiosity.

"Yes, Severus, *Horcruxes*." The Dark Lord cackled madly. He sped across the room and grasped the Potions master's severe face.

Looking up into the smooth, pale features of his master, Snape followed the long fingered grasp on his jaw, rising off the cold floor.

"You *are* gifted aren't you?" the Dark Lord questioned. "I've never heard you think before..." His scarlet eyes flashed in excitement.

The back of Severus' mind screamed, cried even, at his slip. But it was in the back of his mind that he was able to display these emotions, so they lay hidden, locked away from his master's fixed gaze.

"You have no idea how pleased I am of your curiosity."

Severus swallowed, intentionally appearing to be ill at ease.

"Yes, go home. Read it. Then come back and report to me the likelihood of Black's interest in the text. ~~He~~*must* follow suit if I am to remain immortal."

Severus gazed back at the Dark Lord intently. "As you wish, my Lord."

*** **

The Chosen One, Harry thought to himself, snorting in disgust.

It appeared that the ethereal rumors were true.

Ripping the spare parchment in his hands, Harry scrunched the rubbish into a sloppy ball and threw it into the dwindling fire.

Face growing warm as the fire fed, Harry narrowed his eyes, fighting back tears that threatened to surface.

It's not fair, he thought.

Clenching his eyes, Harry shamefully cringed at his self-pitying thoughts.

He wished he felt as confident of himself as he had last year. But, regardless of all of the new information he had just learned, Harry still would gladly kill Voldemort if given the chance.

But now...

What's the point? So I kill Voldemort, and the wizarding world rejoices at the demise of evil... but for how long? How long until the next Dark Lord rises and wreaks his own havoc? Will I be another Dumbledore? Will I grow old and watch helplessly as another wizard follows in the same footsteps as Voldemort? Will I spend my days watching over the next 'Chosen One'?

There just had to be some way to stop this celestial cycle.

Harry's heart rapidly raced at that last thought. If he was thinking this, then obviously Dumbledore had contemplated it as well. Yes, there had to be a way to halt the cycle of... power to those with evil intent. Dumbledore seemed very interested in finding out the identity of the next potential Dark Lord.

Maybe the end to this cycle had something to do with him?

"I'm not too surprised she likes you," said a dreamy voice, suddenly.

Harry's head snapped up from his hypnotic stare at the common room fire. Glancing to his right, he took notice of Luna Lovegood's abrupt entrance through the Portrait Hole.

"Who?" he asked immediately. One thing Harry had learned from his constant interactions with the odd Ravenclaw was that almost everything she said possessed a very real, yet uncomfortable, ignored truth.

"Lavender," she breathed dismissively, sitting beside Harry on the settee.

Harry never really knew how Luna easily entered Gryffindor Tower. True, all you needed to know was the password, but Luna seemed to know it the very moment it had been changed.

Harry leaned back on the settee, adjusting his body so he was comfortable enough for another one of the late night discussions that they had indulged in since the beginning of term.

Luna reached into the pocket of her night robes. After pulling out a ball of twine and a blue Pygmy Puff, she finally found the elastic band she had been searching for.

Gathering her scraggy blonde hair, she started plaiting it over the side of her shoulder.

"She may be a tart, Harry, but you really shouldn't have thrown it in her face like that. I bet she cried herself to sleep."

"I know," Harry said quietly. He'd never told Luna of the exchange he had shared with Lavender by the lake, and he knew for a fact that Lavender would never disclose such a thing to old 'Loony' Lovegood.

All the same, he wasn't surprised that Luna knew. Her odd and accurate observations had ceased to catch him off guard.

"You're attracted to her," Luna announced emotionlessly, turning toward Harry.

Harry grinned to himself, feeling comfortable enough with Luna for her to see it.

"Please, don't hurt Ginny, Harry," Luna said knowingly.

Harry's head snapped up, regarding the sixth-year Ravenclaw through narrowed eyes. "You know that is the last thing I want to do."

"Then stop thinking about Lavender before this ends horribly."

"I have to apologize, at least," Harry countered immediately.

Luna sighed dramatically as if she knew he would say that.

"Luna?" Harry questioned, steeling himself to ask a question that had been haunting him.

Luna leaned back into the settee. Raising her legs, she tightened her night robe against her bended knees. "Yes?" she asked slowly, bracing herself for his inquiry.

"Your mother was a Seer, wasn't she?"

Luna tore her eyes away from the charred embers of the dead fire, closing them with a miserable defeat Harry had never seen her express before.

"Yes."

"What happened when she died?" Harry asked, awe heavy in his voice.

Lowering her forehead onto her knees, Luna spoke in her usually calm manner.

"Mummy was... disappointed that I wasn't a Seer. If I had been, I would have shown signs by the time I was five. But I didn't." Luna couldn't help but laugh uncomfortably.

"Mummy was an amazing witch," Luna said wide-eyed with the faintest hint of a smile. "She was so smart; she helped so many people. Wizards and witches would come from all over the world, just for the chance that she might announce a prophecy in their presence. She loved to read all sorts of foreign books. Everybody adored her yet honored her wish to remain unrecognized."

"She home schooled me herself, wanting to spend as much time with me as she could, waiting for any sign that I would have the sight that she possessed. Not very long after my ninth birthday, Mummy placed a square, locked case on my writing desk. There was a very... dangerous book inside that she had been reading obsessively for almost three weeks." Raising her pale fist, Luna wiped her nostrils, sniffing as her eyes welled.

"I remember Mummy and Daddy fighting constantly when she first brought it home. Daddy never forbade her to read the odd magical books she experimented with, but this one really scared him."

Luna paused from her story, making eye contact with Harry. Harry's eyes were rimmed with unshed tears. Luna knew that hearing her speak painfully of the loss of her mother would strike a chord within him and ignite his own memories. Even though he was very young, his gifted magic enabled him to remember his own mother's death.

Dragging her eyes away, Luna returned her gaze to the fire so she would be able to finish her tale.

"There were many... blood rituals and ancient, *forbidden* magic in that book. Mummy knew this, but she was so desperate to have a daughter who could See like her. After speaking an unusual incantation that I could not understand, she cut the inside of her forearm with a knife. The blood flowed freely. She quickly wiped at the fluid with her undamaged hand, smearing it across my forehead. Then she..."

Vividly remembering that day, Luna could not stop the painful tears that began to stream down her face. Her voice started to faintly hitch and gasp as she continued talking, but knowing that Harry would perfectly understand the sentiments she freely expressed, she kept speaking.

"The moment her blood touched my face... I-I screamed! I screamed loud and hard, screaming for Daddy to come inside. Mummy was so scared, but she didn't know why. She couldn't know why because in that moment she could no longer See. The next few moments are a peculiar blur, but I remember hugging my Mummy, telling her I loved her and squeezing her arm with all my might."

"Daddy..." Luna gasped, tears and mucus mixing together as she wiped her nose, "Daddy raced into the room and grabbed Mummy. He didn't understand why such a tiny wound would not stop bleeding. By then, Mummy was laying on the floor of the kitchen, gasping as the pool of blood around her grew bigger."

Luna stopped speaking to silently sob to herself, placing her forehead back on her hugged knees.

"Mummy!" I screamed. 'Mummy, no!' I kept wailing over and over. She wasn't dead yet, but I knew she soon would be. Because I knew she was dying; I knew she was giving her life so I could have a fraction of the power she possessed. I didn't want it; I didn't want to have such... awareness. I just wanted her to stop bleeding." Luna paused in her story, turning her face toward the Portrait Hole so she could wipe her runny nose across her knees.

"Sometimes," she spoke hollowly, "I wonder if Daddy would blame me if he knew why she did it."

"NO!" Harry barked. He pushed himself across the settee, extending his arm to wrap Luna into an awkward, but heartfelt, embrace. "Don't you dare think that for a second. Your mum made that choice, and if she doesn't blame you, then no one should."

"I know she doesn't," Luna said, lifting her head from her hugged knees. Her tear-stained face looked up at Harry, smiling softly. "She told me she doesn't," Luna said with a sad laugh.

Harry slightly pushed himself away from her so he could look at the truth behind her grey eyes.

Almost fearfully, he asked, "Behind the veil, you mean?"

"Of course," Luna answered dreamily, flashing him a smile.

"What *is* behind the veil, Luna?"

Luna tilted her head, eyebrows pinching together, telling Harry that he of all people should know the answer.

"You ask that as if the veil possesses only one explanation. What the veil is, is entirely dependent on the person entering it. It can be paradise if one knows oneself, or it can be hell to those who refuse to acknowledge their past sins."

Harry swallowed.

I wonder what it was for Sirius?

*** **

Down in the damp dungeons of Hogwarts, Snape reclined further into his lush settee, eyeing the unlocked case on his coffee table. The tattered leather surface and rusted lock seemed out of place in his exceptionally clean and organized living space.

Raising his tired legs onto his ottoman, Snape extended his hand toward the end table on his right side. Turning over his favored crystal tumbler, Snape hesitated in reaching for his bottle of firewhisky.

How Severus wanted to read the book. He was desperate to learn the secrets etched on the wrinkled pages. But he knew he shouldn't. If merely following the orders of both of his masters caused such an internal battle within his mind, he could only imagine the visions that would haunt his thoughts if he read about Horcruxes from *the* source.

No, he didn't even want to imagine it.

As morbid as it was, Snape somehow found relief that this apprehension distracted him from worries of another sort. Raising an agile hand, Severus traced the edges of his lips while his thoughts drifted towards a certain curly-haired Gryffindor.

Granger.

"No, *Hermione*." His mind corrected him in very much the same fashion and tone that she had.

Shite... Merlin help him. He desired the girl.

Well, she's not a girl any longer, now, is she?

Snape grinned devilishly at the thought.

Yet, he still couldn't fathom what had come over him, stimulating him enough to kiss the girl -- twice! After both instances, he swore to himself that he would take it back, that he would tell the girl that this was reckless and not worth taking the chance.

But, just after he had convinced himself, just when his mind was made up, he was forced to observe that mangy mutt drool all over Hermione. It would not have surprised him if Black had attempted to mount her leg and hump it until completion.

Snape snorted as that visual breezed through his mind.

"Granger," Snape murmured to himself, pinching the bridge of his nose. He slid his hand through his oily hair, his head falling back against the cushion.

Since their... discussion in his personal Potions lab a few days ago, Snape had avoided the haughty Gryffindor at every turn. He knew she wanted to speak to him, to keep seeing him, but he was confident that he was making the more sensible decision by evading her and pretending that he didn't start all of this.

No, technically the insufferable know-it-all started this.

Due to her extremely unusual behavior at number twelve Grimmauld Place, Snape had found himself giving the seventh-year more than a flimsy second thought. The blasted girl had even had the gall to kiss him.

She's gone mad, Snape had first thought.

What eighteen-year-old girl would want to kiss her Potions master on the bloody cheek?

Yet, she had kept showing signs of interest and intrigue since that incident, which made it very clear that she did not regret her move.

Whatever her motivations, Snape finally decided to cast his worries aside. He would stop ignoring the girl and indulge her attempts to linger behind after class.

He would not deny what was freely offered.

Author's Notes: Part 2 coming up.

-Story beta'ed by the talented **melusin**.

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's Paradise Lost, Book ii. Line 555.

Chapter Eleven - Of Providence, Foreknowledge, Will, and Fate (Part 2)

Chapter 13 of 36

With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began. And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. Eventual SS/HG. Alternate Universe, HBP death disregarded.

Nominated for best fic in the 2007 OWL Awards: Fire & Ice Category (SS/HG), Romance Category, Angst

Category, and A/U Category

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: My beta, **melusin**, has helped me greatly with this story and the writing.

Harry grumbled to himself, pacing back and forth on the seventh floor in front of the stone gargoyle at the base of the winding stairs. He needed to speak to the Headmaster again. He had far too many questions clamoring in his mind.

After his unsettling conversation with Luna, Harry's mind refused to calm itself enough to find sleep. Quietly leaving his bed, he immediately exited Gryffindor tower to wander the empty corridors as he indulged himself in his obsessive thinking.

His first thought was to speak with the Headmaster, but it was very late, and he knew the frail old man needed his rest. For once, Harry grudgingly admitted, he wanted to make sense of everything as calmly as possible.

A sudden gasp pierced the silence of the chilled corridor.

Whirling around towards the far end of the corridor, Harry briefly noticed Lavender Brown's alarmed face seconds before she spun on her heel.

"Wait," Harry called to her.

Shoulders tensing, Lavender increased her pace down the corridor toward the portrait of the Fat Lady.

"God dammit," Harry breathed to himself, running after her.

Harry's athletic body and longer legs enabled him to easily catch up with the blonde seventh-year just as she scrambled through the portrait hole.

"Come on," Harry pleaded with her, failing to mask the frustration laced in his voice.

Grasping her by the elbow, Harry whirled Lavender around when he caught up with her.

Much shorter than him, Lavender hesitantly raised her vision to his shirt buttons before lowering her eyes back down to the floor.

"Look, Lavender," Harry breathed, releasing her arm to ruffle his hair awkwardly. "I acted like an arse down by the lake... and I'm sorry."

Lavender snapped her head up to look at him through narrowed eyes.

"Fine," she spat. "Apology accepted. Conscience restored?" she mocked, swishing her blonde hair over her shoulder.

She promptly spun away from him and headed towards the stairs leading to the girls' dormitories.

"No," Harry said confidently, following closely behind her. "I still feel like shite."

Lavender froze at the foot of the stairs, but refused to turn around.

"It takes a lot of nerve to admit your feelings to someone. To express your emotions and be vulnerable enough to be hurt. I saw your vulnerability and preyed upon it."

Both Harry and Lavender snapped around at the sound of the portrait hole swinging open.

Lavender quickly grasped Harry around the wrist, pulling him up the stairs and into the girls' dormitories.

"Wait, hold on," Harry protested, yet he followed her lead.

"Shh," she hissed over her shoulder. "What if it's McGonagall?"

Hand still locked around Harry's strong wrist, Lavender pulled him into her room, hurriedly closing and locking the door behind them.

"Why was I allowed up here?" Harry asked curiously.

Lavender laughed out loud, causing Harry to eye the other beds apprehensively.

"Don't worry, we're alone. You didn't really think the stairs would kick *me* out of my own dormitory? Boys can enter as long as they are being physically led by a girl."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, *you* would know that."

Lavender shot him a mutinous glare, crossing her arms over her chest.

Eyes wide, Harry immediately raised his hands in defeat. "Stupid joke, sorry."

Rolling her eyes, Lavender nervously motioned for them to sit on her four-poster.

"Where's Parvati?" Harry asked, eyeing the other beds warily again.

"In the boys' dormitory."

Harry raised his hand to his mouth to cover his knowing smirk.

"Oh, shut up, Harry."

Harry's shrewd smile was instantly wiped from his face when a fuzzy pink pillow collided with his head.

Lavender fell on her duvet in a fit of giggles at the sight of Harry's shocked expression.

Harry quickly bent down to the floor, retrieving the pink monstrosity. Kneeling on her bed, Harry pursued her as she pushed herself towards the headboard.

Grasping her about the waist, Harry began to playfully swat Lavender about the face.

"Stop," she laughed hysterically, twisting under his touch. "Stop it," she gasped. "I'm ticklish!"

Arm frozen in the air, Harry released the horrid pillow. Looking down at her, a mischievous smile quickly spread across his face.

Lavender's eyes widened. "Wait!"

"What?" Harry asked innocently, wiggling his fingers pressed against her waist.

"No... No more!" she gasped through giggles.

Harry wrapped both hands around her abdomen, tickling her with abandon. Openly laughing himself, he reveled at the feel of her curvaceous body squirming beneath him.

Finally showing mercy, Harry ceased his torment.

As their laughter slowly died down, Harry relaxed his weight onto his forearm. Both he and Lavender realized the precarious position they now found themselves in.

Resting almost fully on top of her, Harry recognized that his growing erection was pressed between Lavender's open legs. Her school skirt had ridden up in the flirtatious tussle; the smooth skin of her thighs was clearly visible on either side of his hips.

Ginny... his conscience cried.

"I should go," he said uncomfortably, using his forearm beside her head to push himself onto his knees.

"No, don't," Lavender pleaded.

Pushing himself completely off her, Harry sat on the edge of her bed. Lavender hastily slid her body across the duvet to sit beside him. Extending a well manicured hand to his face, Lavender grasped Harry by the jaw, kissing him on cheek.

"Don't go," she whispered by his ear.

"Lavender," Harry said warningly, turning to face her.

Seeing her chance, Lavender pulled Harry's face toward hers, enveloping his lips in her vigorous kiss.

Reluctantly closing his eyes, Harry did not attempt to protest further. His breathing started to quicken at the feel of Lavender urging his body to lie flat against her bed. She quickly climbed on top of him, placing her exposed legs on either side of his hips as she continued her attack on his mouth.

Groaning into her mouth, Harry finally reached out to grasp her thighs the moment she ground against his erection.

Lavender pushed herself to sit up, smiling seductively and quickly attempted to undo his belt and trousers.

"Whoa," Harry grudgingly protested. "You don't have to do that." His erection throbbed at the sight of her undoing his pants, but his mind screamed this was going too far.

"It's all right," Lavender said huskily. She straightened herself up, kissing Harry while she shoved her small hand into his open pants. She firmly gripped him around the base of his hard cock. "I want to," Lavender said, sliding her soft hand up his erection, over the head and back down again.

Closing his eyes, Harry threw his neck back, grunting freely. Breathing quickening, he allowed Lavender to pull his arousal out from the opening of his underpants while she lowered her body between his legs to kneel on the floor by the bed.

Dropping his face to look at her, Harry sharply inhaled as her pink tongue shot out of her mouth and wrapped around the tip of his cock.

His arousal fully peaked, Harry grabbed Lavender's hair at the back of her neck as she opened her lips to fully take him in her warm mouth.

Moaning deeply, Harry pressed against the back of Lavender's neck, urging her to speed up her movements. At the sound of her contented hum, he fell back against the bed with a groan; no thoughts of Ginny were anywhere to be found.

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Hermione woke with a jolt, startled by her high-pitched Muggle alarm clock. Barely opening her eyes, she blindly reached her hand toward the end table, tempted to hit the snooze button. Hermione actually lay in bed for a few moments as she seriously contemplated not getting up.

Oh, for Heaven's sake, he's not worth moping about.

Hermione had been moving about the last couple of days in an aimless fog. She didn't understand why Professor Snape went from hot to cold so drastically. So sure of his... interest in her, Hermione had attempted to linger after Advanced Potions, hoping for a stolen moment.

But he hadn't so much as glanced in her direction before fleeing to his adjoining office door in an agitated flourish.

Why is he avoiding me? What did I do wrong?

Hermione wasn't that dense. It was obvious that Severus was having second thoughts about their sudden attraction. *If you could even call it that.*

"Fine," Hermione spat, vigorously kicking her cream-colored duvet off her.

She had made an honest attempt to show she had every intention of continuing their interactions. If he wanted her, he would have to show her.

Jumping out of bed, Hermione went about her usual morning routine, walking to the heavy curtains that covered her expansive windows. As she sleepily padded to her window seat, the toes of one bare foot made contact with something warm and fuzzy. Her first instinct was to immediately remove her body weight from that leg.

Falling to the floor, sharp nails clawed at her foot followed by an irritated hiss.

"Merlin, I'm sorry, Crooks!"

A long, deep growl from beneath one of the pale blue wing-back chairs was her only answer.

"Well, don't get fussy with me! If you're tired of me stepping on you, then stop sleeping beneath the window."

Another rumbling growl.

Pushing herself off the floor, Hermione sighed to herself and pulled open the curtains.

For once, Hermione took a moment to gaze out onto the school grounds. The abysmally grey sky hardly improved the dim lighting in her room, nor her melancholy mood. Looking out into the hazy mist of the horizon above the dark Forbidden Forest, Hermione wondered how her parents were faring.

She had never gone this long without talking to them in some shape or form. Not one letter or Floo visit since the end of last term.

Where were they? Were they safe? What about her Muggle home? Did they still own it? If so, how were they going about paying the bills? Would she even have a home when all was said and done with the war? Could she even still call her parents place 'home'?

Hermione's light brown eyes remained transfixed on the orange and brown leaves of the Forbidden Forest as she edged her body to sit in the window seat. Pulling her knees against her chest, Hermione tugged her chemise to cover her legs, the soft satin brushing against her small ankles.

For so long, she had tried not to worry about how her family was doing, thinking she would contain a better grasp on her sanity if she kept an optimistic outlook on things.

Maybe she would fare better if she didn't feel so lonely.

Ginny was good company, but it was difficult trying to juggle spending time with her and time with Harry. Since their break up, both of them had promised to continue associating amidst the same circles. Regardless of their selfless attempts, awkwardness and passive malice hung heavy in the air whenever the two of them were in the same room.

What are you doing, Harry?

Hermione was loathe to admit to him that she did not enjoy the company of Lavender Brown. Her tolerance for silliness and immature drama was extremely limited. Something was developing between the two of them, but Hermione did not feel like it was her place to prevent it.

It was only the second week of October, and she already felt like she was ripping at the seams.

*** **

"What's wrong, Harry?" Hermione asked the moment they took their favorite seats in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom.

"Huh?" Harry spun around from his obsessive stare at the classroom door, eyeing each student as they slowly filled up the empty seats.

Hermione focused her attention on pulling her book out of her heavy bag while she attempted to speak calmly. "You know, Harry, I've been very patient, hoping you would tell me what happened in Professor's Dumbledore's office this past weekend."

Harry tilted his head to the side, narrowing his eyes in slight annoyance.

"Obviously he's said something that distressed you, but you know I am more than willing to listen--"

"Oh, come off it, Hermione," Ron interrupted carelessly. "He'll talk about it when he's good and ready."

She snapped her head to glare at Ron, sending him her typical warning look.

Ears turning red, Ron immediately turned his head away from her and opened his book.

Sharp nails suddenly glided through the hair at the back of Harry's head.

"Hello, Harry," Lavender breathed as she passed very closely by his seat.

Harry instantly sat up straight, his body tensing.

"Hi," he said timidly, avoiding her eyes.

The class finally settled the moment the door to Professor Black's office opened.

Swiftly entering the classroom with a self-important air, Sirius confidently began the day's lecture.

Hermione loved this subject almost as much as she loved Advanced Potions and Arithmancy, so out of habit, she constantly kept her eyes glued to the professors as they spoke unless of course she was obsessively note-taking.

But the last couple of days, Hermione found herself growing uncomfortable as she sat in Defense class. Almost every time she raised her eyes towards Sirius, Hermione found him meeting her stare, but his gaze lingered a bit longer than necessary.

By her classmates' random head turns in her direction, Hermione knew that she wasn't the only one to have noticed.

I've just about had enough of this.

"Please read the next two chapters in preparation for the next lesson. I also want a foot-long summary for each--" At the sound of disappointed groans, Sirius raised his voice, insisting that this was final. "--telling me the most important elements of a Patronus signal."

Hermione hastily shoved her books into her bag, knowing full well that Sirius was gazing intently at her, wishing for her to look up and meet his eyes.

She fled the room without a backward glance toward him.

*** **

"Stop staring at him!" Ginny hissed, nudging Hermione with her elbow.

Pushing her plate away, Hermione gazed at Ginny, wide-eyed.

"Who?" she gasped.

"Sirius! You've been look up towards the High Table all through dinner. I know there's something going on between the two of you, but don't make him think you're desperate."

"There's absolutely nothing going on between the two of us!" Hermione gasped.

"Uh-huh, right."

Sighing irritably, Hermione ignored Ginny's warning and glanced back toward the High Table.

It was just too tempting. She kept hoping that the next time she raised her face, Professor Snape would meet her lingering eyes. But she did have to be careful. She had already unintentionally made eye contact with Sirius. He flashed her such an arrogant leer that it actually turned her stomach, forcing her to push her dinner plate away.

The moment Sirius pushed himself away from his dinner, Hermione immediately rose from her seat at the Gryffindor table. She needed to talk to him: to tell him that his actions were getting out of hand; to tell him that she wasn't developing more than friendly emotions for him.

Walking around the Gryffindor table, Hermione fought the urge to gaze at her Potions master. Reluctantly feeding her desires, she turned toward Snape one more time.

Narrowing his eyes, Snape glared daggers at Sirius' retreating back as he exited the Great Hall through the side door beside the High Table. The moment Sirius was no longer in the room, his severe face instantly snapped toward Hermione, sending her an accusing scowl.

Unable to tear herself away from his piercing eyes, she turned to exit the Great Hall, apprehension and excitement filling her with that one look.

She sped down the corridor. Turning the corner toward the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, Hermione straight away caught sight of Sirius entering his office. Looking up at her, his hand still on the doorknob, Sirius smiled conceitedly as he held the door open for her to enter.

"To what, if I may ask, do I owe the pleasure?"

"Good evening, Sirius," Hermione spoke as she entered his classroom.

Closing the door behind him, Sirius motioned for them to enter his office.

"I need to speak to you," Hermione said timidly.

"I gathered as much," he said with a wink, holding open his office door for her.

Hermione intentionally sat at the students' chair in front of his desk, rather than the intimate cluster of chairs by the hearth rug.

"Tea?"

"Um, sure."

Sirius walked to a large cabinet that stood against the wall opposite Hermione.

"How about some wine instead?" Rather than wait for her answer, Sirius opened the long cupboard doors, reaching for two wine glasses.

"No, please, Sirius, sit down. This is important."

Turning around, Sirius eyed her suspiciously, refusing to follow her request.

"Please."

Closing the cabinet, Sirius finally walked across the room, sitting in the other student seat beside Hermione.

"Yes?"

"I just wanted to tell you how much... fun I had last weekend."

"I had a wonderful time too, Hermione," Sirius interrupted, reaching across to place his right hand on her knee.

Sighing, Hermione grabbed Sirius' hand, lifting it off her leg.

"See, this is what we need to talk about." She lightly motioned for him to remove his hand from hers.

"What do you mean?" he asked incredulously.

"Sirius, you are truly a really good friend. I have a lot of fun when I am with you, but unfortunately, that is all I see you as. I just don't see you as anything more."

Making eye contact, Sirius eyed Hermione emotionlessly, yet a vein in his temple throbbed sickeningly.

"I understand," he said tersely, rising from his seat.

"Wait, Sirius." Hermione reached out to grasp his arm, but he ducked out of her reach.

"Professor Black," Sirius hissed. Avoiding her eyes, he yanked open his office door and stormed across the Defense classroom.

NO! No, no, no... it can't be like this.

Hermione lurched out of her seat to follow him.

"Sirius, please don't be upset with me," Hermione pleaded quietly.

Ignoring her, Sirius wrenched open the classroom door, holding it open, fuming as he waited for her to leave.

Stepping out into the hall, Hermione flinched as he immediately slammed the door closed behind him.

"Goodnight, *Miss Granger*," he said icily.

"Why are you acting like this?"

Sirius marched down the hall, refusing to look at her. "You made this decision, not me."

"I don't want to stop speaking to you," she yelled in frustration as she trailed behind him.

Sirius snorted in response.

"Sirius," she called after him. "Sirius, don't ignore me!"

So he did.

Patience finally wearing off, Hermione pulled her wand out of her robes, pointing it at the end of the corridor.

As Sirius made to round the corner toward the Entrance Hall, he instantly flew back a few feet, grunting as he fell to the floor.

"What the fuck?" Rising off the floor, Sirius raised his hands, touching a wall that he could not see which had blocked him from his determined march out of the castle. Spinning around, he caught sight at the wand in Hermione's hand. His eyes widened.

"Release it."

"No. Not until you speak to me like an adult."

"There is nothing more for us to say."

Hermione marched up to Sirius, anger and irritation clearly showing on her face, wand still in her hand. Sirius backed away from her in alarm until his body made contact with the invisible wall.

"Stop acting like a prat," she hissed, shaking her finger in his face as if he were a naughty child. "I said I valued our friendship, and I meant it. I'm not ready for a relationship with you, but I enjoy your company. I see no reason why we can't continue being friends."

Heart thumping in his chest, Sirius looked down at Hermione's face, pinched with anger. She had never looked so beautiful to him.

"Fine," he said with a sigh. "I-I apologize."

"For?"

"What?"

"I'm not going to let you get away with another empty promise. You swore that you would keep things professional in the classroom; yet I'm forced to put up with my classmates' idiotic giggles every time you look at me! Prove that you give a damn about what I have to say!"

The tables were turned. Hermione now held their friendship by a thin string, and Sirius truly did not want her angry with him.

He reached out, grasping her wand arm by her small wrist.

"Truly, I'm... sorry if I made you feel at all uncomfortable. I accept your friendship and offer you mine... if you'll have it."

Hermione sighed in relief. "I forgive you--"

"Well now," Snape sneered sarcastically, "isn't this touching?" He was standing on the other side of Hermione's conjured blockade. With Sirius' back facing him, Snape was able to send a knowing glare to Hermione's wrist held in his hand.

She instantly snatched her arm away.

"Tell me, Snivellus," Sirius spat, still facing Hermione, "do you enjoy feeding the rumors that you're a walking vampire, or do you actually prefer only coming out when it's too dark to see your greasy face?"

Hermione tsked in appalled disgust. "Don't be rude, Sirius."

"I am quite capable of solving my own issues, Miss Granger. Therefore, I do not need the help of foolish young witches who recklessly break rules."

Appalled, Hermione's head snapped up toward Snape. "What rules...?"

Lip curling, Snape reached into his robes. Retrieving his wand, he flicked it quickly in the air to remove the conjured wall.

"Magic *is* forbidden in the corridors, is it not?"

Hermione inhaled sharply, locking eyes with her professor. "Yes," she admitted grudgingly.

"Yes, *what*?"

Eye narrowing, Hermione sent her Potions master a mutinous glare.

"Yes, what, Miss Granger?" he hissed. "Forbidden use of magic in the corridors has already afforded you one week's worth of detention. Would you like to try for two for insolence?"

Fists clenching, Sirius whirled around. "Oh, piss off, Snape, she doesn't have--"

"Yes, *sir*," Hermione said through clenched teeth.

Severus stepped aside and extended his hand toward the stairs leading down to the dungeons. "You might as well start serving your detention now. Head to my office," he commanded.

Hermione had to force herself not to appear pleased with his request.

"Wait, Hermione. You don't have to go now," said Sirius as he made to follow her.

Hermione paused at Professor Snape's side. "No, it's all right, Sirius... er... Professor Black."

"But it's nearly curfew!" Sirius called after the two of them, forced to watch them walk down the dark corridor.

Snape partially turned around, eyebrow arching in challenge. "The Head Girl does not have a curfew," he said smoothly, edging his hand into the small of Hermione's back.

*** **

Forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty, fifty-one... lying on her back, Pansy continued to stare at the canopy above her. She had acquired the habit of counting the number of frayed threads in the dark green curtains of Nott's four-poster. It was usually poorly lit in his room; the only light offered was whatever degree of moonlight filtered in through the tiny window of the boys' dormitory. Pansy preferred it this way. It made counting the loose threads taxing, focusing all of her attention to find them. Sometimes, when she concentrated hard enough, she imagined she was floating out of the bed. She imagined that she was no longer lying stiffly on her back, with a man she did not love slamming into her. But sometimes, when she finally reached the security of the canopy, she would look down, and still see herself underneath him.

"Stop... crying..." Nott huffed, continuing his merciless onslaught on Pansy's body.

Swallowing hard, Pansy kept telling herself to relax. If only she could just stop her body from stiffening, then it wouldn't hurt as much.

Nott roughly grabbed Pansy's thin thighs, his large hands closing around the back of her knees. He pushed her legs up toward her chest, pounding against her, forcing his erection to sink further into her unwilling body. She cringed at the feel of his rough pubic hair scraping against her sensitive inner lips.

Leaning forward to place his forearms on either side of her head, Nott grabbed Pansy's tiny wrists, irritably forcing her to extend them around his neck.

"Don't be... such a fucking... lousy lay!"

Remus, Pansy cried.

Stop crying, she scolded herself. I won't let him think he has the power to hurt me. This is my life, and I will do as I please.

Theodore was freely moaning now after each thrust. Pansy knew that this meant he was seconds away from ejaculating. Her face flinched away from his sloppy kiss on her mouth and chin as his sweaty body finally rested limply against her.

A surge of disgust threatened to consume her as the sensation of sticky wetness saturated her inner thighs.

Roll over...

If she could think of Remus every time her fiancé had his way with her, then she would not feel as tormented during these unwanted... attentions. But Pansy wouldn't insult her Remus like that. She didn't want to connect the pain her body felt with the image of his sadly beautiful face.

Coughing roughly, Nott rose out of the bed and stumbled clumsily to the bathroom.

Pansy quickly turned her naked body away from him, reaching for the covers to shield as much of herself as she could.

Sleep was her favorite time of the day. At least in her dreams she could escape to a life that she spent freely with her love; to a life where she was not betrothed to a man whose touch disgusted her at every turn.

Tomorrow, she told herself.

Tomorrow, Nott and a few of the other seventh-years would be sneaking out of the castle for another meeting with the Death Eaters. So, tomorrow she would be able to sneak out of the castle to Hogsmeade, to one of the little rooms above a pub where she could escape with the one she loved.

*** **

"Was that *really* necessary?" Hermione whispered harshly, entering Professor Snape's office as he held the door open for her.

"Of course," he drawled, closing it behind him. "I couldn't very well have just left that conjured wall in the middle of the corridor. Imagine the havoc it would have caused tomorrow morning."

Hermione made an insulted noise under her breath. "You know that wasn't what I meant! Did you really need to instill proper manners into me in front of Sirius like that?"

Hermione's eyes widened as his lips rose into a knowing smirk.

"You enjoyed that!" she accused him.

The smirk graced his severe face for a few more moments while he reached into his robe to retrieve his wand. Pointing it at the blank wall by his office desk, a doorknob materialized on one of the grey stones. Remembering this, Hermione noted that this doorknob was an elegant silver, unlike the brass handle that led into his personal lab.

Snape smoothly grasped the cool metal, pushing against the wall. A large, antique door emerged. Turning his head to look at her, his eyebrows rose in question.

"Coming?"

"Where?" she asked apprehensively.

"To my chambers," he said evenly.

WHAT?

Pushing the door aside, Severus entered the room, leaving Hermione alone in his office.

Hermione slowly edged herself closer to the mysterious new door braced in the stone wall. "But I thought you said my detention would be--" She suddenly stopped speaking when she realized what she had just said.

Emboldened, Hermione stormed up to the doorway and swiftly entered Snape's living space.

"Detention!" Once inside the tidy, yet dreary room, Hermione barely flinched when the door slammed shut behind her. She was still angry. "You gave me detention--"

Gasping, a strong arm suddenly wrapped around her waist. Snape descended on her from behind, pressing his whole front side against her back.

Hermione froze in response.

His tall and slender figure loomed over her. Leaning toward one ear, Snape used his free right arm to pull her curly hair off the side of her neck.

"Really, Hermione." His voice was low and threatening. "Did you expect any less from me?"

His breath stirred against her cold neck. Closing her eyes, Hermione leaned her head back until it made contact with his shoulder.

"Well," she said softly. "Honestly, no."

Removing the last of her curls from her shoulder, Snape slowly reached out to trace his graceful hand along the side of her neckline. "You've taken liberties with your station," Snape drawled, trailing his fingers across her collarbone as he turned his nose near her hair.

"What do you mean?" Hermione was finding it hard to speak. All of her senses were on fire, and her body was threatening to melt in his arms.

"You wear such feminine... robes after dinner."

She chuckled lightly. "I patrol the corridors almost every night. I can't very well wear school robes round the clock."

"Indeed."

"Have I done something wrong?" Hermione asked suddenly, a slight touch of hurt laced in her small voice.

Snape's hand stilled from his exploration of the soft flesh of her neck. "What do you mean?"

"You've been avoiding me all week."

Silence.

Lowering his arm from around her waist, Snape slowly dragged his body away from hers. Back towards her, he walked across his living space, elegantly edging his body around his antique furnishings.

"I've already told you," he said, "this is foolish of us." Opening a drinks cabinet, Snape reached for two wine glasses, placing them on a heavy work desk beside him.

Hermione took a few steps closer to the desk. "And I've already told you. I don't care."

"Well, you should."

"Do you want me to leave?" She asked with a slight bite in her voice.

Turning toward her, glass jug in hand, a hollow pop echoed as he pulled out the small cork.

"Does it look like I want you to leave?" He began pouring a reddish purple wine into both glasses.

Unsure of herself, Hermione awkwardly accepted her glass.

"We're not breaking any rules." She slightly swirled the wine before smelling it. "Dumbledore practically gave me his blessing as far as Sirius is concerned."

Snape's eyes snapped toward her. "Did he now?"

"Er, yes, unfortunately."

"Interesting..." he murmured, tracing his lips with his fingers.

"How so?"

Snapping out of his musings, Severus placed his crystal wine glass on the desk, gazing attentively at her.

He didn't know what had driven him to invite the girl into his office, let alone his living space. He just wanted to get her out of the dim corridor and away from that mangy mutt's sweaty paws.

Snape watched her fidget under his lustful gaze. Enjoying the sight of her acting so unsure, so timid. Snape made a show of looking her up and down as he edged himself around his writing desk.

"How do you feel about that, Hermione?"

"Feel about what?" she breathed. Hermione knew why he was trying to get closer to her, but all of this was so new, so she couldn't help but slightly back away from his advances.

"Black's interest in you?" Severus asked, arching his eyebrow. Reaching toward her, he smoothly plucked the wine glass out of her shaky hand.

Completely pressed against her Potions master's desk, the base of Hermione's bum edged against the surface.

"It... disturbs me."

Tilting his head to the side, Snape's lank black hair tumbled against the side of his pale face. Standing extremely close to her, he leaned toward Hermione, placing his hands on either side of her hips.

"Good answer," he drawled.

Hermione snapped her face toward him. "I'm not expressing what you want to hear."

"I never said you were."

"Then stop acting like you are so sure of what I am going to say!"

His lips twitched, forming into a pleased smirk.

Hermione raised her hands to her face, shaking her head from side to side. "Ugh! You enjoy getting me flustered, don't you?"

Closing the mere inches that separated their bodies, Snape lunged at her, gripping her about the waist. Reveling in her startled expression, he lifted her up, placing her to sit atop his desk.

"Perhaps."

Snape gazed down at her hooded light brown eyes. So scared, yet so strong. He sensed her body tense when he touched her, steeling herself for his attentions. Despite her apprehension, she had raised her chin toward him, unwilling to verbally express her fear. It was obnoxiously Gryffindor, but he wouldn't have it any other way. He had neither the time nor the energy to coddle little girls possessing archetypal crushes on their older professors.

Smirk slowing fading, Snape pressed his upper thighs against her closed, bended knees. Raising his right hand from the surface of his desk, Snape confidently returned it to her lower waist. Tilting his head forward, his hair partially covered his face, shielding the lust in his expression. Severus moved his lightly calloused palm against the smooth fabric of her navy blue dress robes.

Neither spoke as they concentrated on one another's irregular breathing. Hermione felt somewhat uneasy by the silence, yet she didn't want to break the swell of apprehension that was drawing their bodies closer. She didn't want to come back to reality. He'd been ignoring her all week. Wouldn't even glance at her in irritation as her energetic hand waved eagerly in the air. But now Snape couldn't take his eyes off her.

Slightly glancing up, Snape pushed his thighs against her knees at the sight of her closed eyes. He returned his vision to her waist, slowly gliding his hand up her side. Snape lightly squeezed the dip of her waist and continued caressing up toward her ribs. Her body was quickly relaxing under his touch; her knees no longer pressed together in fear. Pushing his body completely against her one more time, Snape easily parted her legs until they rested on either side of his hips.

Sliding both of his arms around her lower back, Snape exhaled deeply, pressing his face against the side of her neck and into her soft hair.

Lost in a war of emotions, Hermione finally raised her stiff hands off the surface of his desk, allowing Severus to support her weight.

"You're so dangerous for me." Did she say that out loud? Gods, she hoped not; it was meant to be a personal thought.

Snape's amused chuckle tickled the skin behind her ear.

Shit. She did say that out loud.

"How so?"

Catching her breath, Hermione swallowed before she found her voice. "I'm letting myself get lost by your every whim." Timidly raising her left hand to touch the side of his

face, Hermione urged him to look at her. "I'm not accustomed to willingly surrendering my control."

Snape swallowed uncomfortably. He was overwhelmed with the sudden urge to divert his eyes away from her.

Hermione stroked her thumb across his cheekbone. "Yet, I keep yielding to you."

Lifting her chin, eyes slightly open, Hermione pressed her soft lips against the edge of Snape's mouth.

Closing his eyes, Snape lifted his hand from the small of her back, tangling it in her riotous curls. Growling under his breath as he deepened the kiss, he pulled her toward him, pressing her body against his chest. At the sound of her faint whimper, Severus forced his warm tongue into her mouth, overpowering her lips with his vigorous kiss until she was dizzy with his desire.

Author's Notes: I enjoyed writing this chapter, but I fear nothing here shed much light on the overall plot.

-Story beta'ed by the talented **melusin**.

-I love blunt honesty. Tell me how to improve.

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's Paradise Lost, Book ii. Line 555.

Chapter Twelve - Conscience Wakes Despair, Wakes the Bitter Memory

Chapter 14 of 36

With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began. And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. Eventual SS/HG. Alternate Universe, HBP death disregarded.

Nominated for best fic in the 2007 OWL Awards: Fire & Ice Category (SS/HG), Romance Category, Angst Category, and A/U Category

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: My beta, **melusin**, has greatly improved this story.

Kicking a flat pebble with his foot, Harry watched as it evenly skidded along the surface of the lake. He silently observed the steady ripples disturb the smooth dark waters, spreading away from him.

These past couple of weeks, he had been finding the confines of the castle more and more stifling. If he wasn't being forced to watch Ginny's growing attraction towards Seamus, then he was forced to experience Lavender's growing attraction towards himself. Outside, the sharp chill of the abysmal weather always seemed to improve his mood for some reason.

I'm such an idiot. He had let things escalate too far with Lavender the other night. His mind knew that getting physical with the girl was foolish, but he couldn't help but be tempted by the thought of another encounter.

Look at me, Harry laughed to himself with a shake of his head. *Pacing around Hogwarts' grounds without the faintest idea of where I'm going.*

Now Harry understood why the headmaster had lived so strongly and vibrantly past his one hundredth birthday. Obsessive walking not only helped to clear the mind, but served the health of the body as well.

Lifting his eyes toward the subtle orange afterglow of the setting sun, Harry saw the shadowy outline of the massive Quidditch pitch, thrown into relief against the sun's fading rays.

Thursday, he reminded himself. *The Hufflepuff team will be practicing tonight.*

He decided to continue his mind-clearing amble in an environment he truly treasured.

The moment Harry entered the Quidditch pitch, he shook his head, smiling at the spectacle of violet robes fluttering in the steady wind. He ascended the stands toward the peculiar scene.

"Even when the weather is abysmal, you still come out to watch the Quidditch practices."

Dumbledore looked up toward Harry, face alit in delight, eyes twinkling as he smiled. Harry suddenly paused, finally realizing what was so altered about the headmaster this year. Dumbledore used to be very good at constantly maintaining his optimistic glow. One thing that always seemed unchanging, as the war escalated into madness, was that blasted twinkle. But seeing it now, under a darkening October sky, Harry recognized how rare a sight it had become. The old man's pure light was fading away.

Dumbledore turned back toward the screams and yells of the Hufflepuff team. "Yes," he answered, "but I think it makes the young ones nervous." Scooting a bit to one side, Dumbledore motioned for Harry to have a seat beside him.

"It certainly made me nervous."

"Perhaps, but you were splendid nonetheless." Still smiling, Dumbledore turned to the young man at his side. "Do you miss it, Harry?"

"Of course, but I just don't have the time for it now." Glancing down, Harry hesitantly began to peel the chipped blue paint off the wooden seats. "I was hoping I would be able to spend more time looking for the missing..."

"Soon, Harry. But not yet." Dumbledore sighed, turning back toward the practice.

"Why? If I can't be harmed destroying them, then what else is there to fear? What in Merlin's name am I waiting for?"

Dumbledore shook his head in disappointment -- either at himself for keeping so much from him, or at Harry, expecting the boy to know all the answers... Harry wasn't sure which.

"That's just it, Harry. Because you cannot be harmed, it will be far too tempting to destroy them the second they are within your grasp. I learned that mistake myself." With a morbid smile, Dumbledore lightly raised his damaged arm to stress his point.

"Did you know that would happen?" Harry motioned toward Dumbledore's blackened skin with a nod of his head.

"I had my suspicions, but I needed to be sure. Remember, there is much about this... balance that I wasn't sure of myself. I saw how flawlessly you destroyed Tom's dairy and questioned if it was within my realm of power to destroy a Horcrux as well." Dumbledore sighed. "Now, taking everything into consideration: Regulus' death, your perfect health, and my deteriorating body, I felt certain that this balance was real and true. There will come a time, very soon, when you will find it easy to find the remaining Horcruxes, but be cautious. I don't want you to make Voldemort too fragile before it is his time."

This was the point where Harry was supposed to shout and throw something in frustration. The fact that he could recognize that in his own behavior spoke volumes. Looking out onto the pitch, he laughed at the sight of a gangly second year dangling from a runaway broom by one hand. "This is about the One after Voldemort, isn't it?"

"Yes," Dumbledore admitted immediately.

"Do you know who he is?"

"I have my suspicions."

Harry turned toward his mentor. "Who do you think-- "

"Please, Harry. Forgive me for keeping this from you, but I need to be absolutely sure first." Dumbledore opened his mouth to continue, but closed it again after a moment's hesitation.

Observing the old wizard shake his head one more time, Harry knew he was having some type of struggle in his mind.

"You see," Dumbledore spoke quietly, "twenty-two years ago, I was so certain I knew who the next Dark Lord would be."

Dumbledore's eyes glossed over before he closed them in agony.

"But I was wrong... and the aftermath of my actions was... incomprehensible."

Knowing when to admit defeat, Harry turned back toward the energetic group of players. They appeared so small, so innocent. Is that what he looked like when he was in his second and third year? No, he must have looked much worse. Years of neglect and malnourishment from living with his aunt and uncle had made him one of the shortest in his year. Pulling his eyes away from the Quidditch pitch, Harry looked down at the sudden firm grip on his forearm.

Dumbledore gazed at Harry miserably. The internal monologue begged to spill from his exhausted eyes.

"Oh... forgive me, Harry," he said dejectedly.

Harry didn't want Dumbledore to keep something else from him, but he couldn't help but think that the man was overreacting. He understood the need to be cautious.

"It's all right," Harry said reassuringly. "I'm sure you'll tell me soon enough."

Dumbledore sighed. "Yes, very soon."

*** *** ***

Grey and black were pressing against him, threatening to swallow up his sanity.

Closing his eyes in pain, Snape raised his hands and pressed his calloused fingertips against his throbbing temples. Sitting on the edge of his bed, he was loath to disturb his equilibrium by attempting to steady his weight on the floor.

Sighing in defeat, Snape reluctantly placed his bare feet on the carpeted stone, daring to make his way to the bathroom. Finally opening his eyes, the hazy colors of the grey and black stone walls of his bedroom chambers swirled around him, pushing against the veins on both sides of his head.

He groaned silently, unwilling to experience this hangover.

Friday, his mind moaned triumphantly. Once inside his bathroom, Snape reached into a cabinet for a potion to relieve his headache.

Just get through the day, and I'll have a full forty-eight hours to be by myself with no dunderheaded students to tolerate.

He raised the cool glass to his mouth, swallowing the contents in one deep gulp.

Or not. Mind finally clear, Snape smirked to himself as he remembered another *responsibility* he would have to attend to this weekend. The image of a breathless Hermione Granger sitting atop his writing desk flashed through his mind.

No, he wouldn't be by himself at all.

*** *** ***

Stop it, Hermione, she scolded herself.

Sitting at the back of her Advanced Arithmancy class, Hermione kept finding herself turning away from her professor as she allowed her eyes to wander towards the grounds outside the tall windows.

She just had so much on her mind. Most of it was worth analyzing, but Hermione should have been spending *this* time on her studies.

Sirius... She sighed, supporting her chin with her hand.

As much as she was reluctant to think about the man for a second longer than necessary, Hermione found it more and more essential that she did.

What is your secret?

Their argument last night in the corridor distressed her, but she had to acknowledge it had been well worth it. She had just been so incensed at his selfishness -- constantly ignoring her fears and doubts -- so she had held nothing back. He had almost seemed frightened of her.

But at least he now knows his place.

Maybe now she could attempt to spend more time with him without worrying over how he would interpret her actions. She hated the idea of treading on eggshells to guarantee that he wouldn't get the wrong impression. But the notion of being alone with Sirius did not lighten her mood. She hadn't been lying when she had told him that she esteemed his friendship. Back in her fifth year, she had appreciated his humor for what it was and had actually enjoyed his comical interactions with Harry, Ron, and Lupin.

But something about him now seemed so... erratic -- much more reckless than before.

What happened to you? Hermione had her suspicions but she wasn't certain. *It obviously has something to do with the veil.*

Her ears strained from time to time, picking up on her professor's speech patterns. Detecting her tone turning very precise and deliberate, Hermione hastened to write down everything she was saying.

Twirling her auburn quill in her fingers, Hermione's thoughts turned to Professor Dumbledore's interest in Sirius.

Even the headmaster has Severus attempting to spy on him. She agreed with the headmaster's assessment; if it's personal information he needs that could only be obtained through friendship, in which case Severus just would not do.

Her eyes couldn't help but close slightly at the thought of her Potions master; her lips rose into an unconscious smile.

I wonder how much Severus knows of my orders?

Hermione jerked in her seat at the sight of several hands shooting up into the air. Shaking her distracting thoughts, she attempted to pull herself together.

The days were passing, and she didn't enjoy feeling like she was getting so little done.

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If Hermione thought she had difficulty concentrating during her morning classes, it was nothing compared to Advanced Potions.

Sitting at one of the front worktables, Hermione was keenly sensitive to Professor Snape's presence as he moved about the classroom. Situated there, eyes drawn to him, she was overwhelmed with the knowledge that everything in her manner and speech needed to display a typical student and professor relationship. Because it was essential that she act naturally, she was finding it more and more difficult to comply.

Everything about him distracted her. His lecture failed to grasp her intellectually, as she concentrated on the velvety tones of his voice -- a voice that had spoken directly into her ear as he traced his calloused fingers across her collarbone. His severe eyes, instilling discipline and authority in her classmates, did nothing but arouse the memory of his passion for her. It drove a tingling fire in her belly every time she remembered his lips upon hers.

This class was torture.

Hermione knew that if she wanted to appear entirely unaffected, then she needed to gaze up at her Potions master from time to time. But whenever she met his eye, she would quickly look down at her textbook as a scorching flush swept up her neck.

"Now," Snape's menacing voice drawled, "who can tell me the many uses of Graphorn parts?"

A hesitant silence swept across the lab room.

"Miss Granger," Snape sneered.

Hermione's head snapped up from her Potions text. She inhaled as she met his eyes. "I-I didn't have my hand raised... sir."

Arching an eyebrow, Snape glided down from his desk to stand in front of her worktable.

"Seeing as I have two functioning eyes, I am quite aware of that. But since your arm did not immediately rise into the air, in all its irritating glory, I find myself wondering if you are ill."

Hermione's eyes narrowed in suspicion. Did he really expect her to answer that?

"I am waiting..." he drawled.

He's baiting me! No longer too timid to catch his eye, Hermione looked at him and made no attempt to mask her irritation

"No, *sir*, I am not ill."

"Well then, by all means," Snape said with a wave of his arm, "enlighten this room with the answer."

Hermione's breathing started to quicken as an irked flame blazed in her chest. For once, she had absolutely no desire to prove her knowledge.

The second she opened her mouth, she knew what she was about to say was horrid, but she didn't care.

"No."

Intakes of breath washed across the room in waves.

Professor Snape's eyes widened before narrowing dangerously. "What did you say?"

"No, Professor, I will not enlighten this room with the answer."

"Bugger," Ron breathed behind her. "I'm having that dream again. Harry, pinch me!"

"Shut up, Weasley!" Snape snarled. He stormed around Hermione's worktable, leaning threateningly over her seat.

The class gasped again at the sight of Hermione's humored smile.

"I am giving you one last chance, Miss Granger." His low tones sparked the memory of her perch on the edge of his writing desk. Yet Hermione refused to back down.

"I'm sorry, Professor," Hermione spoke innocently. "You see, I cannot tell the class the answer because I do not know it."

Professor Snape's breathing quickened as his face turned an unnatural shade of red. Finally straightening up from his looming stance over the girl, Snape turned to stalk back toward his desk.

"You are to stay after class today, Miss Granger," he spoke over his shoulder, "so we can make preparations for your week's worth of detention."

"Yes, sir," Hermione snapped.

"Open your books," Snape barked. "And begin the potion on page ninety-seven."

"She's bonkers." Hermione heard Ron mumble.

"Shut up, Ron," Harry whispered.

"Why do people keep telling me that?" he demanded a bit too loudly.

"Because your feeble mind lacks the necessary filters that would prevent you from spouting random nonsense," Snape snarled across the room, voice heavy with frustration. "Ten points from Gryffindor, Weasley! Now be quiet and complete your potion!"

Hermione raised the back of her palm to her mouth. A fit of giggles was threatening to consume her, but she knew this wasn't the time or the place.

At the end of the double class, as the students made their way to place their vials on Professor Snape's desk, Hermione ignored the many sympathetic glances that were sent her way.

Goodness, overreacting, aren't we? she thought.

Slowly filling her school bag, a slight nervousness wracked her body when she realized she was finally alone in the room with him. Her senses were acutely aware of his sitting there, glaring at her, but she refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing her nerves affect her.

Calmly walking to the front of the room, Hermione didn't attempt to make eye contact with her Professor until she placed her vial on his desk. Snape's hand immediately shot out, gripping her around the wrist.

"Enjoy the lesson today?" he sneered.

Hermione confidently met his eyes. "It was quite pleasurable, honestly."

"Is that your idea of keeping this--" raising his free arm, Snape pointed at her chest then his own, "--secret? A silent Hermione Granger is a far cry from typical."

Hermione yanked her arm away and narrowed her eyes.

"You didn't help matters much, either," she said tersely, flipping her long mane over her shoulder.

"What?" he asked slowly.

"If you want me to behave, *Professor*, then you need to know when it is and is not appropriate to a bait reaction out of me."

Leaning back in his seat, Snape trailed his lips with his fingers.

Hermione defiantly crossed her arms across her chest. "You're really not going to stick to the week's worth of detention you gave me last night, are you?"

"Yes, I am," Snape answered smugly.

"What... that's not fair." Hermione gasped in shock as she closed the few feet that separated them.

"Honestly," Snape continued, leaning further into his seat, "after last night I had forgotten about it. But I did just announce your punishment to a quarter of the seventh-years in this school. My sudden decision to relieve you of daily punishment would certainly spark the rumor mill, would it not?"

Hermione raised her hands to her face, sighing in defeat as she massaged her taut brow. She wanted to remain irritated with him, but she was finding it challenging when she remembered that they were finally alone.

"You're going to be late for dinner."

"I don't care," she answered through her fingers.

When the faintest pressure nudged against the side of her hip, Hermione finally lowered her hands away from her stress-worn face. She followed the urging of Severus' hand, walking sideways, until her back pressed against the edge of his desk. Sitting directly in front of her, Snape reached into his robe pocket and handed her a small glass vial.

Hermione thanked him with a relieved smile as she pulled out the cork. Tilting her head back to swallow its contents, Hermione did not remove her eyes from his emotionless expression.

"Do you always keep a Headache Potion handy?"

"Yes," he answered dismissively. Leaning back into his seat, the wooden chair creaked in protest as he attempted to rest his elbow on the arm to support his chin.

"Why?"

"So I can seduce young witches who try to stay after class."

Hermione rolled her eyes. Crossing her arms over her chest, she shot him a playful grin. "I do know the uses of Graphorn parts."

"Of course you do," he said irritably, closing his eyes.

Laughing under her breath, Hermione placed both hands on the edge of the desk behind her. Kicking herself off the floor, she lifted her weight to sit atop the surface. A violent flush spread up her neck when she tried not to notice Severus' eyebrow arch knowingly.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Hermione Granger wanting to ask a question... I'm giddy in anticipation."

"Why did Theodore, Blaise, and Goyle attempt to steal the pocket watch from Sirius?"

"They wanted to know the time."

"Severus!"

Snape's head snapped up in bewilderment, his body stiffening in agitation. Hermione knew that his instincts wanted to reprimand the student in her for using his first name so casually. But he had given her permission. Or maybe, he had never heard his name chided in such a scolding manner by a playful young witch, who was willingly sitting in his presence. Either way, Hermione found herself sliding off his desk, her body craving to get closer to him.

"Really," she asked softly, edging herself to stand between his knees. "What's going on in this castle?"

Severus glanced up toward her. The second he caught her eye, he quickly grasped her by the waist to pull her onto his lap. "It doesn't concern you."

This time, Hermione did not tense in alarm, but melted against him, her body flowing with the movement of his own. Placing his head back on the support of his perched palm, Snape closed his eyes, sitting coolly with his arm around her lower back.

"It concerns Sirius, obviously." Eyes expressionless, Snape edged his hand through the opening in her school robes at her waist. The heat from his hand seared through Hermione's thin blouse.

"I repeat," he sneered, "what does, or does not, concern *Professor Black* has nothing to do with you."

Hermione bit her top lip, tilting her head until her hair covered a portion of her face. "Are you absolutely positive of that?"

"Merlin save me from your never-ending barrage of questions." Snape sighed impatiently. He inclined his head from side to side, grunting faintly as his neck cracked. "Next, you'll be asking me for a detailed explanation for my joining the Death Eaters."

Hermione's body quickly straightened in curiosity, driving her tail bone into his thigh.

Snape tensed under her. "No, Hermione," he warned in low tones.

She nodded in understanding.

Resting her palm on his leg, she attempted to rise from his lap. At the feel of a unyielding grip around her wrist, Hermione turned back to eye Snape seconds before she was smoothly pulled closer to him. "I didn't ask you to leave," he whispered.

"You're going to be late for dinner, Professor," Hermione spoke softly as Snape's arm wound tighter around her waist, squeezing her against his chest.

"No matter... I don't have much of an appetite at the moment." Snape raised his other hand, lightly skimming her throat with the back of his fingers. Hermione closed her eyes, tilting her head back. He slid his hand behind her ear, through her soft hair at the back of her head.

She sighed contentedly, relaxing against him. Hermione followed the gentle nudge, her hair lightly pulled in his fingers, and straightened her neck to gaze hungrily at her Potions master.

She quickly became aware at his quickened breathing; his warm breath scorched her chilled skin. Opening her eyes, Hermione leaned even closer, extending a hesitant hand, wishing... wanting to touch him. Her eyes softened as she gently trailed the tip of her middle finger against the soft skin of his lips, circling them until his face relaxed.

How had it come to this, Hermione wondered? If someone had informed her a year ago that one day she would be nestled in the lap of her Potions master as he allowed her to delicately touch his face, she would have recommended said person to see a Muggle psychiatrist. But here she was, and here it is, and she could not imagine herself being anywhere else.

"Have you ever done this before...?" Hermione huskily whispered against his lips. "... With a... student, I mean?"

"No," Snape answered slowly. Even in his attempt to whisper his harsh tones vibrated against Hermione's small fingers.

She tilted her head to the side, regarding him intensely as she bit her lip. "Good." Slowly removing her hand, Hermione placed the softest kiss on his smooth lips. As she attempted to pull away, Snape's grip held firm to the riotous curls at the back of her head. He raised his other palm, grasping her by the chin so she wouldn't remove her lips from his own.

The consuming fire returned, scorching through her belly at the realization of his intense craving for her. Severus' warm tongue slowly traced under her top lip, then along the bottom, until she finally opened her mouth with a contented hum. When his tongue darted into her mouth to seize her own, Hermione finally escaped all control of her senses. She fell against him, his elegant hands driving her mad with his steady caress across her back and down her side. As Snape's exploration over the swells of her body increased, his commanding lips harshly pressed against hers, forcing whimpers in her throat as a bewildering craving consumed her mind--her body.

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Harry finally made up his mind and marched into the Great Hall. Spotting the various half-eaten bowls of dessert, he knew he had arrived at dinner moments before it was over. Pausing by the doors as he surveyed the Gryffindor table, he searched for that familiar head of unruly curls. Harry quickly walked up to Hermione.

Standing behind her, he leaned into one ear. "I need to speak to you."

She turned slightly in her seat. "Of course." She quickly sensed his anxiety. "What is it, Harry?"

Harry eyed the other students warily. "Not here." He reached down to Hermione's lap, firmly grasping her by the hand. "Come with me."

Hermione eyed her untouched plate forlornly, but quickly rose from her seat, allowing Harry to lead her out of the Great Hall by the hand.

"Hey, Harry!" Lavender squealed when he crossed her place at the table. She turned around, expecting him to wait by her side.

"Not now," he said irritably, not bothering to meet her adoring eyes.

Thinking this odd, Hermione wondered at the hurt expression on the blonde girl's face.

"Hermione: 2," Parvati giggled, "Lavender: 0." Laughter erupted among the cluster of girls.

Turning around one more time, Hermione's curious glance met Lavender's furious glare seconds before she was out in the hall.

Harry pulled her around the corner and into the darkness of another corridor. He leaned back, glancing down both ends to ensure sure they were definitely alone.

"Goodness, Harry, what is it?" Hermione questioned gravely.

Releasing her hand, Harry tentatively lowered both of his palms upon Hermione's shoulders. He needed to talk to someone... about something. He'd been pondering far too much on his own, and his mind was a muddled mess.

"Look, I need to talk about this, but I don't feel comfortable enough talking to Ron. I mean, she's his ex-girlfriend. I know he doesn't care but..."

Hermione rolled her eyes, leaning to one side as she placed her hand on her hip. "Oh, for heaven's sake, is this about that tart?"

Harry's eyes snapped up. The hurt expression Lavender had shot him as she fled from the lake breezed through his mind. "Don't call her that."

"Oh, my God." Hermione raised both hands to her mouth.

"What?"

"You care about her!" she accused with a smile.

"No, well, not exactly." Harry guiltily diverted his eyes.

"Oh, my God," Hermione gasped.

"What?!"

"You shagged her!"

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but hesitated as he didn't know specifically how he should reply.

"Oh, my God!"

"Would you cut that out!" he snapped. "And no, I didn't shag her. But we did sort of... mess around."

Hermione tsked under her breath. "You can be almost as thick as Ron, you know that?" she said disappointedly, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Huh?" Harry lowered his arms in confusion.

"She tried to speak to you in the Great Hall, but you ignored her... holding ~~my~~ hand and pulling me out into the hallway! Look, Harry, I was dragged into her relationship with Ron. Don't drag me into it with you."

"I don't have a relationship with her..."

"Regardless! I don't want her thinking I fancy you if she's trying to get into your knickers."

Eyes wide, Hermione's palm smacked across her mouth, shocked at the crude comment she had just made. Looking at her with surprised eyes as well, Harry snorted in amusement.

Feeling slightly flustered, Hermione grasped Harry by the forearm and attempted to speak seriously. "Look, Harry, just be honest with her. If you don't want a relationship but still want to... you know, let her know. Don't string her along simply because you're afraid of hurting her, otherwise, eventually you will. Don't be as thick as Ron!"

"What did happen between you and Ron last year?" he asked suddenly, moving to lean his back against the wall.

"Nothing."

"That's what I mean. It seems like, by now, at least something should have developed."

Hermione chewed her top lip in thought before she answered. "No, no. We're good friends and nothing more. Honestly, though, I thought about it. I admit I was somewhat jealous about his relationship with Lavender, but it was selfish jealousy. I wanted him to... *want me*, you know? When I thought about reciprocating the attraction, it just felt... weird. We've talked about this. He feels the same way."

"Makes sense, I suppose," Harry said quietly. He was lost in thought again, completely unaware of how intently Hermione was studying him through narrowed eyes.

"Look at me," she commanded.

Recognizing her typical bossy tone, his head snapped up instantly.

Hermione stepped closer, her small hands lightly closed around his face. Tilting her head to the side, Hermione thoroughly inspected the state of one of her beloved friends. Her heart lurched at the sight of his pinched eyebrows. He looked terrible. She trailed both thumbs along the dark circles under his eyes.

"You're doing it again," she said sorrowfully.

"What?" Harry whispered.

"Believing that you need to take on the world -- alone." Raising her thumb, Hermione attempted to smooth the creases between his brow. "After everything, Harry, I feel like I became your friend for a reason. Year after year, I knew a life connected with yours would not get easier as time went on, yet the thought of abandoning you *never* once crossed my mind. I'm *supposed* to be here for you. I won't badger you further, but please talk to me more... like you did right now." She attempted to smile softly.

Harry nodded silently. Reaching toward her, he hugged her, thanking her with his arms since words were just sometimes too hard. Feeling his weight, Hermione motioned for them to sit on the stone floor.

"Come here." Eyes lit with concern, Hermione turned toward him, motioning for him to rest his head on her shoulder.

"I miss her," Harry whispered.

Hermione shook her head. "Ginny walked away from you, without protest, at your request. Ginny only needs your word, Harry. She'll be back at your side in the blink of an eye."

"Exactly."

So he had let her go.

Hermione sharply inhaled at the feel of his shoulders shaking against hers.

"Oh, Harry..." Closing her eyes, Hermione continued to hold him, resting her chin atop his head.

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Later that evening, after dinner, Hermione silently treaded the corridors on the first floor as she waited for the clock to strike eight.

She couldn't believe that Severus was holding her to a week's worth of detention. But then again, this was Professor Snape. She closed her eyes, heart skipping, as she remembered his reason for punishing her.

"Honestly, Hermione... do you expect any less from me."

No, she couldn't say that she did.

But the more she thought about it, the more she realized that a week's worth of detention couldn't be all that bad. That would mean multiple hours, each evening, that she could spend with Severus alone -- without the need for telling lies and making excuses to her friends.

Something told her that Severus wasn't about to order her to spend the whole night scrubbing grubby cauldrons by hand.

Her breathing hitched, cheeks coloring, when she remembered their snog before dinner.

As Hermione was about to turn the corner towards the dungeon stairs, a melodic whistle echoed against the empty corridor. As the music intensified in clarity, so did the sound of steady footsteps clicking against the floor. Without a second's hesitation, Hermione pressed herself behind a stone pillar, wanting to see who was walking in her direction.

Sirius heedlessly rounded the corner, heading straight for the front doors.

He's leaving the castle!

Hermione's heartbeat at once sped up in dismay. What should she do? Run out in front of him and pull him back to his office? Petrify him? No, none of that was wise. But remembering Dumbledore's warning, Hermione knew she couldn't turn back now.

Severus is going to kill me.

She knew she should be heading down to the dungeons to serve her first night of detention, but instead, she was going to follow Sirius out of Hogwarts castle.

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The Three Broomsticks would have been a better choice, cleaner, but Remus needed to be cautious. Here he was: werewolf, member of The Order of Phoenix, engaging in a relationship with a Hogwarts' student and daughter of a prominent Death Eater.

All of this he could accept. But the one thing that haunted him was the knowledge that she belonged to another.

No, Pansy's not a possession. She doesn't belong to anybody.

Regardless, her family still expected her to marry another. *And I'm considered the beast.*

Shaking his head from side to side, Remus scoffed under his breath as he lowered himself into one of the frayed armchairs. He just didn't understand the culture of pureblood families. Since birth, the Malfoys and Parkinsons expected their children to marry and unite two of the most influential, power hungry families in the wizarding world. But the moment Draco was marked, they merely passed her off to the next in line.

It was madness.

Smiling sadly to himself, Remus remembered the night he accosted Pansy in the alley behind this very building. Could it have really been only five months ago?

When he had passed out, he vaguely remembered collapsing into her thin arms. How the little thing had managed to get him into an hotel room unnoticed, he couldn't understand. But she had. She had even nursed him, staying by his side, bringing him back to health.

When Remus had finally been conscious enough to grasp her by the hand, to thank her properly, her eyes had narrowed and a sharp insult had quickly spilt from of her mouth.

He laughed.

Poor girl. Poor Slytherin, constantly on her guard, always struggling to protect herself from getting too close, feeling too much by approaching everyone as if they possessed ulterior motives when they were nice to her.

Abandoning his reflections, Remus' head snapped up at the sound of faint tapping on the battered door. Rising from his seat, he quickly sped across the room to let Pansy in.

Pulling the door open, Remus did not immediately step aside, just as Pansy did not immediately attempt to enter. She stood out in the filthy hallway, chin raised, stony defiance in her eyes.

She always came to him, but she always expected the worst case scenario.

It hurt Remus to know that she still didn't fully trust his love for her, but he needed to be patient. Every time he opened the door, she expected it to be the last visit. She expected to be given a disgusted sneer as she was told that this relationship was over, seconds before the door was slammed in her face. So Remus stood there, heart beating in his throat, loving eyes gazing at her as he held the door wide open. How he wanted her.

He raised his right hand toward her.

Apprehension quickly masked her expression as she flinched away.

To fast. As strong as she was, she had been hurt, so he needed to be careful.

"I missed you," Remus breathed. Hand still in the air, he slowly attempted to grasp her small wrist.

"Please, Pansy, come inside."

Shaking slightly, as she did every time she was accepted, Pansy closed her eyes as she stepped into Remus' open arms.

*** **

Three urgent knocks pounded against his polished office door.

Those three knocks changed everything the headmaster had believed for the last thirteen years. Once the door opened, a life littered with acknowledgements of past mistakes would haunt him for the next twenty years.

"Enter," Dumbledore called confidently.

The Head Boy assertively opened the door and immediately walked to stand in front of Dumbledore's desk. He moved with his shoulders back, head held high with the selfless awareness he'd acquired that year.

"Headmaster, I need to speak to you."

Dumbledore looked up at the young man, his tired eyes quickly brightening. "What is it, James?"

James swallowed. His eyes suddenly grew very serious. Dumbledore sensed his trepidation instantaneously.

Slightly turning to the side, James fisted his hands, grasping the last of his determination. "I'm worried about Sirius..."

"Go on," Dumbledore said with a nod of his head.

James closed his eyes slowly. "I feel terrible being here."

"Sirius is a dear friend of yours. I can safely presume that you wouldn't be here unless you are putting his interest before your own."

James exhaled, straightening his back once more. "It's... er... about Snape."

Dumbledore's eyes darkened instantly.

"What has that boy done now?"

"Um, that's just it, Professor. He hasn't really done anything."

Dumbledore sighed. He was sick of the squabbles between these boys. "You know how those two can get..."

James grunted in frustration. "That's just it, sir. Don't get me wrong, Snape can have quite a mouth on him... but this whole year... " Concentrating on the intricate threading of the elaborate rug under the headmaster's desk, James appeared loath to speak further. "I have to admit that he's been keeping to himself mostly or conversing with that crowd."

Dumbledore leaned forward in his seat. "I'm not so sure I follow? There have been so many fights this year between Sirius and Severus."

"That's why I'm here. I'm worried about Sirius..." James raised a strong arm to ruffle his hair uncomfortably. "He's been getting so out of control. I'm afraid... I'm afraid that I am partly responsible."

"How so?"

"Do you remember, in the beginning of my third year, the warning you gave me?"

Dumbledore's head snapped up in alarm.

"Asking me," James continued, "to constantly be on guard and to protect the other students."

"Yes. I also remember telling you that we wouldn't speak of it again."

James raised his chin defiantly. "I know, Professor, but I must. You see, I did as I was told. Even before you pointed out your worries, I too noticed the extreme amount of... power and ability Snape had in Potions and Defense Against the Dark Arts. Sirius and I both sensed something. I must admit that I was ecstatic when you asked me to keep a watch over Snape -- to keep an eye out for the other students."

James eyes narrowed at Dumbledore's soft smile.

"I knew I could trust you with that James... You've always been such a good student. A loyal Gryffindor. I must admit, I was not surprised when you were made Head Boy..."

"I told Sirius," James interrupted. His eyes closed in shame, bracing himself for the headmaster's reaction.

Silence.

"What?"

James slowly opened his eyes. They darted about the office before he could look the headmaster in the face. "I told Sirius... that you wanted me to keep a close eye on Snape. I told him that you had... doubts... about Snape."

Livid, Dumbledore lurched from his seat; his tall body leaned across the desk. "You promised me that this wouldn't leave my office!"

"I know! That's why I'm here now!" James pleaded. Finally sitting in the student's chair in front of Dumbledore, James let his tired face fall into his outstretched hands. "I feel horrible -- a constant gnawing and it won't go away."

"Explain," Dumbledore commanded.

"Please, Headmaster, I take full responsibility for my actions... but I was only thirteen and Sirius is my best friend. I trusted him, in everything. Honestly, after leaving your office that day I felt... justified in everything I ever said or did to Snape, before and long after. You never said the exact words, but I sensed your belief that Snape was... evil."

Dumbledore was still standing, frozen, with his hands stiffly upon the desk. His breaths were quickening, and James seemed very surprised at such an unfamiliar sight.

"What has he done?"

"I told you," James answered quietly, "Snape hasn't done..."

"No, no," Dumbledore interrupted. "What has... Sirius, done?"

Dumbledore could feel his stomach twisting and turning in fear. He had a ghastly feeling as to what James was going to confess, yet he prayed he was wrong.

"Do you remember..."

Please... be wrong.

"... back in my fifth year..."

Oh, sweet Merlin. No.

"... in the Shrieking Shack..."

"Yes, I remember it!" Dumbledore barked. James immediately darted his eyes away in disgrace. "How can I forget it! I nearly had Severus hauled off to Azkaban because of the testimony of you four boys! Yet, out of all of you, he was the one that needed to spend a week in the hospital wing!"

Dumbledore's breathing began to hitch, and he was getting dizzy. That was the night he had finally believed his suspicions. That was the night he had begun making preparations for the One that would take his own place. The idea that someone so young could be malevolent enough to attempt to kill one of their own classmates -- it reminded him so much of a young Tom Riddle. He remembered secretly wishing, that had all the Horcruxes been found by then, that Lupin had succeeded in killing Severus Snape.

"Headmaster," James breathed, "please, forgive me."

"So Sirius really did want Snape kil-- "

"Yes."

Dumbledore clumsily fell into his seat, shock and defeat coursing through him.

He had been so terribly wrong. What had he done?

The sound of erratic footsteps thundering up the spiral staircase caught Dumbledore's attention. His head snapped up toward his office door the second it was flung open.

"Headmaster!" Lily screamed. Her face was red and swollen, eyes lit with panic.

"What is it?" James asked anxiously, immediately rising to be at her side.

Hiccoughing on her tears, she fearfully looked at James before turning desperate eyes toward Dumbledore. "It's Severus!" she said hysterically. "I saw them fighting out by the lake...my gods, he wasn't moving!"

Not needing to hear anymore, Dumbledore lurched from his seat, down the spiral staircase and into a life that would be far different than the one he had lived the day before.

Dumbledore woke with a start, choking on his own saliva. Bracing his body weight on his functional arm, he leaned toward his end table, blindly reaching for his glass of water.

Feeling wetness upon his face, Dumbledore reached up and attempted to wipe a sweat drenched forehead. But it was dry. He had been crying in his sleep.

Severus... Cringing, the headmaster closed his eyes as the usual shameful guilt washed over him.

"Almost every night now," Godric said softly.

"What?" Dumbledore asked hoarsely.

"The sicker you get, the more dreams you will have."

"Yes," Dumbledore said sadly, "it will not be long now."

Author's Notes: Oh, I wonder what Hermione is going to find following Sirius? I wonder what Severus' reaction will be... when he finds her? These Dumbledore scenes closely tie in with Severus' Hogwarts memory back in Chapter Seven. Hope you liked it!

-My brilliant, PI accredited beta, **melusin** did a great job keeping my sentences in check. With poetry as my first love, I can get pretty carried away and not make any sense.

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book iv. Line 23.

-Sadly, exams are upon me at Uni. I have the next 10,000 words written, but it's all very choppy and only the first draft. Transitions are the devil, so the next update won't be for a couple of weeks. Thank you all for your reads and wonderful reviews!

Chapter Thirteen - And Courage Never to Submit or Yeild

Chapter 15 of 36

With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began. And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. Eventual SS/HG. Alternate Universe, HBP death disregarded.

Nominated for best fic in the 2007 OWL Awards: Fire & Ice Category (SS/HG), Romance Category, Angst Category, and A/U Category

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: CONTENT WARNING: This chapter contains sex, squick, and rape while heavily coated in angst.

-Nothing here would have been possible without the guidance and hard work of my beta,**melusin**.

Hermione clenched her jaw tightly, willing her teeth to stop chattering. The wet grass of the Hogwarts lawn clung to the hem of her robes, whipping about her legs and intensifying the freezing of her body. She couldn't understand why her Warming Charms weren't lasting longer than a few minutes. Maybe she was just too nervous to concentrate properly. But Hermione was absolutely certain of one thing...after tonight, she was going to constantly wear thicker robes during her nightly patrols about the castle.

This is so stupid, she scolded herself. She slightly stumbled over some jagged rocks hidden in the grass.*I'm so stupid! What if something happens to me? No one will know I left the castle... how will they be able to find me!*

In spite of her mounting apprehension, Hermione continued walking. Her calves ached in her attempt to make as little noise as possible by balancing herself mostly on the balls of her feet.

Once Sirius passed beyond Hogwarts' grounds, Hermione was expecting him to instantly Apparate to his destination. Yet Sirius held no thought of that means of travel and maintained the even, brisk pace he had started from the steps of the castle.

He must be heading towards Hogsmeade.

Hermione cautiously trailed behind Sirius down the main street of the small village. She randomly darted into doorways from time to time to prevent him from noticing her should he suddenly spin around. In need of a brief rest, her throat and lungs were burning from the frosty night breeze, even though her body was growing warm and sticky from perspiration.

At first, Hermione had to admit she was somewhat relieved to discover that his destination would be somewhere in this little town. She was very familiar with the area, although she had never wandered around outside Hogwarts...by herself...after dark. It calmed her to know that she was still within running distance of the castle.

But Sirius kept walking.

Approaching the pavement outside the Hog's Head, Hermione was struck by the fact that she had never trod very far beyond this pub before. Passing under the sign of the severed pig's head, Hermione swiftly glanced inside just as someone entered it. The numerous laughs and jeers of drunken witches and wizards surprised her. She couldn't remember ever seeing more than a handful of occupants at one time. Then again, she had never walked wizarding streets at night before, either.

Pausing in another doorway to allow Sirius a healthy lead, Hermione rapidly found herself wanting to turn back. The shops were spreading farther and farther apart, separated by dark alleys and cracked walkways. The odd witch or wizard on the street seemed to have trouble walking, and the quality of the upkeep on the exterior of the buildings was quickly deteriorating.

Where the bloody hell is he going?

Shaking her head to expel her escalating doubt, Hermione thrust herself out of the doorway, hastily following behind Sirius. But she didn't have to wonder about his destination for very long. Sirius suddenly turned on his heel, stopping in front of the entrance of a small wooden cabin.

Hermione cursed under her breath, darting into the alley beside the building.

What is this place? Think, Hermione, think.... What should she do? Enter right behind him and pretend she naturally visited places like this in her free time? Attempt to sneak around inside? No, she didn't see how any of that was possible. Poking her head around the wall, Hermione eyed the entrance once more, inquisitively scrutinizing the various professional looking wizards gradually entering it.

She roughly inhaled when she noticed the single red lantern hanging above the doorway.

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"You have to go back, Pansy," Remus said sadly. Sitting up on the bed, he enjoyed the feel of her straddling him, but his better senses reminded him that they needed to be cautious.

"No, I don't." Her voice rose up and down, singing in that spoiled tone used regularly by females brought up to value money over love. She slowly trailed her hands along the side of his thighs. Her face was a mask of desire, shrouding the fright gnawing at her belly.

"You can't spend another night away from the castle! Someone will definitely notice you're gone. You've already snuck out twice this week." Grasping her by the waist, he attempted to lift her off his lap.

"But it's the weekend!" she whined, swatting his arms away.

Remus growled in frustration. He had never met such a hard-headed girl. "It doesn't matter."

Smiling wickedly, Pansy reached both hands behind her back. In one fluid motion, she unclasped her bra and slowly pulled the straps off her shoulders. Pansy's fingers deftly closed around Remus' hand, lifting it to skim across her hardening nipples.

"Tell me to leave," she said softly. She wanted him to take her right there. Quick, fast, and hard. She wasn't even certain if that was what she truly desired, but it was all she knew.

Remus only devoured her with his eyes. Lifting his other hand, he slid the back of his fingers under both of her pale breasts, delicately holding their weight. His hands and eyes possessed their own secret language, which awed and frightened Pansy in quick succession.

"You know I don't *want* you to leave."

"Then let me stay." Even in her attempt to sound seductive, her voice broke in a high squeak.

Remus pulled his gaze away from her nakedness. Pansy's eyes were closed, eyebrows taut from trying to appear unaffected by his tender caresses.

He hated seeing that look on her face.

Remus heaved his back away from the headboard to wrap his arms completely around her. "What did I tell you?" he said directly in her ear. Her voice softly moaned against her struggle to remain quiet. He began to lick and nip at her neck. "Stop thinking so much... stop fighting yourself."

Remus' tongue trailed down her collarbone and over the swell of her breasts. Pansy sharply inhaled when his warm mouth closed around a nipple, her hands clutching at his hair. Remus tilted his head to the side, wanting to get a better look at her. When their eyes fleetingly met, she hastily turned her face away from him.

He immediately sat up.

"Look at me." He affectionately glided his fingers through the hair above the back of her neck.

"Look at me, Pansy," he said much more forcefully, but the plea in his tone spoke of desire.

She gradually followed the urging of his hand, her chest heaving when she met his eyes. Remus lowered his other hand between them; his thumb fervently skimmed over her wetness as he attempted to get a firm grasp under her thigh. He carefully lifted her weight toward him, positioning her opening over his hardness.

"Stop fighting yourself," he repeated, pushing her hips down, completely filling her.

Pansy's open mouth moved twice in silent bliss. Her eyes threatened to close, but were forced open again by a steady tug on her hair. She continued to keep her vision locked onto the warmth in Remus' natural expression. Tears welled along the rim of her eyes.

"Yes," he hissed, steadily thrusting up into her. "Let me love you."

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Oh, Merlin, I hope I do this right. Hermione nervously tucked her hand into her robe pocket to retrieve her wand. Shakily raising it, she closed her eyes and tapped the top of her head.

She gasped at the odd sensation of cool water being dumped on her.

Inspecting her robes and arms, she smiled in approval at the rather splendid Disillusionment Charm she had cast on herself.

Hermione had gathered a few educated guesses as to what type of... establishment this was, so she definitely had no desire to go inside. Spying the dozens of windows that trailed the side of the building, she thought she would be better off endeavoring to peek through the dirty windows.

Her face instantly colored at the idea.

Lowering herself in the dark alley, Hermione slowly edged her body along the wall, bending under the first windowsill. She distinctively made out the harsh tones of two males moaning.

No, there was no need to look in there. She cautiously moved on to the next.

Reluctantly raising her eyes over the decaying wood of the windowsill, Hermione's breath hitched at the sight before her. A rather well defined...and naked...male stood in the middle of the room, eyes blindfolded and mouth gagged with long strips of leather. His arms were raised high above him, bound to a chain dangling from the ceiling. A scantily dressed witch twirled a long whip in the air before cracking it across his arse.

At the sound of his contented moan, Hermione quickly ducked beneath the window.

Oh, my God! She raised a hand to her mouth, surprised at the wide smile on her face and the need to suppress a rich laugh.

Sirius came here?

Back hunched over, Hermione slyly tiptoed to the next window. This time, she decided, it would be much more... prudent to sit under the sill and listen before attempting to observe the occupants.

"Ello, Love," a woman cackled, seconds before a door was closed.

"You're not properly dressed," a male scolded.

Their muffled voices buzzed against the thin glass of the window.

"Please, Sirius," she cooed, "I just got this done."

Sirius!

In the silence of what should have been Sirius' response, Hermione's ears prickled at the rhythmic jingle of coins shaking in a purse.

"Very well," the woman moaned.

Hermione slowly raised herself over the rim of the window just in time to see Sirius fling the coin purse onto the coffee table. The string opened, sending Sickles across the moisture stained wood.

She's a prostitute! Hermione slapped her hands against her mouth.

The rounded woman sauntered over to her dressing table, plucking her wand out of the mess of fake jewelry and cosmetics. Raising the tip to her scalp, the teased red mess vanished to be replaced by soft brown curls that fell down her back.

Hermione's eyes widened.

Sirius walked toward her, extending his arm to bury his hand in her Transfigured hair. "Much better," he said huskily.

When the woman attempted to remove his robes, Sirius pulled away from her, wanting to do it himself. Slowly reaching into a side pocket, Sirius meticulously removed the black pocket watch, carefully placing it on the end table by the bed.

"Every time I see you hold that," the woman said, "I hope you will give it to me."

Sirius narrowed his eyes at her. "Never," he said sternly. "Take off your clothes."

The woman raised her wand once more, tapping her bodice twice. After a few rips and snaps, her clothes melted off her as if they were being held together by buttons.

Sirius edged around the foot of the bed. Lust clouding his eyes, Sirius reached out, sliding both hands over her breasts, pinching her nipples. He harshly pushed her onto the bed. The woman squealed loudly, allowing her legs to wantonly spread before him.

Hermione repeatedly raised her hands to cover her eyes. Watching another man, Sirius of all people, through a soiled window draped in yellowed lace curtains was obscene. Everything about this felt wrong on so many levels. She shouldn't be watching this. She didn't want to watch this. So, of course, she fell into the temptation of peeking through the creases in her fingers.

As if they were going by routine, Sirius stood by the edge of the bed, making no move to get closer. The woman crawled to him on her knees and began to undo his belt and trousers.

A surge of disgust washed over Hermione when his purple erection sprang free. She really shouldn't be watching this, yet she couldn't look away.

The woman lowered her face, blocking Sirius' nakedness from her view. Her head started bobbing against his groin.

Grasping her roughly by the head, Sirius began to thrust up into her mouth, pounding into her throat as hard as she could take it.

Hermione really shouldn't be watching this.

Sirius suddenly pushed her face away from him to completely remove his trousers and underpants. "On the bed," he demanded. The woman immediately turned around on all fours.

Climbing on to the bed, Sirius kneeled behind her and thrust into her with one quick movement.... She dramatically moaned in pleasure.

Grasping her hips, Sirius pounded hard and fast, grunting deeply. His long hair fell over his shoulders and back, strands sticking to the sweat on his body.

"Say... it!" he demanded.

"More!" she screamed. Her large breasts rocked hard, swinging forward and bumping against her chin.

"Keep... going...."

Hermione's brow pinched in repugnance at his reddened face and sweaty chest.

"Yes, Sirius, harder! I've been wanting this for so long!"

"You like that?"

"Yes!"

"Shit," Sirius moaned, his momentum growing erratic. Reaching down toward her head, he buried his hand in her curly hair, pushing her face against the mattress, moaning as he came.

"Her-Her-Hermione!"

"Oh, my God!" Hermione gasped. She shoved herself away from the window at the realization of how loud she'd screamed.

"Shut up," Sirius chided between deep breaths. "I'm done."

"I didn't say anything."

Sirius' head snapped up toward the window, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Leave me and go and clean yourself." Sirius eyed the window once more, but turned to lie on the bed while the woman exited to the adjoining bathroom.

I did not just see that. Hermione thought to herself, her stomach twisting in disgust. *I did not just hear that!*

Sirius had traveled to the far end of Hogsmeade to pay a witch for sex just to scream out her name. It was repulsive.

Hermione truly did not want to gaze at Sirius' naked body any longer, but her curiosity piqued at the glimpse of the notorious black pocket watch. It must be important to him, she gathered, since he seemed to constantly carry it with him. Exhaling a deep breath to regain her senses, Hermione attempted to slowly ease closer to the window.

But she quickly paused in her steps. Hermione stiffened in unease, the hair on the back of her neck and forearms raised in alarm. She felt... odd... all of a sudden, and she didn't know why.

Heat suddenly pressed against her back. A voluminous robe draped over her shoulders, followed by strong arms wrapping around her waist.

Heart shooting up to her throat, Hermione opened her mouth, screaming for help. But the only interruption to the deathly silence was the frantic scramble of her shoes against the cobblestones. In her alarm, her body had jumped further into her captor's firm embrace.

"What?" Snape whispered. He leaned down to her ear, pressing his jaw against her temple. "I didn't quite catch that."

Hermione tried to whirl around in his arms, turning to look him in the eye. The bastard had *Silencio*'d her!

Bloody tyrant, she mouthed.

Usually one to enjoy the sight of a flustered young witch, Snape found no humor in the situation. He scowled down at her, his lips twisting into a sneer.

"I didn't know voyeurism was a speciality of yours, Hermione," he hissed. "What the fuck were you thinking, coming here alone?" Snape swiftly reached into his pocket for his wand and tapped the top of her head.

Hermione's face reddened. Her cheeks and chest burned against the shock of cool water washing over her. She knew Severus would be angry with her, but she wasn't prepared to see him tonight.

"And to top it off," he whispered harshly against her ear, "you have just skived off your first detention with me..."

Hermione's head fell into her outstretched hand; she pinched the bridge between her brow. Nothing changed. He knew exactly how to make her feel like a naughty school girl, which was almost perverse when you took in their newly developed relationship.

"...to spy through windows in a low class brothel! Stupid, idiotic Gryffindor daring! Do you have any idea what could have happened to you tonight if someone from ~~in~~ there had found you?"

Hermione's breathing quickened at his reprimand. Instead of hearing the insults spitting from his mouth, her ears strained, picking up on the... uneasiness... in his tone of voice. Raising her head, she searched his face for the same emotion his voice expressed, but as per usual, he remained entirely impassive.

The apprehension she felt at being caught by Severus, of all people, didn't remain very long. A deep labored breathing, ending in painful gasps, was coming out of Sirius' window. This did not sound anything like someone experiencing sexual pleasure. Leaning against Severus' forearms toward the window, Hermione watched as Sirius clutched a hand to his chest, eyes bulging with each intake of air.

Hermione sneaked a quick glance at Severus, looking to him for a proper reaction. He seemed almost... mesmerized at what he was watching.

"N-no!" Sirius gasped. He shakily rose from the mattress, wildly staggering to the end table by the bed. The veins along his chest and temples throbbed a grotesque shade of purple. His face turned blue, as if some invisible being was choking his throat, preventing air from reaching his lungs.

Sirius clumsily grasped his black pocket watch, flinging it open. Hermione curiously wondered at the glowing red-face plate. It pulsed somewhat similarly to that of a beating, dying, heart.

What's happening to him? she asked in morbid interest, forgetting that she no longer possessed a voice.

After winding the watch a few times, Sirius' troubled breathing evened out, just as color returned to his sweat drenched face. Swaying on the spot, his eyes rolled back, and he fell to the floor in a limp heap.

Hermione's heart raced rapidly in her chest. Something told her that she had just witnessed something not meant for her eyes to see. Something... unworldly. Frozen in place, she continued watching Sirius' naked body lying face down on the stained carpet.

Seconds later, the woman came out of the bathroom. Drying her hair with a towel, she was too distracted to immediately notice the state of her guest.

Pausing in the middle of the room, the woman's face contorted in horror at the sight of Sirius' lifeless body. Her mouth opened in fright, releasing a high pitched scream.

As if on cue, Snape's hands locked together, and he instantly turned their bodies on the spot.

A steady *CRACK* echoed in the wet alley seconds before it was left completely empty.

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The moment the suffocating pressure released from her gut, Hermione instantly turned around to make eye contact with Severus.

I'm sorry! she mouthed. Her hands rose in defeat.

Crossing his arms, Snape silently glared down at her.

Hermione uneasily stared up at him, waiting for Severus to release the spell that prevented her from speaking. When he made a move to start walking, Hermione darted in front of his path, a silent plea in her eyes for him to release his spell.

His eyebrows rose in mock bewilderment. "Is something the matter, Hermione?"

Losing patience, Hermione tsked under her breath. She raised a hand to her neck, tapping her throat before pushing against his chest.

Snape mischievously grinned as his body slightly fell off balance from her playful shove. "I don't know," he drawled. "You're much more beautiful when your energetic mouth isn't moving a million miles a millisecond."

Hermione's breathing skipped. He'd just called her beautiful.

Severus diverted his eyes; his jaw suddenly clenched. Clearing his throat, he reached into his robes. After a swift flick of his wrist, his wand was tucked away again just as quickly.

Hermione knew she had her voice back, but she suddenly found herself hesitant to speak. Turning away from him, she eyed their surroundings.

Another bleak and depressing gutter of a street.

"Knockturn Alley?" she said quietly. "Why would you Apparate us here?"

"Then, you've been here before?" He eyed her curiously.

"Er... yes, once. Are we safe?"

"Fairly so. Our Disapparation trail is less likely to be followed to a destination such as this. We shouldn't be bothered as long as we don't come across any ruddy Aurors."

That threw her off guard. If anything, seeing multiple Aurors walking around this side of town would put her at ease. "What do you mean? Why should we fear Ministry officials?"

"Never mind." He placed his arm around her shoulders, motioning for them to begin walking down the poorly lit alley.

It didn't take very long for her to abandon her assumptions once they rounded the corner. Severus pulled her to him again, effectively wrapping them both in his black cloak to camouflage them in the darkness.

Hermione knew the two men were Aurors the second she took in their pompous behavior and matching robes.

"Well, well..." said a stumpy, overweight wizard. He pretentiously shoved his chubby thumbs into the inside pockets of his robes, swaying back and forth on the balls of his feet. "What have we found here?"

The other Auror, very twitchy and insecure, walked up toward the scene. He fingered the length of his wand, looking towards the great whale of a wizard for appropriate direction.

"Trouble, eh?"

"Yup, definitely trouble...." The fat Auror moved to the side, giving Hermione and Severus a clear view of their intended target.

"Piss off!" a young witch bellowed. Her defined face appeared odd compared to the round mass of her flowing clothes. She wore various layers of dresses and robes, none of it matching. Hermione had a strong feeling that this was everything she owned. The haughty witch attempted to walk between the two wizards, but was quickly grabbed by the arm.

"Now, now," the portly Auror said slowly, pulling her back toward the brick wall. "Don't be rude. This is merely a... customary search and interrogation. You don't want to be hauled down to the Ministry for failing to follow orders now, do you?"

"I haven't done nothin' wrong," she snarled.

"No one said that you did," the other Auror spoke condescendingly. "Just do as you're told, and we'll let you go on your way."

The heavy Auror tapped the tip of his wand on her collar bone. "Turn around," he said in a sickeningly polite voice.

The young woman swallowed twice and hesitantly complied.

"That's a good lass," the twitchy man hummed. "Now, arms up on the wall."

Watching this in silence, Hermione thanked the gods that she was wrapped securely in Severus' protective embrace. Raising her hands under his arms, she fearfully

clutched at his biceps. Her breaths were quickening, and her instincts told her everything about this was not procedural and about to end very wrongly. Sensing her apprehension, Snape rested his chin on the top of her head.

Face red with fury, the young woman breathed deeply through her nostrils as she slowly raised her hands above her head.

The fat Auror grinned nastily, tucking his wand in his pocket as he reached out to trail his hands down the side of her body, unnecessarily lingering over the swell of her breasts and arse. Ignoring the shaking that wracked her body, he lowered himself to the floor to get a firm grip of the hem of her robes.

"N-no..." she gasped at the feel of her clothing being raised. Legs quivering, her knees buckled, and she lowered herself to the ground to escape the feeling of exposure.

"Grab her!"

The jittery Auror forcefully lifted the woman by the armpits and smashed her face against the stone wall. She let out a desperate wail as the grotesque man violently hauled up her robes, bunching the fabric in the hollow of her back.

Hermione clenched her eyes shut, shoving her face underneath Severus' arm.

Taking advantage of the vulgar and violent struggle, Severus increased his hold on Hermione, motioning for her to begin walking down the alley.

Hermione remained stiff and silent as she walked by his side. The rhythmic echoes of the woman's pained cries followed them down the alley.

Severus found himself repeatedly swallowing in discomfort. He shouldn't have brought her here. What the hell had he been thinking? So used to Apparating to diseased hovels as a precaution against being followed, he had paid no mind to having her at his side. Bile coated his tongue. He wouldn't be surprised if she was disgusted at him for not attempting to save the woman.

Imagining such an argument, a part of him resented Hermione for having such black and white reactions...expectations, of him.

Moving to the side of her, Severus tightly held her to him with one arm. "Are you all right?" he dispassionately asked.

Hermione merely nodded against his shoulder.

"Well, well," a sumptuous voice drawled behind them. "What have you caught this time, Severus?"

Whirling around, Snape pushed Hermione behind him as he reached into his robe for his wand.

Malfoy sneered at the threat pointing directly between his eyes. "Ugh," he grunted. "You really need to work on that dramatic paranoia of yours, friend."

Straightening out of his predatory stance, Snape slowly lowered his wand.

"To what do I owe the pleasure, Lucius?" Snape drawled smugly.

Lucius lunged around Snape, grasping Hermione by the arm, pulling her out from behind him. Smiling at her frightened yelp, Lucius' eyes glinted in satisfaction at her terrified expression.

Snape stood in place, completely devoid of a reaction.

"The pleasure of finding you tonight, Severus," Lucius drawled, "is all mine."

Severus cursed himself in his mind. He shouldn't have brought her here.

*** **

"So, you're making me go back!" Pansy screeched, pacing about the small hotel room, working herself up into a state.

"Please be reasonable, Pansy." Sitting on the bed, Remus rested his aching forehead on the palm of his hand.

"First you make lo--have sex with me, then you send me on my way! Send me back to him! How can you stand anyone other than you touching me?"

"I CAN'T!" Remus screamed, jumping from the bed. Pansy reflexively backed away from him, anxiety etched across her face.

His shaking fist clenched painfully in his greying hair. "... you know that. What do you want from me? I'm trying to be supportive. Whatever you decide, you know I'll stand by you, no matter what."

"You're right, I'm sorry," she said miserably. "I'm being selfish..." she breathed, hugging herself as she turned her back to him.

"No, you are not." Remus quickly moved toward her. "You are putting up with much more than I in this situation." He sighed as he rubbed his hands along her arms. "I just want you to be safe," his desperate voice whispered against her ear, blowing strands of short hair into her face.

"I know," Pansy said quietly. "As long as I... remain by Theodore's side, I am practically untouchable. None of the other Death Eaters would ask my father for my hand, nor would anyone dare to have me against my will..."

Remus instantly pulled away from her, crossing to the other side of the room. "I don't want to get into this."

"I thought you said you didn't care if he... if we...."

"Care is not a very good way to describe it," he bellowed, eyes narrowing. The fight didn't remain strong, as her shoulders hunched against his words. "Of course I care," he added softly, walking back to her. "How can I not? Just the very idea of him touching you, sleeping with you... but that does not mean I do not understand the necessity of it."

Pansy spun around. She gripped frantically at his robes, burying her tear-streaked face against his chest. "Every day away from you is torture."

Remus' heart ached as he wrapped his arms around her. Gods know how he needed her. "We'll find time, I promise you." She nodded against him. "You're so strong, Pansy. I don't like... your betrothal to Theodore, but it doesn't stop me from loving you. We'll find a way around this. I know that this is torment for you. I know his unwanted affections are unbearable..."

Pansy sharply pulled away from him. "What would you know about it?" she snarled in disgust.

Remus gazed down at her, arms frozen in the air from the absence of her body. His eyes closed, body cringing as if she had slugged him in the face.

Pansy wearily wondered at his hurt expression.

It's not her fault. She doesn't know.

"Remus?" she questioned gravely. "What's wrong?"

Turning away from her, he attempted to abandon his own demons and not hold her words against her. "Nothing, love, but it's time for you to go."

*** **

Ignoring Hermione's fear, Snape's dexterous hand painfully closed around her wrist, pulling her out of Lucius' hungry grasp. She gasped at the pain, instinctively yanking her arm, frightened eyes searching his own.

"What I do, or not do, with this little Mudblood," his eyes glistened dangerously at her, "is of no concern to you." Severus held nothing back. Right now, in the presence of a fellow Death Eater, he allowed himself to slip into the mechanical, unfeeling pit of his existence.

Hermione at once began to fight against him, her breathing hitching and squeaking in her struggle. Hermione yanked her arm away forcefully, showing every indication that she wanted to run away.

"Let go of me!" she gasped. Her hand clawed at Snape's steady grip. "Professor, please," she cried, "let me go back to the castle!"

"Feisty little thing, isn't she?" Lucius said with a sickening leer.

Severus yanked her toward him, harshly closing his other hand around her throat. "Stupid girl," he snarled, "if I'd wanted you to go back to the castle, I wouldn't have brought you here, now, would I? I have no intention of ending the evening so soon."

Lucius moved to Snape's side. Hermione was honestly shocked by the identical expressions the two men possessed. Eyebrows arched, eyes hungry with the idea of watching her scream in pain.

Hermione instantly stopped fighting. "No..." she begged desperately.

Lucius' eyes washed over Hermione's body at the dread in her voice. "You lucky devil..." he laughed sardonically. "You've always had the knack for conveniently *finding* luscious prey."

Severus sneaked a quick glance at Hermione to gauge her reaction to Lucius' statement. He resented the natural cringe that wracked her body.

"Ah... I must apologize, dear friend," Snape drawled. He turned Hermione around, his arms reached over her shoulders and through her underarms to pin her wrists behind her back, forcing a yelp of pain. "This piece of trash, I have no intention of sharing."

"Too bad," Lucius said dismissively with flip of his hand. "My *Obliviates* have always been much more precise than yours."

Severus inclined his head to the side. "I'll manage."

"You always do." Lucius laughed.

As the blond wizard turned to continue on his business, his pointed nose rose in the air, his face sending Hermione a mockingly pitiful frown, warning her of the terror she was about to experience.

Even though Lucius was clearly walking in the opposite direction, Snape continued on with his violent hold of her arm, forcing her to walk ahead of him.

"Severus," she said quietly.

"Shut up."

He was actually surprised that she did. *No irritating and nosy questions this time, eh?*

If he had any choice in the matter, Snape would have preferred Hermione to remain completely ignorant of the life he lived outside Hogwarts' walls. If the headmaster didn't demand explanations and justifications for his actions amidst Death Eater circles, then he certainly wouldn't tolerate any lectures from a young chit of a girl who he hadn't even bedded yet.

Losing himself in what he expected would be her inevitable rejection, Snape found himself growing more and more resentful toward her. But it was for the best, he told himself, that this *relationship* end just as quickly as it had started. In truth, he had found the idea of distracting himself in the arms of a young witch quite pleasing, but he wouldn't strain himself over the idea of it finishing.

Severus just didn't see how she could look at him the same, and he was loath to lay himself at her feet. He would never allow himself to be vulnerable enough to grovel and convince her otherwise.

No, he told himself, it wouldn't irk him one bit to be rid of her.

Yet, despite all of his contemplations, Snape maintained his steady grip on her arm. He pulled her through the filthy streets of Knockturn Alley, rounding a corner for a proper place to Apparate away. Pulling her to him, he turned on the spot, wishing to save her from seeing any more tonight than she already had.

*** **

As the lingering, unpleasant remnants of the Apparition pulled away from her, Hermione's ears prickled at the complete silence of their new surroundings. Once she was balanced enough on her own, Snape's arms immediately fell away from her.

He quickly started walking down the uneven pavement without a backward glance.

She sighed.

She just had to go and fall for an emotionally dramatic man, didn't she?

Hermione was still a little shaken up from everything that had transpired that evening, but she was relieved to finally be away from dark alleys, away from wizarding streets, away from wizards in general.

Her stomach twisted in apprehension. She could feel the tension between herself and Severus grow thicker with his every step. She noticed his reaction... to her reactions... of his brutality. He honestly believed that her fear of him was real.

Instead of imagining the dozens of innocent girls, possibly even boys, that had tragically fallen into the hands of those two men... she could only think of Severus.

What hell.

Walking at her own pace on the winding path, Hermione curiously observed the decrepit houses along the residential street. Brick house upon brick house, each one encompassing black windows boarded up with wide slabs of wood. The front lawns had run wild, overgrown over walkways and fences.

Aside from Severus' brisk footsteps and her hesitant amble, the only sign of life was the random rustle of brush from whatever creature she frightened as she passed by.

If she had been alone, on this street, under these non-functioning lampposts, Hermione would have cried herself into a frightened stupor. But the simple fact that Snape continued walking so far ahead of her, showed that there was nothing threatening in this Muggle neighborhood.

Spying the last house that ended along a long brick wall, Hermione knew that it had to be their destination. It was the only home on this street without broken, boarded up windows.

Severus quickly sped up the path, toward the house. The front door banged open the moment he ascended the steps.

As Hermione cautiously walked up the winding path to the neglected house, she knew, based on his silence and body language that Severus did not want to discuss anything that had transpired in Knockturn Alley.

But she didn't care. Connections were forming in her mind, and he needed to hear it.

Striding purposefully into the cramped living space, Hermione noted that this house had probably once looked very inviting. The wall to wall bookshelves had to have been gradually added over time, giving her every indication that this was definitely Severus' home.

She vaguely remembered her bickering last year over Harry's stupid Potions text... leading to her discovery of the identity of Snape's parentage.

This was his Muggle father's house. His childhood home.

Severus restlessly stormed about his living space. He made a show of removing his cloak, folding it, and summoning a bottle of wine.

"Severus," she said quietly.

Back facing her, he froze, preparing himself for her recant. He refused to turn around.

"Listen," she said seriously, "about what Malfoy said..."

"No need to speak any further," he snapped angrily.

"What?"

"Just go," he barked.

"I don't think you understand what I am going to say..."

"ENOUGH!" he bellowed, whirling toward her, forcing her to flinch away. His eyes narrowed, misinterpreting her body language. "We both know you are going to end... whatever the fuck you want to call this between us... so don't worry yourself with unwanted..."

"Severus..."

"...explanations. Go back to school..."

"Severus..."

"...to your books, and your simple life beside Bloody-Boy-Wonder-Potter..."

"SEVERUS!"

Breathing hard through his nostrils, Snape's menacing eyes snapped toward her.

Hermione exhaled a shaky breath. She stood in place in the middle of his family home. There was so much she wanted to say, all at once, but she couldn't find sense in her words.

Before she lost her nerve, Hermione lurched across the room. Her arms wrapped tightly around Severus' neck. She raised her chin, fervently pressing her soft lips against his own as her eyes clenched in fear of being rebuffed.

Severus inhaled sharply through his nose. He tensed in puzzlement under her.

She pulled back slightly, too afraid to meet his eyes, only to kiss his lips once more. Hermione burned a path across his mouth and cheek.

Severus' arms hesitantly rose to grasp her by the waist.

Her breathing hitched in relief at his failure to pull away from her. She leaned back to look him in the eye, her hands closed around his jaw.

"Do I look like an idiot?" she asked sternly. Everything wanted to spill out of Hermione at once. Her mind, her heart, and her desires warred for control, forcing a glossy sheen to the rim of her eyes.

At a complete loss for words or proper reaction, Snape uneasily found himself drawn to her worrisome expression.

"Do you really expect me to be blind?" she half-cried.

Her hands tightened around his strong jaw, forcing his head to slightly bob. His black hair spilled over her hands. "I'm not an idiot, Severus Snape. Did you really expect me to be completely ignorant of your status? I read the papers. I listen to the tales of students who were forced to attend Muggle funerals. I know what Death Eaters do. I know *you are* a Death Eater, and I've known it for a long time."

Snape facetiously sent her a mocking scowl. "Then, my dear, that makes you as sick as I am."

"If not more so."

That startled look masked his expression again at her quick response.

A sad softness clouded her eyes. "Even while you're with me," she spoke softly, "I know you could continue to be summoned to Vol-the Dark Lord." Hermione focused on the small frown line by his mouth that had started all this. Snape involuntarily closed his eyes as the soft pad of her finger caressed his skin.

"I don't want to... share you," she said carefully, "but from the very beginning, I knew, that in some ways, I must."

Snape didn't know what to do. He was... reacting to her, mentally and physically without the desire to analyze, manipulate, or plan ahead.

He couldn't remember the last time he had actually wanted to lose himself in 'the now'.

Hermione lowered her forehead onto his shoulder with a sigh. When Severus' hands finally closed around her back, she turned her face to his neck, pressing her warm lips against his skin.

"I'll only give you ninety-nine more chances to push me away," her wet tongue darted out, sweeping across his pulse, "before I'll actually let you succeed."

Severus inhaled sharply, pushing her away to hold her at arms length. His brow furrowed together, lost in thought, as he gazed at Hermione's determination.

"S-Stay with me tonight?" he asked.

Hermione slowly nodded, smiling shyly at him.

*** ** *

Back at Hogwarts castle, Harry continued scowling at the hearth fire, absentmindedly fingering the pages of his open Transfiguration book. His thoughts warred with the heat of the violent flames.

"I miss talking to you," a female voice said hesitantly.

Harry turned toward the voice. Gaping, he was unprepared for the sight of Ginny standing nervously by the settee.

He attempted to send her a good natured smile. "Want to sit down?"

She fidgeted in place for a few seconds before finally lowering herself beside him.

"You used to share so much with me," she said softly. "Things you were too hesitant to speak to Ron and Hermione about."

Harry uncomfortably shrugged his shoulders. "It's just... weird now, you know?"

Ginny shook her head in frustration, turning herself away from him.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" she asked sternly. She would gladly throw herself in front of a Killing Curse for this thick-headed boy, but she refused to continue playing the role of a fool in love any longer.

"This?"

A tense silence separated their bodies, interrupted by the crackling of the burning logs.

Harry could see her getting closer from the corner of his eye. The cushion next to him dipped under her weight. His eyes closed painfully at the feel of a soft hand gliding through his hair.

Ginny leaned toward Harry, softly kissing him on his temple. He should be pushing her away, he should be getting up to go to his room, but he was losing himself in her delicate touches.

Neither said a word, grasping that nothing that was said would alter their situation.

Both knew that he wouldn't change his mind.

Harry turned to her, hungrily capturing her mouth with his. Ginny's arms extended around his neck, pulling her toward him as she lowered herself to lay flat on her back. Resting his body completely on top of her, Harry pulled his lips away from hers, heart aching at the sound of her disappointed whimper.

Ginny raised her palm, stroking the side of Harry's face, urging him to continue.

Turning his face, he pressed his nose and mouth against her hand, wishing...needing to take her right there. Simply touching her was torture. It had been so long since he'd held her.

Sighing miserably to himself, Harry knew that in a matter of moments he was going to lift himself off her and pretend that this had never happened. Tomorrow, she would wake up and exit the common room hand in hand with Seamus.

But Harry just needed this for right now.

Lowering his face under her neck, Harry exhaled deeply at the feel of her hands desperately closing around his back.

They lay there. Not speaking... not moving... listening to each other's timid breaths, feeling one another's erratic heartbeats until they would be interrupted by the creak of the portrait swinging open.

*** ** *

Would anyone notice she was gone, Hermione vaguely wondered as she followed Severus' lead up the narrow stairway of his Muggle house. She was somewhat untroubled that Severus did not think it an issue to spend a night away from Hogwarts castle, so Hermione decided to let that worry go.

She repeatedly swallowed, trying to wet her drying throat when he pushed open the door to his bedroom.

BED-room, she repeated.

He had only asked her to spend the night... to sleep. But did he expect more? He was a full grown man after all, not a timid schoolboy. Was she ready for this?

Hermione couldn't help the humored sigh she released at the sight of even more bookcases lining his bedroom walls. Casually letting go of his hand, Hermione walked the length of shelves, trailing her fingertips against the rare tomes.

"My, my, Professor," Hermione spoke light-heartedly, "who would have thought you were quite a bookworm yourself?"

Welcoming the thought of returning to normal and casual conversation, Severus raised a characteristic eyebrow. "Unlike certain know-it-all seventh-years," Snape sneered, "I do not parade my extensive knowledge any chance I get."

It felt wonderful to laugh at his sarcasm.

Removing his teaching cloak, Severus hung it over the back of an armchair and quickly turned down his bed. He fell on top of it with a tired moan.

"Feel free to read as much as you want," he spoke to the ceiling, eyes closed with his hand over his brow. "But I do prefer complete darkness when I sleep."

Returning a book back to its shelf, Hermione raised her chin, confidently walking to his bed. In truth, she was nervous beyond belief, but she didn't want to look like a timid little girl in front of him.

She needed to prove that she could contend with all of him.

Sitting on the edge of his bed, Hermione slowly removed her stockings and shoes. The bed moved slightly as Severus turned on his side.

"Do you want to sleep in your dress?" he asked her. "You may borrow a shirt..."

"No need," she interrupted with a hesitant laugh. "I'm wearing a gown under this."

She turned away from him, knowing his eyes were burning holes through her back as she hesitantly began unbuttoning the front of her dress. Slowly pulling the fabric open at the neck and down each arm, Hermione shyly glanced over her shoulders. An aroused flush spread up her neck when she met his intense expression. She quickly raised her hips off the bed to push the loose fabric to the floor.

Snape smoothly lifted the duvet, inviting her into the warm bed.

Uncertainly tucking a wild curl behind her ear, Hermione lowered her head on the pillow, continuing to keep her body facing the wall.

She felt silly again at her reactions. Her body was tense, and she didn't see the harm in facing him. Willing her breathing to calm, Hermione finally convinced herself to turn over to face Severus... just when his warm body suddenly slid across the mattress, pressing against her back. His arm confidently fell on her waist, pulling her tightly to mould against him. Pressing his nose against the back of her neck, Snape released a relaxed sigh as he bent his thighs under her bum.

Maybe she should have taken him up his offer of clothes. Her already short chemise was beginning to ride up her thighs.

Sensing her trepidation, Snape lifted his head to cast a non-verbal spell. The room was immediately cast in darkness.

"Sleep, Hermione," he whispered seriously. She instantly released a relieved breath.

Hermione wanted to sleep. Truly she did. She wanted to ease against Severus' snug support and lose herself in blissful slumber. But her nerves continued to keep her body on full alert. She was thinking too much. Hermione slightly tensed with Severus' every breath.

That intense fire in her belly was stronger than ever. She'd never been so scantily dressed in the arms of a boy...man...before. Identifying a growing hardness pressing against the flesh of her bum, the heat between her legs strengthened, and she found herself fighting the urge to gyrate against him.

I can't take this anymore.

In one fluid motion, Hermione squirmed around to turn her upper body toward him, raising her arm around his neck as she slid her bum against Severus' firmness. He sharply inhaled and tightened his grip on her waist.

Pressing her face into the hollow of his neck, Hermione glided her fingers through the hair behind his ear. She kissed and licked his neck, urging him to lower his jaw enough to reach his lips.

Severus' hand steadily slid down her waist and over her hip. The moment his warm fingers made contact with the bare skin of her plump thigh, his touch slowed, savoring the feel of her exposed flesh.

"Severus." His name left her lips in a high pitched moan, fearfully pleading to stop... to continue. He growled in response, kissing her jaw in search of those lips that deliciously begged his name. Grabbing her by the hip, Snape turned her, forcing her to completely face him on her side. Pressing his hungry mouth against hers, Snape thrust his forceful tongue beyond her lips.

Hermione moaned freely, wrapping her arm around his shoulders. Her inexperienced whimpers increased when his hands returned to the soft flesh of her exposed legs.

She had no idea what her cries were doing to him.

Reluctantly dragging his lips away, Snape released a deep breath, pressing his face underneath her jaw.

"W-what's wrong?" she asked.

Grunting in defeat, Snape gripped the back of her knee, pulling her thigh over his hip.

"I told you to sleep." He could not adequately prevent the heavy frustration in his voice.

Pulling her other arm out from underneath her, Hermione edged it between the hollow of Snape's neck and the mattress, forcing his head on her shoulder. His chin lightly pressed against the swell of her breasts.

Growling hungrily, Snape thrust his hips upward, pushing his aching cock between her legs. His hand crawled up her thigh, palming over her defined bum. When his dexterous fingers edged underneath the elastic of her knickers, Hermione sharply inhaled, both from arousal and fear. But hesitation was growing much quicker than her desire.

Sensing her body tense against him, Snape pushed her to lie flat on the bed.

This was worse. Her hand clenched painfully against his shoulder at his forceful movement. With half of his body on top of her, Snape pulled back to look questioningly into her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said softly.

"What for?"

"I don't know what I'm... this is all so new to me."

Virgin. Shite....

Thinking the moonlight was playing tricks on his eyes, Snape raised his hand to her neck, blocking the pale beams to see if it had any effect on the shadows blossoming on her skin.

It wasn't a trick of the darkness. The shadows were bruises. His hand still upon her neck, he quickly realized that the length of his finger tips matched the purple outline on her flesh.

He had marked her in front of Lucius.

His eyes quickly snapped to the feather stroke on the back of his hand. Her wrist was quickly turning purple as well.

Eyes still hooded from arousal, Snape lowered his face to her neck, his lips silently moved against her damaged flesh.

"Did you say something?"

Snape pulled away from her again, grabbing her wrist. He brushed his lips against his marks.

"Sleep," he whispered more harshly than he intended. "I have no desire to tear your maidenhead tonight." His voice faded slightly, caught off guard by his own sincerity.

Hermione released one long, contented sigh, wrapping both arms around his neck. Reluctantly pulling himself off her, he lay by her side, motioning for her to turn back around so he could tightly hold her to him.

Author's Notes: Gah! I want these two to shag already. I asked them and they both said no. I think Snape threw something at me as I left the bedroom.

-My beta, **melusin**, is a blessing and has polished up this chapter splendidly.

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book i. Line 105.

-I have numerous recs for various fanarts and artists that have inspired my characters, my moods, even whole scenes. Go check out these deviant artists: perselus, flam, tolueno, sweetmoon, comfortablylaura, snapenogger, Cruel-Crush, obfuscatesart, Dream-traveler, Magsby, madcarrot, usagistu, Harry-Potter-Spain, wycked, azmin. On my account, **lissa1011** at <http://lissa1011.deviantart.com/>, I have listed each of their individual artworks that I have enjoyed.

-Next up: The morning after.

Chapter Fourteen - The Palpable Obscure

Chapter 16 of 36

With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began. And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. Eventual SS/HG. Alternate Universe, HBP death disregarded.

Nominated for best fic in the 2007 OWL Awards: Fire & Ice Category (SS/HG), Romance Category, Angst Category, and A/U Category

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: I send my many thanks to **melusin** for going over this chapter multiple times.

Sleep.

That was the first word he thought as Snape slowly awoke the next morning.

He'd slept. He'd slept long. And deep. No dreams.

He hadn't touched a drop of alcohol last night, either. Severus couldn't remember the last time he had awoken so clear-minded.

A deep inhalation of groggy breath interrupted his musings. There was a half-dressed witch draped across his chest.

His eyebrows instantly furrowed together. He'd never woken up in the morning next to a witch he hadn't had sex with before. Maybe that was the reason he failed to recoil in disgust from her.

Hermione sleepily shifted against him. The hand around his neck softly tugged on his sleep-disheveled hair. She wound a strand between her fingers. Hermione's breathing evened out, her weight growing heavy against him as her fingers ceased in their movement. When Severus finally released a tense breath, it dawned on him that his body had stiffened as she roused. He didn't want to interrupt Hermione's sleep, and it unnerved him.

This young witch continued to surprise him at every turn.

First, her continuous and irritatingly persistent presence at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. Then, her incessant fascination with him: in her every look, in the tone of her voice, in her submission to his attentions.

In truth, in the very beginning, he had merely been attracted to her.

Merely. She was, after all, a student, Gryffindor, and practically family with the Boy Who Lived Fucking Potter. All of these circumstances were the very reasons why he should not have sought her out.

But the fact that Black wanted her, he was loath to admit, stroked Snape's ego even more. Objectively, Severus knew that many a witch would say that Black was more attractive than he. Such a thing as physical appearance had never been important to Severus, but he wasn't ignorant to comprehend what he looked like. However, his appearance wasn't an issue because it never seemed to matter with the opposite sex. Severus was never left wanting in the department of lustful witches. Something about his... indifference and darkness always appealed to bored and daring females.

He imagined the same must be true with the eighteen-year-old body pressing its scantily covered breasts against his ribs. He and Black were both twenty years her senior, and yet she desperately wanted *him*.

Another reason he had gradually eased into this *distraction*.

Snape raised his arm, lightly placing his hand on her back. His warm fingers closed over the protruding bone of her shoulder blade.

She hummed sleepily, nudging her face against his neck.

Blood rushed to his groin, intensifying his morning erection.

His eyebrow rose in curious amusement. Something else he wasn't accustomed to in the morning.

Eyeing the growing bulge in his trousers, Snape's thoughts went over everything that had transpired the previous night.

Snape exhaled deeply. Last night was... an experience. Even thinking about it now seemed peculiar as the morning sun penetrated through his dirty window. His eyes glazed over in thought, transfixed on the hundreds of tiny dust particles floating through the bright rays streaking about his room.

Snape had to admit that he had given Hermione far less credit than she deserved. Especially last night. Expecting her to be childish and frightened at the exposure to his double life, she had tolerated it quite audaciously. She had even put on a very convincing show for Lucius.

Maybe there was more to this distraction than he'd originally anticipated.

She had shown far too much emotion for him than he was comfortable with, but he was surprised at how quickly he had welcomed it.

All ulterior motives and selfish inclinations aside, Severus wanted to keep her.

His hand clenched against her back at the thought.

*** **

Hermione's ears pricked at the squeak of aged pipes. Not until the room went soundless did she realize that the shower had just been turned off.

She was so comfortable she didn't want to open her eyes. She had slept fairly soundly, which was surprising, given the apprehension she had felt at sharing a bed with Severus.

She smiled, stretching her arms high above her head, humming as her back arched off the bed.

Her hum was answered by a ragged intake of air.

Hermione's heart dropped, and the sort of irrational fear usually felt by a child waking up from a bad dream ran through her.

Far too apprehensive to glance in the direction of the labored breaths traveling across from the bed, Hermione fearfully realized that there was still noise coming from behind the bathroom door.

She lifted herself to sit up, forcing her sleep-hazed vision against the blinding morning sun. There was a third person in this house.

Her blood ran cold.

A bookcase was pushed open, revealing a darkened doorway. A filthy, emaciated man was standing in the crack, looking at her with sunken eyes.

Mouth falling open, he stepped completely into the room. His eyes washed over Hermione.

Too scared to run, Hermione barely had time to cover herself with the bedclothes. The man saw her fright and nearly ran to the side of the bed. Her mouth opened, releasing a terrified scream.

"SEVERUS!" she screeched.

The bathroom door instantly banged open. In the middle of his morning routine, Severus pounded into the room with an intimidating air, his bathrobe hanging open. The second Snape took in Hermione cowering against the headboard, he threateningly tilted his head toward Wormtail. The cowardly rodent should know better. Snape's lips raised in an incensed sneer, revealing clenched teeth.

"This one stayed," Wormtail rasped fearfully. "I was merely going to... remove her for you."

"Get. Out." Severus' fists clenched as he straightened his back.

Wormtail's mad eyes whipped back towards Hermione. At a complete loss of his senses, Wormtail made no attempt to desist in his oddly casual tone of voice. "She is quite pretty. Have you brought her here before? She looks familiar..." At the sight of a wet and partially naked Snape lunging for his wand, Wormtail finally darted back behind his shelf.

Raising his arm, Snape sent a series of wards against the closed bookcase. He breathed deeply through his nostrils in an attempt to control his mounting anger and irritation.

His eyes fleetingly caught Hermione's as she turned towards the seamless bookcase once more. Her continued shocked expression finally caused him to act.

"Are you all right?" he asked, moving to sit beside her on the bed. When Hermione failed to turn her face away from the wall, Snape slowly reached toward her, grasping her behind the head. "Hermione?" he called sternly.

She finally snapped toward him, her expression cleared at the realization of him being so near.

"That was Wormtail," she declared, voice full of shock.

"Did you watch me? Could you remember the wards I placed upon the door?" Snape asked seriously. They were the very same wards that had lifted upon his entrance through the front door the previous night. In the excitement that followed, in the revelations of Hermione's determination, he had let something as important as the wards on his house slip his mind. And ... still ... he had slept so deeply.

"Why is he here?" Hermione asked with a slight accusation in her voice.

"Hermione! Did you see the wards I have place upon the door? Can you repeat them?"

Her eyebrows pinched in puzzlement. "Yes."

"Good. Hopefully, I will never let something so important slip my mind again, but I can at least feel content to share this responsibility with you as well."

Her next breath paused in her throat. Coming from such a private man as Severus Snape, Hermione read far more into that statement than he. Pushing herself away from her cowered crouch against the headboard, Hermione raised herself on her knees. Leaning towards him, she extended her arms around his neck, completely oblivious to his nakedness.

"Of course," she replied sincerely. "Anything important that you ask of me, I will do."

Snape immediately closed his arms around her, returning the embrace. He welcomed her affection, but his face darkened at her words.

*** **

A few hours after the sunrise Severus observed through his Muggle window found Hermione back at Hogwarts.

So much has been said and done in the past twenty hours. Such incredible and depressing darkness. Her heart sagged at her complete disappointment regarding the hearts of humans and their selfishness. Is this what war makes of men?

But it wasn't all for naught. She couldn't help but be slightly pleased at the sudden turn her relationship with Severus had taken. At least now, she could safely say there was some form of intimate emotion behind the sexual tension that constantly fueled their every interaction.

She wanted him so desperately, but she didn't know how to go about it. She didn't understand it, and she didn't care to. Her every movement and thought, from the second she slyly slipped back up to her rooms, was to hope for the chance to even be able to glimpse him again.

Purposefully treading through Hogwarts halls, Hermione forced herself to shake most of last night's events ... except one.

Sirius.

What was that?

Depending on whether or not he was anywhere to be found in the castle would explain the seriousness of his situation last night. If no one knew of his whereabouts, then he was probably still passed out somewhere in Hogsmeade. Maybe he was far more ill than she'd assumed.

*** **

When her knock on the Defense Against the Dark Arts door remained unanswered, Hermione turned the doorknob, relieved at finding it unlocked. Striding purposefully to Sirius' office, Hermione had no doubt that he was present and well enough to receive visitors.

Sirius paced back and forth in his office. His shadowed figure passed across the small pulse of light spilling from the space below his office door. He seemed to be talking to himself. One moment his voice was a whispered cry, the next a bark of anger. The floor vibrated against the scraping of chairs and falling objects.

Maybe I should come back later.

A pot of tea crashed against the door.

"Sirius!" Hermione instantly shouted in reaction.

All movement inside paused. Making up her mind, Hermione pounded her fist upon the door. She quickly grew irritated when it was not immediately answered.

"Sirius, open this door this instant!"

Sirius yanked open the door. Taking notice of the irritation in Hermione's voice, he refused to meet her eyes and determined to continue pouting at the floor. This, of course, wasn't noticed by Hermione. Suddenly thrust into his presence, feeling his labored breath brush against her face, all of the horribly uncomfortable thoughts of his entertainment the night before flashed through her mind.

She didn't want to remember that she had seen this man naked, pounding his swollen erection into a worn prostitute. The harder she forced the images away, the clearer they became. She colored and purposefully looked beyond him.

Her mouth fell open.

"What are you doing?" she asked in exasperation. Hermione carefully edged around him, stepping into the room around broken china and overturned chairs. She gasped at the sight of scattered books and torn pages.

"Cleaning."

"Were you planning on destroying your office first!"

Sirius sighed and lowered himself to sit on the floor. "I am... was angry," he spat out through clenched teeth.

"Why?" Hermione asked bluntly. She could see no logical reason for this mess. Smoothly lifting a chair, she placed it directly in front of him and made it very clear she wasn't going to move unless he started talking.

"Dumbledore," Sirius said uncomfortably.

Hermione tried very hard not to appear somewhat aware of his meaning. "What about Dumbledore? Did he say something to anger you?"

Sirius clenched his jaw, turning his head away.

Hermione leaned further back into her chair in response.

"He doesn't understand... anything," Sirius spat. "I'm no longer a criminal on the run. I don't see why I should continue playing the role of prisoner just because of his paranoid suspicions. Bumbling old fool..."

"Sirius," Hermione said warningly.

He grunted in frustration. "I should be allowed to come and go as I please. I'm a fully grown man!"

"Who throws tantrums like that of a five-year-old," Hermione countered, crossing her arms.

When Sirius failed to respond, Hermione couldn't help but shake her head in pity. She could imagine the type of conversation Professor Dumbledore would have had with him. No doubt the Headmaster was contacted the moment it became apparent that there was a Hogwarts professor passed out on the bedroom floor of a brothel.

"Stop sulking, and get off the floor," Hermione said sternly.

He eyed her defiantly. Hermione tilted her head to the side, her expression daring him to disobey her.

"You've been spending far too much time with Minerva," he muttered as he slowly rose.

She was actually quite pleased to be compared to her mentor.

"You can't honestly believe that Dumbledore would just make demands of you for absolutely no reason?"

Back towards her, Sirius paused in his movement, but then continued the swish of his wand about the room, repairing everything he had destroyed in his rage.

"He is looking out for your best interests, Sirius," Hermione urged delicately.

"Of course," Sirius scoffed, "everything Dumbledore ever says or does is completely for the good of those involved and never based on private, ulterior motives."

Hermione frowned to herself. She knew that something of the bitterness in his comments was probably justified. She had found herself feeling the same.

"Regardless, I'm sure Dumbledore knows best."

Sirius whirled around. Balancing himself by gripping the back of a chair, Hermione curiously wondered at his expression. Finally, in an emotionless tone, he said, "Did he know better last time?"

"Last time?"

Sirius' fingers clenched, nails digging into the finish of the wooden chair.

"If he hadn't forced me to stay locked up in my filthy, childhood home... If he hadn't ordered me to remain useless I might not have..."

My gods. "Are you blaming your death on the Headmaster!" As the words left her mouth, Hermione knew this to be true, and it explained so much. Sirius no longer trusted the Headmaster. He had even gone so far to convince himself that his blood was on Dumbledore's hands, and no doubt, the Headmaster knew this. This would explain why he felt the need to require more than one person to keep an eye on the irrational man before her.

Regaining her senses, Hermione was uneasily aware of Sirius' determined march across the room.

He stopped inches before her. She leaned back into her seat in an effort to separate the uncomfortable closeness of their bodies. Sirius eyes widened, his nostrils flaring as his face went red.

He lunged at Hermione, grasping her by the arms, yanking her out of the chair.

"My... what?" he roared.

"Sirius," Hermione said fearfully. She pushed against his chest.

"Do I look *dead* to you?" he asked slowly, pausing after each word.

Hermione swallowed. She cried out when his hands closed even harder around her arms. Her words faltered, terrified when his eyes glossed over the more fearful she became.

She needed a different course of action.

Hermione raised her chin. "Sirius, you will remove your hands this instant!"

The rage pulled from his expression, replaced by shock at his firm grip on her arms.

"I-I'm sorry," he stammered, backing away from her.

Hermione made a move towards the door.

"Hermione!" he called after her.

Hermione tensed. She slowly turned around, afraid to make a sudden movement as if she were cornered by a mad dog. It was painful to realize that with this man, the analogy was true.

"I don't know..." His words caught in his throat. He looked wildly around the room, finally comprehending the destruction he had caused to the inanimate objects and the near destruction of the woman standing before him. "I'm sorry," he breathed.

Hermione nodded numbly, turning away to leave.

"And I am not dead," he called after her before the door closed. The finality in his voice told Hermione that he valued her believing this much more than accepting his apology.

*** **

Hermione pounded on Severus' office door. She waited, in hesitant patience, for his thunderous voice to allow her entrance. But there was no sound or movement from inside.

Hermione knocked loudly again.

"Ah, Miss Granger."

Still shaken up from Sirius' near attack, Hermione started at the sudden appearance of Professor Dumbledore. She couldn't help the guilt-ridden, sharp inhale as she spun around.

"Y-yes, Headmaster."

"I believe, in his rush to leave the castle, Professor Snape has allowed your detention to slip his mind. Otherwise, you would have been informed."

"He's left?"

Dumbledore tilted his head to the side, eyeing her curiously. "I have known you to be one enthusiastically thrilled with everything related to education and schoolwork. However, the idea of a student disappointed at a cancelled detention is a bit alarming."

Hermione caught herself, flashing him a knowing smile.

"Not as alarming as Professor Snape denying the chance to instill discipline in a student. Only something very serious would prevent him from overseeing his own detentions."

Hermione wasn't just saying this to draw attention away from herself. In the ordinary interaction between a student and professor, she knew that Dumbledore spoke of Severus' nature fairly accurately. He would have made the effort to reschedule. But given that their relationship was more intimate, and that most likely this evening wouldn't have consisted of typical disciplinary chores, the fact that he'd still failed to send her notice was true cause for alarm. He had left the castle. Her stomach clenched agonizingly at the thought.

Unaware of her internal musings, Dumbledore laughed in amusement. "Quite right, Miss Granger. But since you have the evening free, might I offer you a cup of tea... in my office?"

His serene smile was not lost on her. That was Dumbledore lingo for "time to discuss your assignment."

Good. She had questions about Sirius for him as well.

"Of course, Headmaster."

*** *** ***

Hermione used the cover of slowly sipping her tea to stall for time to think. Should she come out and ask Dumbledore questions or wait for him to lead the discussion? Somehow, whenever the Headmaster led the topic of conversation, he always seemed very talented at asking ... if not demanding ... tasks from her.

She had far too many burning questions to sit quietly.

"Headmaster, may I ask you something?"

"Of course, my dear." Dumbledore raised his tea to his lips, giving her his full attention.

"Does Sirius' return from the veil have something to do with the pocket watch he constantly carries?"

Dumbledore nearly dropped his teacup. Spluttering, he pounded his chest to clear his windpipe. When Hermione rose out of her seat in alarm, he waved her away with his good arm.

"It appears, Miss Granger," he gasped between intakes of air, "that you have gained a far greater degree of trust from Sirius than I had anticipated."

Hermione guiltily diverted her eyes. "Er... no, sir. I just... This is based on observation only."

"So you've seen it?" he asked, genuinely intrigued.

"Yes."

Dumbledore paused as he decided his words. Characteristically, he fingered his bearded chin. "There is no coming back from the dead, surely you understand that? But some people have such a burning will to refuse their fate that they can leave an imprint of themselves on this earth..."

"Which would create their *ghost*," she carelessly interrupted. "I don't see how..."

"I hadn't finished."

Hermione's face reddened. "I apologize."

Dumbledore nodded his head in forgiveness before he continued. "But Sirius' death isn't ... wasn't a typical one. First of all, it was so abrupt, falling through the archway in the manner that he did. Secondly, once he was on the other side, he was not completely aware that he was, in fact, dead. Oh, I'm sure it had crossed his mind, but he wanted answers. He refused his fate until he was given... until he was visited."

Dumbledore paused. He purposefully allowed Hermione to ask whatever question he knew was developing in that incredible mind of hers.

"He was given his timepiece on the other side?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"Of that, I am not positive."

Hermione knew that Dumbledore either hadn't asked Sirius or had asked and had been refused an honest answer.

"What happens to him when he doesn't wind it?"

Dumbledore suspiciously narrowed his eyes at her. She seemed to know an awful lot of information without speaking personally to Sirius on the subject.

"That watch is the key to his ability to live and breathe in the land of the living. But it was created on the other side and will constantly connect him ... bind him ... to the afterlife. Which is why it needs to be carefully maintained."

Hermione swallowed in discomfort. Sirius' *life*, now, seemed almost like... an abomination.

"Now I can see why you would want to keep Sirius out of Voldemort's grasp. I would imagine he would be very curious to have a 'Plan B' for returning from the dead."

Dumbledore's eyes widened.

"Yes, in a manner of speaking. It is essential for Sirius to remain away from Voldemort's influence."

"You didn't exactly answer my question, Headmaster," Hermione probed delicately, folding her hands in her lap.

"What question was that, my dear?"

"What happens to Professor Black if he fails to wind his pocket watch?"

Dumbledore sighed tiredly. "His soul will be sent back beyond the veil, and his body will die."

Hermione laughed nervously. "You say that as if his soul and body were no longer connected." Her face cleared when the old man leaned across his desk.

"If they were connected, Miss Granger, then he wouldn't be so dependant on the pocket watch, now, would he?"

Oh, my God...

Hermione cleared her throat, thinking of another question that might be too imprudent to ask. "Professor... if I may be so bold..."

"As much as we have shared now, Miss Granger, I fail to see what harm any further questions could do."

"Correct me if I am wrong, but Sirius doesn't trust you at all, does he?"

Dumbledore sadly shook his head. "I am not too ignorant or unfeeling to see that Sirius *has* suffered unjustly for a long time. He is looking for somewhere to place blame, and I don't fault him for it."

"But he blames you."

Dumbledore fidgeted slightly. "Sirius views his own pain quite dramatically, so he sees himself very alone. I fear that this makes him susceptible to influences of charismatic powers. He needs a friend, and given that it was Harry for whom he fled to save back at the Department of Mysteries, I am not surprised he hasn't turned to him for counsel."

Hermione's heart raced in realization. "So, you've left this to me?"

"I find your heart so passionate and naturally candid in the expression of your love and devotion to those you have claimed as friends. So steadfast, regardless of any obstacles placed in your way. Sirius needs someone to trust, even love, and I hoped to save him with you."

Hermione's lips thinned at the Headmaster's confession. How dare he assume she would want to give such a man her love? And yet, she remained silent. The Headmaster was old, and very set in his ways. Hermione knew her objections would fall on deaf ears.

"So tell me, Hermione. How are things... developing... with Sirius?"

Hermione clenched her jaw.

"My friendship with Professor Black, sir, is as strong as ever. I will continue to attempt to gain his confidences as well as ensure his safety from negative influences and his timepiece from dubious individuals who may wish to steal it."

"Has someone tried to steal it?" he asked, shocked at the idea.

Hermione swallowed. She assumed Severus told the Headmaster everything.

"No, sir. But I wouldn't be surprised," Hermione answered immediately. Her own words echoed in her ear. Her glands salivated as her stomach turned. She fought the urge to throw up. She had just lied to the Headmaster, and it had almost felt natural, too. Why would she do that?

Severus.

She didn't like it.

Dumbledore released a relieved sigh. "I must admit, I am not sorry that you know all that you do. At least now you are aware of how important the effect of your encouragement is on Sirius and will act accordingly."

Her face a mask, Hermione merely nodded in agreement.

Author's Notes: It has been a bit longer than I would have liked since my last update. This chapter wasn't as long as I normally enjoy writing, but I felt like it needed to be wrapped up here. So as a peace offering, the next chapter is completely written, over 10,000 words and ready for my beta to work her magic.

-**Melusin** was wonderful enough to beta this chapter before she went on holiday for the week.

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book ii. Line 406.

-Next up: Hermione's discussion with Dumbledore leads her to demands answers from Severus. But is she truly ready to hear what he has to say? A routine visit to an underground werewolf pack forces Remus to confront the demons of his past.

Chapter Fifteen - Where Rest Can Never Dwell, Hope Never Comes (Part 1)

Chapter 17 of 36

With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began. And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. Eventual SS/HG. Alternate Universe, HBP death disregarded.

Nominated for best fic in the 2007 OWL Awards: Fire & Ice Category (SS/HG), Romance Category, Angst Category, and A/U Category

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: Story beta'ed by the incredibly brilliant **melusin**.

Four days.

That was the last time she had seen Severus.

Saturday morning, four days ago.

As her Tuesday classes came to a close, Hermione attempted to feign amusement since all of her friends vastly enjoyed the Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson. Given the professor of this class, this was very, very challenging.

"... turning to page 241, you will find the many uses of bewitched sleep as a safeguard against..."

Where could Severus be? Was he in trouble? Was he hurt? Professor McGonagall didn't know how long she was going to continue substituting for his class. Severus had never missed lessons before. Hermione knew that he must be away on business for either the Headmaster or Voldemort ... possibly both.

"... read silently before we begin the practical application of..."

Hermione anxiously wanted to know if he was all right.

She had never felt this way before ... for any male ... and it was truly beginning to unsettle her mind. Whereas other females in her year welcomed the idea of losing themselves in the distracting bliss of breathtaking ardor, the idea that she could allow herself to be such a victim had never seemed possible. She could never compare her love life to that of, say, Ginny or Lavender. Both girls were younger than her, yet they already possessed multiple notches on their bedposts.

Hermione had never been the type of female who used old quills to scratch the name of her lover into the soft wood of the students' desks. It had always seemed so silly, so juvenile. But thinking this didn't change the direction of her thoughts.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder, Hermione tried to tease herself. She snorted. The phrase was beginning to ring true.

She had witnessed what Severus could look like returning from Voldemort and the Death Eaters back at number twelve, Grimmauld place. He had bled before her very eyes as he dispassionately chided Minerva's attentive concern. How was she to know that he wasn't doing the same all over again? Except... alone.

"Finnigan!" Sirius roared.

Hermione snapped out of her distracting thoughts, focusing on the object of Sirius' unexpected irritation. Seated in the desk directly in front of Harry, Seamus' head was face down on his book, mouth wide open as he snored obnoxiously.

The class tittered in amusement.

"Quieten down!" Sirius barked. He stormed to the front of Seamus' seat. "Finnigan, wake up!"

Seamus' only reply was an even louder snore, followed by a heavy thud. Dean Thomas' upper torso had fallen against his desk before he'd fluidly slipped out of his seat and onto the floor.

"What the hell? If this is some sort of prank..."

"Professor," Hermione called fearfully, gazing around. Every student on her side of the classroom was falling limply in their seats. Expressions of contentment on their faces, it was evident that they were all sleeping!

Hermione turned to the rows of student desks on the opposite side of the room. Meeting a few terrified glances, her eyes lowered, grasping the curious state of the friend by her side.

Harry's head was down, oblivious to the scene developing around him. His eyes moved feverishly, swallowing up the text, as per his habit in wanting to absorb everything the subject offered.

"Harry," Hermione called loudly to him. When he failed to respond, she reached towards him, yanking the book away from his sight. "Harry, for Heaven's sake, stop reading!"

He flinched at the sudden movement before sending her a puzzled look.

"No way," Ron whispered dumbly as the unresponsive students slowly twitched as they awoke. "Harry... did you do *that*?" He finished his question by wildly waving at the classroom.

Harry was silent a second, allowing himself to comprehend what had happened.

"How could I?" His face grew warm at the scared looks the other students sent him. "I was reading to myself; I never said a single word aloud!"

Hermione glanced down at his book in her hands. It was open at the practical application of bewitched sleep ... a full three pages ahead of her own reading capabilities.

"Being able to perform this on one person is difficult enough... but half the classroom, using non-verbal magic and no wand..."

She knew Harry would hate to see the look of awe on her face, but this was truly extraordinary, and she couldn't help it.

Harry's expression soured. He scowled at the classroom, daring the other students to continue gawking at him.

"Yes, well," Sirius said uncomfortably. "No harm done. Settle yourselves back into your seats and continue reading."

*** **

Harry's stomach growled angrily as he marched through the seventh floor corridor. News of the incident in Defense class had swept the castle, preventing him from enjoying dinner. Moments ago, as he paused by the doors to the Great Hall, Harry had made up his mind to avoid the meddlesome glances he knew he would receive. But as he silently stood against the massive polished wood, he noticed that the Headmaster was not present at dinner, either.

He hated being viewed as the Hogwarts' oddity and thought that the only person who might be able to give him a proper explanation as to what had happened in class would be Dumbledore. The moment this thought crossed his mind, Harry turned on his heel and treaded back up the marble staircase.

As he approached the stone Gargoyle, the winding stairs were already moving, but they were turning down instead of up.

"Good evening, Harry," Professor McGonagall said warmly, stepping away from the winding stairs.

"Hello," he replied politely. "Have you just been to see the Headmaster? I would like to speak to him."

Professor McGonagall attempted to smile, but her lips thinned into a pitiful grimace.

"I'm sorry, Harry, but the Headmaster isn't much up for visitors today."

"Why?" he asked torpidly. "Is he all right?"

Minerva shook her head sensitively. "Just weak. His years are catching up with him, that's all. He could not find the strength or the desire to remain out of bed too long. He's sleeping at the moment. I'm sure he'll be up for visitors in the morning."

And with that, Minerva sympathetically reached up to pat Harry on the shoulder before walking down the corridor. At a loss for an appropriate reaction, Harry silently watched her retreating back.

The Headmaster... sick?

Scowling to himself, Harry turned from the base of the winding stairs towards the direction of the Gryffindor common room.

The very idea, the image, of Dumbledore being too tired to move turned Harry's stomach. His condition was not improving. If anything, this was evidence of his eventual...

No, not yet.

Fisting his hands into his pockets, Harry was relieved to find the common room empty. Everyone was still in the Great Hall, enjoying the evening meal. In an effort to further seclude himself from the prying glances of his fellow students, Harry marched up the boys' Dormitory stairs.

Once inside his room, Harry paced in front of the foot of his bed. Frustrated, he fought the urge to kick his trunk. Finally calling defeat, Harry allowed his body to limply sit on top of it.

"Are you okay?" a feminine voice asked timidly.

Harry dropped his head. He was far too frustrated and physically tired to deal with this right now. "You followed me?"

"And if I did," Lavender stated defensively.

Harry steadily tilted his head toward his bedroom door.

What the hell was she thinking, following him up here ... into his room? "Why would you?" he challenged. He knew that if he wanted to avoid a row, then he had better control the irritation in his voice, but it had been a long day.

Lavender nervously scratched the corner of her mouth. It smeared her pink lip gloss onto her upper lip, but Harry wasn't sure if he should tell her. Secretly, he wished she wasn't wearing lip gloss. It tasted bitter and chalky.

She flipped her hair off her shoulder. Her feet shifted, unsure if she should remain in the doorway or invite herself completely in. "I wouldn't have to go out of my way to find you if you didn't go out of your way to avoid me!"

Harry guiltily glanced at the floor. His shoulders hunched as he uneasily ruffled his unkempt hair. He knew her accusation to be true.

"Look, Lavender, about..."

"Oh, shut up, Harry," she said softly.

His head raised in bewilderment.

"I really didn't come all the way up here to argue. You looked like you needed someone to talk to, and I know you're not one to go out of your way for it."

"Yeah, well, I don't *need* to talk about anything."

Frowning slightly, Lavender leaned her body weight against the doorframe. She didn't want to intrude any further than she already had, but she wasn't going to leave unless he specifically asked her.

"Um... can I come in?"

Glancing shyly at the floor, Lavender slowly lifted her eyes. She knowingly smiled at him.

Tell her no.

"Uh... yeah." Lifting himself off his trunk, Harry pushed himself back to sit on his bed.

*** **

Pansy threw her robes over a chair and crawled into the bed possessing her tired lover. His body already weak from his approaching Transformation tomorrow, Remus had left the door to the hotel room unlocked.

Remus' hands instantly came around her, holding her back against his chest. His hands trailed down the side of her body before stopping by her thigh. He fingered the hem of her skirt.

"You're wearing your school uniform," he announced flatly.

Pansy merely hummed in acknowledgement.

"You know I don't like it."

"You're not one for kink, are you, *Professor*?" Pansy teased. She knew he couldn't help the guilt he felt at times for sleeping with a student.

Remus yanked the covers off her, sighing in frustration. "Pansy," he said warningly.

Grunting in defeat, Pansy lifted herself off the mattress, removing any and all clothing until she was left in her bra and knickers. "I think you just use that as an excuse to get me naked faster."

When Pansy lay back down on the bed, Remus did not immediately respond. Because of this, she knew that her comment had offended him. He was so quick to show and give her his love that he could be irrationally sensitive to everything she said or did.

"What do you mean?" he asked slowly.

Pansy's heart dropped. She recognized that miserable tone of voice.

"I didn't mean anything." Pansy tried to snuggle against him, but his body tensed at the contact.

"Then why did you say that?"

"I was trying to be humorous," she sighed.

"You didn't laugh."

"Remus!"

He turned his face into his pillow, closing his eyes.

"Please," she begged. "I don't want to argue. I wasn't insinuating anything. I know you love me. I know you would never use me for sex."

"I wouldn't be able to tell by the way you speak to me."

"I didn't mean it that way. I'm sorry," she said wretchedly.

Finally forgiving her, due to the despondency in her voice, Remus' arms returned to clutch her waist.

Sighing in relief, Pansy snuggled against him. She rubbed her bum into his lap. Remus stilled her with his hands.

Whimpering in mock disappointment, Pansy gyrated harder.

"Don't," he scolded. "Not like this."

Pansy leaned her neck back, kissing him on the jaw. But Remus pulled his face away from her.

"Turn around, Pansy. Face me. I enjoy looking you in the eye."

"We've never done it like this," she whispered. Remus tensed when she rubbed her bum against him again. In a playful tone, she said, "Don't pretend like you don't want to bugger..."

"I don't." Remus lifted his arms, pushing himself away from her until he was on the far side of the bed.

Her throat prickled as she tried not to get emotional. She didn't want to argue with him, she just wanted Remus to hold her. Confused, Pansy turned around to eye his bare back.

She paused in thought before reaching toward him.

If she was ever asked how she came to fancy this man, she would admit it had started with his back. How many times had she gradually woken up in the morning with this expanse of flesh before her very eyes? His back was a mystery to her: so many scrapes, so many scars... each of them a different pattern and a different depth.

Pansy had never seen Remus transform before. But if she could call this man her lover, then she felt at some point, she should. Regardless of the many reservations she'd first had at allowing her heart to be completely surrendered to someone else's control, she finally believed that if she could give Remus that control then she also wanted everything about him.

Including the beast.

Out of habit, she reached toward him, hands trailing along the scars littering his flesh. The pad of her middle finger probed the half-circled patterns embedded on both of his shoulders.

"What are these?" she asked softly.

"Bite marks," his muffled voice spoke against his pillow.

She delicately paused before continuing. "You got them when you were bitten, didn't you?"

Remus shrugged her hands off his shoulder. "Define, 'bitten'?" he spat disgustingly.

Pansy yanked her hand back, caught off guard by his sudden change in emotion.

"When... you know... you were made into a werewolf..." she nervously stammered, biting her thumb.

Remus jerked his head off the pillow. Turning his face toward the ceiling, he looked at her through the corner of his eye. "~~The~~werewolf who *inflicted me* made them, but not the night I was bitten," he spat quickly. His eyes bored into her, daring her to ask any more questions.

Pansy did want him to clarify further, but the fear in her expression told him that she was finally putting all the pieces together. She quickly kissed him on the cheek to show that she wasn't disgusted, even if he was.

"Remus..." she cooed. Her hands moved from his bite marks to his face, stroking him with the affection that her voice had always been unable to express.

Closing his eyes, Remus sighed desperately. He turned toward her, placing his head on her chest. He hummed sleepily at the feel of her scratching his scalp. He was weak, so Pansy wasn't surprised at how quickly his body heavily rested against her.

Kissing his forehead, she softly attempted to adjust her legs into a more comfortable position, entwining them with his. But she wasn't tired enough for sleep.

Pansy rested there for some time, holding Remus as he slept. She didn't want to dwell on their conversation, but his comments worried, saddened, and warmed her at the same time.

Was it normal for her heart to soften a little more at the idea that he had been hurt as well? It might be normal, but was it healthy? She didn't know the details, but she had a fairly clear idea what had happened to him.

She had always assumed that the beast had been the one to receive these wounds, not her Remus.

*** **

He wasn't doing this, Harry scolded himself.

And yet, he continued to steadily thrust his hips. His hands uncertainly fisted against his duvet before he thought better of it.

Harry knew he shouldn't be allowing this. He groaned loudly... blindly reaching his hand across his mattress, searching for his discarded trousers.

Maybe that's why he was enjoying it. Gods, how he was enjoying it.

Harry was completely aware that he should have told Lavender to leave his room. What good could have come from allowing her to sit beside him on his bed? ~~Talk~~?

Finally grasping his wand, he flicked his wrist, and the curtains of his four-poster pulled around his bed.

He was a fucking idiot.

Thinking this, Harry waved his wrist one more time, casting a Silencing Charm on his bed.

Harry threw his head back onto the pillow, closing his eyes at the feel of the naked female on top of him, pounding her wet center onto his cock.

Seconds before he was about to come, he hissed at the familiar tightening in his bollocks.

His mouth fell open. "Ginny!"

*** **

Sirius was sick of Hermione avoiding his eye.

He punched his pillow crossly as he tossed and turned in his bed.

She used to smile at him. Sometimes, now, her delicate eyebrows would pinch in annoyance at his continued adoring glances.

Yes, he remembered those smiles clearly, years ago. He didn't want to admit it, but even though she had only been fourteen... maybe fifteen years old, his groin had throbbed at the sight of them. She would laugh and giggle, placing the back of her hand against her lips so she wouldn't alarm and anger Molly. This happened regularly at number twelve, Grimmauld place.

That has seemed like a full lifetime ago.

"It was a *lifetime* ago," said a voice that did not originate in his own head. He chose to ignore it.

But since Saturday, since he had... talked to her, she had completely refused to meet his eye. Was she angry with him? Afraid of him?

No, she couldn't be. Since Saturday, he had asked her to stay after class, and she had always done as she was told. When he attempted to speak to her in the corridors, she would smile and appear genuinely intrigued as to what he had to say.

Sirius regretted letting his anger get the better of him in front of Hermione like that. He truly didn't want to hurt her. He just wanted her to understand. If only he could make her understand.

Yes, he would *make* her understand.

"She never will," that raspy, feminine voice chided.

Moaning in agony, Sirius recognized that dreaded voice as the loud, rushing wind suddenly whipped around him. Gasping, his stomach pulled away as his body began the endless plummet down the rock pit.

He moaned sadly, tears springing to the corner of his eyes at the realization that he had entered this dream.

Again.

He angrily snapped his eyes open. "You don't know that," Sirius barked at the misty green woman.

She laughed throatily. "Poor Sirius, I know much more than you. Otherwise, I wouldn't be your guide."

He snorted in disbelief. "More like a 'torment'."

"This torment is of your own making, dear heart. And yes, believe it or not, I am your guide."

He refused to believe it. "You'll guide me to my death." The... tasks she asked of him. It was incomprehensible.

Or was it?

NO! he scolded his own thoughts. He truly didn't want to make his situation any more horrible than it already was.

"You *are* dead," she commanded knowingly. "The only difference between you and an Inferius is that my master prevents your body from rotting while allowing you to ~~carry~~ your soul."

Sirius' face contorted grotesquely. He shoved his hand into his pocket, pulling out his timepiece. "Tell your master that his ~~gift~~ is quite thoughtful," Sirius spat sarcastically, dangling the timepiece in front of him.

Fluidly spinning and twirling around him, the woman merely smiled serenely. "She'll never love half a man," she whispered harshly.

Sirius' face fell.

Hermione.

He knew this to be true, so for once, he remained silent. His eyebrows pinching together, he gazed sadly into the misty woman's pupil-less eyes.

"Ah... I see I have your full attention, now."

Sirius fearfully looked down at the dark pit below his feet. He didn't want to fall anymore. He didn't want to be damned anymore.

Every time he fell asleep, he came back here.

Glancing back toward the woman, he nodded mutely.

*** **

With an irritated groan, Hermione kicked the bedclothes off her legs to answer the light knocking at the door connected to the seventh floor corridor.

Ginny may be her best friend, but she was getting a little tired of the late night 'girl talks' that were usually the result of a typical row with Harry or a date with Seamus gone wrong. She needed to remind the haughty redhead that these mid-week-late-night visits were a bit too much to handle this year.

"What is it this time?" Hermione rasped sleepily as she yanked open the door.

"*Excuse me?*" answered a deep, menacing voice.

It was far too dark to see him clearly, but his looming shadow was clearly outlined against the doorframe. She didn't know whether to be relieved or nervous. But she was certainly shocked beyond proper reaction.

"Severus!" Hermione quickly tried to hide behind her door, accidentally pushing it against him.

He pushed it right back as he stepped into her room.

"Just what the hell do you think you are doing?" he spat angrily, looking her up and down.

Hermione could find no response, unease and excitement filling her as she watched him close the door behind him. It had been so long. She wanted to go to him. She wanted him to wrap his cloak around her in a deep embrace. However, she sucked in a timid breath, stepping back knowingly when he threw a Silencing Charm at her door.

Severus stared at her with intent. He visually fought to maintain his rage as his pulse quickened from the sight of her.

"I asked you a question, Hermione." He took a step toward her, dipping his head to the side and causing his hair to fall against his face. "Who, exactly, were you expecting in the middle of the night... dressed so inappropriately, I might add?"

Her fright at having a man in her room for the first time quickly became replaced with fury at his insulting insinuation. She scowled at him as she crossed her arms under her chest from both annoyance and a chill ... completely unmindful of the effect the temperature had on her body.

"I was expecting Ginny, if you must know. Her dates end around this time, and since she usually ends up sleeping here, I have no need for propriety around her."

Hermione turned to retrieve her dressing gown from the foot of her bed. But the moment her fingers clutched the thick fabric, Hermione flinched as it was yanked out of her grasp. Turning in anger, she misjudged how near he was standing behind her. A flushing heat of alarm prickled her skin as she unknowingly placed both hands on his hipbones to maintain her balance. She tried to pull away but found the back of her legs hitting her four-poster.

Severus truly did enjoy the frazzled state of her. He leaned down to her ear as he flung her dressing gown on the floor. "Is that really necessary *now*, my dear?"

"Give it back," she spat.

"You should of have thought of putting it on before you answered the fucking door!" He slowly let his eyes travel up her legs, lingering long moments at her breasts before making eye contact. "You never know who might be on the other side," he whispered harshly. Swiftly leaning forward, he edged the right side of his body down to grab the back of her thigh. "Or what their intentions might be."

Severus swiftly pulled her leg off the floor, forcing her to fall back on the bed.

"Severus!" Hermione painfully gripped his shoulders, trying to sit up. He removed her hands from their frightened death grip, pushing her wrists above her head and into the mattress.

It had been a very long time since he'd seen her. And what a sight she gave when he finally had.

Only a couple of days, the dispassionate side of him corrected.

Piss off, he told that part of himself.

Forcing himself on her the way he was, Severus knew he was blaming her for how much he had... missed her. Seeing her so inappropriately dressed fueled that lustful rage.

"Yes?" he murmured above her lips. Severus placed one knee on the bed. He pierced her with his lustful gaze, enjoying her internal battle of fright and pleasure. Before she could properly react, Severus descended upon her. He sucked on her bottom lip, hard. Hearing her emit a surprised moan made him deepen the kiss even more.

This was too much for Hermione. She didn't know what to do. She felt herself welcoming him hungrily into her mouth, but her limbs stiffened in apprehension. The burning heat of his other hand seared through the thin chemise beneath her lower thigh. She was growing dizzy and heated from his consuming kisses.

Severus thrust his tongue deeper into her mouth. When her tongue finally wrapped around his, he slipped his fingers underneath the flimsy material scarcely covering her full thighs. His other hand lazily caressed down her pinned arm, bringing it around his neck. With one fluid movement, Severus took the opportunity to slide a strap down her shoulder.

"Wait, Severus..." she said breathlessly. The heat from his hand seemed to be traveling higher and higher between her legs.

He pulled away from her mouth to suck on the flesh beneath her left ear. "Yes, Hermione?"

Gods, what his voice did to her.

"This... this is a little too fast," she exhaled before gasping as he pulled her chemise further down her shoulder, exposing the top of her full breast.

Severus quickly knelt up, thrusting both hands underneath her slip dress to get a firm grip on her legs. He yanked her toward him, sliding her firm body across the bed so her bum rested against his thighs, parting her legs even further. He savored the sight of her breasts swaying to the sharp movement, nipples tightening against her chemise.

Hermione's breath caught at the sudden movement. A heated flush spread across her skin when she realized her slip dress was bunched around her waist. She frantically tried to pull it down.

Severus grabbed one of her wrists to lift it above her head again as he fully rested his body on top of hers.

"Hermione," he said huskily beneath her ear, "I only desire to *touch* you."

The sternness in his voice told her that he truly meant it.

"But say it now, and I'll stop."

Her body slowly relaxed around him, even as the hand on her hipbone slid down her thigh.

Severus began to suckle on the other side of her throat, pulling what was left of her chemise completely off both shoulders. Her moan grew louder as he bit into the flesh of her neck.

Finally throwing all caution to the wind, Hermione let herself become lost to his consuming mouth and quivering touches. Her excited body writhed beneath him, and a moist heat began to grow between her legs. For as much as he was touching and kissing her half naked form, he was missing all the key places.

Severus grinned against her collarbone, relishing the feel of her squirming against him. Everything he did now would not elicit any further protest.

Severus slowly trailed the tip of his index finger down the center of her chest. He softly bit into her throat once more as he finally palmed the rounded underside of her bare breast. Hearing her high-pitched moan, Severus hungrily ravished the fullness of her breast as his palm skimmed across her pert nipple.

Hermione's whimpers grew louder and quicker when his mouth followed the same path as his hand. Severus' tongue and teeth ravaged her flesh as his other hand glided along her waist before grasping her fully.

"Gods..." Hermione moaned, throwing her head back against the bed. Her hands returned to clutch him by the shoulders, but this grip was one of passion. She slid her legs underneath his teaching cloak, following the outline of his upper thighs. Finally reaching his hips, Hermione wrapped her smooth legs around him, unknowingly thrusting her hot center against his arousal. Severus released a surprised groan against her breast. One hand trailed down to grasp her fully by the bum, stilling her movements. He brought his face above hers for another consuming, and hopefully distracting, kiss.

But the distraction was to no avail. Hermione wanted to hear him make that sound again.

She raised her hips off the bed once more, wantonly releasing a whimper into his mouth from the pleasure of feeling his hardness pressing against her wetness. Severus' lips broke away from hers to exhale a ragged breath before finally pushing himself up on his elbows.

He scowled at her, wanting her to see that he was not amused.

"Don't stop," Hermione whimpered disappointedly as he unlocked her ankles from his waist. She tried to wrap both arms around his neck as her body arched toward his retreating form.

"Do *not* tempt me," he whispered dangerously.

Severus closed his eyes, attempting to slow his breathing. But even in the blackness of his mind he could still see her beneath him. Full thighs wrapped around his legs, bare breasts bursting from her pathetic excuse of a nightgown, swollen lips and pleading eyes.

"Severus, *please*."

Her voice sounded much closer than it did before. Severus opened his eyes at the feel of two soft hands gliding through the hair behind his ears. Hermione mimicked his stance, kneeling on the bed in front of him. An intense craving throbbed in his groin while he watched her stare up at him. Snape brought one hand up, caressing her swollen bottom lip. Hermione closed her eyes, humming contentedly as she sucked his thumb into her mouth.

"Lift your arms up," Severus' husky voice commanded.

He reached around her, trailing his fingers down her back and over her bum, relishing the gooseflesh that invaded her skin. His hands fully gripped her before he pulled the chemise off her thighs and over her head.

Severus' eyes hooded at her nakedness. Bringing his hands forward, he quickly palmed the underside of her breasts, dipping his head to kiss her forcefully.

Hermione vaguely wondered why she had allowed him to undress her, why she did not have the proper urge to shield her body from him, or to be cautious in where this was going. But she truly didn't care anymore. His scent seemed to invade every corner of her room, and she wanted it to stay. She wanted him to stay. Severus made no move to stop her as she unclasped his cloak and pushed it from his shoulders. She didn't bother to lower the amount of noise she was making from his touches to her breasts and bum. Hermione wrapped her arms around his neck, straightening her legs out to lie back down on the bed.

Severus knew he should stop now if he wanted this to remain somewhat innocent. He couldn't stand holding back any longer. He thought all this, but allowed her to pull him back on top of her.

He ravished her neck as he grabbed both of her legs, wrapping them around his hips.

Hermione made no move to still his hand, which was rapidly caressing farther and farther up the inside of her thigh. But she couldn't stop herself from sucking in a nervous breath as Severus traced the outline of her knickers.

"Do you want me to stop?" he asked. Hermione could hear the doubt in his shaky voice.

Biting her lip, Hermione looked up at him as she shook her head. Her hips fidgeted against him, urging him to touch her. She wanted this.

Severus' lips returned to her neck as he slid his middle finger between her legs and over the cloth covering her damp center. He glided his hands from hip bone to hip bone, along the elastic, touching her lower stomach before finally slipping his whole hand under her knickers.

Hermione parted her legs even further, whimpering at the feel of him cupping her sparse curls. She had to tear her mouth away from him as her breathing hitched when he slowly began to caress her with his middle finger, parting her inner lips.

"Fuck... you're so wet," Severus groaned in her ear, biting her lobe. He knew he shouldn't have gone so far. All he could think about now was how ready she was for him.

Severus leaned up on his elbow to watch her reactions as he pulled his wet fingers up her inner lips to stroke her clitoris. Hermione's whole body jerked against him. She latched onto the arm stroking her over and over again. Her breaths grew quick and erratic. Hermione was past all thinking and reason now. A fire was growing deep within her sex, causing her to thrust up against his hand to find the inevitable release.

Severus ground his erection into her hip as he played with her.

Really played with her.

His fervent stroking would slow down right before she crested, dragging out her orgasm that much longer before he quickened the pace again. Severus lavished the feel of her growing wetter and wetter around his hand. He could smell her. He wanted her to beg one more time, but it wasn't as satisfying if he commanded her to do it.

"Oh, gods," Hermione gasped, clutching his wrist, encouraging his movements. "Severus...oh gods, please keep going," she cried as if in pain.

Severus groaned, willing to give her exactly what she wanted... when it happened.

His hand stilled at the sound of faint knocking on her door connected to the Gryffindor common room.

"No!" Hermione wailed, clutching the hair at her temples. "Damn it, Ginny."

Hermione lay there, hands over her eyes. She listened to Severus curse under his breath as he reluctantly rose up off her to get his cloak. She was moist from sweat and arousal, which intensified the chill in her room ... especially without the marvelous warmth of Severus on top of her. Her throat began to prickle from holding back frustrated tears.

"Come here," he commanded flatly.

She rose up on her knees at the edge of the bed where he was standing. Hermione sadly looked up at him as he wrapped her dressing gown around her shoulders. Anything he'd asked of her, she would have done.

And Severus knew it too.

He tilted her head up to give her a faint kiss on the lips. "You are to wear this every time you answer the door."

"Yes."

He was about to caress her cheek, but was interrupted by an even louder knocking. He longingly watched her walk to the door.

"We *will* finish this at another time, Hermione," Severus said over his shoulder before he was gone through the door leading to the corridor.

Hermione yanked open the other door with a thunderous, "WHAT?"

Author's Notes: As you can see, based on the chapter summary, there is much more to this chapter. Next half coming up shortly.

-**Melusin** was wonderful enough to fit in betaing this chapter between reading DH and working on her own writing.

-Now I understand why some of my favorite WIPs were abandoned shortly after HBP. It is almost depressing to see how AU your unfinished story will become. But luckily, this story was already AU to begin with. The only thing I fear is keeping my readers attention with the finding and destruction of the Horcruxes within the universe of *this* story. But not to fear, I have the story mapped out and have no intention of abandoning it. So if you are looking forward to AU after reading DH, I promise to deliver!

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book i. Line 65. The uncut, full phrase is:

Where peace

And rest can never dwell, hope never comes

That comes to all.

-Next up: Chapter Fifteen - Where Rest Can Never Dwell, Hope Never Comes (Part 2)

Chapter Fifteen - Where Rest Can Never Dwell, Hope Never Comes (Part 2)

Chapter 18 of 36

With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began. And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. Eventual SS/HG. Alternate Universe, HBP death disregarded.

Nominated for best fic in the 2007 OWL Awards: Fire & Ice Category (SS/HG), Romance Category, Angst Category, and A/U Category

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: Story beta'ed by the incredibly brilliant **melusin**.

-**This is the second half of Chapter Fifteen** Please be certain you have read the previous chapter before continuing.

Out of habit, the moment Hermione's foot touched the first step to the stairs of the Astronomy Tower, she took off at a quick sprint. Her speed never slowed. If anything, she tried to push her body faster.

She relished the startled looks on students' faces when they spied the Head Girl thundering into the top of the tower: their dilated pupils, their scramble to spring apart while attempting to play down the sight of hands fishing under blouses and trouser waistbands.

I didn't know voyeurism was a specialty of yours, Hermione?

Hermione softly laughed to herself with a shake of her head. Voyeurism wasn't, but discipline and enforcement of rules was.

Today the tower was empty.

Thank gods. As much as Hermione enjoyed the authority her status allowed her, she delighted in the peace of solitude even more. Panting from her brisk run up the stairs, Hermione swallowed the view the height offered. A thick coating of dark clouds partially covered the full moon. She longed for clearer skies so she would be able to connect the various stars that formed her favorite constellations.

Hermione calmly leaned against one of the raised stone pillars on the edge of a glassless archway. The faint perspiration along her hairline cooled against the piercing wind.

Eyes closed, she hummed at the feel of a strong hand burying itself in her hair. She tilted her head to the side as her soft curls were moved off her shoulder.

"Severus," she whispered, voice aching in relief.

"I was hoping you knew it was me." His thunderous tones vibrated against her temple. "Otherwise, your contented moan would have raised ~~many~~ questions."

"Don't."

"Don't what?" he asked slowly.

"Don't *try* to ruin the moment. I smelled you even before you touched me."

He stayed silent, lowering his lips upon her neck.

"Where were you?" she asked delicately, not wanting to sound overbearing. "I haven't seen you for days."

"Really?" he asked sarcastically. "I do believe you have been Confunded, Miss Granger, because I know very well you saw me last night." He harshly whispered toward the end of his sentence, willing her to experience the shameless memory with the use of his seductive voice.

Yes, they had *seen* each other. But in the ache of one another's absence, they had expressed themselves more through actions than words. How could she have possibly forgotten? Last night had been so pleasing and sexually frustrating all in one go ... which hadn't been released until after a long soak in the tub. The experienced touches of his mouth and hands had haunted her thoughts all day.

"You know what I mean," she replied with a smile. "You had come and gone last night much quicker than I would have liked. I didn't get a chance to talk to you all day, either. So... where were you?"

"Working," he answered dismissively.

"Working... for whom?" She hated to admit it, but Hermione was morbidly curious as to what his assignment had been. Had he spent the past few days helping, or hurting, someone?

Snape slowly extracted himself away from her. "Do you really want to know?" he asked irritably.

"Of course," she demanded, spinning around. "Otherwise, why would I ask?" The resolve in her expression released as she gazed up at his pale face. Maintaining eye contact, she reached toward him, closing her soft hands around his cheekbones.

"Have you eaten?" she asked. "You look terrible."

Snape jerked his face away. "Not everyone can be blessed with ravishing good looks," he spat acidly.

Hermione shushed him by pressing a single finger against his mouth. She focused on his lips before slowly raising her chin. She kissed him, forcing him to soften his stubborn demeanor by gliding her soft tongue between his lips, delicately probing, then flicking against his tongue.

Severus immediately took command of the kiss. Nipping against the inside flesh of her lower lip, Snape growled under his breath. One arm wrapped around her neck as the other palmed her waist, slipping through the opening in her robes. When Hermione grasped the voluminous robes of his lower back, Snape pushed against her, urging her flat against the stone wall.

Her body completely yielded to his every touch, and it drove him mad. He suckled against her neck, his hands closing underneath her bum, eliciting an aroused gasp.

"I-I missed you," she breathed. "How did you know to find me here?"

"You've acquired a routine in your patrols," he deeply chuckled against her throat. Catching himself, Severus pulled away, shrewdly looking at her. "Which you must put an end to immediately. Mix up your destinations. Never walk the same corridor, at the same time, every night."

Hermione leaned forward to kiss his neck. Snape felt her smile against his skin. He pulled himself away, arching an eyebrow questioningly.

"What is so humorous?"

"You didn't hold true to your word back at number twelve. It looks like I will benefit from your tutelage, after all."

His lips twitched, fighting against a smirk. When he lowered himself toward her, Hermione raised her palm against his chest.

"Severus..."

He knew that tone. She wanted to ask a question.

"What?" he asked impatiently. Talking was the last thing he desired to do.

"I had a meeting with Dumbledore the other day about..." She swallowed. "... about Sirius."

One lone eyebrow arched. She had his full attention.

"In the course of our discussion, he asked me if anyone had attempted to steal Sirius' pocket watch."

Snape pulled away from her. "What did you tell him?"

Hermione tilted her head to the side, eyeing him inquisitively. The apprehension in his voice spoke volumes. "I told him, 'no'." The last word exited her mouth in the high note of a question.

He smirked in satisfaction, and she didn't like it.

"You know what ... or whom Dumbledore is attempting to protect Sirius against, don't you?"

"Who said Black needs protection from anything?" he growled.

Dumbledore had said it to him. She had heard them through the Headmaster's door when she shouldn't have been listening. Hermione guiltily turned her head away.

"Hermione... Did Black tell you something?" His chin tilted down, lowering his body toward her so he could get a better look at her face.

"Just a hunch!" Hermione threw her hands up in defense. "What I've gathered here and there." This conversation wasn't going at all how she wanted. She didn't want to argue with him, but he seemed hell-bent on sourness whenever the discussion turned to Sirius. She tiredly massaged her temples. "There's so much I want to talk to you about, but I don't want to waste our time together."

But Snape wasn't finished. Folding his arms across his chest, he forced his authority on her with the use of his stance and tone. "Why were you discussing Black with the Headmaster? What business do you have asking anything about that walking corpse?"

Hermione's back fleetingly straightened in shock. Was that a trick question? She had believed that he possessed some amount of intelligence as to the details of what Professor Dumbledore requested of her. Hermione assumed Dumbledore told Severus everything as well.

"He's worried about Sirius' loyalties to him," she stammered. "He wants me to... be there... for him. He wants Sirius to have someone to confide in... to trust."

"And you've consented to this?" Severus gasped.

"Yes..."

Pushing against the wall he had her pinned to, Snape forcefully sprang away from her, pulling his hands through his hair.

"I was asked this at the beginning of the year!" she called after him.

Snape narrowed his eyes. "And at your last meeting? Did you leave Albus with the impression that you are going to carry on with this idiotic request?"

"I couldn't go back on my word, Severus." Hermione pleaded for him to understand. "Please, don't be angry with me!"

"*Angry* with you?" he snarled, lunging at her. "How could you even think that I would allow you to be an intimate friend of his?" He looked her up and down, as if seeing her for the first time. The disgusted look he sent her pulled at Hermione's gut. "Why would you consent to this, *knowing* that he lusts after you?"

"Dammit, Severus!" She fisted her hands in frustration. "Do you think *I* want to do this?"

He snorted under his breath, scoffing in an attempt to dismiss her answer. "You've still consented. That speaks well enough on its own..."

"I sacrificed! Just as you make sacrifices in your position."

His jaw tightened. Swallowing the excess saliva in his throat, he leaned into her, his eyes glistening with bottled vehemence. "Do not interrupt me."

Hermione looked up at him, shaking her head in disbelief as to the sudden turn the discussion had taken. "You can question my orders, my yearning to help Dumbledore. But am I allowed the same? Can I question where you go, what you do, and expect to receive answers?"

He grinned nastily at her, crossing his arms, pulling his teaching robes over both his shoulders. "No. You cannot."

"Then don't demand them of me!" she shrieked, her curls shaking with the violent jerk of her head.

This time, he was forced into silence. All thought of a response completely escaped him.

Clenching his jaw, Severus glared menacingly at her. Looking as if he was forcing himself to continue remaining silent, Snape swiftly turned on his heel, leaving her alone in the tower.

*** **

Snape was not certain exactly how many hours he had sat fuming in his chambers. But he wouldn't have been surprised if it was nearly morning.

Jerking his head back, Snape gulped more Firewhisky as the stone wall to his left began to move. Almost thinking he was hallucinating, he had to remind himself that it was just the door appearing, marking the entrance of a haughty, seventh-year Gryffindor.

Well, here's his proof that she can remember the appropriate application of his wards, after all. He snorted at the thought.

Hermione marched in to stand before Severus, slamming the door behind her.

"Has my door offended you?"

She narrowed her eyes. With her mane of wild curls haphazardly scattered about her shoulders curtaining her puffy eyes, she must have been crying or tossing in bed. Only clothed in her thick dressing gown, it seemed he wasn't the only one who had been unsuccessful in finding sleep after their argument.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'," he drawled, mindful of his voice so he wouldn't obnoxiously slur. "Do try to avoid taking your frustrations out on the castle. She is rather old."

"Shut up."

Effectively shocked, Snape snapped his head toward Hermione. Eyeing the empty glass on the end table, she sniffed the air before inhaling sharply.

"Are you drunk?" she gasped.

"Define 'drunk'."

"So, you're drunk and stoned," she accused.

Closing his eyes, Snape groaned loudly. When he allowed himself to indulge in these vices, it was always with the intention of intoxicating himself into oblivion. So discussing them with an angry paramour while still under their influence was the very last thing he wanted to do.

"What do you want, Hermione?" he spat irritably. That question meant so many different things in his mind. How can she think she has the right to presume as much as she already does?

"I want answers!" Hermione wailed, thrusting her hands into the air to point out the obviousness of her request. "I'm tired of remaining in the dark while being expected to just go along with other people's plans. I'm sick of others demanding answers from me. You've been gone for days, Severus! Did it never cross your mind to send word to me? To let me know you are all right? The last time I saw you, I was nearly attacked by the very man who tried to kill Harry while bringing back Voldemort..."

"Silence!" Severus pushed himself out of his armchair. He had remained entirely unemotional and impassive up until that point. "Do not speak the Dark Lord's name in my presence!" he roared, rounding on her.

Fear momentarily breezed across Hermione's eyes before her stubbornness surfaced again.

She defiantly raised her chin as a sardonic smile graced her lips. In truth, she had always attempted to choose her words wisely when she was in this man's presence, but Hermione wasn't so sure he deserved it anymore. "Fear of a name only increases fear..."

"Spare me that speech," he interrupted with a tired moan. "I've heard it far too many times than I care to. Not even our omnipotent Headmaster knows, nor understands, everything."

"So you disagree," she asked slowly, as if she were speaking to a small child.

"Don't assume that quoting his pearls of wisdom will make you better for it. He's an idealist, Hermione. He can only ever see the bigger picture, choosing to ignore the individual."

"I would never guess *you* would be one afraid to speak his name," Hermione chided.

"Fear has nothing to do with it," he spat, turning away from her. He was about to pick up the bottle of Firewhisky, so Hermione rashly stepped toward him.

"Voldemort," she whispered as harshly as she could. His body faltered slightly as if she had thrown something at him.

Snarling heatedly, Severus' fingers closed around the half-empty bottle of Firewhisky, flinging it across the room. Shards of glass exploded on the stone wall as his voluminous teaching robes billowed behind him at the sudden movement. Clenching his teeth, Snape whirled around, lunging at her with his fingers instinctively curled for her throat.

Knowing what he was about to do was a mistake, Snape halted in his attempt the moment he was close enough to see her pupils. They were dilated in fear. She was frightened at his outburst and had stepped back to get away from him.

This was not the reaction Severus wanted, but the Death Eater in him enjoyed it. His upper lip curled. This was her own doing, and he'd make her realize that.

"Severus," Hermione's voice shakily cried as he resumed his attack. She worriedly raised her arms against him.

Ignoring her, his face twisted in uncontrollable rage. The flames from the hearth caught the grotesque creases around his lips and eyes. Snape swatted her arms away, grabbing her by the hair, painfully pulling her toward the settee as she squeaked in disbelief. The moment he forced her to sit down, Severus released his hold and pulled up the left sleeve of his arm.

The Dark Mark was a horrid scorch of black. He thrust the monstrous sight into her face.

"Every myth," he spoke dangerously, leaning over her so she wouldn't even think of getting up, "possesses some roots of truth in their history. There is a reason wizards and witches have trained themselves against speaking the Dark Lord's name. Because once, over twenty years ago, it seemed that every time it was spoken aloud, some crime or destruction would soon follow."

Hermione wanted to listen, but she was frightened and wounded at his violence toward her. Touching her scalp with her fingertips, she shakily gasped in an attempt not to cry. "I don't understand..."

"If I tell you... demand you not to do something... DON'T. DO. IT. Haven't you ever wondered why wizards and witches all over the fucking world fear to speak it? My master didn't change his Muggle name randomly one morning for the hell of it, Hermione. You must have noticed the extreme amount of self-importance he possesses, so it should be no surprise that he made a sick ceremony of his new title."

Shaking slightly, Hermione vaguely heard his words as her eyes darted around.

"There is power in a name, especially a name created by a madman," he barked, attempting to force her attention through fear. "Look at it," he commanded of her, turning his wrist over so his forearm faced up. "The mark only burns black when we are summoned by him... or graced with the luxury of hearing his name."

Hermione's breath skipped a beat. She stared at Severus, her eyes finally showing some amount of interest in his angry and mad confession.

"Not just anyone can, or *wants* to get a Dark Mark, Hermione. Only the most selfish of intentions, pure malice, and deceitful hearts have the capacity to bear it as he places it upon their skin. And when it happens, every injustice you have ever felt, every enemy you have ever sworn against, every pain you have desired against others, floods through you in a single moment... and you feel powerful enough to make such wickedness happen. Best high of my life," he smirked slightly when her face snapped toward his end table.

Hermione swallowed, her body sagging into the settee as her heart slowly ached with compassion. If she'd known this man a little better, she would have had the better sense to not let such emotion bleed through her eyes. She attempted to place her hand upon his face. "But you've changed," she said softly. "You're good now."

Severus violently pushed her hand away.

"Am I?" he scoffed, dipping his head so his hair thrust forward.

"Severus..." Rubbing her fingers, she shot him a hurt and shocked glance.

"The same emotions I felt the first night I received this," he quickly looked down at his arm, "I have been forced to relive every fucking time I am called to him. Even the sheer mention of his majestic name forces that numbing hate, and my mark burns anew."

Severus dramatically bowed. "So thank you, my dear. Here I was, mourning the loss of such sensations for the past few days, wishing to feel it all over again. You were so kind enough to give it to me... twice."

Hermione's eyes welled. "I'm sorry... I didn't know. I honestly had no idea such things still haunted you."

"Spare me," he coldly snorted. "I am a Death Eater, Hermione. Even you have said so yourself. And I will remain one until the day I die."

Silence passed between them as he continued to loom over her. Snape distantly marveled as to why he had disclosed as much as he had. He had always been so very careful about not revealing personal information that others could use against him. He truly believed that the vast majority of wizards and witches were far too daft, or sheltered, to appreciate such furor, such horror.

But had he thought better of her.

Standing there, clutching the pristine fabric of his Head of House furniture upholstery, Severus actually yearned for her energetic mouth to start moving.

"Are you so quick to give up on yourself when others haven't?" she whispered more to herself than him.

He was speechless a moment. This wasn't the type of reaction he'd expected. Anger or tears would have been much more typical.

"Given up?" he mockingly asked. "My dear, in order to give up, you must first possess hope in something greater than yourself. I have learned to abandon such foolish inclinations."

"Then you're already dead. What makes your heart that much different than the one beating in Sirius?" she whispered.

His jaw tightened. How *dare* she?

"If only it were that easy." His face emotionless, Snape finally pushed himself away.

"Then why do you do it?" she desperately called after him. "Why have you sworn yourself to the Headmaster? Why are you helping the Order... now? What made you want to switch sides in the first place?"

Snape paused by the fireplace. His eyes unfocused for a moment in thought. Since he had already divulged a great deal so far, his annoyance did not fester at her meddlesome questions. "I was..." He paused with a long exhale.

He wanted her to know.

"I was caught by the Aurors a couple of years after I had sworn my allegiance to the Dark Lord... which... of course, was directly before the Potters were destroyed. They intended my immediate death. In the madness of everyone being suspected as a follower of the Dark Lord, just and unbiased trials mattered very little. Somehow, they had figured out that I possessed some abilities with Occlumency. So the Ministry called Dumbledore to interrogate me."

Closing his eyes, Severus derisively smiled at his memories before forcing himself to continue speaking.

"They had also arrested my mother with the intention of charging her for being a Riddle sympathizer...because I lived with her. But this wasn't a coincidence. The Ministry

had already found it quite useful to torture family members during the interrogations."

Severus laughed mockingly. "I must admit, it was very ingenious. As my mother's blood coated the floor, all thoughts of blocking my mind and hiding my emotions were impossible."

"Whatever you were feeling then..." Hermione sensitively added. She spoke softly so her tears would not find their way into her speech. "... yearning for forgiveness, remorse... it was all real. Dumbledore must have seen it."

"He did," Severus admitted. His face was a fusion of emotions, telling Hermione that he hadn't allowed himself to remember such things for a very long time. "And yes, it was very genuine. I didn't want that life anymore. The reasons I had joined, the revenge I had sought against... no matter how hard I tried, my actions never affected the 'right' people. I soon learned that allowing your subordination to a power-hungry...crazed wizard rips all control from your grasp. Thinking I had finally found the means to command my own life, I ended up living one that was twice as horrible. Added to this, I had also grown very wary of living for, and indulging in, the various self-destructing vices with my brother Death Eaters."

Hermione arched her eyebrows questioningly before shooting a knowing glance at his end table. Snape waved his arm and tilted forward slightly.

"What can I say? My relapse this time around feels much more justified. Free of influence and peer pressure. Strange, really, how such notable men can despise everything Muggle in the public eye. You'd be surprised how many witches and wizards enjoy the vices of Muggles. Synthetic narcotics, Muggle prostitutes, piercings..."

"Tattoos?" Hermione spat knowingly.

That far away look Snape had in his eye cleared. Eyebrows pinching together, he spun around.

"What did you say?" he growled.

If Severus Snape hated anything, it was being caught off guard.

"N-nothing," she stuttered unconvincingly. Hermione attempted to rise out of her seat, but Severus stormed across the room to intimidate her beyond movement.

Stupid. How could she be so stupid? It had felt so natural to let that slip. This past summer, back at twelve, Grimmauld Place, Hermione vividly remembered the scene that took place in Snape's room. He had just returned from an assembly with the Death Eaters. It was that first glimpse into his double life that had played in her thoughts all night. She remembered it very clearly: his defined back, taut with quivering muscles, shown splendidly in the candlelit room, and how the candlelight had faintly illuminated the massive tattoo etched across his skin.

Was it supposed to be a secret? Was he ashamed of it? Now that she thought about it, during every one of their intimate sexual interludes up until this point, Severus had never completely undressed.

She shouldn't be thinking all this right now. Severus sensed she was hiding something.

"What aren't you telling me?" he asked bitingly.

"I'm not hiding anything!" Would he enjoy knowing that she had spied on him during one of his weakest points?

"I don't believe you!"

She didn't care if she was lying to him. Hermione was sick of him continuing to intimidate her. She violently pushed him away, slipping out of the seat. "Fine! Then don't believe me!" She attempted to turn away, flicking her wand at the stone wall to reveal the hidden door.

Growling in frustration, Snape grasped her arm, pulling her back toward him.

"Look at me," he breathed in quiet anger.

"Let. Me. Go," she spat.

"Look at me!" He bellowed. His other arm darted out, grabbing her forcibly by the chin.

Shocked at his anger, Hermione fearfully looked into his eyes. The second she focused on his penetrating black pupils, she knew this had been a mistake.

"Legilimens!"

"No!" she wailed.

A searing pain scorched across her mind. Fire flowed through every artery in her temples. She didn't know how to properly shield her thoughts, but everything about this felt wrong. Not being able to see what you want, no control over the direction your memories traveled. To Hermione, a person that treasured her every idea and philosophy, this was horrifying.

"Stop fighting me," he hissed, blatantly ignoring her internal cries of pain.

Tears sprang to the corners of her eyes. "Stop... making... me," she gasped.

She was walking though the dark corridor back at number twelve, heading for the crack in Snape's bedroom door. A surge of excitement that was not her own flowed through her. She sensed Snape's hunger and his strong control in wanting to see the finished scene. As Hermione's face pressed against the doorframe, the image of a half naked Severus, his back facing her, lay before her eyes.

But, suddenly, the door was yanked open, revealing a drunken middle-aged man with bloodshot eyes. The man opened his mouth, yelling at the intruder. A strange, low sound came out, muffled by time and multiple unclear memories. Hermione screamed the very second Snape let go of her face. Her will to remove herself away from her thought and Snape's willing release caused her to fall back clumsily on the floor.

Hermione gasped great gulps of air, forcing herself not to succumb to the panic attack that threatened with silver stars in the corner of her eyes.

"How could you do that?" She hiccupped between sobs.

Snape looked down at her cowering on the floor. His brow furrowed in acute curiosity. "Who was that?" he asked quietly.

"My father," she said furiously. "I haven't seen him... like that... since I was so little." She continued to ramble in an attempt to clear her thoughts. "I mean... my Boggart... at my OWLs fifth year... but it wasn't as real as this..."

Severus awkwardly knelt next to her. Slowly grasping her elbow, he attempted to lift her off the floor.

"Don't touch me." She cringed, yanking her arm away from his hold. Before she thought better, Hermione allowed herself to react with the movement. Her arm pulled back, before sharply slapping Severus on the face.

... her arm pulled back again...

After the first hit, his eyes bulged in shock before clenching in acceptance.

She swiftly slapped him two more times.

He didn't move. If anything, the harsh clench of his eyes vaguely relaxed in unquestionable acquiescence.

A beat of silence passed between them.

Snape slowly opened his eyes. His Dark Mark no longer burned black, so the rage he had allowed himself to succumb to had subsided. His better senses finally sunk in. Severus felt responsible and knew it was up to him to make some type of amends, but he truly didn't know how to go about it. So he remained kneeling on the floor. All he could offer was to desist in his attempt to intimidate her by his lack of height.

Hermione inhaled sharply, forcing herself not to cry. Scrambling away from him, she quickly stood up. The more she tried, the harder the tears threatened to surface.

Hermione was so enraged and distressed that she could find no words. But the sight of his continued kneeling position pulled at her gut. One knee was firmly planted on the carpeted stone, his other knee bent with his thigh parallel to the floor, balancing his weight on the ball of his foot. Severus' head remained down, limp hair blocking everything but his hollow eyes.

The perfect stance of a conditioned soldier who was waiting for the command to rise.

She quickly turned from him and fled from his chambers before she made a fool of herself by begging for his forgiveness.

*** **

Standing on the bank of a trickling stream, Remus raised his chin, nostrils flaring. Following the rivers and streams through the Dark Forest was the easiest way to locate a potential hideout. If large groups of people lived together, then they would need a supply of water.

The stench of body odor and rotting meat floated downwind. He hated that smell, yet, from cave to cave, it was always the same.

He had to be mindful not to hold his nose or allow his face to alter in disgust. That would insult the pack, and he didn't want to ruin any more connections.

Remus lowered himself under the low ceiling of the stone entrance that reeked of decaying meat, unclean bodies, and sex. He kept bending under the grubby stone, deeper and deeper into the cave before finally being able to fully stand up straight.

"You might as well go out the way you came," a deep voice rasped.

Lupin whirled around, eyes narrowing, forcing them to adjust to the low darkness of the soiled fissure.

"Why would you say that?" he asked the seated figure on the floor.

"Greyback visits us regularly."

Remus' face went pale. That wasn't a warning he was prepared to hear outside his own circle of friends.

"And that should matter to me?" he questioned shakily, attempting to feign ignorance.

The woman cackled. She sat crossed-legged on the mud-caked floor, her long hair matted to one side. In her attempt at human speech, her dry lips split open. Her blistered tongue darted out, trailing along her mouth to lick the creases of blood.

This was the very reason Remus preferred to venture out the night after a full moon. Certainly, his own human body was repairing from his violent transformation... but at least he had the gift of Wolfsbane over such individuals. So at any rate, he could feel content in being a bit stronger than the rest of them.

"Rumors get around," the deranged woman rasped. "You may fancy yourself quite the prissy pet of wizards now, but we all know you once belonged to him."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he replied dismissively, pretending to have business beyond an old woman hovering within the weathered seat by the opening of a cave.

Every society had classes, including those labeled as the dregs of the wizarding world. If he wanted to make his way to the leader of the pack, he had better hurry up and push his way to the back of the cave, furthest from the entrance.

"I wonder, Remus, if you are truly afraid or mourn him like a lost lover. Some say you are too petrified to visit his caves, knowing you'll eventually run across his new sweethearts." With that, the woman jerked her head.

Full of dread, Remus turned toward the darkness.

He looked beyond the mangled bodies healing themselves with the grace of time until the next full moon.

There was a young boy, not much older than twelve, in the far corner of the cave.

Furthest from the entrance. It seemed, indeed, Greyback had been here if a boy possessed that station of superiority. After all, Remus had been there himself.

Except... *much* younger.

Shirtless, fresh blood pooled on the hollows of the boy's bony shoulders before streaking down his still unblemished back. The waistband of his trousers grew heavy from catching the falling drops.

Remus numbly walked up to the boy, unmindful of how his own legs guided him there. He watched the young man wince every time he dipped a grubby rag into a bowl of water.

"Poor child," Remus breathed, examining his back as the young man attempted to heal his wounds.

"I am not a child!" the boy instantly snarled, whirling around.

Remus possessed no reply. By the saddened and knowing look he sent him, Remus could see the look of realization pass across the young man's face. Shame and resentment caused his young features to pinch.

"He is not your friend." Remus repeated the very first words a male werewolf had numbly said to him the first time he himself was head of a cave.

The anger and defensiveness immediately released from the young boy's eyes. He looked at Remus as if he were the first family he had seen in a very long time.

But they had never met before.

"Greyback takes care of me," the boy mumbled in his attempt to defend his attacker.

"But at what expense?" Remus asked delicately.

The boy's face fell.

"He might protect you from the others... " Remus turned to eye the other werewolves suspiciously. "But what of your family?"

"I can't go back," the shirtless boys inhaled, shaking his head wildly in an effort to stop from sobbing.

"He won't let you go back," Remus clarified. "If you do, he'll kill them."

The young boy's eyes widened. "How do you know all this?"

Remus painfully closed his eyes. "What's your name?"

"John," he said with a hesitant glance at the floor. Timidly turning around, his fingers nervously fidgeted in his lap, picking at his cuticles.

"He bit you, didn't he, John?"

"Yes," the boy said softly. His head suddenly jerked up, his face contorted in guilt. "But he takes care of me!" he defended again. "Gives me food, protects me from harm." His eyes frantically searched for more excuses for his oppressor.

Remus winced at his familiar behavior, forcing himself to spit out his thoughts. "If he truly cared about you, he wouldn't force himself on you."

The boy narrowed his eyes defiantly.

Remus raised his palms, showing he didn't wish him any harm. "He bit me too."

*** **

"Back sooner than I thought." The Muggle spoke to the dark figure that stormed into his tattoo parlor. Scratching his stubby chin, the Muggle curiously observed the typically silent man immediately start unbuttoning his stiffly pressed shirt.

"Hello, to you, too," the tattoo artist chided further at being ignored. He'd seen patrons much more weirdly dressed than this man. Heard stories much more sadistic. This walking, aspiring vampire before him was no oddity.

"Do shut up, Bartley," Severus hissed.

Severus carefully placed his voluminous black cloak on the counter, followed by his folded undershirt. Walking around the chair, he smoothly draped his leg over one side, mounting the seat so he could rest his chin upon the straight back.

"Honestly, mate, there isn't much room left." The tattoo man cackled, which quickly turned into a hoarse cough.

"Then trace over it," Severus hissed over his shoulder.

Snape slowly closed his eyes, preparing himself at the familiar whirl of the mechanical, tattoo needle. The Muggle first steadily went over all of the faded shading and lines. As the dozens of sharp pin pricks pierced his skin, Snape sighed.

Even this pain was beginning to abate.

"To what do I owe the pleasure for this one?"

Severus groaned at the man's obsessive need of conversation. "Your tact, as always, Bartley, knows no bounds."

Another hoarse, coughing laugh. Snape slightly inhaled as the Muggle drove the needle deeper than necessary.

"So what was it?" the Muggle questioned unbelievably. "Murder two children as their mother watched? Mercilessly pierced the maidenhead of some young girl with a candlestick?"

"That was last week," Snape sneered disgustingly.

"So what creature, symbol, or figure do you want me to etch on your back this time?" The man cackled. Suddenly mindful of procedural rules, he quickly reached for the stained latex gloves discarded and folded on top of his ink bottles.

No matter, Snape had already ingested the necessary potions that prevented infection. He swallowed thickly before verbally requesting his next artwork.

"A lioness," he muttered thickly.

"Blasphemy! You strike me as more the bat- and reptile-loving type..."

Snape grabbed a bottle of sanitizer from a spindly table in front of him, violently flinging it over his shoulder at the rambling man sitting behind him.

"I have a soft spot for bloody kittens. Just fucking do it!"

When a cold, gloved hand grasped the inked skin of his back, the sharp pricks soon followed. At the sound of the Muggle's coughing laugh, Severus prepared himself for the needle. Maybe he should make this despicable man laugh more often. He'd been coming here for years, but he wasn't exactly certain if it had the same effect as before.

Due to the argument he'd had with Hermione yesterday evening, Severus' past has been constantly on his mind. So he couldn't help but remember the reasons he first started this habit.

Initially, it had begun with Severus' bewilderment over no longer feeling empathy for his victims.

Necessary casualties of war, as Dumbledore habitually preferred to call them.

Truthfully, he didn't want to understand his apathy. Snape just accepted it as the way things were now. But he knew it wasn't normal.

Severus remembered it vividly. That first day he Apparated home, very late one night from his ~~job~~. Before, he would practically run upstairs to disinfect himself under the scorching hot shower where he would cry desperately over his sins until the water stopped running red.

But that first time... after swiftly entering his cramped living space, he immediately headed for his drinks cabinet instead.

Then it happened again.

And again.

Thinking he was beginning to go mad, Snape forced himself upstairs and into his bathroom. Yanking his stained Death Eater robes off himself, he stared at the mirror, attempting to recognize the dark man looking back at him. What he saw was a man who no longer possessed self-pity. His shame was gone... even his guilt. Snarling in frustration, he raised his balled fist, slamming into the reflecting glass with all his might.

Tears finally sprang to his eyes as he carefully pulled the broken shards of mirror from his bleeding knuckles.

Not too long after that incident, he'd started coming here.

"Done," Bartley hummed throatily, turning off the electric needle.

"No," Snape growled, "you're not."

Exhaling, he closed his eyes as the rhythmic whirling began once more.

He concentrated on the burning pin pricks of the needle as his thoughts unwillingly traveled, forcing him to think of her name.

Hermione.

Author's Notes: Oh... the angst. Greyback did believe in taking children from their families while they were young.

-**Melusin** was wonderful enough to fit in betaing this chapter between reading DH and attempting her own writing.

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book i. Line 65. The uncut, full phrase is:

Where peace

And rest can never dwell, hope never comes

That comes to all.

Chapter Sixteen - To Be Weak is Miserable

Chapter 19 of 36

With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began. And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. Eventual SS/HG. Alternate Universe, HBP death disregarded.

Nominated for best fic in the 2007 OWL Awards: Fire & Ice Category (SS/HG), Romance Category, Angst Category, and A/U Category

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: Been a few weeks since my last update... I know. But it was time well spent! Next couple of chapters are completed and will be posted as soon as my beta, melusin, makes them all nice and shiny for your enjoyment.

As Macnair extended his hands toward her face, the Muggle woman flinched widely in an effort to escape the blood on his fingers. He smiled at her. He wanted to enjoy this but was growing increasingly distracted in his effort to ignore the groans by the door.

"No one is asking you to stay, Severus," Macnair chided.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Snape lazily leaned against the doorframe. "Every time you're left alone, Walden, plans do tend to go to shite."

"Stop thrashing," Macnair bellowed at the woman, "before I force you to stop!"

The Muggle woman opened her mouth again, testing her voice, shocked that her ability to scream had indeed been taken from her. Her face showed the horror and disbelief at such a thing being remotely possible.

"Did you get what we came for?" Macnair asked Snape irritably without looking at him.

Severus padded the bulge in his pocket. "Every picture and name of every Muggle belonging to this blood line," he drawled.

"So I'll take that as a 'yes.'"

Severus groaned impatiently again.

"If you don't want to have a little fun, then fucking wait outside!"

Not needing to hear anymore, Severus quickly turned on his heel, leaving the small Muggle parlor room and exiting through the front door. "I'm throwing up the Dark Mark in ten minutes," he said sneering over his shoulder.

A wry smile graced the corners of Macnair's mouth at the idea that he was finally alone. Reaching out toward the Muggle one more time, he slid his index finger down her cheek and along her jaw.

"What is it about the color red that makes all Muggle-whores so appealing..." he drawled. Towards the end of his sentence, he thrust his broad chin out, forcing the woman to flinch in reaction.

Macnair leaned in very close, making a show of smelling her. "Stop looking at him like he's going to wake up and save you!" Macnair suddenly barked. When the woman's bloodshot eyes once again darted towards the lifeless body of her husband on the floor, she mutely screamed as the brutal man backhanded her across the cheekbone.

The chair she was tied to buckled under the harsh blow, sending her sideways and colliding with the tiled floor. If she'd had a voice, she would have been shrieking due to the pain of her arm being crushed beneath her.

Her breath hitched when the chair was quickly kicked upright.

"I can see the question..." Macnair rasped wetly. He grasped her chin to make the woman look at him. "...the fear in your eyes. I know what you're thinking."

The woman had a strong feeling that this man possessed no clue as to what she was thinking. What she was thinking felt unbearably inappropriate here and now as the blood of her husband pulled away from him, soaking up the beige carpet they had picked out together in a department store catalogue.

This deranged man standing over her with the weird clothes and stained hands was very handsome. That was what she was thinking. Broad shouldered, dark haired, tall with a chiseled chin. Almost beautiful. Beautiful people don't commit murder, right? She thought all this and prayed God wouldn't punish her for it.

"You want to know why I am doing this," he told her. It sounded much more like a concrete statement than a posed question.

Standing up, he drew back to get a better look at her face. "Yes?" he hissed through clenched teeth, yanking the back of her hair to force her answer.

The woman began to desperately nod.

Smiling openly, Macnair waved his arm dismissively in the air, releasing a booming laugh.

"Because I can."

*** **

"I'm sorry, Remus, but you can't." Dumbledore exhaled resignedly.

Pulling his hand away from his taut brow, Remus instantly straightened himself in his seat.

"No. What I can't do is leave him there. He's the perfect age to begin schooling." When the Headmaster continued to stubbornly shake his head as Remus spoke, his mind quickly sought a different approach. "Check the student log! I wouldn't be surprised if he was sent a Hogwarts letter sometime within the last year or two."

Remus groaned in frustration when the old man silently shook his head again. Remus pointed an accusing finger at the Headmaster. "I know you can falsify his records, Albus... admit him as a transfer student from Durmstrang..."

"You're supposed to be gaining Greyback's confidence, not challenging him!"

Despite the fact that the Headmaster felt very drained, his bones physically aching in pain, he was very good at hiding it. When he demanded his authority be obeyed, it never ceased to catch others off guard.

Remus blinked, taken slightly aback. "P-please, Headmaster," he stuttered quietly. "You should have seen him. You have no idea..."

"Haven't I?" Dumbledore barked, his pale-blue eyes widening. "If my memories serve me correctly, I can imagine he looked very much like you did when I found you."

Remus narrowed his eyes defiantly. This was exactly where he wanted to lead the discussion, but the Headmaster was supposed to be swayed by empathy.

"When you found me," Remus said slowly, "you saved me. You brought me to Hogwarts." Remus glared at the Headmaster through the messy, graying hair covering his eyes. "But now you're forbidding me from doing the same?"

"I forbid you from starting an all out war with the werewolves by challenging their leader! You cannot bring him here." The coldness in Dumbledore's voice told Remus that this decision was final.

Remus remained silent, shaking his head wretchedly. A few nights ago, after he had found and spoken to young John, all Remus was able to think about was snatching the boy and bringing him to the castle where he would remain safe under the protection of this very man. But after speaking to the Headmaster, Remus had found that wish to be impossible. And for what purpose? Let one poor boy endure the hell, which Remus knew of very personally, for the sake of the war effort?

Finally pulling his distant gaze from the polished floorboards of the Headmaster's office, Remus locked eyes with the leader whom he knew was waiting for an exclamation of agreement and acquiescence. Dumbledore gazed back at him, unmoving, stony and almost dangerous.

Lupin felt more exposed than ever when Dumbledore glared at him like that. This old man knew Remus, inside and out, and Remus could easily imagine what he was thinking. The moment Remus had spat out his concern for John, a quick flash of hungry excitement distantly clouded the Headmaster's eyes. Or, perhaps, it had only been a glare flashing across his spectacles.

Either way, both knew that this boy was the link to Remus finally completing the mission that had been assigned to him over a year ago. Fear of confronting his past, fear of sparking a *friendship* with his childhood abuser, had stilted Remus from putting all of his effort into locating Fenrir Greyback.

But now Remus was faced with the brutal realization that this wasn't only about him and his pain. There was young John in the equation now. If he were safe at Hogwarts, Remus would have absolutely no reason to go back to the underground hideout that he knew was harboring the homicidal werewolf.

So the Headmaster forbade Remus to bring John to Hogwarts.

Remus' fear had quickly been put on the backburner... if it would prevent another boy from living a life saturated in that dread he knew far too well.

Because John still lived in that cave, with *him*, Remus felt absolutely no hesitation in returning.

Swallowing thickly, Remus thrust himself out of his seat with a curt nod of goodbye, quickly closing the door behind him so he wouldn't have to endure Dumbledore's heartfelt gratitude.

*** **

It was nothing but a bad dream.

That's what Hermione kept telling herself, over and over again. She would wake up gradually, saturated in a thick gray haze quite similar to the weather outside her

window, every morning for the past few days since...

...*bad dream*...

Her empty eyes slowly closed as the rest of her body sank with the weight of unwanted memories.

Bad dream... all of it: Grimmauld Place, Hogsmeade, their first kiss, the feel of his hair ... of his hands on her. And of course, that horrible argument in his chambers.

It was the morning of Halloween. She'd been lying awake in bed long before her Muggle alarm-clock started screeching. With a tired moan, Hermione rolled on her back, absent-mindedly pushing her wild curls off her forehead as she stared up at the canopy of her four-poster bed.

What the hell had she been thinking? Of all people for her to fall for...*Severus Snape*? She should have seen it coming. Maybe not the exact argument that had taken place, but definitely some type of disturbance in the waters.

No, that was a lie. She truly wasn't that naive. Hermione had some idea of what she was getting herself into. She knew more about this man than most. Knew of his nature and of what he was capable. And yes, Hermione truly did believe she had glimpsed an unselfish amiability in his centre. Nothing incredibly kind or exposed, but a misery that she yearned to touch.

Maybe she was the only one who had done all of the yearning?

She cringed as the vivid voice of Ron Weasley entered her head, calling her a series of names from "bonkers" to "mental."

With a deep sigh, Hermione rolled across her expansive bed, reaching for a thick pillow and stuffing it between her knees.

She missed him.

She cringed again, eyes clenching painfully as every inch of her skin felt heavy.

She didn't even want to imagine what Severus was thinking. Hermione honestly believed she had made a very good show of acting the typical focused student in his classes. Cool and indifferent. But it wasn't so difficult when Professor Snape completely refused to look at her except, of course, when he was insulting her.

The first day of classes after that horrible night, he had made it look very easy. As if she were nothing more than an irritable and vivid bad dream. And it made her want to cry.

All of it made her want to cry: Her pain. His pain. His words, his physical and mental violence. But most of all, the ignorance and arrogance she had shown towards him.

Without realizing it, Hermione had taken so much of Severus for granted, and she truly did want to apologize. But despite the grief that was overwhelming her, to the point where she was contemplating making the first effort to go to him, Hermione knew she was playing into his hands.

He had been far more abusive than her. Going to him would only guarantee it would happen again. She had seen enough of it first-hand at home.

Stop it, Hermione, she scolded herself, clenching her fists against the mattress. She had witnessed far too many girls in her year morph into walking zombies over something as silly as a boy. She refused to allow herself to be such a victim.

Get up.

And so she did. Kicking her duvet off, Hermione padded her way to the bathroom to shower and dress for the day's Hogsmeade visit.

*** **

Albus was slowly killing him, Severus thought. Or maybe, very carefully driving him to the brink of insanity.

Or both.

On second thoughts, Minerva had to be the one behind it all.

No, definitely, it was a combined effort.

Snape easily imagined the two of them up in the Headmaster's office, laughing at his expression when they had given him this idiotic task.

Hogsmeade patrol. He sneered.

"Stop your horseplay this instant!" Severus bellowed menacingly at a group of fourth years passing him as he marched past Hogwarts' gates. "What the bloody hell do you think this is? An outing!"

This *was* an outing, so the terrified and confused looks the group sent him sated his bubbling irritation.

The evil smirk plastered across his face vanished at the sight of a curly-headed mane a few meters in front of him. Severus fought the temptation to inspect the female more carefully. Clenching his jaw, he quickly turned his head to distract himself elsewhere.

Snape knew he could easily forget about Hermione if he truly wanted to. He knew his nature all too well, and indifference was a hair's breadth away from consuming him at will.

But there lay the question... Did he *want* to?

It had been a very long time since he had unwillingly been besieged with emotions such as guilt and regret. But that night, with her, such sensations had inundated him so strongly, he'd had to fight off the temptation to run after Hermione as she had fled from his chambers.

Severus tightly clenched his jaw as he thought of her that night.

He didn't know what to say to Hermione; he didn't even truly know what he wanted from her, but he couldn't let it go just like that.

After his guilt had subsided considerably the next day, Severus had been forced to teach a full day of classes surrounded by dunderheaded hormonal teenagers.

Poor girl, and curse Minerva's diligent schedule making! Hermione's last class of the day just had to be his as well.

Full of anger and resentment, Severus intentionally relieved his frustrations on her. He didn't fully understand it, but Snape hadn't felt any measure of contentment all day until he had driven Hermione to the brink of tears.

Oh, he had made other students cry throughout the day, as per usual. But none of the reddened and sad faces were quite as pleasing as *hers*.

Maybe he just needed proof that she still possessed a measure of emotion for him that did not consist of pure malice and contempt. If she hated or was disgusted with him, anger would have been her first response, not sorrow. Or maybe he was just a sick bastard who got off hurting people he knew he could affect the most.

Either way, they had certainly needed space... and time. And Severus believed enough of both had adequately passed.

But one thing was certain, that one sentence he had thought when he'd woken at Spinner's End to the feel of an ample witch half-covering his body had repeatedly turned in his mind.

He wanted to keep her.

*** **

Harry had walked to Hogsmeade alone, so he did not find it difficult to ignore all of the welcoming glances as he entered the *Three Broomsticks*. Without a moment's hesitation, he looked beyond all of the fake grins for an available empty table.

Slowly sipping his bottle of butterbeer, the loud ruckus of the younger students muffled the steady footsteps approaching him from the side.

As a body stood very near to Harry's seat, a wad of rolled up paper whacked Harry clear across the back of the head. He fell forward, sputtering his drink all over the table.

"What the..." Turning around, he was shocked to see those familiar radish earrings on a young woman brandishing a rolled up copy of *The Quibbler*. "Luna...?"

He grunted as the paper smacked him sharply on the bridge of the nose.

"What the fucg?" He bellowed thickly, holding his sore nose.

"I TOLD you not to hurt Ginny!" Luna scolded with a hand on her hip. She waved the paper in his face as if he were a naughty dog who had just relieved himself on the carpet.

Shaking his head from side to side, Harry widened his eyes in the hope she would explain further. "How did I hurt Ginny?"

Not thinking it possible, Luna's protruding gray eyes widened further. "Ha! How, you say? Lavender!"

Harry went pale. He lowered his hand from his nose, suddenly feeling like such corporal punishment was deserved.

He nervously glanced at the floor. "Did Lavender say..."

"Of course not," Luna said haughtily. "I never go near the girl. That gunk she cakes on her face is infested with cochineals."

"What are coch..."

"Never mind!"

Luna yanked the bottle of butterbeer out of Harry's hand and pulled up a seat across from him. She took one deep swig then sadly shook her head.

"Oh, Harry." Her monotone voice cooed his name pitifully, no longer possessing that sharp bite she'd had seconds ago. Besides his godfather, Luna was the only other person that Harry knew who could produce such odd fluctuations of emotion.

Luna's head continued bobbling, but now she was humming to herself. Harry had a suspicion that she had become distracted in her sorrow and invented some random tune that matched the rhythm of her head.

He really didn't want to have this conversation here, surrounded by nosy glares. In truth, Harry didn't want to have this conversation at all. He groaned loudly, dropping his head into his outstretched hands as the memory of Lavender's furious glare gazed down at him.

He had moaned the wrong name.

And of course, he hadn't talked to her since.

"Gods, I'm such an idiot."

"No," Luna announced flatly. "You're just a boy."

"Thanks, Luna," Harry spat dryly. "You really know how to be uplifting, you know that?"

"Have you ever seen him die in your dreams?"

Harry's heart skipped a full beat. He swiftly turned in his chair to see if she was talking to someone behind him, but their table was right by the wall.

"Excuse me?" Harry gasped.

"Your dreams... visions... What have you." Luna dismissed her stutter with a wild shake of her hand. "You wake up when the Muggle dies, not the wizard. Have you noticed that?"

"Well... I..."

Harry wanted to bellow out "WHAT?!" but he had to remind himself that this was Luna to whom he was speaking.

Just go with it.

"I don't exactly enjoy that dream, so the last thing I want is to view an extended version."

Luna slouched in her chair and sighed loudly. "You really need to learn how to stop fighting your nature, Harry."

Harry groaned as he threw up his hands.

Success! Another honest attempt at a conversation with Luna Lovegood, and he was left confused beyond belief. As always.

Harry lowered his head onto the table more harshly than he intended to. As a pain shot across his temples, he decided to just stay that way. His ears prickled as he listened to the chair across from him scrape loudly against the floor, right before he received a light pat of goodbye on the crown of his head.

*** **

"It's fucking shite!" Nott bellowed, kicking a stray bottle down the man-made gutter running the center of the alley.

A silver flask was gradually passed around the small group of seventh-year Slytherins. Nott swallowed one deep gulp of the firewhiskey, grimaced sickeningly, and handed it to his fiancée.

Distracted, Pansy adjusted her dress around her as she balanced her narrow bum on her perch of stacked fruit crates. She grasped the cool metal and immediately passed it down to Daphne, who was sitting on the floor, leaning against her calves. Pansy was half-tempted to ask what Nott was talking about, but most likely, it would concern a topic that would fail to maintain her interest.

"I know," Goyle agreed dumbly. "What's the point of being a Death Eater if we can't even join in the fun?"

Zabini clenched his jaw at the idea of where this conversation was heading.

Thinking silently a moment, Nott leaned against the brick wall of a shop behind him. He pointed his finger in the air, stressing the obviousness of his train of thought. "I bet you... I bet you Macnair is going to have something good planned. He told me to 'keep my eyes peeled' today. *And* when have you ever seen Snape patrol Hogsmeade?"

Pansy's back straightened in curiosity as Zabini turned to send a longing gaze up toward the castle.

"All I know is," said Goyle, "whatever happens, I'm sure as hell not going to sit and watch."

"Me, neither," Zabini mumbled. Glancing casually at Nott, Zabini waited until Theodore was distracted elsewhere before sending a piercing gaze at Pansy.

Following suit, Pansy's eyes swiftly darted from Nott to Zabini before she vaguely nodded her head.

The tense group sat together a few moments in silence. As the silver flask continued to make its rounds, Daphne pulled her left leg out from under her and lifted her sapphire dress to expose her ankle. A square mass bulged under her knee sock.

One hand steadily removed the packet of fags as the other reached into her cleavage for a lighter.

Nott's foot shifted suddenly on the floor beside her. Daphne glanced up in time to catch his sickening glare.

"What the fuck are you looking at me like that for?" Her petite voice did not take away from the viciousness in her manner. "It's not Muggle-made!"

Satisfied, Nott relaxed slightly and returned to his mount against the wall, gazing out into the streets of Hogsmeade for some sign of action.

Author's Notes: Chapters continuously beta'ed by the incredible **melusin**.

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, book i. Line 157

-Next up: Macnair makes a memorable appearance in Hogsmeade.

Chapter Seventeen - On the Perilous Edge of Battle

Chapter 20 of 36

With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began. And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. Eventual SS/HG. Alternate Universe, HBP death disregarded.

Nominated for best fic in the 2007 OWL Awards: Fire & Ice Category (SS/HG), Romance Category, Angst Category, and A/U Category

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Author's Notes: Chapter beta'ed by the talented **melusin**.

Lifting the collar of her cloak to cover her chin, Hermione quickly ducked into the doorway of Honeydukes. She sucked in an apprehensive breath, allowing an unruly pack of students to walk past her.

Rolling her eyes, she groaned deeply, irritated with herself for the way she was acting.

Hermione wasn't certain, exactly, from whom she was hiding. She was in a very bad mood, so she didn't think she would be very entertaining company for Ginny, or Ron and Harry. But to top it off, she was sick of acting like a heartbroken female, so she had been avoiding Severus at all costs. She couldn't bear the idea of allowing him an opportunity to insult and humiliate her in front of the staff and students.

Poking her head out of the doorway, Hermione ensured the coast was clear of Sirius as well. Although, she grudgingly admitted, he had improved his behavior slightly since his near attack a couple of weeks ago.

He was making an honest effort to remain reserved and professional, if not completely ignoring her, and Hermione had to give him credit. Nonetheless, the idea of spending the entire day in his company didn't sound very tempting either.

"Remus?" Hermione whispered to herself in surprise.

All thoughts of hiding left her as curiosity kicked in. The wizard in question appeared very shabby with his tattered robes, graying light-brown hair and a scarred complexion. Yes, it was definitely Remus Lupin marching down the stone walkway on the other side of the street.

Without questioning her motives, Hermione immediately darted out of the doorway to follow him. What was he doing in Hogsmeade? Was he on patrol for the Order?

Steadily coming up behind him, Hermione was about to surprise him with an enthusiastic greeting... until she heard another female voice beating her to it.

She quickly turned, ducking around the side of the nearest building. Hermione glanced slyly around the wall in time to see Tonks raise her arms around Remus' neck in a warm welcome. Remus stiffened visibly, hesitantly raising his arms before patting her back awkwardly.

"Remus," Tonks questioned weakly. "What's wrong?" Disappointed expectations showed very clearly on her face. His behavior nowhere near matched the warmth and excitement she had displayed.

"I... nothing." Remus carefully extracted her arms from around his neck. "It's just that... you caught me off guard, that's all."

Tonks forced her apprehension to drain instantly. Clearing her throat, she shot him a wide grin. "I haven't heard from you. It's been so long." She smiled to herself, eyes downcast, lost in her memories. "Too long, actually. Not since we bro..."

Remus took a small step back. "I've been very busy."

Tonks glanced at the floor. "I-I know. But... I was hoping that I would have heard from you by now."

Sighing petulantly, Remus turned his head away, and Hermione wanted to slap him for it. Why was he acting this way towards her?

"You said you needed time," Tonks reminded him delicately, "... and I had hoped you've had enough..."

"Look, Tonks..."

Tonks quickly lunged at him, grasping his hand and bringing it up to her face. "I miss you." She tucked his fist under her chin, pressing his palm against her neck.

But Remus wasn't looking at her. His face fell, eyes lit with worry as he looked beyond Tonks' adoring eyes.

"I need to go..." he said urgently.

Hermione searched the streets of Hogsmeade for some type of disturbance that would warrant the fear in his voice and the complete insensitivity he had displayed to the woman he loved. But nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Then Hermione witnessed something that, in all of her wildest dreams, only *she* could have possibly noticed. Narrowing her eyes, Hermione suspiciously observed Pansy running up the street. The two seventh-year girls acutely noticed one another for a moment. One pair of eyes narrowed in question; the other widened uneasily at the idea of being caught. Pansy suddenly turned on her heel and darted between two buildings.

"Remus..." Tonks pleaded, refusing to release his hand as he pulled away from her. "For goodness sake, Remus, I'm pouring my heart out here. Could you at least listen to me!"

"I'm sorry," Remus hissed angrily. "I really do need to go."

Finally yanking his arm free of her, Remus ran to the other side of the street.

Hermione hesitated. Tonks had gone completely pale and had closed her eyes in agony as Remus swiftly brushed passed her. Part of Hermione wanted to come out from her hiding place against the wall to offer a consoling arm for the pink-haired Auror.

Feeling slightly guilty, Hermione decided against revealing herself. How could she console the woman without admitting to eavesdropping? Swallowing uncomfortably as Tonks walked past, Hermione returned her skeptical attentiveness toward Remus. She bore into his back as he steadily marched down the stone pathway.

Hermione's heart suddenly plummeted from her chest. Remus had paused right between the same two buildings Pansy had run through. He quickly eyed the various witches and wizards walking by before turning down the alley.

Hermione was dumbfounded. She wracked her brain for a logical reason as to why he would follow the girl.

Dreading that something horrible was about to happen, Hermione craned her neck, ensuring that the coast was clear before heading in the same direction.

*** **

"Don't tell me it was nothing," Pansy shrieked. "I saw the whole thing. I watched you hold that bitch's hand!"

"She grabbed my hand!" Remus countered. His arms were stretched out in front of him, palms up, pleading for her to calm down.

Pansy paced back and forth in the damp alley, shaking her head in disbelief. "Oh, right. And you looked like you were *just* trying to get away!"

"I DID want to get away!"

"After you saw me catch you!"

"I didn't even want to run into her in the first place! I was uncomfortable from the moment she said, 'Hello!'" When Remus' voice had risen to a thunderous roar, he instantly slapped his mouth shut and took a step back from her. Clenching his eyes, he pulled his hands through his hair, chastising himself for matching Pansy's preference for loud arguments.

"You betrayed me," she spat.

Her words hit him like a bucket of iced water.

"I'm not the one sleeping in someone else's bed whenever I'm not with you," Remus growled.

Both Remus and Pansy inhaled sharply. Neither believed he could have said something so wretched.

The anger in Pansy's eyes immediately drained away. Remus lunged at her, arms stretched out. She cringed when he touched her. "My gods, no," he breathed. "I didn't mean that."

Pansy didn't reply. If she had, her voice would only have squeaked. The harder he tried to face her, the quicker she turned her back to him.

"Please, Pansy... I take it back..."

A thunderous roar filled their ears.

Pansy and Remus both ducked as a loud explosion suddenly shook every wall and window in Hogsmeade. As a high pitched ringing filled their ears, they both turned in the direction of the screams and running footsteps passing by on the main street.

Another boom shook the ground under their feet.

Both of their eyes locked in a fearful gaze, knowing they could not publicly show concern for one another's welfare. They needed to go their separate ways.

Pansy turned away. "It's Macnair's doing," she said quietly. "More Death Eaters will come."

Remus opened his mouth to reply. He wanted to say, 'Be careful'. He wanted to tell her to hide. But his voice cracked in his throat, and she was gone in his hesitation.

She ran out into the madness in search of her fiancé.

*** ** *

Hermione faltered as she suddenly watched Pansy dart out of the alley.

Wide eyed, the two seventh-year girls shrewdly gazed at one another for the second time that afternoon. Hermione now knew that the Slytherin was having an affair with Remus Lupin, and Pansy knew that the Gryffindor had been eavesdropping.

A tense exchange of words, uncomfortable explanations and promises of silence would have taken place if havoc hadn't erupted around them.

Finally pulling their piercing gazes away from one another, both girls suddenly started running down the main street of Hogsmeade, side by side. As numerous students and adults ran past them, away from the madness and the thick, suffocating smoke that ascended toward the sky, they felt no hesitation in running toward it.

Pansy listened for laughs and jeers.

Hermione followed the screams.

They belonged to opposite sides of this world, and there was no pretending that their situations were anything other than that. They didn't even like each other, and most likely, they never would.

But Hermione and Pansy found something oddly comforting about running into a battle with their enemy right by their side. This war, this fight, either now in Hogsmeade or in the grander picture, wasn't just black and white. Every situation and hardship they had faced so far wasn't a simple equation of morality set against evil. Nothing in this world is so cut and dry, or obvious.

Each end of the spectrum possessed a little of both, creating a long streak of gray that had completely swallowed up both of their lives.

"Hermione!" someone screamed.

The two girls looked at each other once more then turned to go their separate ways.

*** ** *

As strange as it was, the bookshop had been attacked first.

Someone, no doubt a Death Eater, had placed an explosive in the Muggle Studies section of the store.

The trap was carefully located in a very popular book, which had been set off the moment a student had pulled the volume from its shelf.

Ron gasped as Luna explained this.

"How do you know?" he questioned morbidly, hungry for details.

Luna, Harry, Ron and Hermione had found each other by accident, scurrying around the streets of Hogsmeade, either fleeing from, or in perusal of, death-masked figures. The intimate group of friends had clutched one another's hands the instant they were aware of who was running beside them.

And so they stayed, hovering in the doorway of the *Three Broomsticks*, listening to Luna's tale.

"He told me," she said loudly, stressing the obvious.

"He?" Ron questioned irritably. "He who?"

"The boy who pulled the book off the shelf!"

Ron stared at her blankly. "How could he have told you? He must have been blown into a million pieces!"

"Ron!" Harry barked. "We'll discuss this later. From the sound of it, whatever sick game the Death Eaters are playing, it's far from over." The group turned back toward the main street, contemplating which side was sending the series of hexes that were flying in all directions.

And a game it had turned out to be. None of them could find any other explanation for it. The second explosion had taken place in *Zonko's Joke Shop*. Harry assumed that the shop had been targeted because of their large and popular stock of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes Muggle magic tricks.

These attacks seemed so petty and juvenile, so they had to serve no other purpose than sadistic entertainment.

A few more Death Eaters had Apparated in the streets as the minutes ticked by. Laughing and riotous taunts soon matched the wailing pleas for help.

"Wait here," Harry said suddenly before he darted out into the street. "And keep an eye out for the younger students!"

"No, wait..." Hermione screamed, reaching for him. "Harry! Where are you going?" She made a move to follow him, but Ron pulled her back.

"Stupid," Hermione growled through clenched teeth. "He's so stupid! And if he gets hurt, I'm going to wring his neck."

"Oh, my God," Ron gasped.

Hermione pulled her eyes away from Harry to follow Ron's gaze.

She sucked in a shocked breath. Thinking little of herself, Hermione did not hesitate in running out into the street. A young student, most likely a third year, was wandering aimlessly with a broken arm hanging oddly at his side. His wide eyes looked around at the various dueling figures, yet he didn't seem to see them.

"Can you hear me?" she asked the young boy as she knelt in front of him.

"Hermione!" Ron yelled in panic.

"Look at me," she said a bit louder. But the boy continued to gaze beyond her.

"Dammit, Hermione!" Ron screamed again. "Get out of the open!"

Just as Ron gave his warning, Hermione looked up in time to see a masked, black cloaked figure plummeting down the street. He raised his wand, sending a series of curses at her.

Reacting instantly, Hermione harshly pushed the boy away from her as she flung herself to lay flat on her back. The hexes narrowly missed them, passing between both of their bodies.

"Hermione!" Ron called again. He ran out into the street to grab her, but she pulled away from his reach, lunging once more for the younger student. The fall seemed to knock some sense into him, as he hysterically began to search for some logical explanation as to what was going on.

"Come on," Hermione called to him. She screamed when he faltered. "Move!"

Gazing out of the corner of her eye, Hermione anxiously observed the same Death Eater raise his wand again.

Time seemed to stand still, clouding her senses. Everything behind and around the Death Eater was a blur of speed, but he was walking very slowly. Something about his stance and ease caused the dread in her belly to turn. This man appeared very certain that he was going to reach his target.

Hermione watched him as her shaky fingers fished clumsily in her robes for her wand.

Feeling like she would not react in time, Hermione dragged the boy to the floor, pushing him behind her legs.

The Death Eater suddenly whirled around awkwardly. He growled irately as he reached up to clutch his face. The hex that had hit him breezed from off to the side and was soon followed by another black cloaked figure.

The Death Eater turned his face up toward the smoke-filled sky, bellowing angrily to the heavens. Yanking his damaged mask from his bleeding face, he thought little of revealing his identity.

Walden Macnair.

Macnair's feet shifted into a threatening stance as he pointed his wand at his new adversary.

Severus Snape's voluminous robes billowed behind him as he abruptly paused in the space that separated the students from the Death Eater. He raised his wand, crouching low in his well-known defensive position.

"You have always been a sentimental fool, Severus," Macnair chided. "Yet, you hide it well... even from yourself."

"Let's go," Ron said to Hermione as he grasped her by the elbow. Pulling the younger student up by his collar, he called to Hermione again. "What are you doing? Hermione, we have to go!"

But Hermione couldn't move.

Severus smirked evilly at his brother Death Eater. "If you want to chat, Macnair, I'll be sure to send you an invitation for afternoon tea."

"What I *want*, is that!" Macnair spat, pointing his wand at Hermione's back.

Severus made a display of gazing around, oblivious to what he was referring to. He shrugged his shoulders dismissively.

Macnair growled in frustration, saliva foaming in the corner of his mouth. "That is the Muggle-whore of Harry Potter! And quite some fun she would have been, too. I will not forget this."

Part of Hermione knew that this was all for show. That Severus had to play the role of a concerned professor in the eyes of the rest of the school... while the Death Eaters *knew* he belonged to them.

But Severus had still gone out of his way to protect her. He had sprang out of nowhere at just the right time; she could only assume that he had been watching her from a distance.

And that was still a Death Eater pointing a wand between Severus' eyes.

"Get up!"

Ron's mouth was right beside her ear. Flinching in pain, Hermione finally allowed Ron to pull her back into a narrow space between two buildings. As Hermione ran, she whipped her head around. When Severus caught her eye from the corner of his vision, she tried with all her might to tell him to be careful.

The moment she turned down the alley, both men bellowed out their hexes simultaneously.

She should have been relieved that she was now safely hidden away with Ron and the student. But all Hermione could think about was that she had fled before she had seen the outcome of the duel.

*** **

Bastards! Harry shouted in his mind.

Cowards! Hiding themselves behind thick cloaks and identical masks.

If they truly believed in what they were fighting for, *in the cause* against Muggle-borns, shouldn't they be proud of it?

Harry continued running, ducking and weaving between Death Eaters and Order members.

It was as if he were invisible. Some of Voldemort's followers even seemed fearful at the sight of him.

Harry had Stunned and Stupefied a few in his haste, but none of the others retaliated in retribution.

Unless he was seriously needed, he continued ignoring the various dueling figures darting into doorways and crouching behind rubbish bins.

Harry was on a hunt for something else. More like someone else. Not one single seventh-year Slytherin was anywhere to be found. None of them were battling in the streets, and it pissed him off.

Somehow, Harry knew that they had known something beforehand, and he was determined to find out what.

Hog's Head.

The location entered his mind suddenly, and Harry listened. That place was one of the least popular locations in Hogsmeade, so it would make a reasonable hideout.

Pausing by the front door of the run-down pub, Harry had a suspicion that he would be better off entering through the back.

As he slowly turned the doorknob, a wave of laughter floated toward him.

But the moment he had softly closed the door behind him, an adjacent door flew open. His arm was seized, pulling him into the darkness of a broom cupboard.

Soft shushing sounds filled his ear as his attacker held him tight.

When Harry had finally relaxed, he whirled around, eyes widening in bewilderment.

"Zabini?" Harry gasped.

"Lower your voice!" Zabini whispered.

He raised his palm in the air and pushed his ear against the door. Harry followed suit, and both boys listened for any disturbance in the conversation outside.

More laughing.

Harry gritted his teeth angrily. "What the fuck is going on?"

Zabini raised his chin, but the rest of his body fidgeted. "Nott and Goyle..." Zabini paused, swallowing repeatedly. He grimaced, most likely at the idea of snitching on a fellow house member. "They helped Macnair. They placed the explosives."

Harry shook his head in disgust. "Why?"

Zabini gazed at Harry in confusion, taken aback by the question. As if such a thing truly could have an answer.

"What did you do?" It spat out of his mouth, laced heavily in accusation.

"Set off the display of Dungbombs in Zonko's," he said quickly.

Harry didn't know what to say, so he just sat in uncomfortable silence. It was obvious by now that Zabini didn't fall in line like the others, but Harry couldn't say for certain that he fell in line with himself. So he remained silent.

"Why did you pull me in here?" Harry asked, looking off to the side.

"There's too many of them out there. Not just students."

"And why aren't the students fighting?"

Zabini snorted. "None of them have their masks or cloaks."

*** **

Hermione couldn't have born it any longer.

The second she had found an opportunity, Hermione had slipped away from Ron, Luna, and the other students through a back door of a nearby shop.

Once her friends noticed she had left, they would assume she had fled in search of Harry.

Finding him did in fact cross her mind, but Hermione knew that Harry could take care of himself.

After a considerable amount of time had passed, Hermione had slipped back out the same door, cautiously stepping out into the alley. It had only been a few minutes, but it seemed like ages.

She didn't want to go to him, but she needed to be certain that Severus wasn't hurt.

Her feet scurried in fear under her as she ran toward the main street. The fighting had died down, and the smoke had ceased to engulf the sky. When someone screamed "Aurors!" with a howl of triumph, a deep relieved breath escaped her.

Her reprieve increased considerably when a dark figure suddenly lunged at her, pushing her into the shadows.

She knew it was him the moment he touched her.

"Severus," Hermione wailed, her high pitched voice on her verge of tears.

Severus pressed a cold finger to her lips as he pressed one against his own. Various footsteps pounded against the cobblestone street a good distance away, but he needed to ensure that they weren't getting closer.

Severus finally turned to her. And when he did, her breathing visibly increased. He took his time, studying everything in her face, as his chest heaved against her: her reddened nose, her chapped lower lip, the swollen and stress-worn skin under her lower lashes.

Finally looking into her eyes, Severus slowly dragged his finger from her lips and down her chin. Their breaths came out in deep huffs, forming small clouds of condensation that combined and warmed their already heated faces.

The moment Hermione's breathing skipped, he quickly lowered his face to her. But just as hastily as Severus had moved, he had also hesitated. The heat from his mouth was intoxicating. Hermione repeatedly opened and closed her lips, lifting her chin toward him.

That was all the encouragement Severus needed. He plunged his tongue into her mouth as he pressed his body against her. Her arms instantly wrapped around his neck, pulling hard on his hair.

Severus' craving was so vicious that he continued to push against her. He needed to be closer, but he was already crushing her into the wall. Following his urges, Severus swiftly hauled up Hermione's robes before lifting her body off the floor.

Her legs wrapped around his waist instinctively.

"Severus," she moaned again.

His cold nose pressed against her throat, then glided up under her jaw.

"I know," he whispered.

Severus sharply lifted her body again to steady her weight, forcing himself to press hard between her legs. He swallowed her moan as he sucked on her bottom lip.

Holding her weight, his hands fished for an opening in the hem of her robes. Finally feeling the bare skin of her thigh, Severus glided his hand higher up her leg.

Hermione gasped as a sharp chill breezed over her exposed skin. Tightening her legs around him, she dragged her lips away when he grinded his body against her again.

Hermione suddenly felt like she had far too much clothing on. She wanted to feel him. She ached to feel his bare skin pressed against hers. So when the hand under her robes squeezed her hip roughly before sliding up her inner thigh, Hermione threw her head back, encouraging his actions.

Her knickers were suddenly pushed to the side. Wrapping her arms tighter around Severus neck, Hermione thrust her tongue into his mouth. Severus thrust his hips up in reaction, encouraging her to grind against the hand pressed between her legs.

When Hermione thought she was going to black out from so many different and overwhelming sensations, reality suddenly consumed her.

This, here and now, was terribly wrong.

"Wait," she gasped, pained that she had said it the moment the word entered her head.

Severus groaned as he bit into the flesh of her neck.

"Wait, Severus," she said again, pushing him away.

Confused in a fog of arousal, Severus hands clasped around her thighs, preventing her from lowering them. "Why?" he breathed.

"Severus," Hermione gasped. "Look where we are!" Her eyes rolled back when his hands steadily slid up her legs. She fought to remain focused. "Who knows what was going on out there while all of... this was happening."

He smirked slightly, pressing himself against her. "I know. And nothing serious is happening out there anymore."

"What do you know?" Hermione asked quietly. "Did you know what was going to happen today?"

"I possessed a few ideas, yes." He answered immediately.

"And you didn't stop it!"

His head snapped up sharply. A dark look overtook Snape's expression as his mouth curled into a sneer. Severus lifted his hands from Hermione and quickly stepped back, forcing her to grasp the wall behind her to steady her own weight.

"Stopping it," he spat, "wasn't part of my orders." Crossing his arms, Severus slowly took a step towards hers.

"Orders?" she asked slowly. Straightening up against the wall, Hermione paused to awkwardly rearrange her underclothes and robes. "So every time that mighty snake commands something of you, you obey, no questions asked?"

Severus angrily slammed his palm against the wall beside her head.

But she didn't flinch.

"Who said the Dark Lord commanded anything of me today?"

Hermione inhaled. "Did...did the Headmaster...?"

"It does not matter," he sneered through clenched teeth. "So please, spare me the pain of your ignorant accusations..."

"It matters to me! Everything and anything I ask you, I ask for a reason!"

Snape leaned over her. He pointed a finger in her face as he visibly fought to maintain a steady voice. "What did I tell you about interrupting me?"

Hermione pushed his hand away and raised her chin defiantly. "Don't worry. I heard your warning the first time. In fact, I have heard and mentally documented all of them. They're somewhat difficult to forget, especially your last *lesson* regarding my behavior."

Severus pulled back slightly. He faltered in his own memories of that evening.

"If you had only listened to me in the first place," he whispered, "things wouldn't have got so out of control."

"Are you blaming your behavior on me!" she gasped.

Severus smoothly grasped her chin as he stepped very close. "That behavior, Hermione, is me. I wish things hadn't escalated so unpleasantly, but if you can't handle such things, you couldn't possibly handle me."

Hermione snorted disdainfully. "You're not a beast, Severus." She yanked her face out of his hold. "You're not some feral animal who can only act on instinct. You're human just like everyone else. So, just like anyone else, you were born with free will. Regardless of what you may have been influenced by."

"Influenced by?" he gasped. "Influenced by... influenced by!" He screamed, face twisting disturbingly. "You know nothing of me. Nothing! So don't speak of my nature or *free will* so freely."

"I know nothing of you?" she half-laughed indignantly. "Do you honestly mean that?"

Severus clenched his jaw and turned his face away.

"Look at me!"

Arms crossed, Snape slowly turned toward her.

"Do you truly mean that? I know nothing of you... Then what am I?"

Severus lifted his eyebrows in mock bewilderment. "What are you?" he asked sarcastically.

"What am I... *Who* am I... to you?"

Her eyes welled with tears, and emotion had found its way into her voice. Severus took a confident step toward her.

Grasping her hand, Severus pulled back the sleeve of her robe. He lifted her arm to his face, placing a soft kiss on the inside of her wrist. "What answer are you looking for from me?" he asked smoothly. "Should I say, 'friend'? Or perhaps, 'lover'." Smirking slightly, Severus pressed her palm against his heart. "Or maybe, you are a failed shag that I keep around for entertainment value."

Wailing in pain, Hermione pushed him away, flinging her body away from him.

She shook her head wildly as she walked backwards toward the main street.

"I do know you," Hermione whispered. "And I know you don't mean that... but I refuse to stand around and let you speak to me that way."

As she turned her back on him, Severus harshly barked out, "Hermione!"

But she kept walking.

Before she was about to step out into the street, Hermione turned her upper body toward him, catching him off guard. Meeting his eyes, she knew he didn't want her to leave.

"You're down to ninety-seven, Severus."

And then she was gone.

Author's Notes: I tried to reason with him, but Severus is a very stubborn man.

-**Melusin** has been a blessing!

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book i. Line 275.

Chapter Eighteen - Of What He Was, What Is, and What Must be Worse.

Chapter 21 of 36

With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began. And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. Eventual SS/HG. Alternate Universe, HBP death disregarded.

Nominated for best fic in the 2007 OWL Awards: Fire & Ice Category (SS/HG), Romance Category, Angst Category, and A/U Category

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: None of this could have been possible without the help of my beta, **melusin**.

"There was something terribly... cold about his speech," Neville said softly. His eyes stared straight ahead, growing watery the longer he went without blinking.

Hermione, Ron, Harry and Neville sat restlessly at a secluded table in the back of the library. They discussed the day's events, stumbling over their words to make their descriptions as tactful as possible.

"I don't think 'cold' is quite the word I would use to describe it," Hermione corrected. She leaned against the table to balance her chin in the palm of her hand.

When all of the students ... the surviving students, that is ... had been safely escorted to the castle, the Headmaster had commanded them all to go to the Great Hall for an announcement. A good number of them had been injured, forced to stay in the hospital wing. Dumbledore was confident that they would heal in time... but five students, unfortunately, had been lost.

No recognizable bodies. They were just missing.

Only when Aurors had found and identified the remaining body parts from the explosions would the school know for certain if the five students had been killed, kidnapped, or had run away. Three Hufflepuff third-years, Orla Quirke of Ravenclaw, as well as Jimmy Peakes of Gryffindor hadn't attended Dumbledore's speech that evening.

"Expected," Harry said flatly.

"Gryffindor is going to have to find a new Beater..."

Hermione perked up when Harry spoke, blatantly ignoring Ron's train of thought.

"What was, 'expected', Harry?"

Harry shook his head, closing his eyes as he attempted to clarify exactly what he was trying to say. He knew the others wouldn't enjoy hearing it. "The way Dumbledore spoke to us... his condolences, his grief, his warnings... It wasn't cold, exactly. It just sounded rehearsed. Almost like he'd expected something to happen in Hogsmeade."

Hermione paled, remembering Severus' words.

"Who said the Dark Lord commanded anything of me..."

But, just as quickly as her professor had entered her mind, she shook her head, forcing him away.

"Impossible!" Neville barked. When the others forcefully shushed him, he whispered, "If Dumbledore had had any idea that there was going to be an attack, he would have cancelled the trip."

Hermione and Harry grimaced at his words.

Given as much as Harry knew about the Headmaster now, he didn't quite believe that to be true. But by the anxiety etched across Neville's face, and the matter-of-fact tone of his voice, Harry recognized that Neville *needed* that to be true. So Harry nodded morosely and said, "No. You're right."

Hermione's head snapped up in alarm. Harry was conceding... backtracking from the last argument he had just made. That was not like Harry. Once he got going, he would argue his point until he either convinced everyone around him or stormed off in a huff. Harry could feel her staring at him. He quickly raised an eyebrow, obviously caught off-guard by her intense examination. Hermione turned her head slightly to the side as if to ask if he was feeling all right. After a slight shake of his head, she decided to let it go.

Throughout this conversation, Harry and Hermione dutifully listened to Ron and Neville speak, swallowing excess saliva while they chewed on the side of their tongues. They both had experienced very... unusual... interactions with Slytherin students in Hogsmeade. They both felt a burning need to disclose that information but doubted it would serve any purpose.

Hermione didn't want to get Remus into trouble with his enemies.

And Harry didn't want to expose Blaise Zabini as a sneak.

So they remained silent, quietly contemplating how this information could be used to their advantage before it was exposed.

*** **

Zabini was sitting in the Slytherin common room a few hours after the Halloween feast. It was well past curfew, so he had taken advantage of the silence of the empty room to gather his thoughts.

He sneered at the sight of discarded bottle caps and sweet wrappers haphazardly strewn around the room.

Quite a celebration the Slytherins had thrown that evening. The similarities between this party and the ones his house typically hosted over Quidditch victories were so alike it turned his stomach. Murder being equivalent to sports... It was disgusting!

Zabini had attended the festivities, of course, for the sake of appearances, but mirth and excitement were not at the forefront of his mind.

Fucking Harry Potter.

Closing his eyes, he groaned, worrying if he had done the right thing.

The right thing, he repeated, laughing sardonically.

That was the question, wasn't it? What was *the* right thing? He groaned, fisting his hand against the cushion.

No, no, he truly didn't have the energy to contemplate such ethical decisions. Zabini rephrased that last thought.

What was the right thing *for him*?

Scratching his chin, Zabini leaned back into the settee, turning over these deliberations in his mind.

If he hadn't stopped Harry in the *Hog's Head*, the Slytherin students and the other Death Eaters hiding out in there would have attacked the Gryffindor. Zabini grudgingly admitted that Harry was powerful, but there was no possible way he could have overcome that many wizards on his own.

Right?

Erring on the side of caution, Zabini hadn't been able to take that risk. So he had hidden Harry in the broom cupboard.

But... why?

I don't want this, he thought immediately. The *this* being the war, the fighting, and the Death Eater summons.

Oh, how he loathed being summoned.

It was a good thing that as a new recruit, he was not granted the privilege of looking his Master directly in the eye. He always had to keep his vision glued to the floor whenever questioned. Truthfully, Zabini put forth the least possible effort when he was assigned to raids, guaranteeing that he wouldn't move up in the ranks.

He had absolutely no training in Occlumency. If the Dark Lord ever glimpsed his thoughts, his Master would know that Zabini did not want him to succeed in this war. The last thing Zabini desired was to live the rest of his life under *that* sadistic rule.

But Zabini groaned at the alternative. The idea of Harry-Bloody-Potter being the wizarding world's hero also turned his stomach, but, for very different reasons.

He knew that this was just his House bias talking. Deep down, Zabini fully recognized that he would rather live under the Gryffindor's reign than the Dark Lord's. Hopefully, when all of this fighting was over and done with, Harry would remember Zabini's efforts.

Zabini snorted after that last thought. Most likely, today's actions would not be enough to clear his name. Another plan was in order.

"I thought you said you had to study tonight?" a saucy feminine voice asked.

Zabini groaned loudly. He responded without meeting her eyes. "I don't need your shit right now, Daphne."

She tsked insultingly. "Ha! Is that right? Like *I need* your fucking lies!"

"I'm not lying. I'll get around to studying... eventually."

Crossing the common room, Daphne quickly sat down by his side. Possessing very little shame, she had intentionally left her dressing gown in her room, desiring Zabini to see her in the skimpy pajamas she wore ... small shorts and a low cut camisole.

"Look, Blaise, if you're getting tired of me, just let me know."

Like he really had the choice. Zabini threw his head back on the cushion. "Ah, hell..."

"Do I annoy you that much, now?" she asked indignantly. "Can't you even stand to talk to me? You obviously can't even look at me!"

Finally turning toward her, Zabini made an exaggerated show of looking her up and down. A derisive laugh escaped his mouth at her attire. "Has it ever crossed your mind... the notion that, maybe, if you stopped nagging me all the bloody time, I wouldn't get so impatient?"

She stubbornly pursed her lips. Zabini had had his say and felt no desire to beat a response out of her. They sat together in uncomfortable silence. He was testing her, but

Daphne didn't care. She quickly spat out her next accusation. "Are you shagging Pansy?"

"WHAT?" he gasped. The look Zabini sent her made it very clear that he thought Daphne must have gone mad.

She turned her gaze down guiltily. "I don't... It's just that... I catch you looking at her at odd times, so I can't help but think..."

"No," Zabini spat through clenched teeth. "I am not shagging her."

"Are you attracted to her?"

"NO!"

Well, that wasn't precisely true. He did appreciate the feel of petite and fragile women. But his relationship with Pansy did not involve any palpable sexual attraction or flirtation whatsoever. She just had the same objective as him, and Zabini couldn't deny that it would be better if he didn't have to work alone.

But the slapper sitting next to him didn't need to know that.

Gods, how he wish he was betrothed to a woman who possessed even an ounce of class and sophistication.

Daphne leaned in very close, placing her hand on his knee. "Prove it," she whispered, gliding her hand up his leg.

Slightly caught off-guard by her offer, Zabini weighed the proposition in his head.

He steadily turned in his seat, catching her eye. "Daphne?" he called silkily, leaning in very close.

Her excitement showed clearly on her face. "Yes?"

Sliding her hair back behind her ear with one finger, Zabini exhaled softly before speaking. "You talk too much," he spat quickly, voice heavy with revulsion.

Daphne violently pushed him away. She blustered at his amused expression. "You're a fucking bastard, you know that?"

"Sorry, my dear, but my parents are married."

When Daphne stood up quickly, she paused in her tantrum, turning to look at him. It was very obvious that she wanted Blaise to ask her to stay.

So he refused to react. Glancing in her direction, he snorted mockingly before waving his hand at her in dismissal.

"Fine!" she screeched, clenching her fists. "You can just sod off, then!"

Zabini laughed at her outburst. Placing an elbow on the back of the settee, he smiled as he thought about her crude suggestion. Compared to that screeching harpy, he really rather would.

*** **

Hermione wasn't certain what had inspired this sudden whim. But she couldn't find sleep, anyway, so she washed her face and dressed under the pretense of doing a late-night patrol.

Severus. She kept thinking about him as she lay in bed attempting to fall asleep. One moment, her blood boiled at the remembrance of his insulting and hurtful words; the next, her face flushed as she envisioned his hands sliding up the inside of her thighs, tugging at her knickers before his dexterous fingers parted her...

She exhaled deeply, releasing a frustrated growl. Hermione chastised her weakness when her own hands began to mimic the memory.

So she fled her room to occupy herself elsewhere. It was a testament to her desperation for a distraction that the 'elsewhere' she had in mind was to search for Harry's godfather.

Sighing resignedly, Hermione conceded to herself that if someone spotted her entering Sirius' office in the middle of the night, it would spark some outlandish and incredibly embarrassing rumors.

But she hadn't seen Sirius in Hogsmeade, or at the Halloween feast, so Hermione felt this intense responsibility to ensure that he was all right.

A child.

When she really got down to it and questioned what she thought of Sirius or of his personality, that was the first word that crossed her mind.

He seemed so very much like an overgrown child. Maybe that was why she was so forgiving of his advances and wild temper tantrums. In a way, it was as if he just didn't know any better.

As Hermione slowly descended the marble staircase, she faltered on the last step. She had the nerve-racking sensation that she was being watched, and it sent goose-pimples down her arms and legs.

With a firm set in her jaw, she passed across the Entrance Hall on her way to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. From the corner of her vision, Hermione uneasily eyed the darkened stairway that led down to the Dungeons.

If Severus was watching her, she prayed that he wouldn't reveal himself. Hermione just couldn't deal with him right now... not after this afternoon.

Typically, after they bickered or argued, she would yearn for the chance to see him again. She craved his presence just on the off chance that he would display a measure of interest that would reassure her insecurities. But she was certain of his feelings for her now. And she also knew that he put the least effort possible into avoiding arguments and saying hurtful comments.

So Hermione just had no patience for him at the moment.

She didn't desire his company, and it emboldened her.

Raising her chin, Hermione continued with confident steps down the corridor towards Sirius' classroom as the edges of her lips rose into a very Snape-like smirk. Once she stood before the door, Hermione quickly turned the knob. Her relief at finding it unlocked turned to satisfaction once she eyed Sirius' office door.

The soft glow of a candle danced inside, spilling out from beneath the door.

She knocked softly and waited, but there was no response. After loudly knocking again, Hermione dared to invite herself inside. She guardedly pushed the door forward, half-expecting to see or hear something that would make her wish she had never come.

Hermione's eyes widened in surprise. Sirius was asleep. His chest and the side of his face lay flat against his desk.

No, not just sleeping. It was very apparent that he was having a nightmare. His eyes were clenched tight, and sweat dripped down his brow. By the random twitches of his fingers and eyebrows, Hermione knew he was trying to wake himself up.

Hermione took a small step toward him. She flinched back when he inhaled sharply.

His breaths suddenly started to build deeply and raggedly. When his face turned that familiar shade of blue, Hermione ran from the door and was by his side in an instant. She palmed the outside of his robe, frantically searching for a bulge in his pocket. Her hand finally closed around something hard and cold. She reached into his robe, smoothly pulling out his black pocket watch.

The second she touched it, she wanted to put it down. It was cold. So cold it almost burned her skin.

Remembering what she had seen in Hogsmeade, when she had spied through the brothel window, Hermione quickly flipped open the latch. Her eyes widened. The second hand ticked erratically, and the faceplate pulsed a deep, blood-red.

Sirius' labored breathing grew worse.

Grasping the side of the pocket watch, Hermione smoothly began winding it.

By the time she was able to give it two full turns, Sirius jolted awake with a gulp of air. Gasping in fear, his hands moved wildly around him, searching his pockets as he remained oblivious to Hermione's presence.

She calmly closed the latch. He whirled toward her at the sound of a 'click'.

"Don't worry," she said. Her voice breathed out soft and soothing, hoping it would calm him. Hermione slowly extended her arm, dangling the watch before him. "I turned it for you."

Sirius' eyes bulged at her words. He looked at her, then at the pocket watch dangling in front of his vision and back to her.

"You... what?" he croaked. His face was horror-stricken at her calm and curious demeanor. Her hand inched toward him, instructing him to take his possession.

Sirius' shaky fingers reached out, grasping the watch by the chain. He held it in both of his hands as the reality of the situation finally sunk in.

Hermione had wound it, he thought. She knew... something. And she was still standing in his presence. She wasn't screaming or running away in revulsion.

Finally, someone knew.

Sirius started to suck in deep, uncontrollable gasps of air, which exhaled in cries of anguish. But this time, his erratic breathing had absolutely nothing to do with his *condition*.

The weight of the situation hit him full force. The one person he had wanted to know... The one person he didn't have the heart to speak to about this... That one person knew and had chosen to help him. He gasped as tears and relief choked his breathing.

Hermione watched all of this, surprised at the swell of compassion fluttering in her chest. She walked toward the side of Sirius' chair, extending her arm around his shoulders.

"It's going to be all right," she said confidently.

Sirius hesitantly raised his arm. He desperately clutched at her waist, pressing his forehead against her.

Hermione shushed and cooed to him, allowing him to cry as she placed her hand on his head.

*** **

"Pick up your gun." Grindelwald's head motioned toward the pistol on the side table.

"I SAID, PICK IT UP." Spittle was flying from Grindelwald's mouth. "NOW!" His mad eyes flashed as the scared Muggle extended a shaky hand towards his pistol.

"Coward! Hiding here as you let others fight a losing battle above you. Your name will have its rightful place in history, believe me." Grindelwald moved his wand from the Muggle's temple and pointed it between his eyes.

"NO!" the man barked angrily. "Wait, it's not over yet!"

"Imperio!"

Dumbledore watched breathlessly as the Muggle's mouth fell open. Dumbledore knew what was going to happen, and he easily could have stopped it. But if he were to trade places with Grindelwald this very moment, Dumbledore would have sentenced this Muggle leader to the same fate. This was no less than the despicable man deserved.

Eyes unblinking, the Muggle reached into his coat, removing a small pill from his pocket which he placed in the back of his mouth. Slowly, he grasped the pistol firmly, raising it to his temple. A second later, he pulled the trigger, spraying the back wall with brain matter and hair.

It was now or never. Swift and silent, Dumbledore seized his chance. "Petrificus Totalus!" Dumbledore shouted as he darted from his hiding place against the wall.

Grindelwald had a fraction of a second to turn, staggered by Dumbledore's presence before he fell stiffly to the stone floor.

"Yes," Dumbledore said slowly as he walked to stand by Grindelwald's frozen body. The Dark wizard looked up at him, face contorted in fury that Dumbledore had finally caught him. "You're right. It is definitely time to end things. I believe I will finish off from your lead..."

Dumbledore raised his wand but hesitated when the bound man suddenly began to chuckle. The chuckle grew from a deep, throaty rasp to an all out laugh. Dumbledore knew this man possessed a dramatic flair for playing games, but despite his reluctance to indulge him, Dumbledore raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"Do you really think this is over?" Grindelwald mocked.

"For you, it is," Dumbledore responded confidently.

"You may be right, Albus, you may be right. But kill me, and it will be over for you as well."

Dumbledore's eyes briefly narrowed in curiosity before his expression became serene again. "Power has made you mad, old friend."

"Not in the least!" Grindelwald barked. "Power has made you, Albus, very blind. We will definitely see each other in the next," Grindelwald chided with a sneer.

"I never took you for the religious type. I doubt you and I will ever cross paths in the afterlife. Our souls will have different destinations."

"Fool!" Grindelwald laughed deeply. "Our kind does not have an afterlife. It seems you're not truly as wise as most believe you to be. No, not the afterlife... but the next life. My power... your power... they will meet again."

"Quoting Matthias, are we?" Dumbledore asked calmly.

"You would do better not to take folklore so lightly. You'll come to learn of the Dualism in time. I possess no fear in telling you this because I know you won't listen to me... now."

Tired of Grindelwald's fairy tale ramble, Dumbledore pointed his wand at Grindelwald's cloak, Transfiguring it into the uniform of the lowest foot soldier.

Grindelwald's eyes widened at the sight of the blood-red band around his bicep. If Dumbledore could say he had ever seen this sadistic wizard display a fraction of true terror, it was now.

"What are you doing?" Grindelwald gasped.

"Like that of your protégé, you will not have the glorifying death you seek, either," Dumbledore said, looking down at him, his face expressionless. "You will not die from a wizard's wand."

He slowly turned his wand to Grindelwald's forehead.

A bomb exploded somewhere overhead, raining clouds of suffocating dust.

"Confundo!"

Grindelwald's dilated eyes looked up at Dumbledore, glazed and unfamiliar with what he saw. Dumbledore bent by his side to gain a firm grasp of his wrist. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on the Muggle tanks and guns of the Allied forces, Apparating the two of them to the madness that lay above their heads.

Harry inhaled sharply as he sat up straight in bed. Breathing deeply, he raised his hands to his temples, pushing his messy hair away from his sweaty hairline.

He concentrated, for once, with the intention of remembering the entirety of his dream.

Harry violently kicked his bedclothes away from him, lurching from his room and down the dormitory stairs.

He smiled, recalling what Luna had said in Hogsmeade.

"You really need to learn how to stop fighting your nature, Harry."

My nature, Harry snorted. But despite his incredulity, Harry had listened. He had made an effort to fall asleep without dread in his heart. Harry consciously invited his mind to open up to any and all visions or dreams that had been hovering on the outskirts of his thoughts just waiting to be seen.

And enter it they did.

Luna was right. There was more to the memory... Dumbledore's memory. Not very long after Grindelwald had killed the Muggle, Dumbledore had finally defeated Grindelwald.

But there was something extremely depressing about this memory. Harry hadn't just watched it, he had lived it though Dumbledore's eyes and body. As he listened to Grindelwald speak, feelings of regret and shame had inundated him.

It didn't make any sense. Dumbledore had defeated the greatest wizard of that time. He had succeeded in destroying his Opposite. The One before Voldemort. So why did the worst feelings of guilt and shame bombard him right before they Apparated away? What on earth would Dumbledore have done differently?

The Headmaster had repented something that had happened that night, and Harry was resolved to discover exactly what it was.

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"Enter," Dumbledore called dejectedly.

Harry quickly pushed open the heavy office door. He took a few wavering steps towards the Headmaster's desk, confused at finding the room empty.

"I knew you would want to speak to me," Dumbledore's voice drifted from across the office.

Harry turned, surprised at seeing the two student chairs facing each other in front of the fire. Dumbledore motioned to the one he wasn't occupying.

"I was afraid I would have to wake you up," Harry mumbled. He met Dumbledore's eye and quickly turned away. The Headmaster looked ghastly. Harry knew that something about the old man had seemed very ragged at the Halloween feast, but Dumbledore had been too far away to inspect clearly. Being close to him now, his face looked haggard, cheekbones protruding from loss of weight.

Dumbledore still managed a serene smile. "No, no, I was already awake. Bad dream."

They exchanged hard, pressing looks. Glancing at the floor, Harry finally moved toward his offered seat.

"I suppose I should be thanking Luna for that," Harry chuckled darkly.

"She is an extraordinary girl," Dumbledore breathed. "I'm happy she's your friend, Harry. She will be quite an asset to you."

"Luna already has been ... for quite some time."

"Good. It's been such a pity, after so many years at Hogwarts, and she still has so few friends. Her kind heart is one of the most unselfish ones I have seen in many years."

Harry hummed in thought before shaking his head. "She's far too eccentric for the other students to see that and truly appreciate her. She makes them uneasy. But I'm not the least bit surprised by Luna's odd behavior and even stranger comments. I would expect that having one's mind constantly pulled between two different realms of existence can take a toll on one's sanity."

Dumbledore didn't immediately respond. A little uncomfortable by the silence, Harry looked up, caught-off guard by his penetrating eyes.

"Very good, Harry," Dumbledore finally said. He did not sound surprised at Harry's insight. Instead, he seemed almost... miserable.

"Why was that a bad dream?" Harry asked, remembering why he had come here. He leaned forward, balancing his elbows on his thighs. "Years from now, I can only pray that the worst of my dreams will be remembering how I destroyed Voldemort."

Dumbledore released a deep exhale. "It was a bad dream because I should have... done things... very differently. I wish I'd listened to him... Grindelwald, I mean. He knew of the balance before I, as well as... the loopholes."

"Loopholes?"

"He knew," Dumbledore continued, "that had I killed him, that would have been the end for me as well. That night, the capacity of my power peaked, and once he was gone, it started to slowly decrease, as it still does now."

Harry pushed his arms off his legs, leaning back into his chair. "Okay, I'm confused."

Dumbledore smiled serenely at him again. "And you're taking that rather well, don't you think?"

"Taking what well?" Harry asked again calmly.

"Being in the dark. Finding out more information that I have kept from you. I needed you to be ready to hear it. And it's very obvious, you're ready now." Dumbledore stopped speaking. He closed his eyes for a moment, inhaling deeply. "My power peaked because... I can't be the greatest wizard in the world if my rival, the strongest Dark Wizard, is dead. My usefulness, *my purpose* is done. There isn't only a balance between the 'good wizard' and the 'bad wizard', Harry. There is also a separate balance on each side."

Harry pulled his eyes away from the floor, finally putting what few pieces he had together. "You mean... good wizard... and good wizard."

Dumbledore nodded very slowly. "The weaker I get, the stronger you get. The more erratic and irresponsible I get, the more clear-minded and focused you become."

Harry suddenly remembered that incident in Defense class. He had shown such incredible magic without truly trying, amazing Hermione even. But when he had gone to speak to Dumbledore, he had been unable to gain an audience. The Headmaster was bedridden that morning...

"This is a little sick," Harry said quietly.

Dumbledore chuckled. "Only because we are trying to understand it. This has been going on since the beginning of time, and I do believe the most that it has been acknowledged has occurred within the last one hundred years. It only feels twisted because we have been trying to understand it... as well as trying to stop it."

"Why do you regret Grindelwald's death?" Harry wanted him to say it, point blank.

"I should have killed Voldemort before Grindelwald." Dumbledore's eyes were dark, stony, with years of pent up frustration.

"But you said Voldemort isn't *your* opposite; he's mine."

"Yes, Harry, but you weren't even alive, then. And without Grindelwald's boon, Voldemort wouldn't have been anyone's opposite. He would have had no protection against me. Harming him, *then*, would not have harmed me." Dumbledore motioned toward his damaged hand to stress his point.

"Boon? You mean Grindelwald's power?" Harry asked hungrily. He crossed his legs, leaning comfortably against the side of the armrest.

"Precisely. I don't know for certain, but I fully believe that if I had killed Voldemort before Grindelwald, this cycle would have ended. You can't change the fate of who is meant to be the next Dark Lord, but I do believe you can prevent them from being placed in power. With Tom gone, had I then killed Grindelwald... where would that Dark power have gone? There would have been no one to receive it."

"You said," Harry asked quietly, "that the more erratic you have become, the more clear-minded I have become as well." Dumbledore closed his eyes, and Harry did not wait for him to respond. "You're dying." It wasn't a question.

"Very, very slowly, Harry," Dumbledore said, a slight pain making its way into his confession.

"So, it won't be long before I get my boon," Harry spat disgustingly. He wasn't looking at the Headmaster. Gazing unblinkingly at the flames of the fire, Harry could see the old man nod from the corner of his eye.

Harry straightened himself in his seat. "I need to find the next Dark Wizard."

"Yes," Dumbledore breathed.

"And I need to kill him."

"Yes." This time the answer was full of anguish.

"Before I kill Voldemort."

Dumbledore remained silent. He didn't need to tell Harry who it was because once he was dead, the knowledge would automatically pass on to him. He just prayed Harry would forgive him. Someday.

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Indifference. Hermione felt like the very emotion, if it could be called that, bled from her every pore. It wafted in the air with each swish of her hand; it drifted in the flip of her hair and showed in the hollow gaze of her eyes.

And she knew Severus could smell it.

Since the beginning of the school year, this Potions class had been the best one yet. She had felt no hesitation in raising her hand to answer Professor Snape's questions. She listened with rapt attention to his lecture, but it was very clear that she was more interested in the information than the sound of his voice. Throughout the whole double lesson, Hermione had kept her mouth in a perfect straight line whenever he had dismissed her answers.

His behavior, of course, hadn't changed. If anything, he seemed to grow more vicious when it became obvious that he wasn't going to get a reaction out of her. Professor Snape's scowl didn't even elevate her heartbeat.

Perhaps, if she had been alone with him, the situation would have been very different. But she felt unbelievably safe and comfortable surrounded by her fellow classmates. Honestly, what was the worst he could do to her *here*? The usual tactics he used to intimidate her classmates weren't enough to frighten or alarm her anymore.

Hermione had touched a much darker creature, which had not been unleashed in this room. But the moment she imagined that creature ~~her~~ Severus, a sharp twang of sorrow choked the air in her throat. She wanted to touch that darkness so badly.

Swallowing thickly, Hermione focused on the indifference again.

Towards the end of the lesson, Hermione thought she had caught him clench his jaw uncomfortably a few times. She knew her behavior was confusing him, but aside from that, anything else he felt really didn't matter.

He deserved it.

Despite how well she was bottling her feelings, Hermione still cared about him. Missed him, even. She just refused to allow herself to think of such things now.

But focusing on perfecting the potion in front of her wasn't enough. She could have done this in her sleep. So Hermione's thoughts drifted toward something else to distract her from her emotions and from Severus.

She thought of the incident with Sirius the previous night.

Poor child. She had added compassion to her estimation of his character. The true extent of the pain he was forced to live with, day to day, had been unbearably tangible last night.

Hermione inhaled sharply, wincing as pain throbbed in her temples. Her hands clutched the side of her work-table. A flash of light breezed across her mind, and in that second, she remembered Sirius crying, his head pressed against her as she held him.

Only, she didn't *choose* to remember that part of last night.

Hermione snapped her head up, sending a loathsome glare at Severus. He should know better than to enter her mind like that again.

She expected to see smugness, anger even, with a bit of disgust directed at her. Only, Severus didn't turn to meet her eyes. He stood rigidly by the blackboard, his hand clenched into a fist at his side. Based on his body language, Hermione would have guessed that he was seething with rage... until she noticed his perplexed eyes.

Three hesitant knocks pounded on the classroom door.

"Go away," Professor Snape snarled, his typical viciousness surprisingly muted.

There was a small silence before one more hesitant knock.

Finally releasing a frustrated snarl, Severus flicked his wand at the door. It flew open, banging against the stone wall.

"What do you want?" he bellowed at the female student standing fearfully in the doorway.

"I... um... Professor McGonagall would like to see Hermione... sir," the student squeaked.

Professor Snape's upper lip curled. He was about to growl something venomous when he noticed the bright yellow parchment in the student's hand.

Despite what Severus wanted to do, he couldn't deny a request from the Deputy-Headmistress.

Swallowing heavily, he turned his back to the classroom, dismissively waving his hand in the air.

Hermione didn't bother glancing in his direction as she gathered her things and followed the younger student out the door.

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"I don't know. I've just been so irritated lately," Hermione breathed. She picked half-heartily at the pastry in front of her. If she didn't attempt to eat it, Minerva would scold her again.

Minerva had told Hermione that she had been acting... unusually lately. Her Head of House had requested this meeting to ensure that Hermione wasn't getting in over her head with the Order on top of her full load of school work.

"Boy troubles?" Minerva announced. She snorted at the absurdity of the topic.

"No. Man troubles," Hermione spat before thinking better of it.

Minerva's tea cup clanged against her saucer. Hermione's head snapped up to meet her professor's penetrating glare.

"What?" Minerva asked briskly.

"I-I... oh, never mind." Hermione slouched in her seat, bringing her hands up against her face, shielding her desire to expel a frustrated bellow. Hermione didn't need another excuse to think about Severus.

"So it's true, then?" Minerva questioned in disbelief. Slowly placing her tea cup to the side, she leaned back in her seat, primly folding her hands in her lap.

"Is what true?" Hermione asked tersely.

"I mean, I heard the rumors... and Dumbledore's incessant rambles... but I never thought you would be receptive to such behavior..."

Hermione raised her head, eyes bulging in shock. "Good lord, Minerva, what rumors?" Hermione gasped.

"You're having an affair with Sirius."

"WHAT?"

Instead of turning into a Confunded mess like Hermione hoped she would, Minerva shrewdly narrowed her eyes. "If you are not having a relationship with Sirius, I fail to see who else you would be having *man* troubles with."

Oh... right.

"No... it's Sirius," Hermione immediately answered. She couldn't help but imagine Severus smirking satisfactorily behind Minerva at her increasing ability to lie on the spot. But then she winced after the thought. "But, it's not like that!" Hermione quickly added.

"Are the two of you seeing each other?" Minerva asked seriously.

"No, not at all. But that doesn't stop him from trying," Hermione answered, irritation evident in her voice.

Minerva tsked under her breath. "Arrogant fool!"

Hermione released a tired sigh. "Indeed. But I can't help but feel pity for him. But, maybe my pity is misplaced, however. The very last thing I desire is to give him false hope in pursuing me. But..."

"But?" Minerva stressed. "Goodness, are you developing feelings for him?"

"No, not in the least. But I can't help but notice how withdrawn and bottled up he is with everyone... except me."

Hermione turned to glance at her lap. She had meant what she said. This was part of the reason she felt such a strong sense of responsibility for him.

"Yes." Minerva hummed in thought. "I have noticed this as well. Ever since he has... er... returned."

Hermione inquisitively narrowed her eyes. "Do you know the reason he is able to be with us now?" How many other of the people she had put her trust in had been keeping her in the dark?

"No, sadly, I don't. The only people I believe may have some idea are Professor Dumbledore and Professor Snape ... and by completely different methods of procuring such information."

Minerva's brows rose questioningly at the noticeable bristle Hermione displayed at the mention of the Potions master's name. "He's cancelled your week's worth of detentions you were assigned at the beginning of the month," Minerva reminded her in good humor. "One would think he has now become your new favorite professor. You just may pass your NEWTs with an unblemished record, after all."

Hermione flushed furiously at being caught. "Eh... no, it's not that."

"What else is troubling you ... which obviously involves Professor Snape?"

Hermione detected a sharp bite in her professor's voice ... a bite that was usually reserved for the likes of Harry and Ron whenever they expressed their many disrespectful and insulting assessments of Minerva's fellow Order member.

Hermione thought quickly. "It's just... so difficult to talk to and... console Sirius with Professor Snape criticizing him every chance he gets."

Minerva's lips thinned in response. "Those two, despite their history, are now fully grown men. Whatever little squabbles they may partake in can, and should, only be handled between the two of them. I suggest, Hermione, never getting involved or voicing an opinion about one, to the other."

Hermione's face darkened. Yeah. She knew that *now*. "I can perfectly understand your advice as far as Sirius is concerned, but I have absolutely no reason to discuss such familiar things with Professor Snape."

Hermione might have been getting better at lying, but she was terrible at covering her emotions. When the name of the Potions master exited her mouth, it did so as if it were a bad taste that needed to be scrubbed off her tongue.

And Minerva noticed this as well. Instead of prim sternness, Hermione was astonished to see a slight drooping in the heavy lines around her eyes.

"Please, Hermione," Minerva spoke sincerely, "while I'll never ask you to like Professor Snape, in the very least... please, don't hate him."

For the briefest moment, Hermione had the sudden urge to confess the extent of Severus' violence towards her, in the hopes of her anger being validated.

Sensing Hermione's desire to argue, Minerva continued, "I have always possessed such a pride in your sentiments and intellect, compared to all of the other students in your year. Even students much older than you. You have always been able to look past house bias, past stereotypes, in order to show respect when it is deserved. As I said, I don't expect you to ever like Professor Snape, but don't hate him. Trust me; I know he is not a nice man."

Hermione snorted in agreement. If Minerva didn't think Hermione was taking the stance of a dedicated friend of Sirius, seeing Severus as the bully, Hermione would not have been so hungry to allow some of her irritation to show.

"I have worked with Severus for two decades. *I know he is not a nice man.*"

Hermione guiltily remembered the scene she had witnessed in Severus' bedroom back at Number twelve, Grimmauld Place. She vividly envisioned the worry on Minerva's face, and then the pain when Severus dismissed her.

"Nice," Minerva dryly continued, "I don't think, is even in his vocabulary. But there is much that he does, much that is asked and expected of him, from both sides of this war, that I wouldn't even wish on an enemy. The Death Eaters, the Ministry, Voldemort, spying, the 'lottery'..."

"The what?" Hermione knew much more about Severus' life than Minerva assumed she did, but this was something she had never heard of.

"The 'lottery'," Minerva answered in confusion. "Dumbledore has asked things of you, assigned missions... I was so certain he would have told you about your parents by now."

Hermione lurched forward in her seat, slamming her hands on the desk. "My parents! You know what has happened to my parents?"

Minerva vigorously shook her head. "Of course I know!" she spat angrily. "But if Albus hasn't discussed this with you, maybe we shouldn't... The less you know, the better you'll be."

"The less I've known the madder I have become!" Hermione gasped, throat growing thick with emotion. "What's going on? What's this 'lottery', and what does it have to do with my parents?"

Minerva furiously muttered to herself as she rose. She staunchly walked toward the window, placing her fingertips against the cool glass. "Severus is a spy," she announced matter-of-factly. "Accusations of not possessing real dedication to Voldemort are thrust upon him by the other Death Eaters from time to time. Without Severus, we would never have known that Voldemort had declared an underground war on the families of Muggle-borns. Without his information, we wouldn't have been able to save anybody; we would never have known who was next in the target houses... but losses, of course, are unavoidable..."

Hermione's heart suddenly started racing. *Losses are unavoidable...* She had heard Dumbledore himself announce those very same words.

"Are you telling me that my parents are... have been..." Hermione's voice had risen to a high squeak.

"No!" Minerva stormed across the room to sit by Hermione's side. She hesitantly covered Hermione's hands with hers. "No. Your parents are hidden safely. Memories modified... temporarily! They can't worry over a daughter they don't know they have. Severus spared them from the 'lottery'."

Hermione visibly relaxed a bit at finally having some information about her parents. Then, as her curiosity sent her mind whirling, she became animated once more. "What is this 'lottery' you keep talking about?"

Minerva swallowed with a quick glance at the floor. "Severus, as I have stated, constantly needs to prove his loyalties. Due to his position at a school with so many Muggle-born and half-blood students, twenty years worth, Voldemort has made it his responsibility to find the whereabouts of their Muggle families. For every five or so families the Order is able to hide, Severus needs to turn one in."

"*He* chooses which families die?" Hermione asked, clearly appalled.

"He also chooses which ones survive," Minerva corrected. "As I have said, it's a very tough line for him to walk. Regardless of whether or not he shows it, or even feels it, it is what it is. So please, don't hate him, Hermione."

Hermione was still dumbstruck, but she managed to catch her professor's eye. "Of course," she spoke softly, "I don't hate him. How could I? He saved my parents."

Any grasp Hermione might have had left for indifference drained with the relief that her parents were alive and content.

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He wasn't asleep.

Severus had tried, for the past few hours, but his efforts had found no success.

Unless he was passed out on drugs and booze, Snape almost never fell asleep naturally.

His thoughts had muddled his senses all day, all evening, thinking *other*. Even when he didn't want to think of Hermione, he thought of her more. He just couldn't comprehend her behavior. Was that the end of it? Had he been so vicious that he had driven her to the edge? To that *dog*?

Severus' upper lip curled as the vision of Sirius' arms wrapped around her screamed in his mind. He shouldn't have done that, entered her mind, because now he couldn't stop thinking of what he had seen.

He should have listened to that tiny voice in the back of his head ... the one that had told him to come out from the Dungeon stairway last night as she walked by. The voice that told him how good, how natural it felt when she was in his arms.

This was his own doing, Severus realized, sighing deeply.

If he had been drinking tonight, he wouldn't have had to be considering all of these regretful reflections.

But if he had been drinking tonight, he might never have heard his bedroom door open with a resisting creak. But when it did, instinct ~~did~~ force him to lunge for his wand.

Her feminine shadow was clearly outlined in his doorway.

He was dreaming. This one just as real as any other he had experienced with open eyes, but twice as torturous.

Pushing himself on his elbows, Severus didn't know what to say. Yet, anger was certainly not his first reaction. His eyes raked her body as he released a deep exhale from... what was that? Relief?

Still unable to see her face, she hesitantly entered his room. As if grasping a final nerve, Hermione walked to the foot of his four-poster.

She stood there, looking at him, as her chest heaved with deep and unsure breaths.

"I shouldn't be here," she whispered softly. Her arms came up before her. They paused in midair before she lowered them to her chest and slowly unbuttoned her dressing gown.

"But, please," she said softly. As her hands moved down her chest, a sliver of bare skin followed the free buttons. "... Don't make me regret it."

Dragging her hands away from her navel, the robe fell completely open. She slowly leaned forward and steadily placed a knee on his bed.

Severus did not show any measure of protest. Feeling the weight of her, he hungrily watched her crawl toward him. The dungeons were freezing, and it showed very clearly on her bare flesh.

Hermione kept crawling until she was able to sit directly on top of his lap. The moment she was within arm's reach, Severus did not hesitate. His arm reached out, palming the underside of one bare breast, reveling in the weight of it.

Hermione slowly inhaled a shaky breath.

Severus' other arm slid under her open gown to grasp her bare thigh. Her skin was heated, yet the goose-pimples still ravished every inch of her skin.

She felt so unbelievably real. Only, Severus couldn't comprehend her coming to him at all, let alone *like this*.

"Kiss me," she breathed, half-begging.

Severus dragged his eyes away from her naked body. He grasped the back of her neck, pulling her face down to his.

He thrust his tongue into her mouth as her heated body ground against him. Her high-pitched whimper finally sent him over the edge. He knew how this would end, and he was certain that she should have guessed the same, coming to him in such a manner.

Severus suddenly grasped her arms, pushing her away. Anxiety at being rejected clouded her eyes, but it became apparent that he had only wanted to remove the layer of bedclothes that separated their bodies.

He grasped her waist, quickly flipping her onto her back.

"You're right," he said smoothly, "you shouldn't have come. But since you have, now you can't leave."

Hermione whimpered in reaction. "You don't want me to leave?" she asked insecurely, breasts heaving against him.

The smirk dancing on the edges of his lips faded. He trailed the back of his hand down her face, skimming her neck, before touching the whole length of her body. "No," he whispered, but his voice still rasped harshly. "I don't."

Clutching the back of his neck, Hermione threaded her hand through his hair. She trailed her fingers down his chest before flicking the top button of his grey nightshirt. "You and your bloody buttons," she laughed timidly.

Smirking as he gazed down at her, Severus grasped the back of her knee, raising it up and pushing it to the side until his body pressed between her legs.

"Off," he commanded, tugging on her dressing gown.

Hermione leaned up on her elbows to completely remove the offending garment from her shoulders. She hesitated slightly when Severus began unbuttoning his own nightshirt in response.

This was really happening.

By now, her vision had completely adjusted to the dimness of the room. Following the light splatter of the hair at his navel, her legs fidgeted in arousal at the sight of him

stroking himself above her.

When she had come here, it had been completely with the intention of giving herself to him. She had never seen his bare skin within arm's reach before. And now that she had, a steady tingling was building between her legs.

Grasping her ankle, Severus wrapped her leg around his hip before sliding his hand up the outside of her thigh. Steadily leaning forward, he lowered himself against her, intentionally thrusting his arousal against her moist clit.

Reveling in her loud moan, Severus bit and suckled at her neck. He'd wanted this for far too long.

"Why?" he asked slowly, slowly pulling his hips back. Hermione's hand clenched against his back.

"W-why... what?"

Breathing deeply in her ear, he continued the slow thrusting, pushing back against her. "Why..." His speech was interrupted when he groaned against her throat as the head of his cock slid against her moisture. "... Why did you come to me tonight?"

Hermione's legs clenched hard against his hipbones before quivering in pleasure. "I've... oh, God... I've told you before. You're far too dangerous for me. But I have always known that, and it's time I stopped trying to change it. I'm submitting to your whim..."

His hand slid up her waist. Palming the underside of her bare breast, he pushed against her again. "Is that all?"

"No!" she wailed in reaction. Hermione kept lifting her jaw toward him. She wanted to feel his mouth, his breath, his tongue, but Severus continued pulling away until she answered him. "I want you... and..."

Dragging his hand away from her breast, Severus quickly thrust it between their bodies. He pushed her leg up, spreading her legs further. "And?" he asked, wanting her to finish her thought. He had never talked during sex before, but now, it was going to be a habit with her.

His thumb barely slid against her clit as he thrust his middle finger into her.

Delirious, she groaned loudly again.

"And... what, Hermione?"

"A-and..." Throwing her head back, her eyes clenched when his hand began a slow rhythm. "I'm sick of arguing with you. I want... I want to feel like I belong to you!"

He moaned loudly at her confession. He reached up to remove Hermione's hands from his shoulders, his moist fingers smoothly closing around her wrists. Lifting her arms above her head, Severus pushed them into the pillow.

"Silly girl," he whispered silkily. Kissing her gaping mouth, Severus bit playfully at her lip before lowering his face to her throat. His knees slid against the mattress as he gradually pulled his cock away from her clit. Positioning himself against her opening, he slowly pushed into her. "... You already do."

Author's Notes: More mysteries answered... hopefully. Hope you enjoyed it. Will try to get the next chapter finished ASAP. I've been spending much of my free time reading Stephenie Meyer's books, *Twilight*, *New Moon*, and *Eclipse*. I wish I didn't finish them so fast, but surprisingly, they did give me some inspiration for this chapter.

-My beta, **melusin**, has been an incredible help on this chapter.

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book iv. Line 23.

-Next up: The morning after. Remus returns to young John's cave. Severus gives Sirius a 'helping' hand.

Chapter Nineteen - Moping Melancholy and Moon-Struck Madness

Chapter 22 of 36

With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began. And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. Eventual SS/HG. Alternate Universe, HBP death disregarded.

Nominated for best fic in the 2007 OWL Awards: Fire & Ice Category (SS/HG), Romance Category, Angst Category, and A/U Category

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: Melusin has been incredible. This story wouldn't be as far along as it is without her.

It was dark when Hermione awoke the next morning. Rubbing the grogginess out of her eyes, she vaguely wondered if it was always this dark in Severus' room, unless of course, the candles were lit. Snape didn't seem like the type of wizard to adorn his living chambers with spacious faux windows.

Hermione hadn't had any deep sleep the previous night, and she was certain that it was still very early in the morning. She had been far too aware that she wasn't in her room... or in her bed. When her mind had risen, she had kept her eyes closed, listening to the sounds around her.

The rhythmic hums of the body beside her warmed her blood, sending a flutter to her chest.

She smiled.

Finally opening her eyes, Hermione slowly turned on her side to face Severus.

Her breath hitched. Perfection. Hermione didn't know how else to explain it.

Smiling to herself again, Hermione lowered her face to him, pressing her warm lips against his back.

Hermione vaguely remembered falling asleep in Severus' arms, but now his back was facing her. And Hermione was certainly pleased that it was.

She truly believed that she had never seen anything so beautiful. Then again, she knew that she was consumed by a forceful desire for this man, which clouded her objectivity on what could be constituted as beautiful. But affection or not, she had never seen a sight so intense.

How long had she fantasized over this breadth of flesh, longing to gain a closer look, she wondered as she skimmed the tips of her fingers down his spine?

She pressed her lips to his back again.

Severus' tattoos were quite similar to Muggle image puzzles. The kind where you needed to haze your vision before you could make sense of anything. The tattoos were symbols on top of symbols, so layered and intricate she probably wouldn't be able to pinpoint a solid line of anything specific unless she asked him...

Hermione winced at that last thought. She may now have the opportunity, the right even, to press her bare skin against his flesh, but she knew that it just wasn't possible to ask him anything personal about it. Given how *that* last conversation on the topic had panned out, Hermione didn't see the likelihood of a similar conversation happening in the near future.

Pushing that despondent thought to the back of her mind, Hermione pressed her cheek against his skin once more, reveling in the actual sensation of him. Neither were wearing any clothes, but Hermione didn't feel the least bit naked. Lightly placing her arm on Severus' protruding hipbone, Hermione hummed in pleasure as she slid her hand forward until her fingertips grazed his sparse hair.

Her hand was instantly seized, a harsh grip closing around her wrist. She was barely able to expel more than a surprised squeak before she was pulled over his body and pressed into the mattress.

A chuckle shook in Severus' throat. He leaned on top of her, his hair cascading over both of their faces. "If you were trying to wake me, then congratulations are in order. My sleep is thoroughly disturbed."

Hermione couldn't remember how to breathe. A burning flush blazed in her chest before spreading up her neck. Realizing that he wasn't the least bit angry, Hermione smiled timidly. She raised both of her hands toward him, pushing his hair away from his face.

"Good morning," she said softly.

The corner of Severus' mouth rose into a smirk. He pressed his chest to her, taking pleasure in her breasts brushing against him.

"Good, indeed," he hummed.

Hermione moaned contentedly, wrapping her arms around his broad back. She wiggled under him, adjusting her legs until they rested on either side of his hips. He pressed himself suggestively against her.

Severus grinned wickedly as her breathing grew erratic.

"Tender?" he asked knowingly.

She couldn't see him clearly, but she could *hear* him smiling. "A bit, yes," Hermione replied with a hesitant laugh.

"Pity," Severus drawled. He moved his hips back, grinding himself against her again. "I don't believe we both received the same degree of pleasure... or completion, last night."

His breath was hot, tickling the skin beneath her ear.

Hermione blushed furiously. Having sex, let alone talking about it so candidly, was all very new to her. "It was my first time. It's fairly unlikely for girls to... orgasm."

"Indeed, but all the same, it would have been very satisfying to try... again."

Hermione lifted her knees, wrapping her legs around him. "Well then, *Professor*, I give you permission to try as often as you would like." She tried to slide her fingers through his hair, but Severus pushed himself away from her.

Leaning on his elbows, his expression grew serious as he quietly looked down at her.

Hermione waited for him to speak, but he just continued to stiffly loom over her.

"I don't think you understand what you are saying," he said darkly, "so I'll pretend that I didn't hear that."

She hesitated a moment before dismissively shrugging her shoulders. With a reassuring smile, Hermione reached up, sliding her palms against his bare chest. "I know very well what I'm saying, Severus."

He snorted mockingly. "No, you don't. As much as I try not to... I keep forgetting... and you obviously don't comprehend... you are so young."

"You still don't think I'm real, do you?" she whispered.

Severus inhaled sharply, pulling away further, forcing himself to kneel between her legs.

"What?" he asked harshly.

"I... noticed..." she spoke carefully, "... the way you looked at me last night... like I was a dream. An hallucination that, any moment, was going to fade away. I don't blame you. I feel that way too... at times."

"Is that right... Like, when?" He tried to sound casual, but sarcasm always danced on the edges of his questions.

"This morning," she whispered. *When I inspected every inch of your back.* Hermione fisted her hands against the bedclothes. She faltered slightly before slowly pushing herself to sit up.

He was still kneeling, his height easily towering over her. She leaned forward, and the muscles in his chest stiffened.

Hermione wanted to be closer to him. She needed to touch him.

Just as she was about to move closer, Severus' hands suddenly closed around her hips, halting her advance. He jerked her body towards him, forcing her to lie back down.

on the mattress.

Hermione gasped from both surprise and a slight bruising pressure on her sides.

She inhaled sharply once more as both of her legs were grasped from behind her knees.

Severus roughly pulled her thighs around him.

The previous night, Hermione had not really feared that sex would be painful. Uncomfortable maybe, and certainly awkward as it was unknown to her, but she had had no fear of actual pain.

Not like she had now. And the fact that all of her muscles instinctively tensed at the idea would not help the situation.

Hermione knew Severus was trying to alarm her...forcing her to take back her words.

But Hermione wouldn't. She wanted to prove herself to him.

What she was actually proving, she was not certain, and whether it was sensible, she could not say either. But, out of all the timid and confusing feelings she was having at this very moment, she was determined not to take back her words.

Severus seemed to pause slightly as he positioned himself against her. Raising his eyes away from her nakedness, he met her eye as he swiftly pushed into her.

Her hands clenched around his biceps. He sank deeper and deeper the more her moisture spread.

Hermione threw her head back, exhaling with the rhythm of his hips.

A low-pitch buzzing sound filled the silence surrounding his four-poster.

Severus froze. Groaning in frustration, he fell limply against her before reluctantly pushing himself away.

"What is it?" Hermione asked breathlessly.

"My alarm," he spat. Yanking the bedclothes, Severus reached for his nightshirt at the foot of his bed. "Get dressed," he commanded. "I tend to get up much earlier than the rest of the castle, but you need to go... so no one notices you leave."

Hermione sat up, ineptly reaching for the bedclothes at her dismissal. "What... Now?"

"Yes," he hissed. "Now, Hermione." Severus then entered his adjoining bathroom and shut the door.

By the time he came out, Hermione was gone. For a moment he felt relieved since goodbyes were just as uncomfortable and foreign for him to make as hellos. But the next moment, he recognized a slight twitch of guilt, which only increased when he noticed the stain of a fresh spot of blood on his linen.

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"I don't understand why on earth the two of you keep asking me to have dinner with you in Sirius' office. You know I won't, so stop badgering me!" Hermione growled.

"Merlin, Hermione. All you had to do was say 'no,'" Harry sighed.

"I ALWAYS say no, but do you listen...?"

It was very evident that Hermione Granger was irritated. Eyes narrowed, she hauled up her heavy book bag, forcing the strap to rest higher on her shoulder. Leaning forward, she marched through the dungeons, leaving Harry and Ron a few paces behind her as students scattered out of her path.

So Ron definitely should have thought twice before saying, "It's not like you've never had dinner in his office before."

Perhaps the reason he had been so rash was because they were standing just outside the door to their next class, assuming that Hermione would swiftly and obediently enter.

Instead, she violently whirled around, smacking Harry with her bag.

"What did you say?" Hermione asked, eyes blazing.

"Dammit, Ron," Harry groaned, irritably passing between them to enter the classroom.

Ron blanched. He was caught off guard but quickly decided to attack the nerve he'd obviously struck. "Oh, come off it, Hermione. You think Harry and I didn't know that you spent a whole evening in Sirius' office, *eating dinner*, instead of in the Great Hall?"

"That was over a month ago," Hermione gasped.

"It still happened."

"Sirius was my escort to Hogsmeade!"

"I think *date* is the word you are looking for. It probably could still describe whatever it is the two of you are doing. You won't visit him *with us*... but you can eat with him alone, huh? Merlin, Hermione... What is he? Twice your age... ?"

"I AM NOT DATING SIRIUS BLACK!" Hermione screeched.

"MISS GRANGER!"

Hermione spun around, only to meet the furious eyes of her Potions master.

"WHAT?"

Both of Hermione's hands came up, slapping around her mouth. She couldn't believe she had responded to Snape like that in public, let alone at all.

"Excuse me?" Professor Snape's voice spoke dangerously low.

His face was turning that horrid shade of red as a vein throbbed in his temple. Everything around them had paused in shock. The corridors were unnaturally silent, making the beat of Hermione's heart pound deafeningly in her ears as every student within earshot turned, slack-jawed, openly staring in horror.

"Oh, my goodness... I'm so sorry, sir! I was... distracted."

Snape visibly struggled to keep from cursing. Predictably, he deducted a ridiculously large amount of points from Gryffindor house while brutally criticizing her carelessness. Hermione astutely picked up on the undertones in his speech. To everyone else, he was attacking the insolence of rule-breaking schoolgirl. But to Hermione, she was being reprimanded by a lover for showing very little, if not any discretion in a relationship that must not show any outward display of there being any such relationship.

"Yes, sir," Hermione replied weakly.

"Now, if you are quite finished making a spectacle of yourself, would you desist in screaming about your love life in the corridors... AND ENTER THE CLASSROOM... NOW!"

Hermione jumped as he barked out his last order. Tripping over her feet, she sped through the door.

Ron wasn't at her side anymore. He must have made a run for it the second Snape opened his mouth.

Throughout the whole class, Hermione's face burned from both embarrassment and fury. She was angry at Ron for being such an insensitive prat, making outlandish accusations without the slightest idea of what he was talking about. But Hermione also worried over the content of the conversation Severus might have heard between herself and Ron before he'd started screaming at her.

That was the night that *they both* had first kissed her, so it shouldn't be a surprise that she'd had dinner in Sirius' office.

Still, just as Hermione predicted, Snape used the entire Potions period to punish her for the remembrance of it. Hermione endured the hostile lecture that day, just as she blatantly ignored Ron's whispering pleas and apologies.

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And the days moved on, dragging through the first weeks of November. None of the students had forgotten what had taken place in Hogsmeade. They vividly remembered the horror, the fear, the gurgling pitch of strangled cries. But there were worse things they could have spent their days envisioning. Hogsmeade was just a large, unwanted dose of reality... a reminder. With the vast majority of students of either Muggle-born or half-blood heritage, very similar acts of carnage could be waiting for their families, any day, as they arrived home in the evenings.

Just as it had been for Laura Madley of Hufflepuff. Hermione was exhausted from deducting so many house points from various students who stared at the girl too long, or asked extremely sensitive questions.

As Head Girl, Hermione was not surprised at being randomly summoned to console Laura late at night. Hermione truly didn't mind. She felt for Laura but was uncertain what, exactly, she should say. Hermione had tried imagining herself in the same situation with her family and had blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

"You still have your father. At least take comfort in that."

There should be contentment that Laura's father had survived, which was more than other students now had... like the Creevey boys, who were now completely alone. They would have given anything to have at least one of their parents back. But Hermione knew that hearing such things wouldn't lessen the pain for Laura, or the shock.

Mr. Madley had been away that weekend on a business trip. But Laura's mother, grandmother and little sister... Hermione didn't want to remember the vision Laura had described when her father had come home to a house that had been ripped of life.

As a result of all of this, Hermione had been avoiding Severus' eye for the past few days. She knew it wasn't fair, for him or the families he chose, but she couldn't help but be slightly affected. And it certainly didn't alleviate their anxiety...the awareness that either of them had yet to acknowledge the two obviously different sexual encounters they had shared.

Severus and Hermione hadn't talked about *that* morning the next day or the day after. And then the havoc with Laura Madley had taken place soon after that. This wasn't the first instance of her being called as Head Girl to console students for identical reasons. This was the first instance she had done it with so much awareness of what went on behind the scenes...that it was, and always had been, a result of the actions of Severus.

Severus didn't know that Hermione was aware of the true extent of his duties, and she wanted it to remain that way. She believed that he had enough on his mind and couldn't be troubled with her curious questions while coddling her emotions. Hermione just hoped that whatever apprehensive feelings she was having at the moment would eventually go away.

"SPOT TEST!" Ginny shrieked in her ear.

Hermione's hand jerked from under her jaw. Her elbow smacked the jug of pumpkin juice on the table, toppling it into a bowl of scrambled eggs.

"Shit!" Ron moaned. Ginny laughed harder at his reaction.

Hermione's thick fog of analysis abruptly lifted as she finally remembered that she was sitting in the Great Hall for breakfast. A rosy flush spread along her cheeks. She must have looked like an Inferius, blankly sitting like that.

"About bloody time you joined us," Ron grumbled as he probed the mushy contents in the bowl. He looked gloomily at the food once more then suddenly rose from his seat.

"Sorry... I was... thinking."

"I wonder who about," Ginny announced knowingly.

Hermione turned to scowl. She was ready to unleash the fury of the Hermione Granger that Ron had experienced if Ginny made a single hint about Sirius being the main reason behind her distracting thoughts.

"So, are you ready?" Ginny asked Hermione, jumping from her seat excitedly as she wrapped a knitted scarf around her neck.

Quickly forgetting her anger, Hermione suddenly became wary. "For what?"

"To go outside of course!"

Turning toward the tall, arched windows on the opposite side of the Hall, Hermione frowned. Thick, fluffy whiteness covered everything. She crinkled her nose at the idea of being cold and wet.

Hermione quickly made a show of gathering her belongings and turned from Ginny's overenthusiastic eye. "As a matter of fact, I think I should go back to my rooms..."

"No," Ginny barked. "No, Hermione. You do not have to study; you do not have to finish an essay or invent the Potion of the year. You are getting up... this instant... and going outside with me before you finally succumb to the ancient curse placed upon you at birth that is determined to transform you into an encyclopedia!"

Hermione dumbly gaped at Ginny, shocked at the forcefulness of her interruption and feeling oddly unsure of a proper response.

"Now get up!"

Ginny yanked Hermione's cloak out from under her and held it open.

"Yes, Mrs. Weasley," Hermione conceded with a smirk as she stepped into her cloak.

"... that's not funny."

Hermione laughed, entwining her arm around Ginny's as they turned to exit the Great Hall. On his way back to the Gryffindor table, Ron passed them carrying a large bowl of scrambled eggs in his arms.

"Ron!" Hermione gasped. "You can't take food off another house table!"

"Says who?"

"Never mind that... let's go!" Ginny yanked Hermione's wrist, dragging her out into the Entrance Hall.

Ginny was practically glowing at the idea of spending the day playing in the snow, and oh, how Hermione dreaded it. Hermione was definitely not the type of person who would allow others to boss her around, but she felt slightly guilty at Ginny's enthusiasm. She had been avoiding the girl, well... everyone really... the past couple of weeks. Hermione decided she could put up with the weather for one day to indulge her.

"Look!" Ginny shouted as they stepped out into the freezing weather. She pointed excitedly at someone standing on a cleared path not that far ahead of them. "I think that's Luna!"

"Luna!" Ginny called to her, waving happily.

Luna jerked around, looking behind, in front and up toward the light grey sky, her protruding eyes searching for whichever entity was calling her name.

Just as they approached her, a female who was walking a few paces in front of Ginny and Hermione suddenly reached out, grasped Luna by the shoulder, and pushed her into a bank of snow. The female's companion suddenly started giggling wildly, and both sprinted away.

"Oh, Luna," Hermione breathed in concern, running to be by her side. Ginny matched Hermione's pace, but when it became apparent that the fiery redhead didn't intend to stop running, Hermione reached out, yanking her back by the pony tail.

"And just where do you think you are going?" Hermione gasped, voice full of authority.

Ginny jerked her hair out of Hermione's hand. "That was Lavender!" Ginny spat.

"No fighting!" Hermione demanded, clearly indignant. "Let's just help Luna."

Both girls turned toward the Ravenclaw, who was lying on her back in at least two feet of snow.

But now, Hermione and Ginny were at a loss on how to proceed.

The corners of Luna's mouth were raised into a contented grin. She moved her arms and legs about, forming a perfect snow angel as if she had meant to do this all along. "Don't you just love the first snow of the season?" she asked dreamily.

Brushing a few erratic curls out of her face, Hermione rolled her eyes but failed to prevent the wide smile that reached her eyes and showed the brightness of her front teeth.

Ginny on the other hand, was unstoppable. When the redhead shouted something about a snowball fight, Hermione immediately took a large step back and raised her hands in defeat. Luna mumbled a sentence describing the dangers of yellow snow, but Hermione didn't quite pay attention.

So she let the two younger girls lose themselves in the unfathomable bliss of being drenched from head to toe.

If only she had brought a book...

Finding the first opportunity that she could, Hermione fled from the wads of mush held threateningly in their raised hands.

Now, trailing along the edge of the frozen lake, Hermione contented herself with leisurely observing the younger students wildly skating across the icy surface.

With a double jerk of her head, Hermione abruptly caught sight of a short crop of dark hair under an expensive hat.

Pansy.

Hermione frowned. She certainly hadn't forgotten what had taken place in Hogsmeade. She had been dying for the opportunity to speak to the Slytherin but feared meddlesome ears would pick up on any echoing conversations within the castle walls.

Pansy was standing on the very edge of the lake that brushed along the boundary of the Forbidden Forest. Back towards Hermione, the Slytherin appeared unnaturally still.

She was either captivated by the frostbitten branches of the twisted trees or was distracted by gloomy thoughts that were forced upon her when she came to this very spot.

Hermione assumed it was the latter and had a vague idea of what... or who... was the subject.

Hermione was in a quandary. She found herself marching straight toward Pansy but didn't know how to begin a conversation with a girl who she typically only engaged in screaming matches whenever they were within earshot of each other.

So Hermione decided to let history and routine guide her actions. "If you take one step into the forest," Hermione forced herself to shout loudly, "you will be in detention until the holidays!"

Pansy froze at the sound of her voice but quickly turned around when Hermione had finished.

"Don't worry, Mudblood! I have no intention of going in there," Pansy snarled.

Hermione merely rolled her eyes.

Teeth bared, Pansy finished whatever she was thinking. "Where's your pack of filthy blood traitors...?"

"Blood traitors?" Hermione interrupted. Her piqued voice rang high, the indignant question extremely evident. She couldn't help but smile sardonically. "Are you honestly accusing *me* of such things?"

Pansy paled.

Sharply turning back toward the wilderness, Pansy gazed out into the darkness of the Forbidden Forest once more, suddenly looking helpless.

"You know what I saw in Hogsmeade," Hermione continued haughtily. "I would think that sleeping with a werewolf wouldn't be the type of behavior advocated within pureblood socie..."

"THEY DON'T KNOW!" Pansy shrieked into the darkness. She stiffened slightly at her outburst, yet knew her voice wasn't facing toward intruding ears.

Hermione was shocked into silence by the sudden volume, but she only remained quiet until she was certain that Pansy had nothing else to add. "Who exactly is... 'they'? The purebloods... or the werewolves... ?"

"... or the Order?" Pansy added an arch laugh.

Two harsh crunches of snow treaded quickly towards Pansy. The Slytherin whirled around in alarm at the sound.

"What did you say?" Hermione growled with her wand in her hand. What business did Pansy have talking about the Order of the Phoenix? Hermione didn't realize it, but her saliva had bubbled in her throat as she had taken a threatening footstep toward Pansy. Like that of a lioness facing a predator who had threatened her cubs, Hermione's teeth were bared for all to see.

And Pansy instantly recognized this. "He told me about it. And I know... I... us... must remain a secret," she said weakly.

"Are you asking me to keep it a secret?"

"Have you told anyone?"

"I would NEVER betray Remus. There are many... friends and foes... who would not forgive him for this. I wouldn't cast him out like that."

Closing her eyes slightly, Pansy deeply exhaled. "Thank yo..."

"I am *not* doing this for you."

"I know," Pansy replied faintly, her dark eyes gazing down at the snow.

"Remus doesn't know I know," Hermione added. "And I certainly wouldn't tell Harry, Ron or Sirius... er... Professor Black."

Pansy's head snapped up. It seemed to be her turn to gaze at a classmate with knowing eyes. "You know... you have a lot of nerve to be involved with him."

"Who are you to judge?" Hermione responded immediately. Typically, Hermione's first instinct was always to deny such a relationship between her and Sirius, but she felt a need to defend him against someone like Pansy and the tone of the girl's voice. "A Slytherin in love with a werewolf," Hermione added sarcastically. "What does your boy-friend think of all this?"

"Theodore does not love me. We both know what the situation is, and his main objective is merely to gain a better footing in society..." Pansy suddenly cut herself off. Eyes widening, she disbelievingly shook her head. "Why on earth am I telling you all this? / have no reason to feel shame or doubt in how I show feelings towards someone else. I do not show Theodore affection because neither of us feels any. You, on the other hand... you know that man is in love with you, yet you torment him and encourage him every chance you get!"

Hermione was appalled. "I do not show Sirius..."

"Do you honestly enjoy being touched by the undead?" Pansy questioned quietly, taking a step toward her. "When you come into contact with him... anything personal that belongs to him... doesn't it feel like the very tips of your fingers...your very being has been suddenly iced over by a numbing chill..."

"What would you know about it?"

"I know what my master thinks of him. At the moment... if Sirius served his true purpose for being in this world now... he would be serving the Dark Lord."

"Your master..." Hermione stressed with a sneer. Hermione was certain that Voldemort told his followers a great many things, more than half of which were either false, exaggerated, or half-truths only to serve his means.

For all that he was, she couldn't think such things of Sirius.

"I didn't give him that title willingly," Pansy responded defensively, "or even with an ounce of reverence. I have to say it... feel it, even. It is the only way."

"For you," Hermione finished.

Narrowing her eyes, Pansy shook her head slightly. For the first time in a very long time, Hermione felt stupid.

"Of course, *for me*." Pansy raised her hand, derisively flicking her fingers at the House crest on her cloak. "Why would you feel such obligations?"

Obligations.

"I..." Hermione closed her mouth as she instantly thought of the Order. It was different... yet in some ways, the same. Hermione was not forced to blindly devote herself to someone who proclaimed to be the master of all. She had willingly and gladly made the choice to devote her dedication to the Order and to the Headmaster.

The blindness came after.

"Obligations... are not foreign to me," Hermione said carefully.

"Your obligations," Pansy sneered, "are not fueled by survival. Nothing that I do, I do to serve anyone or anything but my own interests."

"You could."

Pansy snorted.

"Keep Remus happy," Hermione said forcefully, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"What?" Pansy paled again, as a soft girlish look came to her eyes.

"Remus would die for the Order. I have no doubt of that. Many of us would. Just make sure he feels pleasure... contentment, before it comes to that."

"That is all I ever want to show him." Pansy took another step toward Hermione.

"Then your obligations aren't very far off the mark from his... or mine."

Pansy clenched her jaw. It was evident that she desired to say something biting, but she at least had the grace to turn back toward the forest.

"Remus is out there... isn't he?" Hermione asked softly.

"He is."

"Do you know why?"

Pansy paused as her shoulders hunched. Hermione knew she didn't have right to ask such things of someone who was the very opposite of a friend. But Pansy meekly replied, "He's finally decided to confront his maker."

"Greyback?" Hermione gasped.

"Do not say his name to me!"

Hermione didn't feel true sorrow, so she wasn't going to insult the girl by forcing herself to say the words, but she did have the tact to refrain from asking more questions while diverting her eyes.

"I haven't seen him since... Hogsmeade was weeks ago... Oh... Remus."

The Head Girl in Hermione wanted to console the pitiful student before her standing ankle deep in snow... but she couldn't.

Her Head Girl rules and responsibilities did not typically apply to Slytherin house. Snape always made it a point to handle that house completely on his own.

Hermione was suddenly overwhelmed with the intense feeling of finding Severus. She instantly turned from Pansy at the thought. She did not feel that she was being rude by not saying goodbye. She'd never said such things to Pansy before, and she truly doubted that the Slytherin would appreciate it now. Hermione reasoned that the retreating sounds of her boots against the snow were adequate enough.

"My, my, my," a deep, silky voice drawled behind her. "Miss Granger outside *playing* with her peers. How juvenile."

Hermione slightly inhaled at the sound of his voice but caught herself in time to smoothly turn around.

"Good afternoon, Professor Snape." She flashed him a bright smile.

He merely raised an eyebrow in response.

"Have you come out of the dungeons for a bit of mid-morning ice skating?"

Severus sneered at the sight of the students gliding across the lake, screaming at the top of their lungs as they carelessly fell over each other.

"Certainly not. The very idea of me partaking in such a thing is beyond absurd."

Hermione wanted to laugh at such a predictable response from him, but she suddenly became distracted. She gazed up at him in bewilderment. "~~Why~~ are you out here?"

Quickly growing sullen, Severus clenched his teeth before glaring at her. "Isn't it obvious?"

A heated flush spread up her neck, blossoming in the apples of her cheeks. Her face seemed to grow hotter when she realized that Severus had probably noticed. "I must admit, I feel a bit... anxious... speaking to you in the open like this."

"Now, why is that?" he asked silkily, intentionally taking an intimidating step toward her.

"It's very hard to stand next to you without touching you," she whispered.

Severus made an effort to speak as low as possible and looked at her with the full force of his black eyes. "So, I take it, you still desire to be in my presence?"

It didn't seem possible, but the bright red flush deepened in Hermione's cheeks. Her eyes gazed up at him as her hands clutched the scarf around her neck. "I desire a great many things... all of them involving you," she said earnestly.

Severus carefully looked around before closing his eyes and shaking his head disappointedly.

"Sentimental foolishness," he spat under his breath.

"Severus," Hermione gasped.

He whirled around again, searching any and every face within eyesight to see if someone had caught her slip. "Do watch your tongue, Miss Granger. I have a very low tolerance for insolent schoolgirls who forget their place."

The spell had been broken. Now, she couldn't remember why she had ached for his company only moments ago. Hermione turned her face away from him. "Don't do this," she whispered.

"Don't do what, Miss Granger?" he asked in mock bewilderment.

Hermione didn't have the patience for his games anymore.

"I asked you a question, Miss Granger."

Shooting him a frustrated glare, Hermione whirled away from him and turned in the direction of the castle.

Severus visibly flinched. His first instinct was to thrust his hand out and snatch her by the arm to face him, but he knew he couldn't touch her in the open. So he was forced to just watch her walk away.

Ignoring the cheerful calls of Ginny and Luna as she passed them, Hermione resolutely stalked up the castle steps and across the Entrance Hall. She heard hurried footsteps scrape behind her, but assuming it was just a student, thought nothing of it.

The second Hermione was about to cross the entrance to the Dungeons, her arm was instantly seized, dragging her down the dark steps.

"Wha...Professor Snape?" Hermione gasped in surprise.

"Do shut up, Miss Granger."

He looked furious.

He must have heard her mouth open because his face whipped around, glaring with an unspoken threat if she made a scene by fighting him.

Swallowing hesitantly, Hermione's feet tripped under her as she attempted to keep up with his pace.

Finally reaching his office, Severus yanked open the door and thrust her into the darkness.

She finally screamed once the door closed behind them.

"Dammit, Severus! What the hell do you think you are doing...?"

Eyes glinting with bottled emotions, Severus was upon her in an instant. He grasped Hermione by the waist, yanking her toward him as he silenced her with his lips.

Hermione opened her mouth in welcome, humming contentedly. She raised her arms around his neck and put all of her energy into the kiss.

Severus was breathing deeply through his nose, but Hermione found herself growing more relaxed by the moment.

"I'm sorry," she breathed as soon as she had the chance to draw breath.

"Whatever for?" he asked scornfully.

"Severus," Hermione scolded half-heartedly as he leaned down to press his face against her neck. "You know very well what I mean..." She suddenly gasped when his cold hand closed around her bum. "What are you doing?"

"Removing your knickers."

"Why?"

"I feel that I will not be able to think of a single thing that you could do to make up for your behavior unless they are removed."

Hermione reluctantly smiled to herself at his playfulness but then suddenly remembered something.

"What if," she said delicately, "I asked you... not to?"

Severus stiffened. Pulling his hands out from under her skirt, he returned them to her waist. "Do you... wish me not to?"

"I'll answer that in a moment. But if I said no, what would be your response?"

"I would stop immediately," he said with a frown.

Hermione smiled warmly, which made Severus even more confused.

"And what if I told you not to stop?" Hermione timidly grasped his hand, bringing it back to her bum. She felt very awkward doing something like that, here in his office, and it showed.

"Hermione," Severus chastised with a shake of his head.

She took a step toward him. "No, hush. Tell me, Severus. What if I told you not to stop, to always remove my knickers when you please..." Holding his hand against her, she pulled him as she took a few steps back toward his office desk.

She hesitantly lifted herself to sit on top of it, closing her thighs around his hips.

Severus sharply pulled both of his hands away from her, folded them across his chest and glared disapprovingly at her.

Her attempt at seduction was obviously futile. Deciding to act with her emotions, like she always did, Hermione exhaled deeply and closed her arms around his stiff body.

"I do not understand why you are so stubborn about this. I'm not going to hurt you, Severus."

"What?" he gasped.

"I promise never to reject you."

Severus quickly pushed her away. She gasped at the movement and at his sudden hold on her chin.

"Do mind your tongue, Hermione. I do not wish you to say such stupid nonsense merely because I desire it."

"I'm not saying nonsense! And I say these things because I desire to do them! I feel them...you desire it?"

Severus' upper lip curled as he clenched his eyes.

Growing angry, Hermione grasped the hand at her jaw, forcing him to pay attention. "Why would you even bother with me if you did not want me to be around constantly? If I didn't want anything consistent, then I wouldn't be bothering with you! Or maybe you don't have any faith that a *silly schoolgirl* could choose one, and only one, lover!"

Clenching his jaw, Severus looked menacingly at her. When he still didn't speak, Hermione attempted to push him away.

But he pushed himself against her, preventing her from getting off the desk.

"Let me go!"

"NO."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want you to leave!"

"What?" she asked in disbelief.

"Good God, Hermione, what the hell do you want me to say?"

She timidly looked down. "N-nothing," she said weakly. "That's enough for me."

Her chin was powerfully seized again, but not in anger. After all this, she was shocked that Severus desired to kiss her. And as he did, forcefully and energetically as he pulled her thighs around his hips, every muscle in her body was on the verge of melting.

*** **

It didn't stop when Remus came to Hogwarts.

He cringed as he remembered this. In his hurry through the Forbidden Forest, Remus was thrashing his way under low branches and past thick brush. He was furious with himself for continuing to review every single childhood memory with a self-analytical eye.

It didn't stop, and he was too ashamed to admit it to anyone.

When Remus had begun his attendance at Hogwarts, he was instantly surrounded by an aura of safety.

Now, he believed that it was the suddenness of true fearlessness without resolution that had injured his mind further.

Dumbledore had been extremely kind to him as a young boy, especially in carefully preparing the Shrieking Shack for his transformations. The students had been safe from Remus, and he had been safe from Greyback. To this day, the wards surrounding that dilapidated building continued to prevent Greyback from entering it.

Remus had been safe, and he had been very assured of that at the time. However, after a few years had passed, and he'd entered young adulthood, he still hadn't been able to wrap his brain around it being that easy.

He'd had no closure.

So Remus had gone to find it.

The first time Remus had gone to him after being rescued from *his* cave, Greyback hadn't even looked at him.

Regardless of the fact that Remus despised the man with every feeling in his body, it was shocking how Greyback had not needed... or wanted... Remus in the least. Remus was appalled that he could feel such emotions as well as indignation that Greyback had very easily found another.

Remus had been hysterical that night. What could be worse than a man three times your age forcing himself on you for years? To Remus, a young man with a tortured mind and spirit, it was the unfamiliarity of rejection in a relationship that he'd never had the option to choose in the first place.

As sick and demented as it was, Greyback had been the only one to give him any attention when the rest of society had sneered at the sight of him.

And Remus easily recognized that he'd never enjoyed one minute of it.

Yet, being cast off before he'd had the chance to push, to cry, to truly say 'no'... he just couldn't understand it.

He had been safe at Hogwarts. He could have gone on with his life... but he hadn't. So when Greyback had first rejected Remus, Remus had gone back again, in search of the horror that was all he knew.

And he'd never forgiven himself for it.

Forcing himself to remember all this, Remus ran through the Forbidden Forest in search of John's cave.

Not him, Remus thought. He hadn't known the first thing about saving himself when he'd been young, but he would guide John... even if it meant losing his sanity.

Finally locating John's cave that night, he walked straight toward him without giving a single glance to anyone else hovering on the edges of the fissure. Remus' arm was suddenly seized with a pincer grip.

A furious growl rumbled deep in Remus' chest. He whirled around, alarming his attacker by crushing his hand against his throat.

He gasped and coughed until Remus allowed him to speak.

"You are not allowed to touch him!" a scratchy voice snarled. The man was older, ragged, with a deep scar blazing down the side of his face, which must have been the reason he only had one eye.

"Yeah? Says who?" Remus snarled in response.

"Don't be a fucking idiot! You know very well 'says who!'"

Remus pushed himself away in disgust. "Oh... so it's all right for Greyback to touch him, is that it?"

Grimacing, as if to prevent himself from vomiting, the older man quickly diverted his eyes to the floor. "I never said..."

"Tell me," Remus bellowed. "Do you and the others enjoy watching as you do nothing? Is this how you choose to live?"

"What choice do we have!" a young voice screamed from the side.

Remus whirled around at the familiarity of the sound. The other inhabitants quickly shrank back, pressing themselves against the stone walls, leaving John to stand alone.

Remus took a calm step toward the boy. "What do you mean?"

Clenching his jaw, John searched for the courage to speak further. "L-Look what your kind has done to us! It is because of the wizard's banishment that we live this way!"

"My kind?" Remus repeated. "I AM your kind."

Remus didn't mean to yell, and instantly regretted it at the hurt look on John's face. Scathing remarks hissed in response to the comment. Distinguishing the word 'pet' in the mix, Remus turned toward the fearful crowd.

"YES! I am your kind, but I am also theirs. It doesn't need to be 'us' versus 'them.' Regardless of what they call you, you have made the choice to live like a pack of wild wolves."

Remus turned toward the old man who had grabbed him. "But not one of you deserves the title of such a respectful and powerful creature. YOU ... all of you... are nothing but sheep! Following blindly what one man says because you think it is the only way to feel protected... secure. But secure to what? Did you know your master... Greyback... is a pet himself?"

Remus was forced to scream louder at the sound of hisses and cries. "All of this... all of you are here and lectured at for the benefit of the Dark Lord... Voldemort... to be his pawns."

Some of the hissing turned to growls. But making out a few calls for silence emboldened Remus.

"Yes, I said his name. I am not his follower. I am not his lamb, so I am gifted with the ability to speak it so freely... but what of your master, Greyback?"

"What of him?" someone challenged far in the back.

"He will NEVER speak that name! Your master can't because he isn't a master... he can't because he's the one that does the kneeling. And all of you are following the orders of a low foot soldier. He cannot, and will not, have the means to deliver anything he promises you."

"You don't know what he promises us!"

"He made the same promises to me!"

Breathing hard and fast with adrenaline speeding through his veins, Remus found himself facing attentive ears and silent mouths. "I, on the other hand, I make no promises. I am merely here to inform you that your life doesn't have to be this," he waved his hand wildly around him and marched toward the opening of the cave.

"Yes, go out there into the wizarding world and you will be ridiculed. You will be sneered at and probably even spat at. But what it truly comes down to is... you will have normalcy. You can own property, possess normal jobs... I taught at Hogwarts for goodness sake! But honestly, how much horror do you think is waiting out there for you, when you would gladly choose this as the alternative?"

Exhaling deeply, Remus turned his back to the cool, clean air and marched toward his attentive crowd. "I have no expectations from you," he said earnestly, shaking his folded hands in the air. "I just want you to know your options... that you *have* options. Even the beast can be an option."

All of the heads around him snapped up. Some glared in reproachful anger, some in curious awe. But for the first time that Remus could remember, he had an audience who was willing to hear about the Wolfsbane Potion.

Author's Notes: As you can see from the author's notes in the last chapter, there is a specific scene that was promised but obviously isn't here. This chapter just grew so large over the past month that I had to push that scene to Chapter 20 (which is completed!). I apologize for any expectations.

-My very gifted beta, **melusin**, has been a godsend.

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book xi, Line 485.

-Next up: Pansy can't stand the distance she has had with Remus, and takes things into her own hands... under the watchful eyes of Hermione. Sirius confronts Dumbledore and Snape confronts himself. Death Eaters, raids, Forbidden Forest, lies and revelations.

Chapter Twenty - Think Only What Concerns Thee and Thy Being

Chapter 23 of 36

With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began. And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. Eventual SS/HG. Alternate Universe, HBP death disregarded.

Nominated for best fic in the 2007 OWL Awards: Fire & Ice Category (SS/HG), Romance Category, Angst Category, and A/U Category

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: All hail **melusin**.

Everything, to Harry, had been a blur: his classes, his conversations with his friends, even sleeping.

He was having trouble remembering exactly what he'd been doing two hours ago because it didn't feel like hours, only moments.

Harry just had far too many thoughts clamoring in his mind. He was constantly analyzing his dreams and conversations with Dumbledore while everything he was physically doing felt mechanical.

Like this essay.

He knew he was writing it. He could close his eyes and still hear the tip of his quill scratching across the parchment.

History of Magic had always been such a horrid subject for him. Before, without Hermione's notes, he would never have gained a fraction of the understanding that was required to pass.

He knew he was writing it, and he knew what he was writing was accurate. Harry didn't even attempt to question how or why. There was no reason.

It just was.

Merely reading a few general details from his book placed everything on the parchment: Sir Horatius Balder, The Knights Templar, Dualism...

And now he had a four foot essay.

Harry's left ear suddenly strained. Dropping his quill, his eyes clenched as he groaned under his breath.

Harry had come to his room for some peace and quiet to do his work, knowing that everyone else was gathered in the common room... when he heard his door slowly open.

The squeaking of the hinges hesitantly paused before creaking even louder as it was completely pushed open.

"Ah, hell," Harry groaned again. He fell back against his bed, dragging a hand over his eyes.

The bed-curtains were drawn, so he couldn't see who had come in... but there was only one person who would have had the gall to sneak up the boys' dormitory stairs and lack complete confidence upon entering his room.

Harry listened as his bed-curtains were pulled while the scent of floral perfume wafted toward him.

"Don't look so excited to see me," Lavender said scornfully.

"Good, 'cause I'm not happy to see you."

"*I can tell*"

Harry quickly hauled himself to sit up. Glaring at her, he didn't know what to make of this girl. Sure she was attractive, and Harry honestly believed that Lavender cared for him... until he reminded himself of what type of person she was by the way she treated everybody else.

"Look, Lavender, I really need to get this essay done. If you're looking for a quick shag..."

"A *what*?"

"What else do you want to call... what we did?" Harry snapped.

Lavender glowered reproachfully as she crossed her arms over her chest. "Call it whatever the hell you want, just make sure you get my name right next time."

"Next time?" Harry scoffed. "I really don't think that it was a good idea to begin with..."

"I didn't come in here to fuck you, Harry!"

Harry's brows rose skeptically.

Lavender angrily opened her mouth, but then quickly shut it. Glancing at the floor, her lower lip unwillingly protruded as she whispered, "I... I'm pregnant."

*** **

"Rise, Severus."

Snape forced himself to steady his shaky knees, smoothly pushing himself away from the floor without the aid of his hands.

He was the only Death Eater in the dusty, old parlor room. His nerves instinctively tensed at the idea. The Dark Lord made it a point to only see his followers alone when he had assignments to give... or punishments for not completing them.

Severus was already up to his neck in orders, which only left...

"How have things been... developing at Hogwarts?" the creature hissed, intentionally forcing a casual tone.

"Fairly... tolerably, Master." Severus may have been blessed with the gift of rising, but he knew he should keep his eyes fixed to the floor.

"And things with Sirius Black?"

Two red eyes behind thin slits glared malevolently at the Potions master. Even though Severus was not looking into them, he had enough memories to accurately imagine the sight. Something told Severus that the Dark Lord already knew the answer to his own question.

Here it is then.

Severus inhaled steadily, but his mouth went dry. His body tensed at this odd reaction. He was usually very adept in controlling such things. "Not as well as we both would like, Master."

"I know... or Black would have been to see me by now. You haven't given him the book yet, have you?"

"I..."

"Haven't even developed a plan on how to arouse Black's desire to read it. Far too preoccupied with the tempting flesh of your young students?"

The Dark Lord did not know it, but every vein in Severus' skull throbbed, rushing his blood straight to his heart.

Control.

Keeping a lid on his emotions and fears was the one thing Severus had ever truly had an absolute grasp on. Or, he at least liked to believe he did. Severus' expression and thoughts revealed nothing to the Dark Lord, but that didn't prevent his body from reacting under his voluminous robes.

"I apologize, Master. I fear that I do not follow..."

An invisible force smacked Severus across the face. He fell to the floor and instinctively froze, fighting the temptation to touch his throbbing cheekbone.

"WRONG CHOICE OF WORDS!"

Severus inhaled, but he wasn't asked a question, so his response died at the tip of his tongue.

"Yes, Severus... you DO follow. You may be too pathetic a creature to complete the simplest tasks I ask of you... but you do, AND WILL ALWAYS, FOLLOW!"

"Yes, Master," Severus responded meekly.

The Dark Lord took an abrupt step away from his threatening stance over Snape. He remained silent as he treaded around the room, knowing that each unsure moment was torture to the man kneeling on the floorboards. "I have spoken to Wormtail."

Perfect.

"He has informed me that you have been having an overnight visitor... a student from Hogwarts. He did not recognize her..."

Severus silently exhaled in relief.

"... but he has been around the castle long enough to recognize its students. What do you have to say about this?"

Snape kept his eyes glued to the hem of the Dark Lord's robes. "He has gone mad with starvation."

"Why are you starving him, Severus?" The Dark Lord did not sound angry in the least. If anything, he appeared somewhat amused and disappointed that it hadn't been his idea.

"Because I can."

The creature's pale, white lips rose into a twisted smile. Placing a cold, scaly hand on the Potions master's chin, the Dark Lord glided his thumb along the base of Snape's jaw. "Prove to me that you are not deceiving me... that you are not shagging a student."

Severus remained entirely emotionless, but dutifully raised his hazed eyes. The Dark Lord inspected all of the thoughts and memories that Severus allowed him to scrutinize.

Hermione may have been the first that he had protected from Pettigrew; she was one of many that Pettigrew had happened upon in his bed, so this bout of Occlumency was fairly easy.

He presented the Dark Lord with an array of whores and slags for his perverted merriment.

And to further prove to the Dark Lord that he was not distracted by underdeveloped flesh, none of the women he displayed possessed any of the youth and vitality...*that my Hermione has.*

His eyes widened.

"Very well, Severus," the Dark Lord purred. "I am satisfied that you do not have any distractions at Hogwarts that are keeping you from giving me all of your devotion and attention. But the next time I speak to you... Black had better have spoken to me first."

"Of course, Master."

As he was dismissed that evening, Severus was overcome by a suffocating uneasiness. Which, of course, would be completely understandable. He had a very short timeframe to convince Black to read the book before his next summons. But Severus' feverish thoughts were completely removed from the mangy mutt.

My Hermione.

The same phrase had repeated in his mind, but not as a statement...it was a question.

By the time Severus arrived in his dungeon chambers later that night, he had repetitively gone over every reason why he would give the Gryffindor such an endearment. Severus had always scoffed at such useless sentimentality within any form of human interaction. Not even the women he slept with were gifted with compliments during copulation.

But it doesn't have to be an endearment, does it?

Merely saying her name forced a wave of thoughts and images to flood his senses: the sound of her breath panting in his ear, the sight of her breasts rising toward him as her back arched off his mattress, the feel of her bum against his thighs as he slammed into her.

"I promise never to reject you."

Severus groaned as her voice involuntarily entered his head... again.

His eyes suddenly narrowed as he gulped a tumbler of whisky.

No, it definitely didn't have to be an endearment at all. And he wasn't deluding himself in the least. She was his Hermione... and no one else's. And if Severus had his way, which when attempted, he always did, she would always belong to him.

It wasn't sentimental prattle, he told himself, merely an accurate term for a possession.

*** **

Sirius was very surprised that the Headmaster had finally allowed him a meeting. Since the beginning of the year, Sirius had been repeatedly requesting to speak to the old man, but all of his efforts had been denied.

But now, sitting in the seat normally reserved for students, perched in front of the Headmaster's desk, Sirius desperately wanted to leave. Yet, he found himself repeating the same question for the third time, hoping to hear a different answer.

"NO, you cannot leave the castle," Dumbledore said reproachfully.

The fact that Albus refused to meet his eye when he spoke to him in such a scolding manner infuriated Sirius.

Sirius growled under his breath. Furiously thrusting himself out of his chair, he leaned over the desk.

"You can't keep me here, old man." The challenge was very evident in Sirius' voice.

Dumbledore coolly looked back at him.

"Just look at you," Sirius chided further. "I wouldn't be surprised if you croaked any minute."

"That was an order, Sirius," Dumbledore stated casually.

Another demand with a dismissive glance at anywhere but him.

"If listening to you means doing such nonsense, then maybe I don't want to be in your *little Order* anymore."

Dumbledore shook his head in frustration. Slowly removing his spectacles, he pinched the bridge between his brows. "You sound no different than an adolescent boy... no different than you did twenty years ago. Foolish, selfish and pointlessly headstrong. Why must you be so difficult?"

Dumbledore's question was to himself, not Sirius, and they both knew it.

"Why can't you just be honest with me for once?" Sirius countered. "What's the real reason you seem hell bent on keeping me locked up at any chance you get?"

"It is far too dangerous for you to be away from the safety of the castle, or the Order."

"Dangerous?" Sirius laughed indignantly. "I know how to fucking take care of myself!"

"You don't know anything!" Dumbledore barked, pushing himself out of his chair. "You thought you knew what you were doing... leaving Grimmauld Place... and it brought

you death at the Department of Mysteries! And now... you don't even know what you are... which is also a result of your stupid, selfish choices. Even in death, you can't do what's right!"

Sirius paled. Hand in his pocket, his fist clenched around the watch in his palm. His hysterical eyes darted around the office, stopping here and there at heavy metal objects within his reach. Shaking away the absurd temptation of attacking the Headmaster, Sirius exhaled deeply in the hopes of grasping a clearer thought.

"What I do know is that my life has been one miserable hell after another... because of you! Shall we finally lay everything on the table, Albus?"

Dumbledore calmly turned his face away as he sat back down. "I haven't the faintest idea what you are talking about, Sirius."

"Twelve years!" Sirius screeched his familiar mantra, slamming his fist on the table. "You left me in Azkaban for twelve years! You *knew* I was innocent. You're an Occlumens for fuck's sake. You interrogated me! You knew I never committed those murders..."

"Sirius..."

"Admit it! I don't know what sick game you were playing, but from the moment I left Hogwarts, I felt your disgust... your distrust. Because of YOUR advice, James and Lily made Pettigrew their Secret Keeper instead of me. Admit it! Admit that you wished I'd never escaped Azkaban to begin with!"

"YES, I WISHED IT!"

Sirius found himself violently pushed back, either by the wandless magic of Dumbledore's rage or his own shock, forcing himself to fall clumsily in his chair.

"Look at you!" Dumbledore continued. "Insanity has run in your family for generations! It's sucked the life out of your cousin Bellatrix, just as it consumes you now. Since you were a boy, it has been very clear that you are a nasty, unstable creature with less sense than a dog!"

Sirius inhaled sharply, but it was a few moments before he would remember to breathe.

Like all of the students who had once idolized and looked up to Albus Dumbledore, Sirius' image of him had been shattered. But he had discarded those broken shards of this man a very long time ago. Now, hearing what the Headmaster truly thought of him, Sirius' budding indignation that had been based solely on suspicions turned to pure abhorrence and malice.

Dumbledore did not feel guilty about this confession, but made an effort to calm his voice. "You do not, and cannot know what hell you would be thrust into without my guidance and protection."

"Stop!" Sirius snarled, hands clenching against the armrests of his chair. "Don't try to convince me that you have my best interests at heart. Make your demands upon me and be done with it! Your reasons behind your tyranny mean shite."

"Very well. Go back to your office and your rooms. Complete your lesson plans and teach my students. And yes, you are NEVER to leave the castle unless you are escorted by a member of the Order. Even when you leave in rebellion, you will still be followed by a member of the Order."

Sirius didn't bother looking at the old man as he said all this. He was already halfway to the door before Albus had finished.

After slamming it with all his might, he pounded down the spiral staircase while screaming a stream of expletives.

*** **

Severus had been putting off this assignment much longer than he should have. The moment he had stolen that Dark book from Borgin and Burkes, he should have immediately devised a plan that would result in Sirius finally reading the damned thing.

Except, Severus had been far too curious for his own good. Truthfully, he felt absolutely no desire in obtaining any type of power through a text with the word 'Horcruxes' written along its spine.

He just wanted to be very certain exactly what type of power he was willingly handing over to that dog.

It might as well have been written in Gobbledegook for all he'd got from it.

Severus' nightmares had become fairly unbearable anyway, so he didn't mind parting with his late night reading.

He sighed as he pushed open Sirius' office door.

Just drop the book and go, he told himself. That was all it would take. Something told Severus that Black wouldn't have the common sense to question a foreign book suddenly appearing out of the blue. Especially if it was attached to an anonymous note that read, 'Dumbledore does not wish you to read such things.'

Severus was aware of Dumbledore's obvious scorn and irritation at Sirius. And Severus was certain that Sirius was aware of it as well.

There was no other way. Severus knew that he could not just hand the book over to Black.

How obvious would that be?

Regardless of the fact that this was what the Dark Lord wanted, and regardless of the fact that this was also what Sirius wanted, whether he knew it or not, Sirius would only question the situation for however long it would take him to recognize Severus.

Sirius would roll his eyes disgustingly as Severus pushed a book into his hand with the word 'help' exiting his mouth in the process.

Severus did not want to 'help' Sirius in the least. And Sirius would be suspicious of any type of assistance from Severus.

With very, very good reason, of course.

No, Severus' idea was much more practical. Break into the mutt's office, leave the damn thing on his desk, and hopefully no one will notice him coming or going.

There. Problem solved.

"What are you doing in here?" a feminine voice asked behind him.

Severus cursed under his breath as he rolled his eyes. Of course... it couldn't be that easy, could it?

"Nothing," Severus said emotionlessly. With the book already tucked under the mess of papers and lesson plans on Black's desk, Severus smoothly turned towards Hermione. He marched toward her, grasped her by the hand and pulled her through the door.

When it was closed behind them, Hermione paused. "Did Dumbledore send you in there?"

"What have I told you about asking ridiculous questions?" Severus snarled as he brushed passed her.

"And what have I told you about refusing to give me answers?" she immediately countered, trailing behind him.

Severus whirled around. He graced her with an indulgent and patronizing smirk.

She fidgeted before asking, "Does that... follow the orders Dumbledore's placed upon you?"

His eyes narrowed. "What orders?"

"To protect Sirius from the hands of Vol..."

Severus' upper lip curled as he took a threatening step toward her.

"... the Dark Lord!" she corrected loudly, raising her hands defensively. "Please tell me... that whatever you were doing in there... it wouldn't please *him*."

Nothing ever truly pleased *him*.

"Tell me..."

"Are you asking me to tell you the truth, or what you want to hear, Hermione?"

"The truth, of course. All I ever want from you is the truth."

Sending a quick glance over his shoulder towards the classroom door, Severus closed the space that separated them. He slowly wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her against him. He brushed his index finger down her cheek, along her jaw, and across her throat.

Hermione earnestly wondered if he was addicted to the sensation of her pulse quickening.

Severus' voice spoke very low. "I can understand why you would have... questions about finding me alone in Sirius' office. But I also have a question for you."

"Yes?"

"Why have I also found you... alone... in Black's office?"

Hermione opened her mouth but obviously hesitated.

"Yes?" His hand closed around her throat during his delicate probing of her flesh. He wasn't hurting her. In fact, his fingers were barely touching her, but the situation could change instantly, and it all depended on her answer.

"I followed you," she said softly.

Severus emotionlessly gazed down at her. She assumed her answer was sufficient when he finally lowered his hand to pull her closer.

"Would it please... him?" Hermione asked again.

Severus silkily murmured in her ear. "May I see you.... late... tonight?"

"I...What? Um, of course..."

Severus pressed his cool lips to her forehead so she couldn't see him smile.

"No, Hermione... it wouldn't."

*** **

Another raid.

It was another day, Severus thought, so why not another raid?

His own sarcasm was very evident in his head.

Severus honestly couldn't understand how his brother Death Eaters constantly found the energy to make the most of these situations.

He yawned as the sound of Lucius' pretentious drawl echoed in the background. Severus' idea of entertainment typically involved a bed.

"I found something in your wardrobe," Lucius whispered viciously. Even draped in typical Death Eater robes, the pompous wizard intentionally moved primly in the hopes that his social class would be obvious to all. His every moment showed clear disgust towards the surroundings that were evidently beneath him.

Severus couldn't help smirking every time he noticed this. His reactions to the Muggle homes each and every time were exactly the same.

Shaking these thoughts from his head, Severus continued his stiff and looming stance against the daisy-papered wall as he easily ignored the cries and sniffing from off to the side. Typically, the longer he went without speaking, the more imaginative and hysterical his victims became.

"W-what is it?" the Muggle man gasped. He didn't know where to look, but the long, white-blond hair under that horrific mask kept grabbing his attention.

"Filth!" Lucius pulled something from within the inside of his robes, flinging it at the old man's feet.

The Muggle flinched in reaction. The pistol fell against the floor with a heavy, metallic thud, spinning by the barrel. He jumped back again as if expecting it to go off from the violence of the fall.

"So... it is loaded?" Lucius questioned triumphantly.

"Yes," the Muggle wailed. "Why do you ask? What do you want!"

The Muggle quickly fell to the floor, an invisible fist punching him in the stomach.

"Pick up your gun," Lucius snarled.

The smirk dancing on the edges of Severus' lips instantly pulled away. Regardless of the fact that Severus was already standing bone still, he froze at those words.

"NOW!" Lucius snarled.

The Muggle fumbled for his pistol.

Severus pinched himself under his robes. But it was pointless, he was certain he was awake.

For the first time in years, Severus turned away. He didn't know if it was Lucius' words or the Muggles standing before him, but he feared that he was going mad. Part of him desired to *Silencio* the line of children. Their hysterical cries and gasps for air rang in the back of his mind. It would certainly be a sound that he would continue hearing once they were all dead.

"Get on with it," Severus snarled at Lucius.

"I am," the blond wizard replied smugly. Lucius eyed the pistol in the Muggle's hand before turning toward the row of victims. Locating one that least resembled the Muggle man, Lucius' cold hands closed around her throat, yanking her away from the wall. Continuing with the fluid movement, he thrust his arm toward the Muggle, forcing the girl to fall by his feet.

Expecting her to scream... to wail, bile had coated Severus' tongue when she had gone silent the moment Lucius touched her.

"I'm in the mood to be very generous, Muggle. I noticed you have daughters, three to be exact by the number of little beds in that frilly room. But there are seven children standing against that wall. So here is your chance."

Lucius flicked his wand at the Muggle. Horrified, the man watched as the arm holding the pistol raised of its own accord.

"Oh, God... please, no," the Muggle cried.

"Kill her," Lucius continued, "in exchange for them."

Severus' eyes had unfocused, and he possessed no desire to clear his vision. He felt an odd vibration on the wall behind him, then a slow dragging sound followed by a limp thud.

One of them must have fainted.

"Well?" Lucius asked, his sickeningly polite voice dripping with hatred.

The Muggle couldn't gain a steady control on his sobs well enough to answer.

"Very well," Lucius sighed exaggeratedly. He quickly turned back toward the wall, yanking another child with his vicious grasp.

A flash of light from Lucius' wand forced Severus to close his eyes again. A throaty and wet gurgle filled the room. It was a sound that Severus knew all too well, so he didn't need to see it happen.

There were now two bodies lying on the floor, but only one was breathing.

The Muggle man was now on his knees, a series of pleas spilling from his mouth. Some of them were to the black-cloaked men standing in his hallway, some were to his Maker.

"I see," Lucius said matter-of-factly. "Shall I give you another demonstration that I am completely serious?"

"NO! Oh, God... ok... ok..."

"I am waiting."

The Muggle clenched his eyes and slowly raised his shaking arm.

The blast from the Muggle weapon startled Severus much more than he would have liked to acknowledge. But if someone had asked him if the scene was horribly grotesque, he would never have given an answer.

He couldn't.

He couldn't admit, not even to himself, that he had slightly turned his head and clenched his eyes in the same fashion as the Muggle who had pulled the trigger.

*** **

Her bedroom door creaked open.

Hermione was fast asleep, but she still jolted in alarm.

She froze, unsure if she should hide under the covers or continuing gawking at the shadow in her doorway.

Her eyes finally comprehended who she was looking at. Turning over onto her back, Hermione's body relaxed into her mattress.

Instead of demanding how he was able to enter her room, Hermione gazed worriedly before saying, "Severus? What is it? What's wrong?"

But she immediately closed her mouth after she said the words. To any other indifferent and pitiless eye in the school, a billowing black cloak on Severus Snape would always be just that. Hermione, on the other hand, instantly noticed the difference, and what he was wearing now were not the robes he taught in.

She pulled back the bedclothes. "Come here," she called to him.

Severus elegantly crossed the room in silence, removing his cloak and shoes in the process before entering her bed.

A flutter of nerves danced in Hermione's stomach when Severus threw the covers over the both of them. She instinctively drew back, but he gently reached out and pulled her against him, sliding his hand down the length of her body as he kissed her soundly.

A strangled whimper escaped her throat when he deepened the kiss. Effectively pushing her to lie flat on her back, he moved himself over her.

Sliding his hands up her thighs, Severus lifted her nightgown past her hips. Stifling a growl, he lowered his face to her exposed stomach. Grating his teeth against her skin, he hooked both fingers into her knickers.

By the time Hermione realized he had removed them, he was already brushing up against her and pushing into her at the same time.

Her body arched toward him.

He slowly thrust into her twice more before pausing. Breathing heavily, Severus leaned against his elbows as he silently looked down at her.

Hermione hungrily listened to his panting breaths. Lifting her arms off his shoulders, she slid her hands through his hair... and smiled.

Severus released a deep breath in response, lowering his head onto her breasts.

She gathered that he wanted silence, so Hermione adjusted her legs until she was comfortable without suggestively moving herself against him. Lowering her chin to look down at the top of his head, Hermione frowned at his expression.

His eyes were open and blankly staring ahead.

She softly slid her fingers through his lank hair. Hermione marveled at the feel of it and at the feel of the man lying on top of her.

"What did you do?" she asked softly.

When he didn't immediately respond, Hermione did not feel inclined to press further, nor was she hurt at being ignored.

Severus inhaled slightly, and the breath paused in his chest.

"Nothing," Severus finally whispered.

Hermione scratched the base of his neck, lowering her chin to press her lips against him.

"Then it sounds like you didn't do anything wrong."

More silence.

She was so relaxed, Hermione had forgotten that she had asked him a question. His strangled voice spoke against her breast.

"I'm starting to think that 'nothing'... can be the worse type of 'wrong'."

Author's Notes: Melusin has had her hands very full and was still able to beta this very quickly.

-The Death Eater raid scene was borrowed from a Holocaust/WWII movie. In the movie, a different type of father (priest) was given a similar choice, but for the life of me I can't remember what the movie was called.

-I recently reread a couple of my favorite SSHG stories: *Sonata of the Spellbound* by A N Llewellyn and *Taking Over Me* by Snapesforte. Since these stories moved me, enough to consider attempting to write my own story, I feel like I must give credit to them. These are my favorite stories for a reason; it wasn't intentional, but I feel like the characters created in those two stories vastly inspired the ones I created.

-*Sonata of the Spellbound* can be found at <http://ashwinder.sycophanthex.com/viewstory.php?sid=10221> but it is abandoned.

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book viii. Line 163.

-Next up: Pansy can't stand the distance she has had with Remus and takes things into her own hands... under the watchful eyes of Hermione.

Chapter Twenty One - The Torturing Hour Call Us to Penance (Part 1)

Chapter 24 of 36

With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began. And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. Eventual SS/HG. Alternate Universe, HBP death disregarded.

Nominated for best fic in the 2007 OWL Awards: Fire & Ice Category (SS/HG), Romance Category, Angst Category, and A/U Category

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: Been a very busy Christmas season, and **melusin** was wonderful enough to find time to beta this chapter.

Sirius didn't enter this 'dream' quite as apprehensively as he had in the past. Despite the pulling in his gut at his abrupt and never-ending fall, and despite the thunderous rush of wind against his ears, he still didn't suffer his usual dread.

He almost wanted to smile.

But nothing would change his intense loathing for his *mentor*. She was the messenger, after all.

If she'd had a physical body, he would not have resisted his urge to strangle her.

"Pleased to see me, I see." The woman's voice echoed against the molten rocks.

Sirius narrowed his eyes. Glancing up, he eyed complete blackness, and glancing down, he was presented with exactly the same. He couldn't see her yet, so he had to wonder if she was able to read his mind.

The moment that last sentence completed itself in his head, she somersaulted into his line of vision, giggling repeatedly.

Sirius glared mutely at her.

He hated coming here. Regardless of the perplexing and overwhelming confidence that was filling him, nothing would ever change that. He hated constantly being reminded of the day he'd fallen through the veil back at the Department of Mysteries. Endlessly falling at mind-numbing speed.

He loathed recalling his initial dread for the impact of this fall. And he cringed as his own voice echoed in his mind, screaming variations of prayers that begged for the bottom to finally end it all.

"Still pitying yourself, I see."

"What do you want, now?" Sirius snarled.

"Just making sure you know your options. Such resiliency... as I have said before, I can't believe you have lasted this long."

"Well, apparently, I have."

"Then I began to wonder," she continued, obviously ignoring his attempt at rudeness, "that perhaps you were just too ignorant to realize *you had* options. All of the others I had before you knew their...well, that they had at least two choices. They either had to wind their pocket-watch for the rest of their lives... or stop."

She giggled again. Green mist darted toward Sirius as if she were trying to affectionately touch his face.

"Living day to day..." she cooed quietly. "Winding and winding... gasping each and every time their last breath almost escaped... but, they all eventually stopped winding their pocket-watches."

Sirius' hand instinctively darted into his pocket, his fist clenching around his watch.

"But you..." she laughed. "*Sirius Black*..." Every syllable in his name was exaggerated, as if he were some celebrity whose history could be repeated on command. "You seem to enjoy your daily torment. I could... end it all for you."

She finally stopped circling him, coming very close, practically whispering in his ear.

"Would you finally like to see the end of this pit?"

Sirius' breath hitched in his throat. Glancing below his feet, Sirius had to admit to himself that it would be tempting to finally know.

Shaking his head, his long hair whipped against his face. It wasn't what he wanted. Not anymore, at least.

"No."

She reached toward him. This time, Sirius recognized the fluid movement. She was reaching for his pocket-watch. Glaring at her, he jerked away, possessively clutching his pocket against him.

Eyes dancing in excitement, she gleefully beamed at him. "Then it is done! *You do* know your options."

He lifted his chin tenaciously. "Yes, and that..." He nodded towards the darkness before his feet. "... is not one of them any longer."

The woman did not say anything, but her pitying smile was not lost on him.

"We'll see...."

Sirius jolted awake, drenched in his usual cold sweat.

Forcing himself to lie against his mattress, he kept his eyes closed to remind himself where he was, concentrating on the erratic and heavy heaving of his chest.

Finally relaxed, he carefully lifted the huge tome off his torso.

His hands blindly fished around his bedclothes. Finally locating the crumbled piece of parchment that had accompanied the text, he shoved it between two yellowed pages, marking his place in the tome.

Pulling the duvet up toward his chin, Sirius kicked his leg over, turning on his side, shoving the bulk of the bedclothes between his legs. Carefully placing his second most precious possession on the bed-side table, Sirius reached for his pocket-watch.

Hermione. He sighed, lovingly caressing the cool metal.

*** **

Hermione shifted in her seat, silently staring at the front of the room.

Potions today had been fairly effortless. As per usual, she had been the first to finish the potion, which had left her bored and very uneasy.

Professor Snape hated seeing his students doing nothing. It didn't matter if her potion was complete and absolutely perfect. None of that mattered when an Advanced Potions student was found to be aimlessly twiddling her thumbs.

Hermione turned the page of her Potions text, giving the appearance of studying. Her finger nervously curled the corner of the page. Leaning against the worktable with her chin in hand, Hermione slyly looked up to the front of the room through hooded eyes.

It was always amazing... and irritating... how disciplined Professor Snape was...that he was able to be only Professor Snape to her in each and every class.

Sometimes, Hermione felt like she was burning holes through his skin with the fierce gaze of her eyes. Hermione was certain that Snape knew she was staring at him, and that he knew exactly what was on her mind every time she did.

Hermione released a frustrated groan under her breath, rubbing her palm across her forehead.

Relax, Granger.

The faint hiss of a whispered conversation caught her attention.

Hermione slightly turned on her stool, glancing over her shoulder towards the back of the lab room.

Pansy's eyes darted up at Hermione's movement, meeting the Gryffindor's stare before sending a quick look to her side.

Nott was entirely preoccupied with completing his potion. So engaged, he was unaware of Blaise, who was sitting behind Pansy, whispering urgently in her ear.

What's going on now? Hermione wondered. The idea of all this being absolutely none of her business didn't even cross her mind.

"Who the hell are you eyeballing?" Ron insultingly whispered directly into her ear.

Hermione flinched in reaction, her stool almost tipping completely over. Grasping frantically for the rim of the table, Hermione yanked it too hard, sending her cauldron toppling across the surface.

"NO!" she screamed as red-hot Blood Replenishing Potion oozed over the edge of her table and splashed across the stone floor.

The room gasped in unison.

"QUIET DOWN!" Professor Snape snarled from his desk.

Face covered by both of her hands, Hermione's stomach tensed as Professor Snape's chair scraped against the floor.

"I do believe hell has frozen over," his voice drawled directly in front of her. "That would make your score for today... a zero... would it not, Miss Granger?"

Hermione's hands began to shake. Perfect... her potion had been perfect! And he could clearly see that it was, too, regardless of the fact that it couldn't be bottled and labeled!

"I asked you a question, girl."

"Yes, sir," Hermione barked from behind her hands.

After a short pause, Professor Snape sneered, "Miss Granger, you are to stay after class and clean up this mess. Do I make myself clear?"

Sighing in defeat, she finally lowered her arms. "Y-yes, sir," Hermione answered weakly, unable to meet his eye.

"Bottle and label your potions and leave them on my desk!"

Severus ignored Hermione as her fellow students gathered their belongings and gradually filed out of the classroom. As Harry and Ron were the last to leave, they both shot her a pitying glance...Ron's was more of a guilty grimace, actually...before turning down the corridor.

Being far too distracted as she tidied up her own table, Hermione did not notice the growing smirk on Severus' face.

She jumped as the classroom door slammed shut. Quickly glancing over her shoulder at the door, Hermione caught a movement out of the corner of her eye. Her expression startled at the sight of Severus' wand raised in front of him.

"Come to me," he commanded smoothly as he turned toward his desk.

Hermione looked questioningly at the mess covering her worktable and the floor. "But I thought you wanted me to..."

Severus swiftly waved his wand once more, and the room lay spotless before her eyes.

"Severus?" Hermione narrowed her eyes at him.

"I think," he drawled, "I have something else in mind for your... punishment, Miss Granger. Now, come here."

Hermione exhaled with a shake of her head before steadily walking around her worktable. "*Hermione*," she scolded, reminding him that they were alone.

"Oh, no," Severus purred. "I fear that you must remain 'Miss Granger' until... you leave."

Skeptically arching a brow, she waited obediently to the side. Severus took a few steps back and pointed to the floor between himself and his desk.

She shot him a look from the corner of her eye. Hermione slowly walked around his wide desk to stand before him. She crossed her arms impatiently, leaning on one hip.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Manners, Miss Granger." Severus sneered. "Turn around."

"Why?" she asked steadily.

"Because I told you to."

Hermione swallowed heavily. She recognized the blazing gleam in his eye. It was the exact same one she had been sending him all through class. Despite his odd habit of refusing to call her anything but 'Miss Granger' while in this classroom, she had a feeling his punishment wouldn't involve *typical* teacher-student conduct.

She hesitantly turned around, facing his desk.

"Very good." He chuckled deeply. "Let's see how well you can continue to obey authority."

Hermione heard a rustle of fabric as he stepped closer to her. She felt very vulnerable with her back to him and wished to turn around.

Sensing her impulse, Severus harshly spoke in her ear the second she fidgeted. "I did not give you permission to face me," he said sternly.

Hermione nodded mutely.

"Now," he drawled. "Place your hands on the desk."

Hermione lifted her hands out in front of her but faltered.

"Obey me, or I will be forced to dock points, Miss Granger. As a matter of fact, here is your chance. Accept a loss of twenty points, and you may leave. Or... continue as we are. Which will it be, Miss Granger?"

Bastard!

Hermione wasn't sure if she should react to this situation as a student or as a lover. Instead, she reminded herself that she was both to this man, and it left an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. She swallowed one more time before leaning forward, placing both hands flat against the desk.

"Very good." He wasn't patronizing her. Severus actually sounded pleased indeed.

He stepped closer.

"Spread your legs apart," he whispered roughly.

Hermione complied immediately. Her breaths were quickening at the realization as to where this was going. She was nervous, uncomfortable, and excited: a very confusing mixture.

"Now, lean forward... slightly."

The moment Hermione submitted, Severus took another step toward her. Her legs nearly buckled at the feel of his calloused hands lightly skimming the back of her knees. His touch continued upward, gathering her school robes in the process.

The classroom suddenly seemed very bright. Too bright, in fact. Insecurities clamoring in her mind, she slightly pulled away from him when the hem of her robes lifted past the elastic of her knickers.

"Severus, what if someone were to come in?" she asked quickly.

She sharply inhaled when his hand suddenly closed around the inside of her thigh.

"If you are that worried, Miss Granger..." His hand pulled back, tracing his fingers along the elastic of her knickers. "... then, by all means accept the loss of points..." Continuing on his determined path around her arse, he slipped one finger under the elastic, following it until his hand was completely between her legs again. "... and leave."

Hermione's knees were shaking beyond her control. She hissed when his fingers began a slow and determined rhythm.

"So, do you want to leave?"

"N-no," she gasped.

Severus' hand paused. "No, what, Miss Granger?"

"No... sir!"

Severus' only response was a throaty chuckle. He began the slow dance of his fingers once more.

Closing her eyes, Hermione lost herself to the smooth rhythm of his agile fingers. Elbows shaking, she didn't realize that she had been thrusting back against his hand until she heard his ragged intake of air. She whimpered disappointedly when he suddenly stopped.

"Patience," he breathed throatily.

Both of his hands closed around her hips before he slipped his thumbs under the waistband of her knickers. That feeling of overexposure returned again at the feel of her underwear being slowly dragged under her bum until they wrapped around her upper thighs.

"You, Miss Granger, have a deliciously rounded arse."

Hermione instinctively pulled away at the idea of having her bum under inspection.

Grasping her hips, Severus yanked her back.

"I did not give you permission to move."

Just when she desired nothing more than for him to be much closer, Severus wrapped an arm around her waist. His hand trailed across her quivering stomach before slipping under her blouse. Lowering his face into the hollow of her neck, Severus pressed his chest against her, encouraging her to completely bend over.

Warm, bare skin pressed against the back of her thighs.

A high pitched mew escaped Hermione's throat as Severus slid the palm of his other hand up her back, slightly pushing her against the surface of his desk.

She instinctively arched, thrusting her hips against him.

"Yes," Severus groaned. "Yes... just like that."

Severus' hands disappeared between her thighs. Spreading her moisture with the tips of his fingers, he easily guided himself into her.

Hermione was taken aback by the foreign pressure of this angle. Her arms blindly reached out in front of her until she was able to grasp the rim of the desk.

Severus steadily pushed into her.

Gathering a handful of hair, he slightly tugged, instructing her to tilt her head back.

He slowly pulled out of her.

Pressing his jaw against her temple, Severus wrapped his arm around her, pushing up once more.

"Relax," he breathed into her ear.

"All-all right," she gasped as he filled her.

"Am I hurting you?"

"No," she lied.

"This will never feel pleasurable for you if you continue to remain so tense," he purred into her ear. His voice, his breath, hot and panting were doing wonders in the area that his cock was occupying.

Still holding her around the waist, Severus placed his other hand flat on her thigh. He slowly slid his palm against her heated and soft skin... so close, yet not touching her where she wanted. Her muscles clenched when his knuckles barely skimmed her wetness.

"Stop," he groaned, voice catching as he pushed into her once more. "Stop fighting me," he whispered, pressing his face into the back of her neck.

As if on cue, Hermione's muscles instinctively clenched around him. He groaned louder.

"As much as I enjoy it, my dear, this will remain uncomfortable as long as you keep doing that."

Hermione smiled slightly and intentionally squeezed hard.

"Fuck."

Holding her tighter, Severus' steady thrusting built into a quick rhythm.

Listening and feeling him panting on the back of her neck was making Hermione increasingly warm. Relaxing finally, she groaned at the sounds of his exposed upper thighs smacking against her bum.

She fell forward against the desk, her legs no longer able to hold themselves against Severus' repeated plunging. Her inner muscles clenching once more, Hermione groaned in pleasure... to her surprise. The pressure was starting to feel wonderful, and yet, it wasn't enough.

She couldn't help the moans and gasps escaping her mouth.

Severus' growled in response. Inspired with a new energy, he pushed into her energetically and deeply.

She moaned again... but in pain. Her body cringed within itself when Severus pushed hard against her cervix.

He instinctively froze.

His hand squeezed against her stomach. Pushing his sweaty brow against her ear, he tentatively whispered, "Are you... uncomfortable?"

"I-yes," Hermione gasped.

Severus' other arm wrapped around her waist. "Let's go," he said, not allowing her to move of her own accord as he pulled her weight off his desk. Turning her around, he easily lifted her by the bum, half tossing her over his shoulder.

"Severus!" Hermione gasped.

When he started walking, Hermione clutched the robes on his back, praying that he wouldn't drop her.

Leaving the classroom behind, Severus passed through an adjoining door. Hermione pulled her eyes away from the stone floor; she watched his office pass her vision and then disappear when a second door slammed in her face and disappeared into the wall.

When she realized that they were in his personal rooms, she finally spoke up. "Severus..." she said worriedly, "Harry and Ron will be waiting for me at dinner. I think perhaps we should..."

"I couldn't give a toss," he said dismissively, interrupting her.

She cringed at his words, eyes closing in pain.

Seconds later, when she reopened them, she looked up at her Potions master as he laid her on his four-poster.

Removing his robes, Severus slowly descended on top of her, sliding both hands up her bare thighs. Wrapping her leg around his hip, Severus lowered his face to her.

Hermione turned her jaw away. The idea of kissing him didn't seem appealing at the moment.

She couldn't see him, but she could feel his eyes staring at her, searching her face.

"Are you... rejecting me?" he asked slowly.

"Never." As the word exited her mouth, Hermione was unexpectedly overwhelmed. She meant what she had said, and it... hurt. It hurt because she was starting to believe that she was the only half-naked person on this bed who felt such things. Wetness rimmed in her eyes.

Severus pressed his lips against her throat as he slowly pushed into her. One hand glided down her motionless thigh, pulling it around his other hip.

He reached out, sliding his hand through the hair at her temples, urging her to face him.

"I lied," he whispered, pressing his lips against her throat.

Barely comprehending what he'd said, Hermione turned toward him, nudging her jaw against his face. The ache that had been gathering in her eyes escaped, rolling down her face.

Pulling back slightly, Severus thrust into her again. He groaned and pressed his face against her cheek. Feeling wetness, his tongue darted out. He exhaled at the taste of salt.

"I lied, Hermione," he said again.

Hearing those words, Hermione's body sagged into the mattress as she groaned in pleasure and relief. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she slid her hands through his hair. Raising her hips off the mattress, she met his every thrust.

Her tears never stopped. The more he kissed and whispered in her ear, the quicker they trailed down her face.

*** **

"Pregnant?" Ron gasped. The full implications of that one word hit him as the last syllable rolled off his tongue. He dumbly bent his knees, sitting on his four-poster.

"Yeah," Harry said hollowly.

Ron's mouth opened and closed. Finally looking up at Harry, he blurted out the first thing that popped in his head.

"Didn't you wear a johnny?"

"I-no," Harry admitted shamefully. "It sort of... just happened."

"Fucking hell."

Harry dropped his face in his hands.

"What are you going to do?" Ron gasped. "No! What *is* she going to do?"

Turning his face slightly, Harry blankly stared at the floor. "I don't know what to do. She said she won't get rid of it... and I don't blame her. I wouldn't want that."

"This is bad, mate."

Expecting an exclamation of agreement, Ron repeated his words a bit louder.

"Is it?" Harry slowly said to himself before turning to Ron. "Is it really?"

"Harry... you're seventeen-years-old! Of course this is bad!"

Harry remained silent. He skeptically looked at Ron, shaking his head slightly.

Ron blanched, swallowing thickly.

"I've been thinking about it since she told me. It doesn't sound so terrible. Having a kid... a family."

"HARRY..."

"Listen to me, Ron!" Harry snapped, slamming his hand against the wooden bed rail. "You grew up with the family the size of a Quidditch team, so I can understand why this would be something you would dread. But... I've never had a family. The idea of having one now... it doesn't sound so bad."

"Okay, I get it," Ron groaned, rolling his eyes. "You want to be a number one dad."

"I dunno... maybe more."

*** **

"You asked to speak to me, sir?" Hermione poked her head into Sirius' office, eyes dancing around until his voice revealed his location.

"Sir?" Sirius gasped by the window. He dramatically placed a hand over his supposedly hurt heart.

Hermione rolled her eyes. She indulged him with a smile as she took the last remaining steps into his office.

"Shut the door, please."

Her hand clenched around the doorknob so hard, her knuckles turned white.

In her haste to make a decision, she imagined the worst case scenario being the result of him noticing her reluctance.

Hermione closed the door behind her, standing with her arms crossed over her chest.

A gleeful smile pulled at both corners of Sirius' mouth. "Sit." He pointed to one of the two armchairs directly in front of the hearth.

Tilting her head to the side, Hermione skeptically looked at him but still walked to sit in her offered seat. He seemed to be acting much stranger than usual...which was alarming for a man verging on the edge of an emotional meltdown.

Hermione's lower lip vanished behind her teeth.

Grin plastered across his face, Sirius crossed the room toward his desk. Leaning against it, he lifted himself to sit coolly on its surface.

Hermione's brows rose, obviously showing her wonder as to why he couldn't just sit in a chair like a normal person.

"This isn't a school-related meeting, Hermione. No, this is about something much more important."

She calmly looked up at him. The last time she had been alone with this man, she had saved him from near... death... and then held him as he cried.

Sirius coughed roughly, clearing his throat. "I want to... um... thank you... that is, for what you have done for me. I don't know... how much... you know...."

"Sirius..." Hermione interrupted, lifting her palm. "It's okay. You don't have to explain."

Unbeknownst to each other, they both instantly remembered the fact that Hermione had wound the watch for him. Hermione felt a little embarrassed, but Sirius stared at her through harsh eyes.

"Why do you know... so much?" he questioned darkly. Sirius quickly slid off his desk. "No, let me rephrase that. What do you know?"

The only thing Hermione allowed to flinch was her heart. Was she allowed to tell him this? Is it what Dumbledore would want?

She opened her mouth and inhaled. "Now," she said reassuringly, "don't be angry... but I don't think Dumbledore meant to reveal anything...."

Sirius noticeably prickled at the mention of the headmaster's name.

"Most of it I guessed based on various hints!" Hermione added quickly. *And saw... in the brothel* She groaned when Sirius' naked body instantly flashed in her mind.

"Guessed... what?" he snapped.

Too angry to think properly now, Hermione jumped from her seat. "I saved your life, if you remember, so you'd better watch how you speak to me!"

She was waving her finger in his face again. Somehow, Hermione's scolding always brought him back to his senses. Gazing at her meekly, he shrugged his shoulders, urging her to continue.

Taking advantage of the opportunity to put some distance between them, Hermione paced his office, refusing to look at him directly. "I know... that you received your... your pocket-watch on the... other side. I know you must constantly wind it to maintain your... health. And I know that if you don't wind it, you will... die."

Sirius had stiffened as she tried to speak but was now shaking his head frantically. "You knew all that..." he said to the floor, "and you still chose to help me? Can stand to be near me?" His head snapped up to gauge her reaction.

Hermione honestly couldn't understand the emotions behind this. "Why wouldn't I?"

Sirius darted towards her. Again, Hermione had the better sense not to recoil in the presence of a mad dog. "Do you ever know what I am?"

"N-no," she said quietly, looking up at him. "Do you?"

Sirius paled, pulling back. "I could be a monster; I could be an unnatural atrocity...."

"Or," Hermione interrupted, in the hopes of calming him down, "you could be none of those things."

Sirius took a measured step toward her.

"What am I to you?" he asked huskily. His hands darted out, fighting against his instinct to touch her.

"A..." She swallowed. "A friend, Sirius."

He began shaking his head once more. "That's all?"

"We've already covered this...."

"But *you* know things about me that no one does. *You want* to know things about me that no one does. You understand things about me that no one can!" Finally following his emotions, he thrust his arms out in front of him, fingers wrapping around her arm.

Hermione stiffened.

"You helped me... where no one else could possibly know what to do," he said, his voice growing deeper and quieter as he pulled her closer.

"Sirius, please stop."

"You don't know it yet...."

"Let. Go." Hermione finally attempted to jerk away.

He shook her. Hard.

It only made her flail twice as fiercely. Loosening his hold, his hand clenched around her jaw as he tried to draw her face closer. "But you'll love me... eventually."

Hermione could taste his breath, and it turned her stomach.

"No!"

A swift gust of wind blew Hermione's hair as Sirius' office door was kicked open.

Sirius instantly pushed Hermione away from him, turning toward the intruder.

Severus Snape malevolently hovered in the doorway, his robes billowing around him in his haste.

"Professor Snape!" Hermione's voice clearly gasped in relief, and it was obvious to everyone standing in the room.

Sirius' expression instantly twisted from panic to bitterness.

"Am I... interrupting something?" Severus drawled. Crossing and uncrossing his arms, he stood rigid with a wand in his hand that he hadn't been clutching moments before.

"NO!" Sirius took a step toward him. "So you can fly back to your cave the way you came!"

With every word Sirius spoke, Hermione moved an inch closer to her Potions master.

"No..." Severus repeated mockingly. "So you usually have young girls in your office who scream 'stop'?"

"How dare you make such insulting accusations!"

Severus' upper lip curled. "Then perhaps... I heard wrong." His head slightly inclined to the side as he said, "Miss Granger, I need to speak to Professor Black... alone. Please wait out in the corridor."

"But, sir..."

"I said NOW, Miss Granger!" he barked, finally gazing at her.

"Yes, Sev..." Hermione cleared her throat before correcting, "Sir!"

Chest heaving, Sirius gazed at Snape with a perplexed expression as Hermione exited his office. Either Black had caught Hermione's slip or he was covetous of the authority Severus had over her.

Both turns of the situation made Snape openly display a very pleased smirk.

"Go to Albus!" Sirius snarled nastily. "See if I care! I doubt he'll believe any of your ridiculous accusations."

"We aren't fifteen anymore... if you have cared to notice. I very much prefer solving my own... dilemmas." Casually glancing at the floor, Severus crossed his arms as he leisurely rounded Sirius. "Besides... you're the *black*-sheep, now." Severus' smirk grew nastier. "Fitting, isn't it?"

Vainly trying not to let Severus' words affect him, Sirius shouted, "How the fuck is this *your* dilemma?"

"Stay away from her!" Severus immediately barked, secrecy be damned.

Sirius attempted to smile knowingly. "Why would I want to do that?"

"Well... the fact that she was screaming 'no'... means without a doubt that she finds you absolutely repulsive."

"She does not!"

Severus dramatically groaned as he rolled his eyes. "It's like arguing with a five-year-old," he said dismissively, whirling to exit the office. "It makes no difference," Snape said dryly over his shoulder. "I'll just forbid her ever to be alone with you, anyway."

"Forbid her?" Sirius scoffed.

Severus completely ignored him as he stormed through the Defense classroom.

"What right do you have to make demands of her?" Sirius barked.

Knowing it would drive him mad, Severus continued to hold his tongue.

"Why would she even listen to you?"

The end of Sirius' hysterical tirade briefly echoed in the corridors as Severus exited the classroom. He slammed the door angrily, startling Hermione, who had been fidgeting outside.

Nostrils flaring, he sharply turned his head, silently glaring at her through curtains of lank hair.

Maddeningly chewing her top lip, she walked toward him, mouth open and ready for an explanation.

He quickly lifted his hand. "Do not say a word. Go to my office."

"Won't you even listen to me?"

Severus lunged at her but caught himself in time to search the corridors for prying eyes.

"In my office, Miss Granger!" he whispered harshly.

Hermione half-screamed in frustration and stomped her way towards the dungeon corridor.

Author's Notes: Of course, no teacher/student story is complete without inappropriate classroom sex. I have always wanted to write this hot and heavy cliché, yet still remind the readers that they *are* teacher and student.

-Story beta'ed by the very talented **melusin**.

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book ii. Line 90.

-Next up: The second half of this chapter.

Chapter Twenty One - The Torturing Hour Call Us to Penance (Part 2)

Chapter 25 of 36

With the climax of the next great battle drawing near, the key players who have the ability to halt or bring about potential destruction take center stage, as they always have in every great war since time began. And Dumbledore knew all this, but not when it truly mattered. Eventual SS/HG. Alternate Universe, HBP death disregarded.

Nominated for best fic in the 2007 OWL Awards: Fire & Ice Category (SS/HG), Romance Category, Angst Category, and A/U Category

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: Must thank my incredible beta, **melusin**, for her super-human editing skills in the midst of a pet crisis.

Dumbledore's feet slowly shifted against the floorboards. Inhaling sharply, a piercing pain shot up the 'good' portion of his back. He clumsily grasped his bed-side table to steady his footing.

"Fool," a disgusted voice chided.

Releasing a defeated exhale, Albus' shoulders hunched as he attempted to crawl into bed. His eyes remained downcast, avoiding the argument that threatened from the founder's portrait. Dumbledore didn't possess the energy for any intense discussions at the moment.

But that mattered very little to Godric Gryffindor.

"Made any monumental life changes today?" the school founder harassed further.

Turning his back to the portrait, Dumbledore carefully eased his body to sit upon his extravagant bed. "Enough."

The ever demanding and authoritative Headmaster wasn't present tonight. That one soft whisper of a word pleaded for mercy.

His request was answered by a thunderous laugh. The raucous sound bore down on him, bringing with it a rendition of memories, reminding him of even his tiniest mistakes.

"What more do you want from me?" Dumbledore finally barked. "I stopped taking the potion... I have accepted my fate!"

"YOUR FATE?" Godric roared, all humor gone. "If you had accepted your *fate*, you would have died from the rot given to you by the Peverell ring!"

Dumbledore cringed. Raising a wrinkled hand to his face, he brushed his fingertips over his brow.

"If you had accepted your fate," Godric continued, "you would have died in the cave! Your self-centered attempts to alter the inevitable have been useless."

"We've been over this before."

"AND YOU NEVER LISTEN TO ME!"

"My ears have not succumbed to decay yet, Godric. There is no need for you to yell."

"This war could have been over by now," Gryffindor said simply. He was past reprimands and warnings now. The school founder truly believed that the worst had been achieved.

A colossal delay of time and nature due to the hands of this blind man.

So, simply forewarning the old goat was nowhere near enough anymore. No, laying blame and barking out particulars of Dumbledore's mistakes felt much more satisfying to Godric. Albus *had* stopped drinking that monstrous potion, after all.

Dumbledore had to force himself to inhale steady breaths. Not to slow his breathing, but to remind his body to take another. This topic was just... too much.

And it frightened Albus. He vividly remembered the day he had reveled in these long debates with Godric. Now, fear throttled his heart every time the sandy-haired man opened his mouth.

"COMPLETELY over and done with... if you had never interfered. Harry would have had his boon for over a year! He would have had the power to defeat Voldemort..."

"Or fall to him," Dumbledore interrupted.

"It does not matter! His fate was decided long ago."

"Of course it matters!"

"To *you*. It matters to *you*, Albus. Who are *you* to decide so much for everyone? You have the same responsibilities that the ancestors in your house had before you... nothing more or less. You cannot change fate!"

Dumbledore's shoulders shook uncontrollably. He fought the grief and desolation that choked his throat, but to no avail. "I don't just want Harry to win... I want him... EVERYONE to grow old without witnessing the rise of another Dark Lord! How many loved ones can someone lose in war... repeatedly?"

Sitting back in his ornate chair, Godric coolly looked down at the crumbling man before him. "The Balance exists for a reason. Everyone connected to the Dark and to the Light are already on the path made for them... They are all on the path that will cause either Potter or Voldemort to fall. It's been mapped out since the beginning of time. What right do you have to destroy it?"

"War shouldn't be the norm!"

"Don't preach to me! I care not for your idealism. Fine... let me rephrase that last question. What on earth makes you believe that mere humans have the ~~power~~ to change it?"

Dumbledore remained completely motionless for a moment. His good arm then slowly reached out, lightly grasping his duvet. Back still facing the portrait, Albus silently rested his head on his pillow.

"That's exactly what I thought," Godric sneered smugly.

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Hermione quietly followed Severus into his office, forcing herself to hold her tongue. She was seething with so much aggravation and fury, she feared screaming something that she would later regret.

What the hell is wrong with Sirius? her voice shrieked in her mind.

She almost wanted to remind herself not to swear, but she was just too distracted to maintain that reprimand. Hermione was beyond a logical explanation for Sirius' behavior at the moment. She couldn't understand why he didn't *get it*. She didn't love him. She didn't want to even think of the possibility of such a relationship with him.

And she had said all this to him. Over and over again.

And then there's Severus! How dare he yell at her after everything that had happened. By the set of his jaw and the twitching vein in his temple, Hermione knew he was angry as well. But he had better place that anger where it belonged, if he knew what was good for him.

Hermione didn't realize it, but she'd glanced at Severus the second that threat entered her mind, her eyes vividly spelling it out for him.

He merely raised an eyebrow, closing his office door behind them. Severus turned from her, swiftly flicking his wand to reveal the silver handle in the stone wall.

"Black's office... again, Hermione?" he asked dryly. He didn't wait for her response as he disappeared into his private rooms.

Groaning in frustration, Hermione marched after him. She spoke up the moment she stepped beyond the door. "What do you mean 'again'?"

Severus ignored Hermione as he walked straight to the opposite side of the room, busying himself by a tall cabinet.

Hermione couldn't see what he was doing, but the soft sounds of glass upon glass were not lost on her.

"Jesus, Severus, it's not even dusk yet! Must you have a drink~~now~~?"

Severus fluidly twirled around, smirking, with a very full wineglass elegantly grasped in his hand. He focused his eyes on Hermione, slowly looking her up and down as he leisurely raised the crystal to his lips. He swallowed three large gulps, then held the glass out to her.

She disgustedly narrowed her eyes. "No thanks," Hermione hissed. "I'm trying to cut down."

Turning from him, she covered her face with her hands to prevent herself from screaming.

Circles.

Her every moment for the past few months had been one large circle after another. Repeated and continuous highs and lows with Severus. The highs were mind-numbing ecstasy, but the lows continuously made her cry. She danced in circles with Sirius even, moving from fear to compassion in seconds, which recurred almost daily.

She didn't even want to get into her dealings with Dumbledore. That man had to have invented the art of talking in circles.

Hermione rubbed the palms of her hands into her eyes so hard, a blinding white light peppered the edges of her vision.

Her body jerked at the feel of a hand wrapping around her hip. How~~dare~~ he touch her as if nothing was wrong?

Spinning on the spot, she met Severus' insulted scowl with one of her own.

"You still haven't answered me," she said quietly.

"What part of 'again' didn't you understand?" Snape immediately retorted, crossing his arms.

Hermione was aghast.

"What else am I to do when a *Professor* requests a meeting with me?"

"I didn't know it was customary for Professors to request meetings in the middle of the fucking night!" Severus immediately clenched his eyes after he said this. Growling, he turned away.

Wide-eyed, Hermione curiously gazed at him before gasping, "Is that what this is all about?"

Severus was obviously resentful towards her for going to Sirius in the middle of the night. Based on the memory that he had basically robbed from her mind, Hermione was certain that he knew nothing had happened between herself and Sirius. But the only reason he was aware of this evening was due to his *second* uninvited intrusion into her thoughts. Given all that, she didn't think he had a right to be cross with her.

"You're paranoid," she snapped.

"Excuse me?" he instantly snarled, whirling around. Lip curled, he stormed towards her, forcing her to step back until she bumped into his settee.

Swallowing, Hermione defiantly raised her chin.

Severus placed his hands on either side of her, fists clenching into the upholstery. "Do *not* insult my intelligence, Hermione. I didn't accuse you of being intimate with Black, nor do I possess any doubts of your feelings for him. But I can resent your feelings for what they are. Just the fact that you even bothered to *check up* on him pisses me off!"

"You already know the reasons behind my concern."

"Don't give me that crap about Albus' convoluted requests upon you. Had he never placed any responsibility upon your shoulders, I would not doubt your Gryffindor compulsion to poke your nose where it doesn't belong!"

"If you care to remember, my Gryffindor *compulsion* brought me to you!"

Severus slightly pulled back. Jaw clenching repeatedly, he growled under his breath and finally pulled away.

"I refuse to prattle away like a jealous schoolboy. Do not make me waste my breath. If I tell you not to be alone with Black, DON'T be alone with him. Obviously, from what has just happened today, I am not saying this for nothing. Would it have been *that* difficult to go to Minerva or myself to request an excuse... a meeting to override his?"

Snape ended his furious pacing about the carpeted stone to stand before Hermione again.

Breathing heavily, she kept her face turned towards the floor.

Severus growled as he sharply brushed past her to sullenly sit on the settee Hermione was perched against.

Straightening herself up, Hermione opened her mouth but then quickly closed it. Truthfully, the alternative Severus had recommended had crossed her mind, but Hermione just didn't want to admit to herself...and especially to Severus...that she was... curious... as to what Sirius wanted to talk about.

Her body visibly sagged in defeat.

"You're... right. I should have..." Her whisper cut off to relax her breathing and gather her thoughts. Hermione determinedly walked around the settee to get closer to him.

Hermione tentatively lifted her arm in the air but jerked back when his face sharply turned from her.

Edging closer, she raised her arm again. Softly sliding her hand through his hair, Hermione waited for Severus to unwind his legs and uncross his arms to invite her onto his lap.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

Severus continued to silently glare at the flames dancing in the hearth. His eyes narrowed cruelly... but his legs and arms were now ready for her perch.

Hermione eagerly snuggled into him. Severus humored her by wrapping his longer-fingered hand around her thigh.

Turning her face into his neck, Hermione brushed his lank hair away with her nose. "But you really didn't need to overreact."

"Overreact..." he repeated in his sarcastic drawl. His index finger rhythmically tapped against her leg. "I think it's time I made myself perfectly clear."

Hermione sat up, openly intrigued as to where this was going. Severus didn't face her as he spoke, but his demeanor and tone of voice was completely void of mockery and cynicism.

"Before all this, Hermione, you were never one of my favorite students. This much, I am certain, you already knew. But I had also never liked you. I never respected you. Sometimes, I had to fight the temptation to curse your ever-energetic-arm into mush... Don't turn away from me. I'm talking to you."

Tisking insultingly, Hermione followed the light tug on her elbow. She did not bother masking the indignation in her expression.

Snape answered it with an intensely compelling gaze of his own. Suddenly becoming aware of the heated hand splayed across her back, Hermione swallowed timidly as her throat grew warm. Swiping her hand across her neck, her fingers nervously entwined around a stray curl.

"As I first said... that was before... You are not a mere student any longer." The hand on her thigh arched, his fingers digging into her flesh. "Complete indifference towards you may have been the norm for the past six years, but it obviously isn't now. Since I first possessed you, Hermione, all of my behavior...anything regarding you...cannot, and will not, be described as 'overreacting'."

Hermione let go of the small curl she had been twirling nervously with her fingers. Despite her pulling and tugging, the strand sprang back into its original coil, lightly resting on the flesh of her cleavage. Severus mindlessly watched all this until his vision focused, and he soon realized he was no longer staring at the curl.

Casually raising an elegant hand, Severus trailed his fingers across her flesh under the pretense of pushing that curl over her shoulder.

He gave no indication of noticing Hermione shudder under his touch.

"You asked this of *me*, Hermione."

"What did I ask?" she whispered.

Severus lowered his face to her throat. "The night you came to me..."

He was whispering much more quietly than Hermione thought possible for his voice.

His lips brushed against her ear. "...lying naked beneath me... body writhing as you begged..."

Hermione certainly remembered now.

I want to feel like I belong to you!

Severus brushed his hand down her leg, edging his fingers beneath the hem of her robes, only to brush it back up again. Lowering his face to her chest, Severus swiped his tongue across her warm skin before lightly biting into her.

"You asked it of me," he said harshly against the rise of her breast, speaking over her moan. "And I'm certainly going to deliver...with no intention of allowing you to change it in the near future."

Hermione gasped as Severus' hand continued to stir beneath her robes. Eyes rolled back, she vaguely wondered if he was threatening her. It certainly sounded like it. Perhaps, she should be analyzing where this was going, and whether or not a relationship with a man like this was even healthy.

Instead, Hermione said the first word that had been dancing in her mind. "Promise?"

Severus' body froze.

Reluctantly dragging his mouth off her tempting flesh, he almost ignored his niggling hesitation. He had somewhat expected Hermione to bristle at the way he was speaking to her, but the pitch of her voice sounded almost... hopeful.

Their bodies had slowly fallen to one side during his harsh whispers, and now he was completely lying on top of her. Pushing himself up slightly, Snape tried to think fast. Was he backing himself into a corner somehow by answering her? Giving far more of himself than he really wanted to?

He thought again of what he had just said. Looking down, he fully took in the luscious, young female splayed beneath him. Bare knee wrapped about the back of his thigh, her robes falling open around her.

Hermione groped his arse as she gyrated against him. Her teeth scrapped his throat, urging him to continue.

Snape hissed as he pushed back.

Severus then envisioned someone else being exactly where he was. Unwillingly, Black popped into his mind. He had to fight the snarl that threatened in his throat.

His hesitation immediately evaporated. He had meant his words.

"Without a doubt."

Severus slid his hand up her inner thigh, his hand quickly sliding under her knickers. Ripping the cloth away from her, Severus proceeded to demonstrate his promise by his actions.

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Late the next evening, Hermione mindlessly hummed a Muggle tune as she lost herself to her patrols.

She would glance up, take in her surroundings, and not remember how she had got there in the first place.

For the next two hours, she continued this, her footsteps echoing against the stone walls of the eerily silent corridors, persistently diverted by her thoughts.

Until... Hermione finally stopped bothering to search the castle for rule-breaking students and decided to busy herself with what she truly wanted to do.

Shivering, her muscles tensed as she continued standing by a window on the second floor, silently gazing out into the white-covered darkness.

Hermione pressed her palm against the freezing glass, sighing despondently. Her eyes danced across the grounds, searching for the dark and lithe form of her Potions master. She nearly pressed her cheek against the window, hoping to extend a few more inches of eyesight across the frozen lawn.

Severus.

She sighed deeply once more, condensation imprinting her palm against the glass.

Hermione had gone to his office earlier in the evening in hopes of... well, she really didn't know what, but she'd had to see him.

She always had to see him... From the time she awoke in the morning until she went to bed... Nothing else consumed her senses with such potency.

But Severus hadn't been there. Nor could she find him hours after that.

So Hermione had no choice but to assume that he had left the castle. Her stomach tensed just thinking about it.

Standing straight, Hermione didn't turn away from her search of the school grounds until her handprint had completely evaporated from the glass.

She turned in the direction of the massive marble staircase.

Smiling to herself, Hermione fantasized at the idea of Severus coming to her rooms sometime before dawn.

Just as he had last time.

Her fantasy involved two completely different scenarios: in one, Severus' face pressed into the hollow of her throat, his hands driving her mad as his cock plunged deep and hard.

Face growing warm, Hermione blindly grasped the stair-banister to steady her descending footsteps.

In the other fantasy, both she and Severus were fully clothed. But that minor detail did not alter the speedy patter of her heartbeat. He was lying on top of her, using the arch of her breasts as a pillow while he spoke freely. He would then allow her to affectionately glide her fingers through his hair as they discussed where he had been and what he had done.

Hermione was honestly starting to believe that that had been her favorite part of the night he had last come to her.

Severus had been obviously upset over his... Death Eater... activity, allowing Hermione to tenderly console him.

And she'd cherished every moment of it.

Then there was last night.

Eyes briefly closing in reflection, Hermione paused when she reached the last step of the staircase.

Hermione wasn't stupid. She knew exactly what type of man she had committed herself to. Severus was possessive, sarcastic, forceful, and passionate. Some of those attributes being much more scary than others.

But he was hers. And from his admission last night...and demonstration...Hermione was thoroughly and completely *his*.

Which was exactly what she had wanted from the beginning.

"Wait!" a voice resonated in the distance.

Hermione had to slap her hands around her mouth, forcing herself not to scream in fright. Jumping from the last step of the staircase, she spun in half-circles, immediately comprehending that she was in the Entrance Hall of the castle and what her next step needed to be.

The voice was hastily answered by a harsh shush.

Stomach twisting in apprehension, Hermione eyed the dungeon stairway as the voices grew louder. She ran across the dark Entrance Hall. Tucking the hem of her robes between her legs, Hermione huddled behind one of the sizeable stone pillars mounting the Great Hall doors.

"Just let it be, Blaise!" hissed a feminine voice. Only moments later, the voice was followed by the sight of an agitated Pansy Parkinson. Hermione instantly noticed the unusual sight of her fur-collared cloak and bulky snow boots.

Running up the dungeon steps, Zabini had finally caught up with her. "At least tell me where the hell you are going!"

"It's none of your business!"

"Is that right...? Maybe *Nott* would think this was his business!"

Pansy whirled around, hands clutched against her chest. "Would you really do that? *To me?*"

Rigidly straightening himself up, Zabini attempted to appear indifferent. He may have been angry, and he was very curious as to where Pansy was going... but he couldn't do that.

The muscles in his face finally pulled away from their stony defiance.

Pansy quickly reached out to give his arm an awkward squeeze. "Thank you," she said so lightly, it was almost a sob.

If those two students had belonged to any other house, Hermione would not have hesitated in coming out of her hiding place by now. She would have docked the necessary points and assigned detentions with their least favorite professor.

But, as she had learned long ago, things were done very differently with Slytherins. Hermione had always watched their preferential treatment, typically at the hands of Professor Snape, while she silently cursed all parties involved for the injustice of it all.

Some things however, as Hermione now knew, were just more important. Discovering what Pansy was up to and where she was going was much more significant than assigning detentions.

Hermione's heart beat wildly as she watched Pansy turn towards the large oak doors, obviously intending to leave the castle.

Should she stop her, Hermione wondered? It would be for her own safety, of course. Hermione had an idea where Pansy was intending to go... and who she was hoping to meet.

Hermione tried imagining herself in Pansy's situation. To what extent would she go... What dangers would she be willing to face if she knew Severus was somewhere remote, alone, and possibly in trouble?

Hermione quickly turned her face away. It was the only way she could physically allow a student to do something so seditious under her guard. She breathlessly listened to Pansy opening the Entrance Hall doors.

The sounds of Zabini's hesitant movements stole Hermione's attention. The instant the top of Zabini's head disappeared down the dungeon stairway, Hermione bolted after Pansy.

Yanking the doors open, she left the castle.

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Furiously shaking her head, Hermione continued chastising herself for her stupid mistake.

She clenched her teeth together hard, fearful of creating too much noise if she wasn't mindful of their chatter.

Her face momentarily scrunched in shame as she once again questioned her own decision making. Hermione knew she should have either made herself known to Pansy before they'd both entered the Forbidden Forest, or she should have remembered to place a Cushioning Charm on her feet before stepping into wild brush. Pansy had been completely unaware that she was being followed as both girls marched across the snow covered lawn.

But when they entered the jarringly silent Forbidden Forest, they hadn't walked more than half a meter before Hermione's boot crunched against a pile of dry leaves and twigs that weren't blanketed by snow.

Pansy had instantly increased her pace as a result.

Breathing heavily from exertion, Hermione now found herself practically chasing the Slytherin.

The perspiration her body created from the exercise was a blessing at the very least. Hermione felt slightly heated...if she made the effort to ignore the fierce wind pushing against her face. She was not as painfully numb as she had first felt running down the front steps of Hogwarts; the shock of stepping into shin-deep snow had also dissipated.

But Hermione recognized that her perspiration would become a horror whenever she stopped running, or if necessary, sat idly in the snow.

Snapping out of her musings, Hermione almost grew hysterical when she thought she had lost Pansy from her line of sight.

The very idea of Pansy being nowhere near her froze the breath in her lungs.

Hermione was fully tempted now to call out to her, to let Pansy know that there wasn't anything dangerous chasing the girl. But in her apparent fright, Pansy was already making enough noise as it was. Who knew what predators were out here, just waiting for potential prey to walk right into their path?

Hermione was also starting to wish she was back at the castle. Or in the very least, had Harry or Ron to participate in this madness alongside her. She cringed, thinking of how foolish and brash just running out into the Forbidden Forest had been.

But no, she thought again with a shake of her head. She couldn't allow Pansy to go running into the wilderness completely by herself. Remus was not only dear to Pansy, but he was also Hermione's fellow Order member. She had a right, if not an obligation, to worry over his wellbeing. She just hoped Pansy had some idea as to where the werewolves' hideout was located.

Werewolves!

Hermione's throat burned from suddenly gasping one large, cold gulp of air as her pulse pounded forcefully in her ears.

In her haste to be a companion for Pansy, and in her righteous desire to find Remus, Hermione had completely forgotten ~~why~~ Remus was in the Forbidden Forest to begin with.

Blindly thrashing past thick brush and under low branches, Hermione lifted her face toward the night sky.

But there was no sky. Only a very tiny peak of star-dotted blackness was visible through the snow covered canopy layering the colossal trees.

Unable to properly gauge the cycle of the moon, Hermione broke out into a cold sweat as she continued chasing Pansy.

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Snarling gleefully once more, Greyback raised his wand, finding childish pleasure in blasting an entire bush out of his path.

"Do remind me," Macnair irritably drawled behind him, "why we are stomping around the Forbidden Forest in the middle of the fucking night!"

Greyback quickly looked over his shoulder as he heavily marched through his newly cleared path. "I ain't goin' in that cave alone!"

"Is it not *your* cave?" Macnair laughed sardonically. "Really, Greyback... All of this just for fear of one man?"

A thunderous growl rumbled deep in the back of Greyback's throat. He spun toward his fellow Death Eater, his teeth snapping threateningly like a dog. "I ain't afraid of Lupin!"

Macnair froze, and for very good reason. Raising his chin, he haughtily looked down his nose at Greyback, attempting to feign an amused sneer. But it was all pointless.

The werewolf easily smelled his alarm.

Grinning to himself, Greyback's top lip pulled over his gums, revealing unnaturally sharp teeth. He reveled in the idea of this man fearing him, but both knew that his threat was an empty one. Even when provoked, Greyback was very disciplined against attacking a Death Eater who out-ranked him.

"It's ain't jus' Lupin," Greyback clarified, turning away from Macnair to march through the forest.

Self-consciously smoothing out his robes, Macnair stepped back into his superior stride, glaring malevolently at the feral man walking away from him. Fenrir trod the ground heavily footed, shoulders hunched over, with his long arms hanging oddly towards his knees. Macnair wouldn't have been surprised if this half-breed preferred running on all fours.

"Who knows how many of his other Phoenix fucker friends he has with him by now!" Greyback continued. "No... there's no way I'm messin' with that alone."

"And you called me?" Macnair scoffed. "I'm honored."

Greyback cackled gruffly in response.

Increasing his pace to follow the werewolf more closely, Macnair found himself fighting against the urge to warily eye every wide tree and rustling bush.

"What if you're right?" Macnair asked suddenly. His eyes widened at the noticeable apprehension in his voice. He cleared his throat roughly before purposefully snarling, "What if the entire Order is with the pack...? Perhaps just the two of us isn't enough."

"Then, by all means," said Greyback, "call whichever brother you would most like with us."

The Forbidden Forest surrounding the two men remained completely motionless and silent, so there was no one there to question the vindictive smirk that steadily stretched across Macnair's robust jaw. Lifting the left sleeve of his robes to reveal his forearm, he pointed his wand at his inactive tattoo.

If he was going to be forced to challenge, and hopefully kill, Dumbledore's precious Order members, who better to assist him than someone claiming a seat within those ranks?

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What Hermione had been dreading since she first stepped foot into the forest appeared to have happened.

She had completely lost Pansy from her line of vision. She couldn't even hear the Slytherin's frantic thrashing through the snow covered brush.

Hermione's heart dropped as every nerve in her body pulsed.

Nearly hyperventilating, other horrifying scenarios bombarded Hermione's thoughts: images of herself happening upon a pack of hungry werewolves, closing around her as she attempted to fight them off... alone.

Hermione stop running. She needed to steady her breathing.

Calm down, she told herself. Staggering over jutting roots, she braced her hand against a wide tree. Trailing her fingertips upon the rough bark, Hermione circled the base, frantically deciding which way to go... praying to hear sounds of Pansy's retreating steps.

Trying to release a steady sigh, Hermione quickly sucked in a breath again when her breathing threatened to be consumed by frenzied sobs.

Her ear suddenly prickled, hearing movement in the eerily quiet woods, much more rapidly than her mind was able to comprehend.

Wide-eyed, air frozen in her lungs, she snapped towards the sounds.

Hermione flinched away from her perch against the tree as the noises grew more violent. She plainly recognized that they were not the clamoring of a lone and frail girl.

And if it had been Pansy, the sounds shouldn't be coming towards her.

Adrenaline coursing through every vein in her body, Hermione listened to the urging of her nerves. She ran as fast as she could...in the opposite direction of the sounds.

She knew the branches were slicing against her face and arms, but she didn't feel it, nor did she care.

Just when she thought her lungs and legs would give out, a new fright stunned her senses. Nearly yelping in shock, Hermione was unexpectedly pulled back, her cloak snaring on a branch.

She immediately yanked and pulled against her binding, desperately trying to break free.

Hermione was harshly jerked again.

Her back pounded roughly against the frozen ground. A cold hand clasped around her mouth as the blessed sight of Pansy hovered over her vision.

Wide-eyed, Pansy pressed a finger against her lips, signaling the urgency for silence.

Ignoring the throbbing pain shooting up her spine, Hermione quickly turned over. Glancing at Pansy, Hermione snapped her attention in the direction the Slytherin was looking.

Both girls visibly tensed as the echo of snapping branches drifted towards them.

"Gods, no," Pansy gasped under her breath, her face lit in fright. "They heard us."

Holding her breath to listen, Hermione understood that 'they' had indeed heard them. The rustling noises, of obviously more than one person... or thing... was heading right in their direction.

Both girls knew 'they' were too close now to make a run for it. By the same method that Hermione had followed Pansy thus far, whoever was trailing them would easily hear their frantic flight through the forest.

Hermione inhaled sharply at that last thought, almost afraid to listen to the plan that had unwillingly popped into her head.

Horried, Hermione turned towards Pansy as she quickly jumped onto the balls of her feet, her fingertips dipping into the snow to steady her balance.

Pansy did a double take before glancing at Hermione warily.

Pansy was the one who had come into the forest for a purpose, Hermione thought quickly. And the purpose Hermione herself had trailed the girl the entire way was to guarantee that Pansy reached her destination safely.

A destination that would determine the wellbeing of an Order member.

Neither of their intentions should change now. What good would it do for both of them to be caught and kil-hurt?

It would all have been for nothing. Hermione's face slightly inclined down, her anxious eyes pleading for Pansy to understand.

Which she did, in obvious terror.

Pansy's arm darted out, fingers clenching against the hem of Hermione's cloak.

"No," she whispered.

The rustling was getting even closer.

Hermione quickly lifted herself off the ground, effectively pulling herself out of Pansy's grasp. Bouncing on the balls of her feet, she remained hunched behind the thick bush that hid them, gauging her timing for the right moment.

"You're looking for Lupin," Hermione emotionlessly reminded Pansy. "Wait until they are completely following me."

"No, Hermione!" Both of Pansy's hands yanked hard on her robes, trying to force her back to the ground.

Hermione angrily whirled around, swatting her away. She sent a piercing look towards the girl.

"Don't you *dare* make any of this a waste!"

Using the sharp movement of turning away from Pansy, Hermione pushed her body with a small wail, flinging herself out from behind the bush.

She ran blindly through the darkness.

Hermione was pushing her body so fast and hard, she knew she was making an appalling amount of noise.

But that was a good thing, she tried to tell herself. She knew her plan had worked when the rustling footsteps had turned into frantic running as well.

Lifting her arms to shield her face, Hermione cried out as she listened to what was chasing her.

She didn't know specifically what kind of creature it was, nor did she know how many there were. A werewolf snarling and snapping would have been terrifying, but they would have had the intelligence of a mere beast. And a centaur she could have pleaded with.

But Hermione recognized that there was definitely more than one predator... and they were laughing as they chased her.

She was openly crying now.

Just a little bit farther...

The tears trailed down her reddened cheeks, burning her skin as the freezing wind cooled against her face. If these creatures were so amused by the chase, Hermione dreaded what other entertainment they would create once they had her.

Come on... faster, Hermione!

Hermione needed to be unquestionably certain that she was a good distance away from Pansy...enabling Pansy to make a total escape before Hermione even considered making one herself. If she Apparated too soon, Pansy's thrashing through the forest would capture their attention.

Despite her attempt to shield herself, thin gashes littered her skin. Hermione couldn't gather her senses. Hopelessly attempting to ignore that pain, as well as the screaming resistance of her legs, she staggered clumsily over the protruding roots and uneven snow.

Gasping wildly, Hermione realized that she needed to center her mind if she wanted to escape safely.

But the chasing footsteps grew closer and closer by the second until Hermione knew they were on her heels.

A body Apparated dead in her path.

Hermione ran hard into a broad chest and strong arms closed around her.

For the briefest of moments, when she fully believed she had reached her end, Hermione selfishly allowed herself another fantasy.

She fantasized that the body currently holding her belonged to Severus.

The black-cloaked figure started shaking uncontrollably as a contemptuous chuckle rumbled in his chest.

The height was completely wrong, Hermione thought to herself, fantasy miserably crumbling. The smell wasn't his... and neither were the hands. Severus wouldn't hold her so painfully.

Hermione still couldn't bring herself to open her eyes. If she didn't see it, it wouldn't feel quite so real.

Hot breaths lowered towards her ear, followed by a wiggling tongue.

She jerked her face away, turning it towards the sky. Finally facing what she dreaded most, Hermione slowly opened her eyes. She focused on the starry, black sky, teasing her through small openings in the snow-covered canopy.

A gruesome face materialized in her peripheral vision.

"I knew I'd eventually catch you," Macnair whispered harshly, his chapped lips scratching against her temple.

*** **

To the detriment of the placid and out-of-breath Death Eaters, Hermione Jane Granger was past panic and sniveling. Recognizing what kind of crisis she was in and who was restraining her, her dread had mutated to outright rage.

"Hold her!" Greyback goaded. Exhaling in exasperation, he stormed towards the flailing girl in Macnair's arms, only to jerk back when she clawed at him.

"LET. ME. GO!" Hermione shrieked at the top of her lungs.

"SHUT UP!" Macnair barked at her. Looking over her curly head, he gasped at Greyback. "I'm t-trying." Macnair snarled impatiently, desirous of catching his breath. He persisted in his shaking and grabbing, recklessly attempting to maintain his hold on the frantic girl wiggling incessantly in his arms.

Every time he reached for her throat, Hermione snapped at him, threatening to bite his hands.

"Fuckin' hell," Greyback moaned. "Let me have her."

With Hermione facing away from him, Greyback effortlessly slid his arms through her elbows, pinning her wrists behind her back.

"Don't touch me!" she screamed. "Death Eater scum..."

Assuming that Greyback was holding her soundly, Macnair released the girl in relief.

But Hermione's flailing didn't stop. Taking advantage of the leverage, Hermione kicked her heels off the ground, landing a formidable swing dead center into Macnair's crotch.

He released an embarrassingly high-pitched scream. Macnair held himself as he keeled over and lay motionlessly on the floor.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Greyback groaned.

"F-fucking... BITCH!"

Invigorated with a new energy, Hermione's thrashing grew worse.

Coughing and gasping, Macnair blindly reached for his wand and flicked it in her direction.

She screamed in pain, heat searing through her cloak and robes. Bending over, Hermione groaned dreadfully as the ache in her side intensified.

All three of them were far too distracted to notice a fourth in their midst.

Snape couldn't believe the scene he had Apparated to. When his brother Death Eaters had Summoned him, he'd impatiently waited; he couldn't Apparate to their location if they didn't stop moving.

When the minutes dragged on, it suddenly dawned on Snape that they must have been on a chase.

Why they would be running through the blasted forest, he didn't know. And why they were holding ~~her~~, Severus certainly couldn't say.

The sight of Hermione, here, combined with her sweat-drenched and bloodied face, stunned him so severely, Snape hesitated in making himself known.

Half-hidden behind a tree, Severus continued silently observing as much as he could before deciding to make a move... until he was shocked into action by that horrid scream.

"Well, well," Severus drawled as he stepped onto the scene. "All this trouble for one little girl? Please don't tell me I was Summoned to assist you ~~in~~ *this*."

Turning his face away from the floor, Macnair glared hatefully at his brother Death Eater. Macnair despised the idea of Snape, of all people, seeing him laying arse up in the snow. He scampered to stand up.

"And neither of you are wearing your masks," Severus drawled. "Have you learned nothing from... Hogsmeade, Macnair?"

"Oh, shut the fuck up, Snape," Macnair snarled as he straightened his robes. "We were on our way to one of Greyback's packs when we called you. And then this happened."

"Why the hell is she out here?" Severus hissed impatiently. His sour manner, of course, went unquestioned by Greyback and Macnair. Severus Snape found disfavor in everything, especially when in want of answers. The men thought he was impatient for information, but Snape was livid that he had been placed in this situation.

The deafening silence of the Forbidden Forest rang in their ears. Perplexed, the Death Eaters gazed around until they were aware that the girl's frenzied screaming had stopped.

Everyone turned in her direction at the unusual silence.

Face smudged from blood and dirt, wild hair haloed around her face, Hermione stared wide-eyed at the snow. Arms pinned behind her in Greyback's ruthless grasp, Hermione's chest vigorously heaved.

"P-professor... Snape?" she hiccupped.

Macnair released a booming laugh. Slapping his knee, his previous pain throbbed anew, turning his laugh into a pitiful cough.

"Yes," Greyback hissed in her ear. "Yes... your precious Potions master is a valued servant for the Dark Lord."

Hermione physically sagged in his arms.

Severus was at a loss for words. Was she playing a part? If not, why would his presence make her so... miserable?

Macnair and Greyback rightfully assumed that the girl was crumbling from the shocking revelation of the allegiance of a Hogwarts professor.

The terror that had spread over her features persevered as her body began to shake uncontrollably.

Conveniently hidden behind his mask, Severus uneasily stared at Hermione. From the moment he had comprehended her presence, dozens of scenarios had flashed through Severus' mind. Scenarios of how, if it were at all possible, he could save her. And for a brief moment, he'd resented her for placing him in this situation. Severus internally cringed at the idea of her calling him out by name, of her revealing a personal relationship with him.

Personal relationship or not, Severus knew that dueling two Death Eaters in the hopes of saving an exhausted girl would have a tragic end for himself. Perhaps not for his life...he truly believed they could get away...but for his purpose. His usefulness as a spy would come to an end.

Severus head swiftly snapped up. As Hermione continued to fall to pieces, he finally realized what was troubling him so much.

Hermione had yet to even look at him. Especially his eyes.

"She's quite a nasty mess," Macnair chided, staggering towards her. "But some fun she'll be!"

Greyback and Macnair broke out in raunchy laughter.

Severus silently thundered closer to the three of them. On the exterior, his typically reserved nature did not draw the attention of his brother Death Eaters. But underneath his robes and mask, every nerve was on fire.

He continued to watch Hermione, silently praying that she would look up at him.

Snape knew she could clearly see his robes as she continued to cry at the floor. But when she still didn't look up, Snape shook his head in appalled disbelief. He instantly comprehended that she had analyzed the situation exactly the same as he had... And had come to the same conclusions.

She feared the situation she would force Snape into if she begged for his help. It appeared Albus' brainwashing and 'Order mentality' was now complete, Severus thought hatefully to himself. For years, the Headmaster had audaciously instructed that 'no sacrifice was too great in order to maintain his position'.

And now Hermione believed it as well.

His brother Death Eaters' sneers and cackles barely registered in his mind as they continued taunting Hermione, obviously believing that they were the means behind her despair.

But Severus knew better. Standing unnaturally still, he continued staring at her, hoping... pleading that she would look into his eyes. His mind was already prepared. If she would just glance at him, they could synchronize a plan to get out of this situation.

It was now or never.

All three men audibly hissed, bodies flinching in the direction of their left arms.

Severus inhaled sharply, but not from the pain of his tattoo. He looked at Hermione in dread.

Now... it was too late.

"We cannot take her," Snape said forcefully.

Hermione slowly closed her eyes, bleakly raising her face towards the sky.

Macnair swallowed. He measured the situation as he gazed at the girl sullenly. He refused to waste this.

"It's fine," he snarled, snatching her out of Greyback's meaty arms.

Face still pointed in the air, Hermione opened her eyes as she was passed into another's hold. She knew Severus was looking at her, burning holes with his eyes... but she couldn't let herself see it.

As all three men prepared for their Apparition, Severus' internal screaming had not stopped.

He wanted her... needed her to beg him to save her. He needed to hear her say it because he couldn't face the fact that he hadn't done it of his own accord.

"Nothing," Severus muttered hatefully under his breath. He tormented himself as he said the word again, over and over. Because that was exactly what he had chosen to do.

Macnair's burly hands dug into Hermione's arms as he prepared to turn into the Apparition. The cold breeze brushed against Hermione's face. Stomach tensing in fear of the unknown, Hermione decisively focused her eyes. Glancing up, her heart and fears silently spoke to Severus when she finally looked at him at the precise moment both knew it was too late.

Author's Notes: This 'half' of the chapter had to be completely rewritten (my computer ate itself) which explains the long wait.

-Story beta'ed by the very talented **melusin**.

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book ii. Line 90.

-Next up: The Dark Lord and Hermione's experiences with 'Death Eater scum.'

Chapter Twenty Two - These Troublesome Disguises Which We Wear

Chapter 26 of 36

He would certainly mourn the loss of a friend, Severus acknowledged bitterly, but Dumbledore would have killed the Potions master himself if Snape's continued existence jeopardized the 'greater good.'

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Author's Notes: My beta, **melusin**, made this chapter nice and shiny for your reading pleasure.

Snape smoothly steadied his balance. His boots touching down on the wooden floorboards, he instantaneously perceived the number of Death Eaters in the parlor room. Flowing black cloak after black cloak, firelight scorching identical masks, the men were forced to push their backs against the mouldy papered walls to secure a personal space of clean air.

Indifference promptly reined in; Snape did not turn towards the three bodies that had accompanied him from the Forbidden Forest. It wasn't intentional, but he had also turned his back so Hermione wasn't even visible from the corner of his eye.

The Dark Lord was not in the room, Snape mentally noted. If he had been, the Death Eaters wouldn't be slouched together in small clusters, laughing as they moaned about the inconveniences of the week's latest raids.

A meeting of this magnitude had not been called in a fairly long time. The Dark Lord usually preferred addressing only very particular circles of men. The more secretly he assigned orders, the more likely his loyal subjects would grow wary of his brother standing next to him. This was also a very effective method for building irrational paranoia and forcing wary informers to loosen their lips. An environment drenched in fear had always been the ideal method for a madman to maintain his position of authority.

Various Death Eaters below Severus' rank casually stepped out of his path as he made an elegant sweep of the room. Completing a full round, Severus finally took notice of something he realized he had been trying to ignore.

Hermione had started flailing again. Severus stormed across the room towards Macnair. Rolling his eyes, he sneered at the sight of Macnair attempting to put on his mask while struggling to prevent Hermione from pulling away.

"Can't you keep her *STILL*!" Snape thundered.

Hermione tensed at the forcefulness of Snape's voice. It was very obvious to whom he was really speaking. Macnair shook her hard in an effort to prove to Snape that he could adequately control his captive.

Neck snapping brutally, Hermione squeaked as she bit her tongue. She obediently sagged in Macnair's arms.

The conversational murmuring that their small party had Apparated into slowly began to quieten down. Numerous heads turned in Hermione's direction, attention drawn to the only body in the room not wearing black robes and a mask.

Sensing Macnair's distraction as well as the pompous lifting of his shoulders, Hermione sucked in her breath before yanking her hand out of Macnair's grasp. She thrust her arm into the air only to ram her elbow down into his gut.

She released a titter of hysterical giggling at the familiar pitch of Macnair's screams.

Initially, most of the Death Eaters were stunned into silence. But when they realized that Hermione was not one of their party, and merely a young girl Macnair had been struggling to subdue, raucous laughter rang against the walls.

This, Severus immediately realized, was a very big mistake. Turned away from their diligent watch of the door, the Dark Lord was forced to make his entrance into a sea of men with their backs towards him.

An ear-splitting hiss sputtered from his throat.

The men simultaneously groaned in alarm. A wave of movement flowed across the room as all the followers immediately turned, their knees slamming to the floor. Macnair slapped his hand around Hermione's mouth, forcing her to the ground with him.

But Macnair's efforts weren't necessary. Hermione had absolutely no intention of drawing attention to herself.

Breathing heavily through the thin slits in the center of his face, the Dark Lord's red eyes darted around the room, intent on locating the culprit for the mutinous diversion that had caused so many to be careless in his presence.

The Dark Lord took two quick steps forward, forcing the Death Eaters at his feet to flinch back. "Move," he growled.

The kneeling Death Eaters pushed themselves back with their hands. The Dark Lord stepped into their cleared space, forcing two more Death Eaters to scamper away from him. A path quickly carved out of the fearfully reverent men.

The Dark Lord stormed forward, and Severus Snape did not second guess where he was heading. A few deafening seconds passed before their master's determined stride paused. The Dark Lord towered over Macnair, whose body was half-covering Hermione. Snape slowly closed his eyes.

The room had grown tense. Breathing had hesitated; the Death Eaters waited for some type of action before releasing an apprehensive exhale.

The Dark Lord stared blankly at the intruder hiding beneath Macnair. Face expressionless, he stood unnaturally still.

Macnair's face was down, mask nearly pressed against the floorboards. His eyes darted around, looking at other Death Eaters for some hint as to what the Dark Lord was

doing. Finally focusing on the creature's robes, Macnair eyed the hem, waiting for some type of movement.

Hermione's breathing grew hysterical under his hands.

"What is this?" the Dark Lord finally asked, his voice calm.

Macnair released a shaky breath. Leaning back slightly on the balls of his feet, he lifted his vision to his master's midriff. "A... captive, my Lord..."

"Stand!"

Macnair jerked himself up.

"That much is very obvious. What I really want to know is why you have brought her to my summons?"

"We couldn't let her escape, Master. She saw us without our masks!" Macnair urged.

Snape snorted under his breath.

When Snape's outburst went unacknowledged and unpunished, Macnair's mood instantly soured.

"We...?" the Dark Lord repeated.

"Greyback and I were on our way to one of hi-your werewolf communities. We called Snape to assist us before we happened upon her."

Greyback was nowhere to be seen at this moment. But the Dark Lord felt his presence in the room and knew the werewolf was pressed against the wall with every other low ranking Death Eater.

"You should have killed her, then, before you came," the Dark Lord said emotionlessly.

Macnair gaped at the floor. He wanted to argue, but he dared not to...

The Dark Lord straightened himself up, turning smoothly towards Severus, who was off to his left. The moment he made eye contact with his Hogwarts' spy, the creature snapped back towards Macnair.

"Severus advised you not to bring her... yet you chose to, anyway."

"I-she," Macnair muttered, his confidence falling apart all around him. "She's... She's the Mudblood whore of Harry Potter, Master!" Macnair gasped importantly.

At the sound of intrigued murmuring from his brother Death Eaters, Macnair stood a bit straighter, feeling like the situation had just been saved.

"And that should matter to me... because...?" the Dark Lord responded casually.

Severus smirked as he watched Macnair's eyes startle behind his mask.

"You could... use her... my Lord."

"No." The Dark Lord smoothly turned away. He marched silently around his kneeling followers before speaking further. "No, Macnair... I will not. But it seems very evident to us all that *you* intended to use her, and now you are wasting my time with your pathetic excuses."

Macnair suddenly released a strange gagging sound, startling the Death Eaters surrounding him. Men jumped back as he fell to his knees. Macnair's arms reached up, clawing at his throat. He couldn't breathe. He scratched viciously at his neck, intent on removing the invisible barrier that was pressing against his windpipe.

Hermione curled further into a ball as Macnair thrashed on the floor by her feet. By the time his screams mutated to gruesome retching, Hermione had lost all ability to find humor in his pain.

Clenching her eyes shut, she fisted her hands against her ears.

Severus' eyes darkened. Unlike every other gawking face in this room, his vision had been focused on the captive, not Macnair.

The unnaturalness of the Dark Lord's rigidity finally released. Simultaneously, Macnair groaned while sucking in a large gulp of air. Turning onto his back, he laid still as he steadied his breathing.

"I shouldn't have to give any of you a lesson *in this*," the Dark Lord drawled. "You are summoned for my pleasure, amusement, and especially your usefulness. Don't you *dare* come here with ulterior motives."

As the Dark Lord said this, he weaved between his kneeling subjects. Finally making a full circle, he made contact with Snape's penetrating eyes.

"Rise!" the Dark Lord immediately commanded, unnaturally swallowing thickly.

Another wave of obedience washed around him.

The Dark Lord turned pointedly to the only Death Eater struggling to separate himself from the floor. "Take your prisoner to the courtyard, Macnair, and wait for further instruction. I don't want to smell her polluted blood any longer."

Groaning as he pushed himself off the floor, Macnair immediately complied.

Hermione struggled to remain silent as she was yanked up by her hair.

Walden pushed and tugged at his captive. His body half-numb, hers exhausted, a ruckus of noise followed them as they disappeared further into the house. The Dark Lord waited until the thudding and shrieking ended with the kitchen door being slammed shut.

"Severus!" he barked.

Snape stepped forward. "Yes, Master," he said smoothly with his head respectfully bowed.

"I... demand to be further informed of this evening's events... privately. Follow me into the next room." The Dark Lord glared in disgust at those closest to him before sharply whirling around.

"Of course, my Lord."

*** **

Pansy gasped in relief the moment the sound of water reached her.

Pansy didn't think she could find the strength to continue running through the wild woods. When those horrid noises had wildly chased after Hermione, laughing and taunting, Pansy hadn't been able to remain in hiding any longer. Half a glance had been enough for her to recognize *those* haunting black robes.

She had pushed herself away from her huddle in the snow, running blindly with all her might to separate herself from the presence of Death Eaters.

When her steps had slowed, Hermione's screams had reached her ears.

The Gryffindor's voice sounded hollow, drowned out by the thickness of the forest. Yet, Hermione's fright was still tangible.

Pansy had run faster.

By the time Pansy had reached the small stream she had been looking for, the echo of Hermione's shrieking had abruptly cut off. It wasn't until the Forbidden Forest became silent that the idea of going back crossed Pansy's mind.

Pansy inhaled sharply, turning her face towards the water. The inclination to help Hermione wasn't felt until Pansy knew it was too late. She suddenly became light headed. Shaking her hands wildly, Pansy fought to maintain her control.

Was it really a desire to help, then? Or was she just trying to make herself feel better for never turning back? Pansy didn't possess the answers for those questions, and she hated the self-doubt it engendered.

It's too late, she told herself. Alone in this dreary forest, she needed to focus all her energy on taking care of herself.

Sharply shaking her head, Pansy pushed onward with a loud squeak. She would follow the winding stream as far as it would take her. All she remembered Remus telling her was that the cave mounted a steep hill overlooking the riverbank.

Remus would never have told Pansy the exact location of the cave he had visited on occasion. Not long before the last Hogsmeade trip, Remus had informed Pansy that he would be staying there for a few days. A few days had turned into a month, and Pansy wished that they had not argued before he'd left.

Why had he not sent word to her? Did he think she was still angry? ~~Was~~ she still angry with her?

Maybe he'd stayed with the werewolves because he had nothing to come back to. Maybe he just didn't want to see her anymore...

Pansy stopped walking after that last thought. After everything that had happened tonight, could she handle Remus dismissing her? Would she just accept his rejection and turn back?

Fears crushing her one after another, Pansy sharply turned on her heel, plowing through the snow in the direction that she came.

*** **

Severus elegantly walked out of the parlor room with his back straight, his countenance rigid with importance at being singled out. He knew the other Death Eaters would murmur in jealous curiosity as soon as he and the Dark Lord had stepped into a different room to discuss matters.

He followed the Dark Lord down a darkened hallway. Severus' ears strained for any voices or movement downstairs. Hearing none, he felt no desire to question the matter further. Severus' face twitched slightly behind his mask.

The Dark Lord smoothly entered the bedroom. He fluidly slipped through the opened crack without touching the door.

Once the crumbling door had closed behind them, Snape immediately fell to his knees. "Forgive me, my Lord," Severus obediently pleaded at the dust.

The creature stepped closer, the hem of his robes brushing against the Potions master's clasped knuckles.

Severus was completely taking advantage of his last chance to save the girl.

His current state of mind refused to acknowledge that it would be his first and only attempt as well.

Ever the obedient Death Eater, Snape was also Dumbledore's man. And Snape did not need to force his mind to remember this. It was instinctual for him. Yet, such devotion was also troublesome as he struggled to ignore the voice of Albus Dumbledore shouting in the back of his mind.

Swallowing, Severus' temples throbbed painfully as he continued to wait for his master's acknowledgement of his reverence. His mind refused to settle as the silence dragged on.

Severus knew that Dumbledore would not have hesitated in sacrificing the girl if the only means of her rescue necessitated the information that was about to pass through Severus' lips.

Dumbledore would have made it an order to dispose of her. No question.

But Severus had already put the thought of Hermione's wellbeing aside. After his arm had scorched, and the intoxicating pain of his summons had surged through him, he'd found it fairly easy to continue keeping thoughts of her at bay. What he really needed now was to divulge something essential in order to save his own life. The Dark Lord had already made it very clear that he didn't want to see Severus again unless he was accompanied by Black. Coincidentally, Hermione was essential for the plan that had quickly connected in his head.

So here Snape was with Black nowhere to be found.

Dumbledore was dependent on Snape's infiltration among the Death Eaters, and Snape had always known that. But the old leader wouldn't have hesitated in sacrificing Severus' life, either. He would certainly mourn the loss of a friend, Severus acknowledged bitterly, but Dumbledore would have killed the Potions master himself if Snape's continued existence jeopardized the 'greater good.'

Greater good be damned, Severus emotionlessly thought. Dumbledore's agenda wasn't essential to Severus anymore, and it hadn't been for a very long time. And Snape didn't feel the least bit disloyal as he thought this. Deceiving the Order did not equate devotion to the Dark Lord.

Severus' allegiance, first and foremost, was to himself.

Snape merely wanted to guarantee that he would walk out of this house, able bodied...and if he was lucky...accompanied by his new possession.

"My Lord," Snape repeated bravely. He was one of the few Death Eaters the Dark Lord indulged. Severus had always known this, and now he was going to take full advantage of it. "You are completely accurate in the uselessness of the Mudblood in regards to Potter... but Black..."

If they had been still among those assembled, the room would have visibly tensed when that daring 'but' exited Snape's mouth. 'But' was virtually telling the Dark Lord that he had been absolutely and plainly wrong in his previous decision. Thankfully, Severus was sharp enough to use Occlumency to request such things in the privacy of his

mind so as not to undermine the Dark Lord's authority. And using his distinctive cunning, Snape also knew to immediately follow the 'but' with a name sure to titillate the Dark Lord more than 'Potter'.

"What about Black?" the Dark Lord snapped impatiently.

Severus' breathing grew quick as he organized his words. "It has *very recently* come to my attention that Black possesses an obsessive infatuation for that Mudblood."

The Dark Lord glared at Snape through narrowed eyes, doubting the convenience of the word 'recently'. The Dark Lord also doubted the possibility of a Mudblood being desirable to a pure-blood wizard like Black.

"Black is hopelessly and disgustingly... depressed, my Lord. Dumbledore has sensed this as well. The old man is hopeful that the company of the girl will dissuade Black from suddenly taking his own life... or whatever life he has at the moment."

"Suicide!" the Dark Lord gasped, clearly appalled.

"Yes, Master. I am not certain why Dumbledore wishes for Black to continue his existence...to continue winding his timepiece...but I do believe that the old fart has not completely seen the consequences of his actions. By placing the girl in Black's path, Black has become lustful and obsessive. Not only does he want to continue to... exist... but I now fully believe that his pursuit of the wench has been, and will continue to be, a large factor in his..."

Voldemort jerked towards Snape. His excitement was palpable.

Snape tensed as his master palmed the underside of his jaw. Yanking his mask away, the Dark Lord carelessly discarded it on the floor. His scaly hands wrapped around Snape's face, instructing him to rise.

The Dark Lord could not feel Severus' horror. He never did. Snape had never seen him so fervent and nauseatingly giddy. It turned his stomach. Unlike other power hungry Death Eaters, Snape did not find pleasure in gifting this creature with such emotions. Tilting his face up, Severus willingly allowed his master to view the scene that had happened between Hermione and the mutt in Black's office only a day ago. Severus feigned curious amusement while hiding the bubbling fury this memory was forcing him to relive. He could almost feel the pleasure again at kicking in the door.

The Dark Lord hungrily watched Hermione in the arms of the licentious madman. He nearly laughed at the spectacle of Black's gleaming eyes becoming guilt-ridden when he sprang away from the Mudblood at the idea of being caught groping a student.

Pulling himself out of Snape's mind, the Dark Lord gazed at Severus in bewilderment... and pleasure.

"You are obviously correct, Severus."

Severus bowed his head in acceptance of such praise. When the Dark Lord did not speak further, Severus knew he was allowed to fill the silence. "It is thanks to you, my Lord. Black would not have contemplated such ideas if he had not read your ancient text. He would not have known that he possessed a... choice... in extending his life...existence beyond the incessant torment of worrying over and protecting the object confining his soul."

"My faithful servant," the Dark Lord repeated mockingly, "obviously remembers my warning for our next meeting... this meeting."

Severus certainly did. Black should have been the one to see the Dark Lord first.

"Black's reluctance at immortality has surprised even me, my Lord! Now, I think I completely understand why. He held absolutely no reason or motivation in ~~his~~^{her} worth a never-ending existence... until now."

"Love..." the Dark Lord sneered in acknowledgement. "And with a Mudblood, no less!"

Severus' hands fisted at his side. His words were betraying more than one person.

Dumbledore's sad face unwillingly appeared behind Snape's closed eyes. He shook him away. Severus' face clenched in suppressed mortification before he spewed the exact words he knew the Dark Lord wanted to hear. "Yes, Master. Because of this one girl, Sirius Black will finally be tempted toward immortality. For her love," Severus spat, "he will finally turn his burden... his timepiece... into a Horcrux."

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Pansy didn't know if she was being brave or foolish but after walking through a meter of her own footprints, she turned around again, determined to find Remus' cave.

Recalling the quick bites of stories about his nightlife, Pansy used the same means that Remus had when he had first found this pack. She first searched for a stream, which she was now walking along, and then for any evidence that the riverbank had recently been visited.

Half-stumbling now from exhaustion and cold, Pansy paused abruptly. She blankly stared at the snow by her boots.

A large patch had recently been disturbed. The snow was clumped and muddy, multiple footprints leading away from the river. Pansy stood in place as her eyes followed the erratic trail until it disappeared up a steep hill...the top of which was leveled and formed the base of another small hill... and the opening of a cave.

She warily eyed the handprints mixed in with the foot impressions.

This had to be it.

Legs giving out, Pansy dumbly sat in the mushy snow as she continued staring up at the cave. Remus was in there. *right there*.

But... now what?

Pansy certainly knew she couldn't just walk right in and calling out for him would have been completely stupid.

She shakily reached a frozen hand into her robes, retrieving her wand. She concentrated on any and all memories she had of Remus. Not until he had become a powerful force in her life had she been able to learn the basic concepts of producing a Patronus. And only after diligent practice under his guard had she finally been able to create one.

Pansy looked down at her extended arm. This would be the first time she had ever sent her signal to him.

Pansy flicked it in the direction of the cave. A silvery mist grew at the tip of her wand before a small, four-legged animal sprung out of the tip. The tiny pug excitedly sprinted up the side of the hill and disappeared into the cave.

A thunderous snarl growled angrily, echoing against the stone walls.

Pansy's body was already shaking from her huddle in the snow. Gasping in dread, she pushed herself up.

The sounds of a heated argument grew to a chaotic roar. Fidgeting in place, she finally thrust herself behind a large boulder.

She knew what werewolves thought of wizards, and no doubt the sight of a spell entering their domain would frighten and anger them. Pansy just hoped that it wouldn't anger Remus as well.

Pushing herself up slightly, Pansy peeked over the surface of the boulder. The shadow of a cloaked man swelled across the interior wall of the cave. Unable to blink, Pansy watched as he calmly exited the fissure and slowly edged down the hill.

It was Remus.

Pansy was burning to run out to him, but she knew she needed to be patient. She watched and waited as he trailed the stream in her direction, his eyes frantically searching the darkness.

When he finally located her footprints, Pansy uneasily stood up, revealing her location. Remus paused, her presence catching him off guard.

Remus nervously walked in her direction with his face turned towards the entrance to the cave. Making certain that no one had followed him out, Remus finally turned to eye Pansy.

He flinched slightly, caught unprepared again by how close she was. He didn't remember walking so fast. His breath hitched as he noticed the dilation of her pupils.

"You shouldn't have come," were the first words out of Remus' mouth.

Pansy didn't have the energy to feel offended. Half-sobbing, she closed the steps that separated them, her arms wrapping around his waist.

Remus gasped, not ever remembering an instance where she'd initiated contact. At the feel of her body shaking against him, his arms reached down, returning the embrace with equal energy.

"You shouldn't have come," he repeated in a miserable whisper before pressing his lips against her temple.

Lost in the satisfaction of holding her, Remus realized that Pansy's shaking had grown worse.

She was crying. He carefully peeled her away.

"What is it?"

"Stupid.... Stupid girl!" Pansy cried. Her face cringed in the remembrance of everything that had happened just for the hope of this selfish moment.

Remus gazed at her in complete confusion. "Who?"

"I'm so happy and relieved to finally find you, Remus!" Pansy gasped. "But it also feels wrong. I could have... I should have stopped her! But... I didn't want to... Oh, gods... I didn't want to..."

"WHO, Pansy?"

"Hermione!"

The extent of Remus' surprise was obvious. Pansy's excitement grew to near hysteria as she relayed everything that had taken place up to the present moment. He didn't leave go his hold on her arms, and by the end of her tale, his fingers were digging into her flesh.

Warily, Pansy watched Remus blankly staring at the snow while his mind absorbed what she had just told him.

"How did she know you were looking for me?" Remus barked suddenly.

"She knows," Pansy squeaked.

Remus shook her hard. "WHAT DOES SHE KNOW?"

Eyes widening, Pansy barely yelped as he crushed her to his chest.

"I'm sorry." Remus sounded very pained for his actions. The idea of someone being privy to his affair with a student frightened him, but he didn't mean to take that out on Pansy. Imagining Pansy and himself being exposed filled him with the shame that a man should feel for desiring a student twenty years younger than him.

"Hermione saw us," Pansy mumbled against his filthy robes. She pushed herself away to speak more clearly. "Or heard us...I don't know which, exactly...in Hogsmeade."

Gliding his finger against Pansy's reddened cheek, he regretfully looked down at her as they both remembered the words exchanged the last time they had seen each other.

Remus suddenly gasped, registering that Pansy had just told him that Hermione had been attacked by Death Eaters. "We must summon the Order." He turned from her to search for the wand he had hidden in the forest.

"NO!" Pansy shrieked. She yanked on his arm before Remus was able to completely pull away.

"What do you mean, 'no'? What's wrong with you? We can't just leave her out there like that!"

"She might already be dead! Summon the Order!" Pansy scoffed. "And then what?"

"And then what?" Remus repeated impatiently.

"How are we going to explain why *you know* she was in the Forbidden Forest to begin with? She was following me, Remus! And how are we going to explain why *she* even here?"

Pansy focused on a point beyond Remus, her eyes growing wide. As if suddenly grasping something, she looked pointedly at him once more. "My gods... If Nott or my father were to find out..."

"Okay...Pansy! Calm down." Remus' hands closed around her face.

"They'd kill me! I wouldn't even have a grave..."

Remus jerked her lightly. "It won't come to that! Calm down, Pansy!"

Gritting his teeth, Remus tried to grasp the right thing to do. "We're going to have to do... something. If Hermione is alive, or found, an explanation of some sort will be needed. The Order would want know the truth..."

"Which you're not going to tell them." Pansy's hands fisted against his robes.

After a long silence, Remus finally said, "No... I'm not."

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"You're such a slut," Parvati nastily hissed. Seated across from her best friend in the common room, she had been staring at Lavender emotionlessly. The screeching blonde had finally demanded to know what Parvati was thinking about. Best friends tell each other the truth, Parvati thought to herself.

Lavender smiled slightly, shocked and humored at Parvati's sudden bluntness. Leaning back into her seat, she carelessly dangled her legs over the armrests while she raised her left hand in the air. Lavender took her time admiring the bright green shade she had just added to her nails. "You're just jealous."

Parvati snorted mockingly. "I'm sooo jealous that you're going to be the size of a baby Hippogriff in five months."

"Watch it," Lavender snapped without thinking. Suddenly worrying if anyone was watching them, Lavender warily glanced around the common room without moving her head. Satisfied that the two of them possessed a degree of privacy for this conversation, Lavender glared at Parvati before growling through clenched teeth, "In almost *seven* months."

"Right." Parvati grinned knowingly. "Seven months..." she drawled. "Has he even given you a ring yet?"

"Nope. I'll just have Harry take me shopping during the holidays."

Parvati dramatically rolled her eyes, reaching for the copy of *Witch Weekly* on the end table. "Don't count on it. Everyone knows that Harry is such tight-fisted..."

"You can get a lot out of a man when you shag them silly."

"Everything except a marriage. You shagged Weasley silly, and he dropped you out of boredom. *You* obviously need to be up the duff to get a husband."

No longer dangling her shapely legs, Lavender's heels slammed to the floor as she faced Parvati head on. "What the hell is your problem?"

"I've no idea what you're talking about." Parvati sighed, feigning boredom.

"You *are* jealous, or else you wouldn't be so bitter. You're envious of me because I have secured my future, with a celebrity I might add... Where as you... You'll be unmarried after your NEWTs and end up on the streets or a common laborer."

Lavender felt such satisfaction to finally say this out loud. As the color faded from Parvati's face, Lavender smirked openly. Every social climbing witch in the school knew there was nothing worse than to be forced to earn your own living. Since she'd been twelve, Lavender had had every intention of marrying into affluence...not earning it.

Weasley may have been a step down, due to his non-existent family fortune, but he was a pure-blood and best mate of Harry Potter *The* Harry Potter. Some type of financial reward would have had to come of that, eventually.

But when her precious Won-Won had tossed her aside, Lavender had been determined to go after the next best thing.

"I am perfectly content with Dean," Parvati insisted snottily.

"I suppose I should be asking to see your ring... but you obviously can't have one yet if your boyfriend hasn't proposed."

"I am certain that Dean will ask me to marry him!"

"No, no. You see, *I am certain* that I'm going to get married... but I definitely will hope for the best for you."

"You're getting married?" A doubtful yet curious voice rang behind Lavender.

Both girls froze. Parvati's expression broke out in delight as she stared at Lavender, whose mouth was gaping in an odd smile.

Lavender turned around slowly. She eyed Ginny with the nastiest mask of fake pity she could muster.

"Acknowledging my presence *now*, I see?" Lavender said bitterly.

Taken aback slightly, Ginny leaned on one hip and cocked an eyebrow that insisted Lavender elaborate.

The conversation Lavender had just had with Parvati incited a forceful swell of bravery and self-importance. She had tried so hard at the beginning of the year to build a friendship with this girl, she thought to herself. It had been the only way Lavender thought she could get closer to Harry.

Ginny and that frizzy-haired-uptight-swot, Hermione. Those girls, Lavender thought bitterly, had always fancied themselves to be so...*special*. Always sneaking out at night. Always mentioned in the tabloids. Always invited to Dumbledore's or McGonagall's office for fancy, important... tea parties! And never mind that Lavender thought Hagrid was the most beastly creature employed at this school; she wouldn't have ever visited him in that wretched hut if they'd asked her to. But damn them for *never* asking!

Ginny finally attempted to fill the uncomfortable silence. "If you are getting married, I would like to do what is proper and congratulate you."

Lavender smiled the loathsome, pitiful smirk. Tapping Ginny on the wrist, Lavender cooed, "Go and wish Harry congratulations. You're his... friend... not mine."

Ginny released a small burst of uncomfortable laughter. "What?"

Lavender shrugged her shoulders dismissively. Turning her back on the redhead to face Parvati, she purposely snorted loudly before walking away.

"What?" Ginny said again, blood draining from her face. Her eyes shot at Parvati.

Hand over her mouth, Parvati shook her head slightly, pretending she didn't have the faintest idea what was going on as she attempted to hide her sadistic amusement.

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Severus had a very sour taste in the back of this throat.

Everything about tonight was twisted. He had promptly left the Dark Lord as he was dismissed and instructed to attend *the captive*. Snape sneered to himself. He hated that word.

Thundering down the staircase, his pace did not slow as he reached the small kitchen. Quickly gliding across the uneven linoleum floor, Snape flung the back door open.

Severus startled Macnair. The Death Eater flinched away from a shadowed mass lying motionlessly in the frozen grass of the back garden.

"What did you do?" Severus asked dangerously.

Macnair attempted to straighten his back, ripping his mask off with one fluid movement. He returned Severus' glare, refusing to answer him.

Snape's eyes darkened. "She is under my charge now, you..."

"WHAT?" Macnair thundered.

The corner of Severus' lip twitched up, his eyes flashing vindictively. "I do not have to explain my orders to you. Now go, the Dark Lord wishes you to join the rest."

Macnair lunged at Snape. His gruesomely contorted face displayed the pure hatred he had for this man and his desire to punish Snape for everything that had gone wrong tonight.

With his hand already grasping the wand in his sleeve, Severus promptly armed himself. Macnair didn't see it but paused in his attack when the wooden tip dug into his already sensitive neck.

Fear spread over Macnair's features, then embarrassment when he realised Snape had seen it. Glancing at the body on the floor, he barked, "I do not have to take orders from you!"

Severus shoved the wand harder into his throat. "My birth may prevent me from ever attaining your rank, Macnair, but we all know I am but one of the few whom the Dark Lord truly trusts. Don't join the rest, and see what our master does..."

A frustrated growl rumbled in Macnair's sensitive neck. Admitting defeat, he quickly spun on his heels.

When the back door had slammed shut, Severus turned to the body lying in the mud... to his newly appointed captive. He slowly edged towards her.

Hermione attempted to move at the sound of his boots crunching against the muddy snow. She groaned when her body resisted.

Severus pinched the bridge between his brows and sighed. He was not used to dealing with helpless individuals on nights like this. Helplessness had never been attractive to him in his daily life. And it certainly didn't ignite the basic human response of compassion...not when dressed as he was tonight.

Severus knelt on the ground next to her in an effort to gauge the severity of her wounds.

Hermione's eyes flittered open. She gazed at his black robes and flinched away from his outstretched hands.

"I need to see where you are wounded," he dispassionately commanded.

Hermione's breathing stopped, but Severus knew it was not due to her wounds. She released her breath at the realization of who was leaning over her and turned her body slightly to face him. Blood from the wound on her side gushed onto Severus' thighs. Looking down, he acknowledged that the dirty mush he was kneeling in was not muddy snow. Pulling out his wand, he went to work at closing her wounds.

"Severus..."

Severus' jaw clenched at the hoarseness of her voice.

"Severus..." The word died on Hermione's tongue as she gasped again. Her eyes widened when she realized that she had spoken his given name. She had been so determined not to reveal her connections with Severus. All night, just when she thought she would pass out from fright, Hermione forcibly bit her tongue to keep herself from screaming his name.

But it wasn't just the life-threatening consequences she feared that kept her from asking for his help.

It was the fear of her pleas falling on deaf ears.

Hermione glanced up at Snape, waiting for a reprimand. His hollow eyes relentlessly focused on the task at hand. Her total powerlessness hit her as she continued gazing at her beloved savior, forcing her to choke back pitiful tears.

Snape quickly slid one hand behind her neck, the other under her knees. Hermione moaned as her body was sharply lifted off the floor. Her arms clenched around his neck as they spun into his Disapparition.

Hermione gasped in relief when the pressured spinning stopped and familiar smells reached her nose. They were right outside Hogwarts' gates. Hermione could see the castle out of the corner of her eye.

Carrying her across the school grounds, Snape could no longer ignore her unblinking stare. "What?" he finally snapped.

Hermione flinched slightly then whispered, "Macnair was one of the Death Eaters who escaped from Azkaban in August."

"Are you asking me? I already know this."

She could almost taste his irritability; it was so strong.

"You helped him...them."

Silence.

Hermione finally turned her face away.

"Was *that* a question?" he hissed.

Her exhausted arms shook as they struggled with their hold around his neck. She wanted to look pointedly at him but was quickly losing all coherent thought. Before fainting, she managed to breathe, "Not anymore."

Author's Notes:: Like to send my thanks to the many at Potter Place for replying to my questions on Pansy's Patronus. It was first pointed out that it wouldn't be canon for Pansy to conjure a Patronus, since only the Order and DA members were taught this. But Pansy is shagging an Order member, so it makes sense that Remus would teach her. Some very interesting suggestions for her Patronus were a female ferret, a Yorkshire terrier, a pig, a toad (she's secretly in love with Neville apparently), and Ems suggested a penguin, which I seriously considered.

-Many thanks to my talented beta, **melusin**, for the time she had spent on this chapter.

-Chapter title take from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book iv. Line 739.

Chapter Twenty Three - Those Thoughts That Wander Through Eternity

Chapter 27 of 36

Dumbledore needed her. The Dark Lord needed her. And both would hold Severus responsible if she were to die without their prior knowledge—or instruction.

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: I send all of my heart-felt gratitude to my beta, **melusin**, for her hard work. She has been correcting my story and advising me for over a year now!

Severus didn't say a word.

He couldn't.

Far too much had already been said and done tonight.

If he attempted to speak to Hermione, there were only two exact words that should exit his mouth.

So he remained silent.

Juggling Hermione's limp body weight by one thigh and arm, Severus reached into his pocket for his wand. With one swift flick of the wrist, his office door banged open and then promptly crashed shut behind him.

It was nearly dawn.

As he had carried Hermione's unconscious body across Hogwarts' grounds, the black sky had quickly paled on him. Snape had chased after the darkness until he was greeted by the obscurity of the dungeon corridors. The severity of Hermione's wounds hadn't become worrisome until he'd been almost forced to view them under the morning sun.

Balancing her weight once more, Snape turned the brass handle the moment it materialized on the stone wall in his office.

Rapidly twirling his wand, the back of his private lab room revealed a wide day-bed.

If Hermione had been at all coherent, she would have immediately taken notice of Severus' sharp and abrupt movements.

When the next twenty-four hours were over and done, Severus himself wouldn't remember the steps he had taken carrying her through the corridors nor the measuring and slicing in this lab. He was acting on instinct while his mind feverishly raced within a separate realm, totally unconcerned with its surroundings.

Snape leaned over the newly Transfigured cushions and cautiously extended his hands. Hermione limply slid down his arms until her backside rested on the wide bed.

Spinning away from her, wand still in hand, he Summoned a large cauldron and several bottles to the worktable in front of him.

Everything landed precisely where he needed it to be.

Hermione's erratic intake of air sent him into action.

Snape sighed, both with resignation and apprehension, as he set to work with the onerous task of healing her. He knew that it was his responsibility to ensure that Hermione was restored to health and speedily heading towards a complete recovery.

Dumbledore needed her.

The Dark Lord needed her.

And both would hold Severus responsible if she were to die without their prior knowledge...or instruction.

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Not long after the time Pansy had finally found Remus, he had urged her to Apparate back to the castle.

Despite her protestations and desires, Remus had assured her that he would remain protected. The cave was under his control and guidance, now. When she had finally been convinced of his physical safety, Remus had taken the opportunity of stressing the impairment that would be caused to his mental stability if he wasn't assured of her own wellbeing.

"How can I carry on here if I must constantly worry and wonder if you are wandering about in the woods at any moment?" he had told her.

Guilt successfully driven to her core, Pansy had promised that she would remain within the safety of Hogwarts' walls and wards.

The entire night had been fiercely cold in the middle of the Forbidden Forest, yet it had become even more so as dawn grew on the horizon. Her body craved for the warmth of a fire as she trod the extensive grounds on her trek back into the castle.

An insistent knot in Pansy's gut threatened her with the impulse to retch. Pansy had absolutely no idea what Hermione expected of her, nor did she care... exactly. She had started to develop a story and easily assumed that the Gryffindor would go along with it.

That is, if Hermione even came back.

That gruesome knot in her belly forbade Pansy the luxury of going back to her room for sleep.

Aimlessly wandering the corridors, hands fidgeting in dread, Pansy prayed she would cross the path of a professor, who would demand an explanation for her being out of bed. Hermione and Pansy were on the brink of having their nights' events exposed to the entire castle and, eventually, to the Order and the Death Eaters. If Pansy didn't

come clean...in a sense...to Dumbledore, all of her lies would unravel around her.

The idea of seeking help from Professor Snape did not cross her mind.

Much sooner than she had anticipated, Pansy found herself standing before Professor McGonagall's office.

"Miss Parkinson?" a stern voice commanded behind her.

Gasping loudly, Pansy whirled around, face lit with fright.

"What happened?" Professor McGonagall demanded.

An abrupt movement forced Pansy to flinch, and she let out a sharp squeal. She was fiercely grabbed by the arm. McGonagall towered over the Slytherin, forcing the girl to feel no bigger than a first year.

Pansy fearfully looked up into the wide eyes of the Gryffindor Head of House, dread pulsing with the blood-flow of the wrist held in the woman's grip. Pansy's mouth fell slack, her lips opening and closing.

"Pansy Parkinson!" McGonagall screamed more fiercely.

Pansy continued to silently stand there, dumbstruck that Professor McGonagall had already assumed that something ghastly had happened and that she had caused it. Resentment stopped the explanation dead on her tongue. Pansy hadn't even admitted anything yet, and already McGonagall has made it very clear that she was in trouble.

Little did Pansy know that Professor McGonagall wasn't the least bit angry.

She was horrified.

Minerva had rounded the corner to her office and had been stunned by the unexpected sight of a pathetic figure standing outside her door.

The figure of a filthy, mud-caked and weather beaten girl, who looked like she had run to hell and back. A girl who continued fidgeting oddly, her expression hollow with obliviousness as to the state she was in.

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Severus was mindful not to contaminate his fingertips as he wiped his sweaty brow with the back of his hand.

The sound of an odd slap against the stone floor momentarily diverted Severus' attention from the potion he had been preparing so carefully.

Turning around, he frowned at the sight of Hermione's lifeless arm resting on the floor. Coming up to her side, he rested her hand back on the cushion. Tucking her arm carefully against her thigh, Severus readjusted her torn robes.

He hesitated.

With a rumbling sigh, Snape finally lifted her robes slightly to ensure that all of the slicing hexes had been properly closed. A part of Snape was grateful that he had been the one assigned to take care of Hermione. No one else would have been as capable of closing wounds so deep.

Well... one other person could, but his body was deteriorating so fast, Snape doubted if he still possessed the same abilities. Thinking of Dumbledore, Snape questioned the oddity of how long he and Hermione had been down here without interruption. Already having sent his Patronus to Albus the second they had entered the castle, Snape was shocked that Minerva hadn't kicked down his door by now. Minerva would no doubt demand total charge of Hermione's care.

Turning back towards his potion, Severus groaned at the idea of being required to explain...*something* to those who would want to know how this had happened to her. They needed to think up a reasonable story, but he decided to wait until he could collaborate with Hermione first.

It had already been long obvious to Snape that the truth was completely out of the question.

Truth. Snape snorted. He himself didn't even know what that was anymore.

Lowering the flame beneath the cauldron, Severus slowly closed his eyes. He dropped his face to the potion's blue surface, whispering the precise words needed to complete it. Snape had whispered those words so many times, it was automatic. The verse barely registered in his thoughts, and yet it didn't damage the spell's effect. What truly mattered was the intent and will of the person who said it. And Severus' intent towards those who ingested this potion was always the same.

Dipping a ladle in, Severus disturbed the pristine surface, spooning the liquid into a ceramic beaker. Carefully cradling the mug in both palms, Severus turned towards the stone wall opposite him and disappeared into his private rooms.

Within moments he was back in the lab room again, urging his hands underneath Hermione's motionless body.

Snape cautiously lifted her towards him.

Her arm fell from her side again. The movement forced her to jerk awake.

Severus swallowed uncomfortably, steadying his vision to avoid hers. Hermione's eyes flittered a bit before he was aware that she had finally focused on him.

"I'm sorry," Hermione softly whispered, gripping him tighter.

Exhaling, Severus couldn't help shaking his head in disbelief. "Whatever for?"

"Questioning you... and judging," she breathed weakly. Hermione may have been groggy with exhaustion, but she had the mind to speak cautiously. "Judging your assistance to those... men... who escaped. I know you had no choice in the matter."

No choice, Severus repeated darkly to himself.

Drawing his bedclothes back, Severus carefully laid her on the mattress. Hermione gripped his wrist before his arms had completely pulled away from her.

"I didn't..." she gasped, alarmed that he might be very angry with her. "I revealed nothing... I swear."

"I know," Snape responded, sitting beside her.

Hermione hiccupped before leaning back against his pillows. There was a barrier between them now, so strong that it was suffocating. Snape itched to pull away during the uncomfortable silence. They could not pretend something serious hadn't happened, and they certainly could not go on as they had before without making some type of acknowledgement. Both knew what was needed to purge this encumbrance.

To neither of their surprise, Hermione was more gracious than he.

"It's... all right," she attempted to say with a smile. When Snape still didn't turn to look at her, Hermione tugged at the hand still clutched in her grasp. "Really, Severus... I'm okay... I'm not so thick not to acknowledge that whatever was said and done needed to be... or else I wouldn't be here."

Face forever wearing that mask of indifference, Snape glanced at her briefly as he reached for the ceramic beaker already waiting on the bedside table. Carefully grasping it with both hands, he urged Hermione to open her mouth.

Lifting her sore shoulders off the pillows, Hermione immediately complied. Mouth open, she lifted her chin slightly as he brought the cup to her lips. Pale blue fumes filled the air separating their faces. Hermione lost herself to the euphoric dance of the mist, unaware that behind them, Snape was watching her.

"It's safe," Snape said needlessly. He was more concerned with filling the silence with his voice than saying something profound.

Hermione was already nosily gulping the cool liquid. The edges of her lips rose in return, stressing how unnecessary such a comment was.

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"She was what?" Professor McGonagall gasped. Headmaster Dumbledore rested his hand on her shoulder, reminding her of the necessity to remain calm.

"Captured," Pansy repeated hesitantly. Seated in the Headmaster's office before two incredibly intimidating figures, Pansy struggled to finish her story. "I-I-didn't know what to do! I ran back as soon as I could!"

Minerva made a move towards the Floo. "My Gods! Something needs to be done!"

"Calm down, Professor McGonagall," Dumbledore quickly called after her. He gifted her with his serene smile and the miniscule amount of twinkle he could add to his aging eyes. "Something already has been done to retrieve her."

*** *** ***

Severus was lying in bed with one arm over his head.

Hermione was beneath the covers, he above them.

He'd been thinking far too much the past couple of hours. His mind had been moving feverishly since Minerva had started screaming in his private office, demanding that he speak to her. After she had been assured that Hermione was alive and healing, Minerva had offered to take her to the hospital wing. To Snape's shock and confusion, she conceded to his request that Hermione not be moved.

Snape had immediately grown suspicious. When he had asked if Albus wanted to speak to him, Minerva had told him there was no need. Pansy Parkinson had already told the Headmaster everything that had led to Hermione being captured.

Pansy Parkinson?

According to Minerva, Pansy had told them that she had been sneaking out at night to go to the pubs in Hogsmeade. When Hermione saw her leave the castle, she'd decided to follow the Slytherin instead of confronting her. Eventually, Hermione had challenged Pansy and demanded that she turn back to the castle, but Pansy had violently refused and run away. Moments later, Pansy had heard a scuffle in the street. Turning towards it, she'd fearfully watched as two black-cloaked figures...Death Eaters...grabbed Hermione and Disapparated away.

Severus was appalled and angered as he listened to this, knowing that similar things had happened in the darkness of the Forbidden Forest and not Hogsmeade. Hermione should know better than to go running out in the middle of the blasted night to follow people.

He would take her to task for that... later.

Minerva continued. Apparently, Dumbledore had decided to take pity on Pansy for her honesty and the information that her fiancé, Theodore Nott, and her father...who were both Death Eaters...would not hesitate in disposing of her for such blatant acts of insubordination within a society where complete submission was required of wives.

After listening to this tale, Severus asked again if Dumbledore wanted to see him. Surely the old man would want to know the events that had taken place between Hermione being captured up until he had received word of her safe presence in the castle?

Minerva had uncomfortably told Snape that Albus was sleeping and should not be disturbed.

Something wasn't right; he had seen it in her eyes.

On the morning after his betrayal of Albus and the Order, Severus wasn't prepared for the idea *of not* being questioned by the old man. The heavy weight on his shoulders only intensified.

Now, lying in bed next to the young woman he had used for his own means, he couldn't stop thinking about his allegiances. The things he had said at the feet of the Dark Lord had seemed entirely reasonable and justified at the time.

But, most of the sinister and selfish decisions he had made always seemed justified when the smoldering of his tattoo was fresh. Snape was just not accustomed to thinking of such things after the fact. Everything he had told the Dark Lord: Dumbledore's intentions towards Black with the use of Hermione, and Black's fascination with her, had been entirely true. Snape started to wonder how much he might have damaged everything that Albus had worked so hard to accomplish these past twenty years.

Snape's expression darkened...just as it always did when he thought of the past. He had done his fair share of hard labor as well.

His distracted reminiscence faded with a unexpected movement at his side. Hermione jerked awake with a loud gasp.

She gazed at her surroundings in confusion and alarm before sinking into sated comprehension at the sight of Severus by her side.

"Bad dream," she mumbled sleepily.

"About?" Snape questioned, already knowing the answer. Folding his arms behind his head, Snape steadily gazed at the canopy above him.

"*Him*," Hermione spat. "And something Harry said... I suppose I never realized how right he was. Once the Dark Lord has it in his mind to kill you... you're dead. I've never felt so completely helpless..." Yawning noisily, Hermione abandoned her train of thought and quickly fell back asleep.

Severus was grateful. He wanted silence at the moment.

He had felt her helplessness as well and despised it. He had saved Dumbledore's three-favorite dunderheads, especially Potter, on more than one occasion and had never enjoyed it.

It was an obligation in the eyes of Albus, so it had irritated Snape no end.

He had no choice in the matter. If he wasn't being given orders of heroism by an idealistic old wizard, then he was charged with similar duties by a homicidal snake-man.

The Dark Lord had ordered that he ensure Hermione's safety, and it had tainted that act of valor for him.

The last time Severus had saved someone because he truly wanted to...

Hermione flinched in her sleep when Severus suddenly sat up in bed. He pushed himself off the mattress to cross the room.

He needed to move his body to force away the memories of happenings from twenty-odd years ago. Severus shook his head, determined to bring his mind to the present. But this was how it usually was when he did both of his masters' bidding. His mind constantly going from one event to another. It didn't matter if he was asleep or awake.

Snape turned, intent on leaving the room to find the drink he knew would adequately distract him.

Snape didn't even make it to the door.

Alcohol had fiercely been on his mind until a more pleasing distraction caught his attention.

The bedclothes layering Hermione had snagged during his move away from the bed, and now a good portion dragged across the floor.

Severus slowly walked back across his bedroom. Upon reaching his four-poster, he lazily leaned against it, bracing his forehead on the heavy wood. Glaring up through strands of dark hair, Severus eyed Hermione's bare back. Her unruly hair was a proper contrast to her pale and smooth skin. Severus followed the curve of her spine until met with the bedclothes barely covering her arse.

Severus swallowed, idly closing his eyes.

If the Dark Lord hadn't ordered Snape to take her... to watch over her... after everything he had said to add value to her life...would he have attempted to save her? Or was she merely a pawn used to save his own life?

Snape regretted that series of questions the moment they had begun. Such probing forced the remembrance of events he had no desire to relive, yet he succumbed to the images.

Severus' hands shook uncontrollably. Raising them, palms up, he gasped at his inability to prevent the tremors. When clasping them together didn't work, his fingers sought the armrests. Skin already unnaturally pallid, his knuckles whitened as his hands harshly fisted around the wood.

"I can't do this anymore."

Dumbledore gazed at Severus from an angle, vision drawn to the armrests. "Are you still yielding to dependent... amusements, Severus?"

"Did you hear what I said?" Snape snarled.

Dumbledore shook his head pitifully. "Are you asking me... or telling me?"

"The Dark Lord's been dead..."

"You and I both know he isn't dead."

"He's been gone," Severus loudly corrected, "for five years! His supporters," Severus spat disgustingly, "aren't as devout as they once were. There's only a handful of us now, including those like Lucius who still claim the defense of the Imperius Curse. It won't be long now before everything is forgotten..."

"You know you can never leave your post."

"So you condemn me to a life of hell? The only reason I have remained among them...when I had made it very clear to you I desired nothing more than to abandon it...the only reason is you."

"You can choose to leave my service anytime you want, Severus. What I meant was that you can never leave this. You are branded. You will forever belong to Tom. Do his work or die. Now ask yourself: would you rather die, working blindly in the cause against Muggle-borns, or pretend to work for the cause while you're truly functioning for the light."

Severus turned his head slightly to avoid Dumbledore's penetrating gaze. If he kept allowing the old man to easily peruse his thoughts, Severus would never be rid of his memories.

"And we both know you had condemned yourself...not I."

Severus started. He allowed himself the freedom of clasping his right hand over his long inactive tattoo.

"This," Severus hissed, "wasn't what I wanted. And I certainly didn't expect what it had become."

Dumbledore now found himself to be the one caught off guard. He guiltily diverted his eyes. "Yes... I know what you wanted when you kneeled to receive that."

Recognizing what he had inadvertently caused Dumbledore to remember, Severus betrayed his emotions by leaning forward. "I wasn't trying to make you...I didn't mean to bring up..."

Dumbledore smiled sadly as he lifted his palm. "No need... no need. I've already told you time and time again... you don't need to apologize any longer."

And Severus hadn't, even during the few times he'd recognized an apology from him was needed and had been earned.

Severus relaxed the harsh clench of his eyes, gazing down at the half-naked female body splayed across his mattress.

Pushing himself away from his perch against the four-poster, he unbuttoned his shirt and returned to bed to chase a few measly hours of sleep before classes.

*** **

That day, Hermione had had the most wonderful and arousing dream.

She dreamt that she was sleeping in Professor Snape's bed, his voluminous bedclothes and pillows draped around her.

This had in fact happened, but she was elated to be aware of it in her sleep.

Simply being invited to enter such a private man's chamber was reward enough. Something about her being allowed to even touch the same pillow that such a dangerous

and severe spy rested his head against drove butterflies into her belly.

'Snape' and 'pillows' were two words no one in this school would ever think to put together. But the combination, and her presence against them, made Hermione smile and hum in her dreams.

In her dream, Hermione had hugged one of her professor's pillows between her knees as the bed sagged beside her.

The weight on the bed drew closer as a tentative hand caressed the rise of her hip. In her dream, that nimble arm drew Hermione's back flush against a bare chest. A cold face pressed against the back of her neck.

Two words Hermione had been yearning to hear had finally been spoken in her dreams.

That cavernously velvet, baritone voice calmly breathed a phrase against her neck.

Hermione woke up late in the evening. She had slept all day. But she still couldn't forget her dream. Lying in his bed, sleep quickly took hold of her consciousness once more.

As she felt herself drifting off, Hermione repeated the sound of Snape saying, "I'm sorry," hoping that she would dream of it again.

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Severus was eagerly anticipating the scene that was due to unfold by the end of the day.

He entered the Great Hall for supper, his entire being filled with pleasure at the disgusted glance Weasley sent his way.

He expected a similar one from Potter, but the boy's look was one of fear.

The last thing he ever expected from Potter was fear. But Snape was doubly pleased to see that the worried look only intensified when the boy turned to expectantly gaze at those entering through the Great Hall doors.

So, Black still didn't know.

Snape knew that the intelligence of Hermione's... experiences... last night could not be kept secret from Potter and Weasley for more than a day. No doubt they were alit with panic when her absence from classes and meals continued.

The Gryffindors knew the book-worm would undeniably attend classes half-comatose. Snape had regrettably experienced that side of her nature this morning when she had awoken during his morning routine. The blasted girl had actually attempted to get out of bed!

Severus was so alarmed by her sudden movements and angered by her carelessness that he brutally demanded she lie back down before he tied her limbs to the bedposts.

Expecting a fierce row that was usually the result of making demands on her, Snape was doubly surprised when Hermione smiled artfully at him and quietly went back to bed. Before he departed, Severus couldn't help but ask what exactly she found so amusing about his displeasure.

The witch had the cheek to reply, "Once you'd finished tying me to your bed... Professor... I have a feeling you might have missed your first class as well."

Sitting at the High Table, Severus adjusted himself inconspicuously. His robes tightened uncomfortably at the thought of her words. As tempting as such a notion was, Severus wasn't an animal. If merely walking to and from class was detrimental to her recovery, then certainly other... activities... would aggravate the healing process. He hadn't spent his energy and skill to heal her for nothing.

He could wait, Severus thought with a smirk.

The smirk dancing on one corner of his mouth spread to the other side. He couldn't help smiling gruesomely once the mad dog entered the Great Hall. Just as he expected, Black went straight to the Gryffindor table wearing a very convincing expression of complete anxiety.

Potter's mouth started moving feverishly. The boy hesitantly glanced at Snape and sharply turned his eyes back to Black.

Snape knew that Minerva had told the boys everything she had told him last night. He wished he could have seen their faces when she had informed them that Hermione wasn't in the hospital wing where they could visit her... but in Professor Snape's rooms.

The woman always picked the right moment to admonish him. Minerva leaned into Snape and harshly whispered, "Could you at least *pretend* that you're not enjoying this?"

Snape snorted as he reached for his goblet. He nearly spluttered when Black finally screamed, "SHE'S WHERE?"

Author's Notes: Uni has been kicking my butt, and I'll finally be graduating this spring, so I apologize for the long delays in updates. I WILL finish this story!

-**Melusin** has been incredible. I recommend all to read her award winning Potter Place Prompt fic *Three Blooms in the Cauldron*. It's a fun, romantic read at 47,000 words and complete! <http://www.thepetulantpoetess.com/viewstory.php?sid=8290>

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book ii. Line 146.

Chapter Twenty Four - Which, If Not Victory, Is Yet Revenge

Chapter 28 of 36

Hermione hadn't talked about the Death Eater meeting or her horrid run-in with Voldemort and Macnair, and now it was becoming increasingly evident that she needed to. Her feelings and worries were preying upon her, and if she didn't verbally rationalize all of these confusing thoughts soon, she feared she would succumb to the mental turmoil she had

endured back at number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: My beta, **Melusin**, has made this chapter readable for your pleasure.

Snape detested the idea of surrendering to a coughing fit in the middle of the Great Hall. Unless he was expelling a thunderous reprimand or sneering some insult, Severus Snape never drew attention to himself in the midst of an audience. Holding in his breath, he had fled the moment his throat had constricted.

Once he was behind closed and...thanks to his quick spells...soundproof walls, Severus nearly keeled over. Bracing his palms against his thighs, he hacked and coughed until the last remnants of that blasted pumpkin juice had cleared from his windpipe.

This was as close as he was ever going to get to raucous laughter.

Severus had been waiting all day to witness Black's reaction to learning the whereabouts of Hermione. And Snape had to admit... his sadistic needs had been properly sated. Now all that was left was the inevitable confrontation between Black and himself. Snape certainly felt no need or obligation to explain a damn thing to Black. He just predicted that the mangy mutt would confront him...eventually.

If Snape had remained seated at the High Table, he was certain Black would have demanded answers in the middle of the Great Hall...regardless of the underage audience and without concern for tact or discretion. So, apart from the undignified choking fit Snape sought to suffer alone, he would have exited the Great Hall regardless.

Snape also enjoyed the scheme of forcing the beast to suffer a bit longer and *earn* their inevitable confrontation. If Black was at his mercy for information about Hermione's condition, Snape was certainly going to make him aware of it.

Hermione had been in his rooms all day, and thanks to Minerva's permission...largely due to her overbearing concern for the Gryffindor's wellbeing...Hermione would stay there until she had completely recuperated.

Which was to be determined by Snape himself.

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"Why do you keep looking around?" Lavender snapped. She spoke low enough in Harry's ear to prevent others from eavesdropping, but it didn't alter the suspicious impatience that grated in her voice.

"No reason," Harry grumbled.

Lavender was chipper in an instant, shooting him a toothy grin. Scooting a bit closer, she softly placed her hand on his thigh.

Harry frowned into his bowl of pudding. Half-heartedly prodding one of his favorite dishes, Harry gave up attempting to eat it. Not unlike the previous meals today, he just didn't possess a proper appetite.

Glancing to his left, he snorted at the sight of Ron shoveling food into his mouth. Despite the worry and anxiety both of them had endured for Hermione, it appeared nothing short of death would prevent Ron from enjoying his meals.

Professor McGonagall had tried to reassure the two of them that Hermione was in good health and would attend classes again very soon. But Harry's nerves wouldn't ease until he heard such reassurances from Hermione's own lips.

"*Snape*," Harry growled to himself. He stabbed at the mush in his bowl, sending spurts of pudding onto the table's surface.

Harry grudgingly admitted to himself that if Hermione needed to be healed by complicated potions, then she *was* in the right hands.

But he just didn't like it. It was Snape for Merlin's sake!

Harry was regretting telling Sirius the details. He should have waited until after dinner. But his godfather had been hounding him all day for particulars and wouldn't accept 'later' as a suitable response. Luckily, Professor McGonagall was by Sirius' side in an instant, quickly shoos him out of the Great Hall and to his office to finish the tantrum.

Harry might not have understood the nuances of love and relationships, but he wasn't so thick as to not recognize Sirius'... er... crush. Regardless of their age differences, Harry had been somewhat open to the idea of Hermione and his godfather becoming more...familiar. He would much rather see her with him than dumb-witted gits like Krum and Seamus.

That was before, however.

It had soon become noticeable to Harry that the crush was entirely one-sided. If Sirius wasn't careful, he was not only going to lose any hope of Hermione reciprocating the attraction, but he could even make an enemy of her. And Harry couldn't imagine being forced to choose sides between one of his best friends and his godfather.

Even though Harry wasn't surprised by the reaction Sirius had just had, it deeply unsettled him, nonetheless.

Sirius simply had one of those persistent personalities that refused to take 'no' for an answer. When Sirius didn't get what he wanted...what he felt he rightly deserved...Sirius would not only grow extremely sullen but take whatever action necessary to achieve his desires: like escaping from Azkaban for the sole intention of killing Pettigrew, attacking Ron to get to Pettigrew, and leaving number twelve when Dumbledore had instructed him to stay there no matter what the circumstances.

And we all know what became of that decision. Unless he starts acknowledging his mistakes, history is going to repeat itself

Harry groaned. He knew it was true, but he didn't *want* to think such gloomy thoughts about his godfather. Ever since his last conversation with Dumbledore, Harry could swear that the old man had somehow engrained his 'pearls of wisdom' into his head.

Almost like he had been possessed.

But Harry recognized that it wasn't Dumbledore's fault. He couldn't help it: neither of them could. With every day that passed, Dumbledore was weakening more and more. And as the Headmaster steadily lost his magic and wisdom, it was steadily... collecting... in Harry.

And Harry wasn't enjoying one minute of it.

Balancing his chin on his outstretched hand, Harry sourly gazed down the Gryffindor table. Frowning once more at Hermione's empty spot, he questioned Ginny's empty seat as well.

Come to think of it, he hadn't seen her at meals today, either. If she wasn't ill, Harry had hoped that she might have been able to visit Hermione down in the dungeons.

There was absolutely no possibility in the seven levels of hell that Snape would allow Ron or himself into his private rooms.

But perhaps Ginny...

Harry jolted in his seat. He hadn't been paying attention to Lavender's stroking of his leg until she gave his inner thigh a firm squeeze.

"Don't," he snapped, yanking his body away from her hand.

"Then pay attention when I'm talking to you!"

*** **

Sometime before midnight, Severus entered his private rooms with a billowing flourish, heading straight for his bedroom.

His eyebrow arched. Snape was mildly surprised to notice that his bedroom door was closed.

Nonplused, Snape reasoned that these were his rooms, and therefore, there was certainly no need to knock. Quickly entering without salutation, he slammed the door closed behind him and smoothly crossed the carpeted stone.

"Been rummaging through my bookcases, I see," Severus hummed in a monotone voice. He kept his back turned towards Hermione as he hunted for a clean robe in his wardrobe.

Hermione was sitting up in his bed, back perched comfortably against his pillows. Every candle in the room was lit. She had been so utterly engrossed in the large tome balanced on her bent knees that she hadn't glanced up when Snape entered.

"Hmm..." was the only acknowledgement that she bestowed on him. No one, not even Severus Snape himself, could successfully distract Hermione from her reading.

Well... perhaps Severus Snape.

It wasn't Snape's voice, nor his gruff temperament that had captured Hermione's attention.

A flash of bare, pale skin forced Hermione to mindlessly read the same sentence repeatedly.

Snape had completely undressed with her in the room and had not hesitated in doing so. She didn't want to be caught ogling him, but his wiry muscles and bare arse strained her concentration on the Multi-Species Transfiguration text she had found engaging only moments before.

Elegantly throwing clean robes over his broad shoulders, Snape casually began buttoning the thick fabric as he stalked to stand at the foot of the bed. He didn't truly care if she read his books, but there was no doubt that she had lingered before his numerous bookcases before finally making a decision. The multiple slicing wounds on the surface of her skin might be closed, but it would be days before the internal damage was properly healed. Thinking this, Snape snapped, "What did I tell you this morning about getting out of bed?"

"I was already up," she breathed, attention focused on the book once more. "I suppose I somehow wandered into your office after using the toilet."

Impertinent! "Since I am standing directly in front of you, I would prefer it if you would give me your undivided attention when you are speaking...is that my shirt!"

"Yes, it is," Hermione replied sweetly. She licked her finger and turned the page.

Snape did not respond. He continued silently glaring at her, still as a statue, breathing heavily through his nostrils.

It took a moment for Hermione to realize that she had just answered him again without looking up from the book.

She loudly slammed it shut.

"Firstly," Hermione saucily retorted, "I would like to *thank you* for bathing me after you healed me last night, but it would have also been *very kind* of you to have given me something to wear."

Hermione had slept most of the day and evening unaware that she had been completely naked. Around the fourth time she had awoken from a delirious dream, she was coherent enough to take in her state and notice that no robe or nightgown had been laid out for her at the foot of the bed. The next logical step was to hunt for something to wear, so she didn't see anything wrong in taking things into her own hands.

Snape crossed his arms, gazing at her indifferently. "The only items of clothing belonging to you were ripped and drenched in blood."

Hermione snorted. "And you couldn't send a house-elf to my room to get me a few things?"

"I am shocked, Miss Granger," Snape responded in mock bewilderment. He played a graceful hand across his chest. "I am completely aware of your past efforts against the enslavement of such innocent creatures. I would never force a helpless elf to work...without pay...in your name."

Hermione was now the one silently glaring with her arms crossed. She struggled against the urge to hurl a pillow at him.

Severus shot her a devious smirk and disappeared into the bathroom.

"What did you expect me to do?" Hermione called after him. "Recuperate in your bed bare-arsed for the next few days?"

Snape was silent a moment in thought before his voice echoed against the tiles. "It was an idea..."

*** **

The next day of classes weren't quite as entertaining as that first day back.

Rumors began circulating with unsurprising speed, students pondering the whereabouts of the Head Girl and the circumstances of her attack. Many rightfully assumed she had been kidnapped by Death Eaters owing to her Muggle-born status. But as Snape stalked the corridors, he caught a few alarming words mixed in with the tales, including 'ravished,' 'sadistic entertainment,' and 'disgraced.'

That simply wouldn't do.

Snape had deducted so many points by the end of the day that anyone who dared to breathe as he passed them in the corridor was reprimanded for gaping like a fish. Expectantly, his final class entered the classroom reeking of the trepidation that had always been his favorite environment in which to lecture.

Severus cursed under his breath when he felt the presence of a body pause by his desk. Rubbing his forehead with his hand, he hoped that if he pretended not to notice the little bugger, then he would finally exit the class with the rest of the students.

Knowing what Potter wanted to discuss, Snape didn't have the patience for him at the moment.

When the last of the seventh-year students placed their labeled bottles on the surface of his desk, Snape recognized that Potter was still standing off to the side. The boy...young man's...height annoyed Severus. Even with the added inches of the raised dais his desk was perched on, Potter's eye-line managed to meet his own.

Snape slammed his balled fist down on his desk, sending the boy an irritated glare. "What do you want, Potter?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, sir..."

Snape had to prevent his eyes from bulging in shock. Did the boy actually just apologize and call him 'sir' in the same sentence?

"... but I wanted to see...to ask how Hermione was doing?"

Snape leaned back in his chair and narrowed his eyes. "Hasn't your Head of House been keeping you informed?" he drawled sarcastically.

"She has, sir. But I know Hermione has been taking potions to heal her, and... er... Professor McGonagall isn't a Potions master."

Snape's upper lip curled. "What is it you want to know?" he chided.

"It's been two days... Do you have any idea when Hermione will start attending classes again... sir?"

Snape didn't respond right away, his eyes narrowing once more. The little shit was actually being polite. Not just by using the correct words but by actually sounding like he meant them, which was new. Snape wanted to choke him more than ever. He didn't feel obliged in the least to explain anything to the Gryffindor, but Snape wanted to see how long Potter could keep this up. "Exam day before the hols," Snape said emotionlessly.

Harry scratched the back of his head. Shifting uncertainly, he half-turned to exit before facing Snape again. "Do you know when...if Hermione could receive visitors?"

"Never." The very idea of Potter in his private rooms!

"I wouldn't presume, sir."

Snape eyed him skeptically.

"But Ginny would like to see her... sir."

Snape opened his mouth to sneer a reply but was interrupted when his classroom door suddenly flew open, banging against the opposite wall.

Sirius Black stormed into the room.

"Oh, for fuck's sake..." Snape groaned under his breath. Now he was in the company of two of his least favorite Gryffindors. He watched Black march towards his desk before asking contemptuously, "Are you lost, Black?"

"Where the hell is she?"

"To whom are you referring?" Snape asked in insincere puzzlement.

"Sirius," Harry hissed, "I don't think this is the time."

"I know you have her chained up somewhere, you sick bastard!" Sirius' face was a deep shade of red, ready to turn almost purple. Hands fisted at his side, he struggled to remain on the opposite side of Severus' desk.

"Sirius!"

"Leave off, Harry!"

"I think we *both* should leave. You're overreacting." Harry moved to grab him by the arm.

Sirius roughly shook him off.

"She's been living with *Snape*, Harry! *Snape*!"

The one goal Harry had hoped to achieve had now been shot to hell because of his godfather. There was no way he was going to persuade Snape to allow Hermione visitors now. Harry shot Sirius a disappointed glare before turning to retrieve his belongings. Hesitating in his path to the door, he turned to confront Sirius once more. "You're acting like a spoiled brat."

Sirius wordlessly glowered at him.

Shaking his head, Harry fled the classroom with a disgusted groan, ensuring that the door was properly closed to drone out Snape and Sirius' inevitable argument.

The corner of Snape's mouth was raised in an amused smirk. He was leaning comfortably in his chair, enjoying the spectacle that had just taken place.

"Where is she?" Sirius spat, taking a threatening step towards the desk.

"Who?" Snape's eyes widened. He casually lowered his chin in his hand.

"I don't have time for your crap, Snape! Where's Hermione?"

"Oh... oh, her." Severus scratched his chin with the tip of his finger, tilting his face to stare at the ceiling. Humming loudly, he took his time, exaggerating his attempt to remember what he'd done with her. "She's asleep," Snape said gruffly. He reached for a stack of parchments and slowly started thumbing through them.

"*Where*."

Snape was thoroughly enjoying tormenting Black but knew he was about to take this a step too far.

The temptation of that step too far emanated in his muscles. He had waited to see Black like this and knew this confrontation could become twice as entertaining. But Snape's idea of enjoyment tended to lead to duels. Thinking this, Snape vainly attempted to remain silent a few seconds longer, gazing unresponsively at Black through his greasy hair before sending Black a challenging leer.

Sirius lunged forward, slamming his fists on Snape's desk. "WHERE IS SHE, YOU PATHETIC, BUGGERING DEATH EATER!"

Grinning evilly, Severus thrust himself up, matching Black's threatening stance over the surface of his desk. "In... my... bed."

Sirius snarled as if in pain, thrusting his hand into his robes for his wand.

Snape shoved himself away from his desk. The wooden chair flew back and cracked against the wall.

"*Expelliarmus!*"

As soon as both men had their wands leveled, unspoken hexes dancing on their tongues, a third party cast a seamless spell from the corner of the room. Snape and Sirius both watched, flabbergasted, as their wands flew out of their outstretched hands and landed seamlessly in Hermione's.

All three uncomfortably gazed at each other. Hermione's other hand was still wrapped around the silver handle that led to Snape's rooms.

Sirius was disturbingly aware that the robe tied hastily around Hermione's waist was black and dragged on the stone floor.

"What is going on?" she gasped. She glanced down at the wands clenched in her fist, eyeing them with disbelief. Disbelief that the safety she had depended on down in the dungeons was being breached by the threat of a duel, disbelief that the sharp spell that had quickly ended the confrontation had come from her own mouth. "There was so much screaming." Hermione was aware of the horror-struck muscles pulling in her face, but after the last few days, she just couldn't muster enough energy to mask it.

"My wand, Miss Granger," Snape said coolly. His dispassionate expression reprimanded her own.

Hermione swallowed and hesitantly walked to tuck Snape's wand into his outstretched hand.

Turning towards Sirius, Hermione was aware of Snape's eyes on her, his fierce gaze forcing her to stand her ground. She did not move forward like Sirius expected. Instead, Hermione extended her arm so he would have to walk to her.

"Hermione..." Sirius breathed softly. He couldn't blink as he gazed at her.

Hermione was conscious of him inspecting the scratches and bruises on her face and arms. She tilted her head diagonally towards the floor, forcing her curls to fall against her cheek.

Taking his wand, Sirius' fingers lingered on Hermione's wrist. "You're... all right."

She attempted to smile reassuringly. "Of course I'm all right." Taking a step back, Hermione gasped when the light pressure of his fingers instinctively curled around her wrist.

She froze, heartbeat quickening. Hermione was afraid, but she didn't know why. Snape was right behind her... He would protect her.

But she couldn't see or hear Snape. Unable to gauge Severus' reaction to this, she only imagined his eyes boring into her back, waiting for her next move.

Hermione didn't want to embarrass Sirius, but she didn't think he had a right to act so passionately worried. The last time she had been alone with him, he had held her tight, forcing a kiss on her, while ignoring her flailing against him.

She still hadn't yanked her hand away.

What the hell was wrong with her?

"You know you shouldn't be exerting yourself, Miss Granger," Snape growled, his dangerous voice shattering the silence. "Go and lie down."

"Yes, sir," Hermione whispered.

Sirius tugged her wrist harder.

"No, Hermione. You don't have to stay here! You can go the hospital wing where you'll be in proper hands."

Hermione narrowed her eyes, obviously insulted. "I *am* in proper hands."

Sirius flinched, his lips pursed sourly.

Blowing out a resigned sigh, Hermione finally yanked her hand out of his. "My wounds were fairly serious ones... which cannot be healed by spells alone. Professor Snape has me on a series of potions that I must take every day. This would be too difficult in the hospital wing; surely you, Harry, and Ron must see that? Plus... given the... circumstances of my... of the incident... I think this arrangement would be best..."

"Circumstances..." Sirius snorted. "You mean like the fact that Snivellus' *friends* were the ones who nearly killed you?"

"Don't say..."

"Were they all masked?" Sirius hissed at her. "I wouldn't be surprised if *he* kidnapped you himself."

Hermione took a second too long to deny this. Wetness gathered in her eyes.

"Oh, good God... That's what happened, isn't it?" Sirius made a move to wrap his arms around her, yearning to pull her away from the beast waiting calmly behind her back.

Hermione quickly thrust herself out of his way. She was nearly pressed into Severus. The hem of his robes wrapped around her ankle.

A dexterous hand she knew all too well lightly rested in the hollow of her back.

"No!" Hermione yelled with a new energy. "Of course Professor Snape didn't do this. Without him, I wouldn't even be here. And I don't appreciate you speaking so flippantly about my... experience. Why are you trying to make me feel worse?"

Sirius dumbly gaped at her. "I'm not... I didn't mean..."

"I think that is quite enough excitement for one day, Miss Granger," Snape said quietly, face turned towards her ear.

Hermione silently nodded and turned in the direction of his private rooms.

"Dammit, Hermione!" Sirius yelled. "You don't have to stay here!"

"Your right... I don't have to." Half-way through the conjured door, Hermione tilted her head back, eyeing Sirius harshly. "Don't insult me by spreading lies about Professor Snape. I'm exactly where I want to be, Sirius."

"*Professor Black*," Snape corrected her with a vicious snarl.

Hermione nodded at Snape with an apologetic smile. "Good day, Professor Black."

When the door slammed shut behind her, Sirius made a move to follow but stopped when the silver handle abruptly vanished. Whirling around, he stared at Snape in appalled disbelief. "What have you done to her?"

Crossing his arms, Snape sneered, "Whatever I wanted."

*** **

Hermione awoke the next day slightly more energized. Tentatively curling her toes against the rough carpet lining the stone floor, she was pleased when the muscles in her calves did not cramp. Taking advantage of her solitude, she convinced herself that she was strong enough to shower without the assistance of Snape's house-elves. Repugnance for brain-washed labor aside, Hermione was a bit disturbed by the elves' bullish eagerness in helping her rise out of bed and... shower. She snorted to herself at the remembrance of the giggling fit they'd instigated as their tiny hands attempted to scrub the soles of her feet.

Slowly padding her way to the bathroom, Hermione released an amused snort and rolled her eyes. Propped up against the foot of Severus' four-poster lay a black, wooden chest, on top of which were piles of pristinely folded laundry.

Her laundry.

She hastily grabbed a few things before heading into the bathroom.

Hermione was thankful that the Potions master's amenities were very similar to the bathroom she had in her Head Girl's rooms. Remembering her first experiences with the intimidating Prefects' bathroom, Hermione didn't have the energy to fumble with unfamiliar taps. She just wanted to get clean as quickly as possible and go back to bed.

She hadn't been up for more than twenty minutes, and her limbs were already starting to feel a bit wobbly. Hermione wondered if the blue gunk Snape has been feeding her every day since her... return... had been taking a toll on her energy.

She groaned when hot water pounded against her back and ribs. The heat felt marvelous on her muscles, but the shower-head's pressure stung her tender scars.

Scars.

Hermione sighed, her body cringing.

Lathering herself more vigorously, the logical part of her mind fought to push these self-conscious thoughts away. Things could be worse...much worse. Appreciating the gift of her ever increasing health, Hermione knew the thin red welts scattered across her ribs would continue to fade.

She just didn't like looking at them.

If Hermione didn't look at them, she wouldn't have to remember the circumstances that had led to their presence on her body.

Unless she was passing the dawdling hours reading, her mind would wander to the events *of that* night. Hermione could still see his mad eyes in darkness.

Macnair.

Those unblinking, dilated pupils sunken behind a grotesque mask. Even though she couldn't see his ruthless smile, Hermione clearly imagined it when she closed her eyes. The cackle he released in response to her screams with every Slicing Hex he wreaked on her body...

Stop it, Hermione.

Hermione heard the pipes groaning before she realized she had just turned the water off.

Hermione hadn't talked about the Death Eater meeting or her horrid run-in with Voldemort and Macnair, and now it was becoming increasingly evident that she needed to. Her feelings and worries were preying upon her, and if she didn't verbally rationalize all of these confusing thoughts soon, she feared she would succumb to the mental turmoil she had endured back at number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

Snape hadn't broached the subject yet, but that didn't surprise her. Hermione wanted to talk to him, but she was unsure of how to introduce the subject without putting him on the defensive.

Face smothered in her towel, Hermione groaned loudly, willing herself to stop thinking so much.

She carelessly slipped on a nightgown, desiring nothing more than to lie down and go back to sleep.

Reaching for the door, Hermione stifled a scream when the handle was suddenly yanked out of her hands.

Hermione uneasily gazed up at the intruder but quickly calmed when she realized that it was only Severus.

Of course. Who else would it be?

"Merlin!" she breathed. "You scared the crap out of me."

Hermione continued to vigorously dry her face and hair, so she took no notice of the long pause before he spoke.

"Did I?" he asked silkily.

"Were you waiting long?" Hermione waved her wand to remove the condensation from the mirror and quickly dried the wet spots on the tiled floor. "I must have lost track of time in all the heat..."

Hand braced against the door frame, Hermione stepped to the side to give Snape free access to his bathroom.

But he didn't move.

Snape's billowing robes and tall frame completely blocked the doorway, his hands clutched on either side of the frame. Hermione didn't realize he was intentionally preventing her from leaving the bathroom.

Curiously gazing at him, her stomach clenched when his eyes failed to meet hers.

Breath hitching, she swallowed loudly. Snape was meticulously taking his time devouring her body.

In her abrupt haste to end her shower, Hermione had carelessly slipped a nightgown over her moist shoulders. Feeling his eyes on her, she was unexpectedly aware of the thinness of the material.

A deep flush blossomed on her chest.

Which Severus noticed. Finally dragging his ravenous vision above her neck, he bore into her, expression filled with intent.

Hermione recognized this dangerous look... the look that both terrified her and sent a hungry tingle between her legs. Maybe it was the dilation of his pupils, or maybe it was his tilted chin that forced him to look up through strands of lank hair... but despite how intimate their relationship had become, those eyes never failed to force Hermione to take a tentative step back.

Which was exactly what she did.

Severus followed with a step of his own. He didn't say word... There was no need for him to verbalize his intentions.

Hermione's chest heaved as her breathing increased. Back pressed against the wall opposite the door, Hermione stiffened against it.

Snape did not scold Hermione for her continuous retreat from him. He silently stalked towards her. Savoring the sight she presented once more, the edge of Severus' mouth raised into a smirk. The only sound in the bathroom was that of an erratic drip in the shower and the clink of metal as he steadily unfastened his belt buckle.

Hermione's abdomen throbbed at the sound of the leather whipping loose from his trousers.

Snape stopped advancing on her right before their bodies met. Tilting his head to the side, he elegantly raised a hand to her neck, pushing away the long strands of wet curls that had soaked the fabric covering her breasts. He took his time removing each curl, fingers skimming across her cleavage.

Snape's other hand disappeared between them, deftly unbuttoning his trousers with a quick movement.

Hermione wasn't fearful anymore, but her hesitancy was still strong. She wanted nothing more than to have him press his lips against her, but couldn't find the courage to initiate it.

No sooner had she thought this, Snape had slid a hand up her neck to firmly grasp her jaw. He pulled her face toward him, pressing a knee between her legs.

His knee rose, edging her quivering thighs apart.

Feeling her legs nearly give out from under her, Severus lowered his face, sucking her bottom lip into his mouth.

Everything within them released at once: the fear they had shared in the Forbidden Forest, the uncertainty of either of them leaving the Dark Lord's presence alive... never mind together. Snape's tentativeness regarding her physical safety the past couple of days had placed a physical barrier between them that had morphed into constant sexual tension.

It had been difficult for Severus to have her in his bed and not fuck her good and hard.

Strangely enough, he had taken that frustration out on her by robbing Hermione of her clothes. Snape's irritation always seemed to abate at the knowledge that he wasn't suffering alone.

But there was no stopping him now.

Before either of them had noticed, Hermione was yanked away from the bathroom wall. Hungry hands closing around her bum, Hermione was roughly deposited onto the surface of the counter. She gasped at the cold granite pressed against her skin, instantly conscious of Snape pushing her nightgown up her thighs.

Driving his body between her legs, Snape swallowed her aroused moan. Tongue trailing down her jaw, he had to fight against his impulse to bite into her warm throat.

Snape ground himself between her thighs. Hermione threw her head back, banging the crown of her skull against the mirror. The pain seemed fitting in the midst of their frenzy of arms and tongues.

"... far too long..."

She had been mumbling continuously. Snape finally discerned her exact words.

"... far... far too long."

Yes, Snape thought to himself.

It has been.

Responding to this line of thought, Severus' hands wrapped around her arse, jerking her towards him, and finally thrusting into her.

Hermione gasped loud and sharp. Snape would have been aroused by the sound if her body hadn't frozen against the mirror. Or if her expression had shown a minimal amount of pleasure, instead of the pained furrow of her brow.

Chest heaving, he waited a few seconds longer; her hands hadn't let go from the rough clench against his arms. Pushing back slightly, Snape frowned as he continued gazing at her. He waited for a sign that her pain had subsided.

Hermione finally released a shaky breath. Her body sagged against him.

"Obviously, it hasn't been long enough," he scolded.

"I'm okay," she breathed, attempting to smile.

"That certainly did not look 'okay.'"

Sitting up, Hermione palmed her sides. "My ribs are still a bit tender, that's all. I'm feeling better every day."

"Better is not well. Get into bed."

"No!"

"What..." Severus wasn't able to finish his reprimand. His sneering mouth was suddenly enveloped in warm, humming lips. Severus succumbed to the arousing kiss for a few seconds... until he felt her thighs scoot further off the edge of the counter, forcing him to sink deeper into her wetness.

"Severus..." Hermione softly whined when he pulled away. She pressed her face into his neck, willing him to stop moving.

Gathering her by the waist, he pulled her off the counter much more carefully than the method used to put her there. "I did not spend all of my time, skill, nor my depleting stock of potions ingredients only to kill you myself."

"Don't be so dramatic. You wouldn't have killed me," Hermione pouted.

"Nevertheless... get into bed."

Holding his open trousers with one hand, Snape stormed towards the bathroom door and held it open until she exited.

*** **

It was pitch black in Snape's bedchamber.

Hermione had been staring into the shadows for a good hour, her mind forming odd shapes in the darkness that floated up towards the roof of the canopy.

She didn't know how much more of this 'recuperating' she could take. She had slept all day, which only left her awake and restless at night. Snape wouldn't even allow her to complete her school work yet, and the idea of falling behind was driving Hermione mad. Perhaps if she had the distraction of her classes, her analytical nature wouldn't be feverishly attempting to explain everything that had happened at the... Death Eater... meeting.

Knowing that this was a foolish time to bring the topic up, Hermione was still determined.

Turning over on her side, Hermione eyed the shadowed figure of Snape's lithe body. Pushing herself up on her elbows, Hermione thought better of shaking him awake.

Instead, she leaned into the blackness of his hair splayed across the pillow. "Severus..." she whispered against it.

Severus was a very light sleeper. He immediately, though somewhat groggily, grunted in acknowledgment.

"I...um... can't sleep," Hermione stuttered.

"Remind me to alert the *Daily Prophet* in the morning," he groaned thickly. Snape readjusted his position, yanking the bedclothes past his chin in an effort to disappear beneath them.

Hermione thrust her leg out with a huff, kicking the covers away.

"Severus we need to talk..."

When Snape still didn't respond, she sighed in frustration. Pushing herself to a sitting position, she hissed, "Severus!"

Snape spoke very low, obviously trying to control his temper. "*Do not* force me to bind your limbs and Silencio you, Hermi..."

"The Dark Lord has something planned for me, doesn't he?"

"Bloody hell!" Caught off guard, Snape had rolled onto his back, punching his fist into the mattress.

He breathed heavily through his nostrils.

"I need to know what he's commanded of you," Hermione said quietly.

"I think it would be best if we discussed this..."

"No, we are discussing this now."

"Silence!" Snape roared. His body moved like a snake, sitting up with a quick snap.

The severity of *this* outburst made Hermione physically flinch away from him.

"I still find myself baffled," Snape thundered in the darkness, leaning over her threateningly, "that someone who has never once spoken over a professor in a classroom, *especially me*, now seems to constantly have trouble holding her tongue. How many times must I demand that you do not interrupt me!"

"*Lumos*," Hermione shakily whispered.

All of the candles in the bedroom ignited at once. But with the bed-curtains drawn around them, only a fraction of light squeezed through the small openings hidden between the folds of fabric.

Severus face was red. Hermione could clearly see that he was livid but doubted that her interruption was the only reason.

She haughtily crossed her arms. "I am not a mere student any longer, Severus, remember?"

Snape continued to glare at her.

"Listen," Hermione sighed dejectedly, "I apologize for interrupting you, and I promise to resist in making this a continued habit... but don't try to change the subject or dismiss me when I'm speaking to you! I know I guessed the right question to ask... your reaction made that obvious. But I am not going to wait until tomorrow to find out what sinister plan the Dark Lord has you using me for! I'm not stupid. I'm a Mudblood..."

"Don't use that word in my chambers," Snape groaned distastefully. "I hear it enough everywhere else."

Hermione was about to admonish Snape for *his* interruption, but that comment disheartened her anger.

"I'm a Muggle-born," she stressed loudly, "and there is no possible way the Dark Lord would allow me to leave...unharm...to return to school with my Death Eater professor!"

"I do believe you have just received your first 'O' of the year from me, Miss Granger," Snape drawled nastily. "What a ~~are~~ excellent display of reasoning and deduction."

Hermione was stung.

Gazing at Severus, she steadily shook her head in amazement. "This is my life you're joking about, Severus. Don't you care if I...?" Realizing where she was going with that line of thought, Hermione instantly cut herself off.

"Forget it," she said quietly. Hermione reached for the bedclothes and turned to lie down. "I apologize for needlessly waking you. Goodnight."

Severus sighed loudly. Leaning over her, he curled his fingers around her arm, urging her to face him again.

Hermione tugged her arm out of his grasp.

"Don't be stubborn," he scolded lightly, pulling her more insistently.

Hermione finally laid flat on her back but kept her face pressed against the pillow.

"And *do not* cry. You should be accustomed to my sharp tongue by now. And, you should certainly know better than to ask me for details of my orders."

"But they're concerning me."

"Partly." Noticing the miserable tone of her voice, Snape relaxed slightly, falling closer to her as he rested on his elbows. Misery he could handle much better than an enraged witch. "But you must trust that I will tell you what you need to know."

Hermione raised her eyebrows expectantly. She was making it very clear that she expected to be told something...now.

"As I am certain you have deducted at this point...due to your dealings with Dumbledore...the Dark Lord also has an... interest... in Black. Mainly Black's mental state. Both he and Dumbledore are prepared to take any necessary precautions to prevent such a mental case from unnecessarily taking his life. And they have also both come to the conclusion that love...just...and the like, would adequately pull Black from his self-centered petulance."

"I've heard this conversation from the Headmaster already..." Hermione acknowledged carefully. "But... how did the Dark Lord come to that conclusion?"

Snape hesitated before saying, "I convinced him."

"You what!"

"I said what needed to be said... or else you wouldn't be here!"

"I know... I know... It's just... disturbing."

"As anything involving Black naturally is."

"But what other plans are there?"

"Given everything from the moment that we left the Dark Lord depended on you, my main priority has been to prevent your death. Now that that is obviously out of the way, I haven't really entertained much else. But stop asking me questions and don't pester me. That is... if you trust me..."

Hermione smiled, snorting softly. She quickly turned to face him, her arm reaching up to push a strand of hair behind his ear. When Snape closed his eyes at the contact, Hermione leaned up to kiss him on the cold, bony flesh of his cheek. "You know I do," she whispered.

Soft, warm kisses peppered his face. Snape instinctively leaned against her.

When the wetness of her tongue dragged across his throat, he finally pulled away.

"That's enough."

Hermione wrapped her arms around his shoulder blades before he moved too far. "No, please," she begged at just the right tone to make his cock twitch. "Don't pull away... I just want to touch you."

Severus groaned in resignation. He didn't know what was worse: a raging erection pressed into the cold mattress or a warm hip.

Hermione made the decision for him. She scooted under the space separating him from the mattress.

"Just lie down, Severus. Go back to sleep," she breathed in his ear.

Snape finally allowed himself to relax, his body half on top of her. When his chilled face pressed into the warmth of her neck, he growled, "*Nox*."

Author's Notes: The plot is lagging... I know! But it will definitely start picking up again next chapter. On another note, I was very pleased to receive an email from the LJ community *The New Library* informing me that I have been preliminarily nominated for the first round of *The New Library Awards* in the following categories: Best Dark!Fic, Best SS/HG Hurt/Comfort, Best SS/HG Drama, Best SS/HG AU, and Best New Author. I cannot explain how humbled and speechless I feel. I thank those of you who nominated this story. I am also using this opportunity to pimp the TNL awards (and shamelessly pimping myself), which is currently open for second-nominations. Many incredible fics are running (which makes this even *more* intimidating), like **Lariope's** *Second Life*, **MiaMadwyn's** *Care of Magical Creatures*, **Melusin's** *Professor Snape in the Bedroom with Chocolate Ice Cream*, and **Mazzy's** *GeeLicious*. The TNL Awards can be found here: http://community.livejournal.com/tnl_awards/2911.html

-As always, I am eternally grateful to my beta, **melusin**. Without her, this story wouldn't be what it is.

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Book ii. Line 105.

-Next up: Why has Ginny been avoiding Harry? *Will* Snape allow Ginny to visit Hermione? If he does, I wonder what news Ginny has for her... It's the week of the hols, and omniscient Dumbledore believes a bit of Christmas celebrations are just what the Order needs... at Sirius' house.

Chapter Twenty Five - Confusion Worse Confounded

Chapter 29 of 36

As soon as the redhead's pathetic divulgence had processed in Hermione's mind, she was on her feet and out the door, thundering through the dungeons with only one thought on her mind. Answers—and lots of them.

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to my talented beta, **melusin**.

There is a large dose of angst and abuse in this chapter. Although, I'm not sure if that's a warning or a promise...

"Harry... please..."

Desperation hung heavy in the air. Just as it always did when his back was turned to her. Harry ceased in his exit not only because of her request but largely due to the sharp pain it stabbed in his gut.

"Lavender." Harry sighed, clenching his eyes.

"You don't need to leave. Parvati won't be back for hours. Stay here with me... please."

Scratching the back of his neck, Harry faltered, eying Lavender's once fit stomach... which now displayed a proud bulge.

Her proud bulge.

Her pregnancy wasn't *that* obvious, to say the least. At any rate, Lavender had possessed the tact to habitually wear a larger set of school robes to every class and even when lounging in the Gryffindor common room. Rumors hadn't spread yet, so Harry had assumed that only very few knew about him...them.

But Lavender always made a point of shedding her outer robes when the two of them happened to be alone.

Harry sullenly sat down beside her on the bed.

Silently, he waited like he always did for her inevitable attack on his person. She was always quick to place a hand on his leg, lean into him, or hungrily kiss his cheek.

The uncomfortable silence dragged on.

"I appreciate what you have done for me." Never knowing when his mood would change, Lavender was careful to speak gently. "But, you don't *have*... to do it."

Harry turned sharply. "Are you *crying*?"

"No," she sniffed, sloppily wiping her runny nose with her wrist.

"Is this one of those hormone things?"

"UGH! You are such a dolt!" Lavender lunged for one of her gaudy pink pillows. Hand fisted in the padding, she punched Harry in the stomach...hard.

Falling back against the bedpost, Harry awkwardly sat back up, staggered by her outburst.

Harry hadn't the faintest idea what he should do. What did she expect of him? They weren't in love. They both knew that. He had made that perfectly clear to her, too, when he had asked her to marry him. But he had also told her that he believed in many different types of love. Regardless of how uncomfortable this pregnancy made him feel, he really did want the baby. They...all three of them...just needed time to get to know each other.

Thinking all this, Harry grimaced as he watched Lavender cry into her mattress. "Get up," he sighed.

"No!"

"You're acting childishly."

It wasn't his intention, but his judgmental comment and insensitive tone made Lavender comply with his demand much quicker than Harry expected.

"Don't you dare call me a child! Not only will I be eighteen soon, but I'll also *behaving* a child..."

Harry cut her off with a wave of his hand. "If you don't stop screaming at me, then I'm going to leave."

"Fine! Leave! I don't need you and neither does your baby!"

Harry cringed. A hard knot tightened nauseatingly in his gut. Gritting his teeth, he remained exactly where he was. It had never once crossed his mind that Lavender was manipulating him whenever she said such things. Harry yearned to do the right thing so fiercely, he couldn't muster the spirit to be suspicious.

It also wasn't worth the risk of what he might lose.

Harry leaned into her. He reached to touch her back but clumsily drew away. "*am* trying, Lavender. I don't understand what you expect me to do."

"I know you're trying," she said miserably. "But you don't need to remind *me* of how this is such a *sacrifice* for you. I don't enjoy feeling like I need to force you to be with me."

Tears streaming down her face once more, she turned away from his penetrating expression.

"Come here," he whispered suddenly.

Lavender tensed at such an unfamiliar request from him.

Harry leaned across the bed, lightly resting his hand on the base of her belly. He smirked slightly when she hiccupped at the contact. Sensing her hesitation, Harry's own nervousness melted away. He pulled her, pressing his chest against her back, urging her to lie down with him on her bed.

Yes, Harry had acknowledged to himself that they needed to get to know each other better. But if that was ever going to happen, Harry knew he needed to stop deliberately avoiding it.

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Hermione feverishly jotted down a few more notes, her ears straining for sounds within Snape's bathroom.

It surprised Hermione how much time Severus spent in the shower. Almost as long as she did. But Hermione had much more hair on her head... so she couldn't imagine what he could be doing in there.

Well... Hermione *could* wantonly imagine a few things... Hermione raised the back of her hand to her mouth, stifling a giggle. The idea of Severus Snape wanking in the shower didn't seem likely...no matter how often she enjoyed envisioning it.

Not that she was complaining at the amount of time she now had to herself.

Hermione had feigned sleep when he had arrived in his chambers after classes, knowing Snape would take advantage of the rare, although minimal amount of privacy he had to himself. The moment the bathroom door had closed behind him, Hermione wasted no time in summoning Snape's house-elves.

They were quick in getting every book, quill, and parchment she needed to complete a week's worth of missed assignments.

A sated calmness swept over Hermione as she medicated her mind with facts and the scent of ink.

About twenty minutes from the time Snape had entered the bathroom, Hermione tensed as she listened to the water being turned off.

She eyed the mess covering his entire bed. Thinking quickly, Hermione realized she was loath to put her things away. Straightening the parchment on her lap with a flip of her wrists, she huffed to herself, determined to finish what she had started.

In the face of her determination, Hermione still couldn't prevent her breath from skipping when the bathroom door flew open. The moist humidity swept into the bedroom, only one of many causes that forced Hermione's cheeks to turn red.

She didn't want Snape to notice her apprehension at being scolded. Keeping her eyes trained on the books in front of her, Hermione nervously finished writing the sentence she had started. Ineffectively straining her focus from Snape's pause in the doorway... Hermione's feeble efforts allowed her to catch the slight tilt of his head as he stalked to her side of the bed.

"What is this?" Snape barked, looming over her.

Hermione flinched at the volume but then giggled at her own silliness. She knew she was well enough to complete a few homework assignments. Snape was acting unnecessarily overprotective and controlling.

Glancing up at him, the smirk Hermione had prepared slowly melted away.

Snape hadn't dressed.

He was only wearing a towel wrapped around his waist, held loosely by one hand over the side of his hip. Hermione swallowed, unaware that she had been drinking him in with her eyes. Snape's wet hair splayed across his broad shoulders. His firm chest and stomach were beaded with moisture. Hermione's eyes traveled down his body, quickly drawn to the natural bulge between his legs that was exaggerated by the wet towel.

"I asked you a question, Hermione..." Snape tried to sound stern but humor resonated in his voice.

Hermione blushed, suddenly insecure of what he thought of her licentiousness.

"Homework," Hermione mumbled. She glanced at the quill twirling between her fingers before finally looking him in the eye.

"I do believe you are the most willful woman I have ever... encountered."

Hermione smiled instinctively, her cheeks turning red once more. She loved it when he called her anything other than *girl*. If Snape was still attempting to intimidate her into putting her books away, he certainly wasn't going about it the right way. She knew he was annoyed with her for being up when she should have been sleeping. But Hermione didn't care. How could she? Grinning slightly, Hermione brashly allowed her vision to return to the prominence between his legs.

Throwing the bedclothes aside, Hermione slid her bum across the mattress, making an effort to be closer to him.

"What did I just say?" he thundered, all humor gone.

Ignoring him, Hermione slowly reached out, grasping the back of Severus' thigh. Glancing up through hooded eyes, she drew Snape closer to the bed.

Swallowing, Snape gracelessly stepped into her insistent nudge.

When Snape was near enough to stand between her legs, Hermione hummed contentedly, wrapping her arms around his waist, nuzzling her face into his navel.

He chuckled throatily in response. "Don't start something you cannot finish. I need to be in the Great Hall for dinn..."

Smirking up at him, Hermione shamelessly squeezed his arse. "Don't worry... I intend to finish..."

Severus sucked in a breath when she slowly pulled the towel away from him.

Face still against his taut stomach, Hermione shuddered when his hardness quickly thrust away from the folds of the cloth only to press firmly beneath her jaw.

"Severus," she hummed in frustration. Hermione struggled to prevent her nails from digging into him. It had been almost two weeks since they had... done anything, really. Despite the teasing encounter in the bathroom, the both of them had attempted to avoid as much overly-tempting physical contact as possible, for fear of being carried away.

Her hands slid up the back of his bare thighs, drawing him even closer.

Lifting her face, Hermione's innocent and curious expression warred with the intense gaze with which Snape graced her. She slid her quivering palms across his hipbones, savoring the feel of his naked flesh under her fingers.

Severus calmly raised a hand to her face. Staring down at her, he trailed her bottom lip with his thumb before edging it into her mouth. Hermione's tongue swathed around his finger eagerly. Impatiently wrapping a greedy hand around his cock, she grinned when Snape failed to suppress a loud hiss.

Hermione continued playing with him delicately as she lowered her face. Her cheek softly brushed against his hardness, reveling in the distinctive texture of his skin. When the corner of her lower lip dragged against the head of his penis, Severus quickly raised a hand to clench into Hermione's hair.

"Open your mouth," Severus groaned.

Driven by an ardent arousal, she immediately complied. Mouth opening, Severus eagerly trailed her lips with the pad of his index finger before grasping himself to guide his hardness past her lower lip.

Hermione's warmth closed around him. She moaned contently.

Snape growled at the sound, smirking slightly. He had to fight the instinct to thrust into her wonderfully wet mouth. He watched Hermione alternate between sucking him senseless and softly licking circles around the tip.

Severus couldn't prevent the chuckle of absolute pleasure that escaped him.

Feeling Hermione insecurely draw away, Snape tilted his hips forward, gently pressing himself deeper into her mouth. "No," he groaned, loath for her to stop. "That was right. Again..."

Her tongue darted out once more, wrapping around the head of his cock.

"Yes," Severus hissed. Her tongue flicked again. "Now... take it completely," he grunted. Holding the base of his cock, Severus slowly pushed himself further into her hungry mouth.

Hermione did as instructed, groaning in pleasure at hearing and feeling him so excited.

Snape threw his head back and sighed. Chuckling again, Snape released the off-color comment that had been twisting in his thoughts. "*G*ood girl. Ten points to Gryffindor, Miss Granger."

Snape may have been teasing, but he had never given House points lightly before and so hadn't anticipated the consequences of his words. A floor above him, the Gryffindor hour-glass clinked loudly as ten rubies were added to the count.

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The next day, Severus hadn't protested when Hermione woke up early to work on the mass of assignments she needed to complete.

It was Saturday. If she hadn't bullied his house-elves into retrieving her things yesterday, he would have sent them himself at the crack of dawn. Exam day before the hols was fast approaching, but Snape didn't doubt her ability to effortlessly 'exceed expectations'.

He snorted at the thought.

Thundering into his bedroom before lunch, her daily potion in hand, Snape unresponsively gazed at Hermione and the layer of parchment and books she'd gleefully immersed herself in on his bed. When Hermione failed to glance up at him, Snape cleared his throat and drawled, "You have a visitor waiting for you in my office, Hermione. The house-elves have been instructed to bring the two of you some food. I'll be back in an hour." Snape placed a mug-full of the blue mixture on the end-table beside Hermione and turned to leave.

Hermione called after him before he fully exited the room. "You're*allowing* me visitors?"

Snape arched an eyebrow. "Despite the incessant rumors circulating the castle... You are not my prisoner,*my dear*."

Hermione wanted to admit that she wouldn't mind if she had been. She smiled instead. Reaching for her potion, she swallowed a few tentative sips and hummed, "Thank you. Who is it?"

"Ginevra Weasley. A much better alternative to her witless brother, I must say."

Hermione struggled to ignore the insult against her friend. The idea of speaking to someone other than Severus while she was down in the dungeons hadn't crossed her mind. It seemed absurd that *she* had even been allowed down here. But Hermione didn't want to run the risk of angering Snape by defending Ron. She very much craved the opportunity of talking to Ginny, now.

"While I can tolerate her in my chambers," Snape continued, "it would be completely inappropriate for her to see you... in my bed."

"I agree. Is the living room fine?"

"Adequate. But *after* you've finished every drop." With that, Snape whirled around in a billow of robes with Hermione eagerly crawling out of bed to walk closely behind him.

Snape spun to face her, causing Hermione to slam into his chest. "What did I just say? After you finish the potion, Hermione."

Disappointed, she nodded in response.

When the Conjured door leading into Snape's office slammed shut behind him, Hermione rolled her eyes. It was just like Snape to make Ginny sit uncomfortably in his office instead of inviting her in himself.

Hermione ignored his instruction, believing there was no harm in waiting. She lingered a few seconds to ensure Snape was thoroughly gone before she invited Ginny in. Right before Hermione reached for the brass handle, she gasped at the realization of her own carelessness. Glancing down at the thin nightshirt she typically wore when lounging about, it had suddenly dawned on her that this wasn't appropriate to wear around Professor Snape...in the eyes of everyone but her and Snape, that is.

She ran back to his bedroom to throw on her school robes. Closing and warding his bedroom door, Hermione stilled her nervous breathing before inviting Ginny in.

She stepped into Professor Snape's office and shook her head. Hermione laughed at the sight of Ginny standing painfully still in the middle of the room.

"Glad you came." Hermione sniggered.

Ginny briefly grinned in return. The energetic smile faltered as soon as the redhead's eyes focused. Ginny frowned, almost gaping at Hermione, before she fruitlessly attempted to grin again.

Hermione awkwardly drew her hair to cover more of her face. Her bruising wasn't nearly as ugly as before; her skin didn't hurt when she touched it. But the yellow discoloration of her fading injuries had been enough for Ginny to imagine the worst.

"Come on." Hermione sighed, jerking her head into Snape's living space.

Ginny's eyes widened as she walked through the door. "I cannot believe I am down here..*in here*."

"I can't believe it, either." Hermione laughed.

Hermione sat down on the settee, and two house-elves instantly appeared with a tray of sandwiches and tea. They magically Summoned the coffee table closer to Hermione's knees and then popped back down to the kitchens with a snap of their fingers.

Ginny hadn't moved from the wall where the door had been. She impulsively examined Snape's living rooms with a strange expression of both fear and awe.

"Oh, relax!" Hermione lightly scolded, patting the cushion at her side.

"Relax?" Ginny scoffed, rolling her eyes. "*Here*?" Hermione's lack of nervousness was obvious, compelling Ginny to flip her hair over her shoulder to appear just as nonchalant. Ginny finally took her offered seat. Hermione reached for the pot of tea, pouring boiling cupfuls for the both of them.

Hermione cleared her throat, turning her face so Ginny couldn't see her smile. She had felt so secure in these surroundings that she delighted in Ginny's hesitancy within the very same walls. The dreaded Potions master's chambers almost felt like her rooms, now. *Our rooms*, her mind corrected. This was punctuated by Hermione acting quite the little hostess in the manner she was serving Ginny.

Snape would be furious if he had been here to witness this.

Which of course made Hermione smile even wider. Clearing her throat again, she focused on the real matter at hand.

Popping a sandwich into her mouth, Hermione turned to Ginny with forced good humor. If she led the conversation, Hermione could avoid the topic turning on herself. "So...what excitement have I missed in Gryffindor Tower? I know Harry or Ron must have got into some form of mischief without me."

Ginny's face snapped up, glancing at Hermione oddly.

Hermione swallowed her partially-chewed food, throwing the leftover piece in her hand onto the table. "Why are you looking at me like that? What is it?"

Ginny shook her head furiously, unable to speak.

"Has something happened?" Hermione demanded.

"Stop! I didn't come here just to talk about me," Ginny said, surprisingly angry all of a sudden, sharply turning away.

Hermione comprehended the redhead's outburst, nonetheless. Not one to normally shed tears, Ginny's feelings of sadness had always twisted into frustration. Hermione had been used to similar emotions from Ron.

"Well, I certainly don't want to talk about me!" Hermione laughed archly. Only one thing...one person...could make Ginny react like this. "Harry...?"

Ginny nodded. Hermione gave her friend time to compose herself before she made Ginny tell her everything.

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Hermione couldn't believe all that had happened in the past week-and-a-half while she had been recuperating in the dungeons.

Lavender was months into a pregnancy... and engaged to Harry!

Hermione was further dismayed to learn that Harry had been so careless in not preventing such an... accident. There were certainly other options available to them that wouldn't necessitate him marrying the slapper!

Ginny had sobbingly confessed all of this to her in Snape's living room. As soon as the redhead's pathetic divulgence had processed in Hermione's mind, she was on her feet and out the door, thundering through the dungeons with only one thought on her mind. Answers...and lots of them.

Ginny had trailed after her, bawling uncharacteristically as she begged for Hermione to leave things be.

Leave things be, Hermione scoffed to herself. Over her dead body!

Curly hair wildly swirling behind Hermione in her haste, she hadn't been surprised when the younger students in the corridors dashed out of her path. Many had seen the Head Girl in such a state before, so Hermione hadn't felt surprised when they diverted their eyes to the floor, hoping they weren't the reason behind her wrath. Not one student dared to whisper about the Head Girl's suspicious absence for the past week for fear that Hermione might overhear them.

Upon reaching the Gryffindor common room, Hermione was relieved to notice that Ginny had finally abandoned her incessant pleading. As the redhead fearfully watched Hermione crawl through the portrait hole, she sharply turned on her heel and ran back down the corridor in the direction they had come.

The portrait of the Fat Lady hadn't completely closed before Hermione screamed, "Harry Potter!"

The image of a livid Hermione Granger was certainly a sight that had been seen before in the tower, but now she had fading battle wounds and rumors of their existence to add to the intimidating vision. All heads in the common room dutifully turned down, giving the appearance of minding their own business to avoid confrontation.

Harry tentatively descended the boys' dormitory stairs.

"I need to speak to you," Hermione said through clenched teeth.

"I figured as much..." Harry was at a loss on how to properly react to her unexpected anger.

"In my room, if you please." Hermione whirled away from him, expecting Harry to obediently follow. Hermione stormed through the common room to the door that led into her Head Girl's rooms. She gruffly thrust open the door.

Hermione turned, only to meet the scandalized eyes of Lavender Brown, whose palm was pressed firmly against Harry's chest.

Lavender was determined to keep him exactly where he was. Not only in the physical sense, but mentally and emotionally as well. She had covered much ground during Hermione's absence and wasn't willing to lose it without a fight.

"Can I help you, Miss Brown?" Hermione sang sweetly with her head cocked to the side.

The common room had fallen deathly quiet. The only person who dared to breathe was Harry, whose face had fallen into his hands with a dreaded groan.

"Anything you have to say to Harry, you can say to me as well."

"Oh, I don't think so." Hermione laughed condescendingly. "I have no duty or obligation to afford *you* such courtesy. You are not his wife...yet."

"Enough!" Harry yelled. Taken aback by his own ferocity, he wavered before ultimately taking an even step past Lavender.

"Harry!" Lavender cried.

"QUIET, please!" Harry snapped.

Hermione was quite satisfied to see the aghast look on Lavender's face...until Harry turned on her with the same irritation.

"And you!" Harry snarled at Hermione. "No 'hello'? Not even a quick word or owl to let me know you were all right?"

"I..." Hermione hadn't come prepared for *this* row, but now she realized she should have. She guiltily shut her mouth before replying softly, "Professor McGonagall told you I wasn't in any danger..."

"Don't you think Ron and I would rather have heard that from you?"

"I've been bed-ridden, Harry!"

"Really?" Harry narrowed his eyes at her. "You seem quite energized now, don't you think?"

Stung, Hermione lunged at him, hands fisted at her side. "I'm bloody angry, that's why!"

Oblivious to what had been going on, Ron descended the boys' dormitory stairs. He hadn't heard the topic that was being discussed, only being able to make out the voices of his two best friends. Ecstatic in the return of his female companion, Ron laughed. "Hermione's swearing! Who kicked a house-elf...?"

"THIS ISN'T FUNNY, RONALD!"

The entire common room followed Ron's lead and gazed at Hermione as if she had grown a second head.

Hermione composed herself with a deep huff. Looking past Lavender's death glare, Hermione finally spoke calmly. "I apologize. It's good to see you again, Ron."

"Er... likewise."

"And we'll discuss my careless decisions later, Harry. Right now, I'm here to speak about *yours*."

"Excuse me?" Lavender hissed.

Harry thrust his arm out to keep Lavender behind him.

"Hermione," Harry said quietly, "you're out of line."

"So are you! I cannot believe I had to hear about this from a heart-broken Ginny! How could you, Harry?"

"What?" Harry gasped. He turned to look at Lavender, but she had made it a point to divert her gaze before Harry had been able to catch it. Turning accusing eyes to Ron, he was suddenly nowhere to be seen. "Ginny? I haven't told her anything..."

Hermione growled through clenched teeth, momentarily shame-faced at blaming Harry for Ginny's state. But the second she realized that Harry hadn't been the one to tell Ginny, Hermione already knew who was at fault.

Parvati failed to remove her heartless smirk fast enough to prevent Hermione's notice. Lavender's wide eyes of warning towards her best friend finally snapped the last of Hermione's control.

Wand raised, Hermione lunged at the vicious blond. "You... you spiteful bitch!"

Lavender ducked Hermione's hex, screaming at the top of her lungs. A cushion behind her exploded in a cloud of feathers. Lavender screamed again, throwing herself towards Parvati and forcing her friend in front of her path.

Harry caught Hermione by her wand-arm at just the last minute. "Calm down," he barked, struggling to subdue her. "Ron!" Harry yelled, fearing he would need help.

"This is madness, Harry!" Hermione finally stopped struggling to speak pointedly to him. "Don't you have any idea what kind of snake you're committing your life to?"

"I have to...I *want* to do this, Hermione."

"NO. You don't. What for? Duty? Playing the father you never had?"

"Hermione!" Ron's voice screamed, completely appalled.

"How do you know her baby is even yours, Harry? It's no secret that she's... that she's been... UGH! I won't say that, but it's obvious she's deceiving you!"

"STOP IT!" Harry thrust Hermione away from him. She stumbled backwards, unable to regain her footing until Ron finally came out of hiding and caught her.

Hermione had never seen Harry so angry. His rage finally melted her own.

"These are my decisions to make, Hermione. So *get over it*."

"I only wanted to..."

"NO! And I don't want to hear you saying such things about the baby's parentage, either. Why would Lavender lie about something like that? Regardless of who she may or may not have been with in the past, she's with me now!"

The cruel smirk twitching on the edges of Lavender's mouth had disappeared long before Harry finished saying this. She yanked herself away from Parvati, desiring nothing more than to run to him but turned instead to run up the dormitory stairs to be alone.

"Harry..." Hermione didn't have the chance to finish her sentence. She choked on her saliva when a dreaded roar forced Hermione to swallow her words.

"MISS GRANGER!"

Aside from the few whimpers and squeaks of the first-years, the entire common room was rendered silent once more.

Hermione found herself hesitant to face him. What in Merlin's name was Snape doing in her common room? How could he get in?

Spinning around, Hermione winced at the sight of Professor McGonagall standing beside her Potions master, both wearing identical expressions of discontent.

Hermione calmly folded her hands behind her back. "Yes... Professor Snape?"

"Did your Head of House or your... physician... give you permission to leave your sick bed?"

"I...no, sir."

"Then I strongly suggest you to return to it."

"Yes, sir," Hermione replied meekly.

"Honestly, Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall huffed with an exasperated wave of her hands. "What were you thinking?"

"I apologize, Professor McGonagall. I... wasn't... thinking, that is."

"That much is already obvious," Snape sneered.

"Yes, well, Professor Snape, no harm done as you can see. I'm certain you can take over from here?" Thin lipped, Minerva waited for some sign of acknowledgment. Snape bowed slightly, waving his arm towards the portrait hole. Minerva comprehended his meaning with a roll of her eyes.

"Ladies first," he sneered so only Minerva could hear him. Standing rigidly straight when she had exited, Snape turned to glare venomously at Hermione.

At the sound of a very recognizable and exaggerated snicker laughing at her retreating back, Hermione's previous resentment swelled in her chest. Making a show of calmly following Professor McGonagall and Professor Snape out of the common room, neither noticed the presence of a wand in her folded hands. Hermione snapped her wrist, whispering under her breath before she was completely through the portrait hole.

Parvati's tortured scream echoed in the common room, followed by gasps of horror that abruptly cut off when the portrait of the Fat Lady closed.

Luckily, Professor McGonagall had already rounded the corner in the direction of the Headmaster's office. Hermione wasn't surprised by the obvious hurry of her Head of House. No doubt everything Minerva had learned in the Gryffindor common room would be replayed for the Headmaster in hopes that some... solution... could be attained.

Professor Snape held very different priorities than his fellow Order member. He whirled around to the sound of Parvati's distress. Senses on full alert, his wand-arm flinched in preparation.

"Keep walking," Hermione whispered, passing him.

Hermione didn't wait for him to follow, expecting that eventually he would. A vengeful smirk began to spread across her face.

The metal toe of Snape's dragon-hide boots idly scraped behind her. His long-legged stride enabled him to quickly match her pace.

"What did you do?" Snape asked quietly.

"I gave that snorting face of hers a nasty snout to match," Hermione casually responded.

"Hmm," Snape grunted.

Hermione tentatively glanced up at his lack of reaction.

"You're not... upset?"

"Rule breaking in the Gryffindor common room is Professor McGonagall's inconvenience, not mine," Snape said briskly.

Increasing his pace, he easily passed her.

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Once they had returned to Snape's chambers, cold and indifferent Professor Snape melted away as soon as he was certain they weren't within earshot of anyone roaming the dungeon corridors.

Professor Snape had been instantly replaced by Severus Snape's wrath.

Severus had loudly slammed the door, making Hermione cringe. Trying to avoid his rage by appearing minuscule, Hermione darted across the room to sit quietly on the settee.

"I cannot believe you left these rooms...without permission...and without finishing your potion."

"I'm sorry," Hermione breathed tiredly. "I was speaking to Ginny and got... distracted."

Crossing his arms, Snape marched to stand before her. "You mean," he sneered, "you received some tid-bit of student gossip and immediately had to stick your nose in other people's business!"

Hermione jumped to her feet at his undeserved accusation.

"Harry's business is my business, Severus. That should be very apparent by now!"

Snape narrowed his eyes. Slowly walking closer to her, he leaned into Hermione, forcing her to sit back down on the cushions. "Perhaps... this routine meddling should now come to an end."

Hermione vigorously shook her head. "Never."

"So, you're going to tell Potter whom he can and can't marry?"

"He's marrying a... a... you know what kind of girl she is. Marrying her out of pity for a baby he didn't father."

"You don't know that for a fact, Hermione. And even if it were true, it is not your place to decide such things for other people."

"Harry's my best friend, Severus. I know the two of you have never got along and probably never will, but sometimes friends know what's best for each other, even if said friend doesn't know it himself."

Severus chuckled throatily, pushing himself away from her. "You are a complete hypocrite, Hermione."

Hermione was dumbstruck.

"What did you call me?"

"A hypocrite," he said evenly with a dismissive flip of his hand. Snape's weariness for discussions related to anything Potter drove him to retreat into his bedroom.

Hermione sat for a few seconds in silence, taken aback by his insult. Stifling a screech, she thrust herself off the settee, storming through his living space and ranting off the top of her lungs. "How dare you say that to me! *You*, of all people, calling me a hypocrite. *Snape*," she scoffed nastily, "the dedicated spy of not one but *two* masters... Snape, the sacrificial hero for the Order... Snape, the most valued pet of Voldemor..."

Hermione had entered Snape's bedroom before she was able to prevent her ghastly slip from rolling off her tongue. But regardless of her carelessness, it was stopped for her. A fierce hand clamped around her mouth as another closed around her throat.

Snape thrust her against the wall.

Hermione's feet scrambled beneath her, her toes desperate to touch the floor. Eyes bulging, Hermione's arms flailed against him, and for the life of her, she couldn't recall if she had completely said the Dark Lord's name or not.

Snape towered over her, his hair draping both sides of his face, casting a black shadow across his eyes.

His voice hissed low and threatening. "I believe you have finished mocking me."

Snape removed his hand from her mouth to grasp her jaw tighter. He shook her face to force a response. "Yes?"

Hermione fervently began shaking her head.

"Say it."

When her back began sliding up the rough wall, Hermione cried, "Yes! Yes... I've finished. I won't mock you... again."

They stood there staring at each other, the silence dragging mercilessly. Hermione's muscles threatened to cramp in her effort to remain perfectly still as she watched Snape's own battle to control his anger. She had no idea how long this mood of his would drag out. When Snape sensed her quivering in his arms, his dangerous expression slowly altered to heartless amusement.

When Hermione averted her eyes, Snape jerked her jaw, forcing her to look at him. "I am not a hypocrite... because I do not claim to be either of the things you accused me of. Nor do I make such claims for others. You, on the other hand, are so quick to voice your opinions on the choices of everyone around you, believing that Miss Hermione Granger knows best..."

At the sight of tears welling in her eyes, Snape finally yanked his arm away from her with a snarl.

Hermione fell forward; coughing for air, she held her sore throat.

Lip curling, Snape turned away from the sight.

Hermione pushed herself off the floor but was mindful not to say a word.

Snape sensed the exact moment she was facing him. Whirling around, he ignored her retreat away, grabbing her by the arm. Hermione prepared herself for pain but was doubly confused when his arm softly wrapped around her waist. Hermione struggled to pull away.

Snape held Hermione close and sneered, "Feeling better? Shall we continue, then?"

Hermione glared at him and snarled, "If you want to talk, fine. But perhaps we should wait until *you* are feeling better?"

Snape faltered slightly but then only held her tighter. "Unfortunately, that isn't an option. I have far too many questions for you. What if...stop struggling and listen to me! What would happen if your precious Potter had an opinion on *your* love life...?"

Hermione stilled like he expected, finally meeting his eye.

"That is," Snape whispered nastily, gently brushing his lips against her ear, "if you even have one?"

Hermione cried out, surprising Snape with a hard kick in the leg. Using the distraction of his pain, she finally pulled away from him. But Hermione made no move to escape from his bedroom. She wasn't afraid of him; although, she knew in many ways she should be. When his arms closed around her from behind, Hermione could no longer hold back her tears. Her mind was always a war of emotions when he was... like this. She had experienced his physical violence before, but it had never cut her as deeply as his callous words.

"I asked you a question," Snape hissed against her ear.

"No," Hermione screeched, throwing his arms off her. Her back still facing him, Hermione thrust herself towards the four-poster, unable to prevent the wrack of sobs that were taking control of her breathing and senses. Falling dumbly against the bed, she gasped. "You're just lashing out."

"Answer me," Snape said quietly behind her.

Was there a question? Hermione couldn't remember... She turned her face into the mattress.

Snape snarled in impatience. Lunging towards the bed, he grasped her by the arms, yanking her up to face him.

"Tell me now!"

"What? What do you want to know?" Hermione cried. She made a move to crawl away, but Snape was too fast for her. He clambered on top of her and pinned her arms to the mattress.

"When Potter and Weasley find out who you have chosen to be intimate with, what do you expect their reaction to be? Professor Snape, the dreaded Potions master and *very* loyal Death Eater... Wouldn't you expect them to make similar demands as you did today?"

Hermione's eyes widened. She couldn't understand why he had been lashing out like this, and now it all finally made sense. She had never pondered the 'what-if's' of their senselessly continued liaisons. Was he afraid that she expected him to remain her dirty little secret forever?

"Yes... they would," Hermione breathed, finally glancing up into his furious face.

"And would you let them persuade you?" Snape barked at her.

Hermione lifted her shoulders off the mattress, meeting his anger. "What if I did?"

Snape pulled back slightly, his eyes strangely going blank. The anger melted from his face until he was no longer pressing his intimidating weight against her. It appeared Hermione wasn't the only one who had been ignoring the 'what-if's'.

At a loss for words, Snape turned his expressionless face, slowly struggling to remove his hold on her.

Before he had completely pulled himself off her, Hermione asked, "Would you?"

Tears running out of the corner of her eyes, Hermione clenched them shut and furiously shook her head. She fiercely wished she hadn't been desperate enough to ask that. Not expecting an answer, Hermione pulled her legs out from under him and quickly rose off the bed.

She gasped when determined hands closed around her waist, pulling her back down on the bed.

"No more," she cried, her hands digging into Snape's arms.

"I don't..." Snape faltered, swallowing thickly. It was obvious he wasn't angry anymore, but his dark eyes still possessed a dangerous gleam to them. "Don't leave..."

It wasn't a command. Hermione found herself struggling to deny his sincere request.

Despite... everything... it was difficult for Snape not to be conscious of his hold on her arms and of their position on the bed. Grasping her hands, Snape softly lifted them above her head, holding both of her wrists in one hand. Unable to prevent certain... bodily... reactions, Hermione was soon aware of it herself.

He could feel her entire body trembling underneath him; whether it was from fear or arousal, he couldn't say for certain. Snape released her arms, snaking his hands in the hollow between her back and the mattress, pulling her hard against him. "Would you," his voice was a strangled whisper, "end all of this, merely to please them?"

"No!" Hermione cried, anguish and disappointment rang heavy in that one word. "Never... you know I wouldn't."

Pressing his face against her neck, Severus exhaled at the forcefulness of her reaction.

"That is why you are a hypocrite."

Hermione pushed against him, but Snape refused to give her a chance to argue. "Enough." His hair brushed against her face as his lips pressed carefully against hers. Hermione's tears and runny nose did nothing to deter his onslaught. If anything, the taste of them made Snape deepen the kiss further.

Hermione weakly placed her hands on his shoulders, her whole body feeling too heavy to move.

Looking down at her, Snape pulled his lips away to whisper, "And no. I wouldn't."

Hermione returned his kiss, her eyes widening. Had he just answered *her* question?

Snape slowly lifted Hermione by the bum, pushing his robes out from under her. Lightly edging his fingers beneath her bare thigh, Snape carefully dragged it over his hip. With a few quick movements, he released himself, reveling in the sensation of his aching cock pressing between her legs.

Face pressed into his neck, Hermione groaned when Snape leisurely pushed into her. Her hands clenched against his robes; she was taken aback by his slow and determined movements. Snape had never... not like this...

Hermione tensed when she felt Snape unexpectedly freeze on top of her.

Pushing himself away, he looked down at her in horror. "Bloody hell!"

"What?" Hermione gasped. Snape pushed himself off her, lunging for the forgotten healing potion on the bedside table.

"Severus," Hermione asked again. "What is it?"

"You didn't finish your potion," Snape responded sternly. He grasped her wrist, urging the mug into Hermione's hands.

"It's all right. I was just..."

"NO, Hermione. It is not all right. You don't know what this is..."

"I... um... The ingredients are similar to the Strengthening Solution, but the color and consistency seem a bit... heavy."

Snape chuckled, lightly shaking his head. He hadn't asked her to name the potion, but he wasn't surprised at her attempt, either. "Close. This is a variant of the Strengthening Solution not commonly known since it's been banned by the Ministry."

"Why?" Hermione clasped a hand to her mouth, staring fearfully into the mug.

Severus sighed. While Hermione was distracted in her horror, he reached out to grasp the hem of her robe, pulling it down to cover her partial nakedness. Acknowledging that the mood was long gone, Snape rose from the bed to fasten his trousers before beginning his explanation.

"Because of the dosage. It needs to be taken once a day, at the exact same time each day, for twelve days. The first six days of the potion introduces a magically simulated parasite that feasts on tissue...quite similar to maggots. This potion does target infected tissue initially but won't recognize it and when the body has healed. Once these 'parasites' have successfully eradicated anything foul within the wound, they will begin to harm the host in hopes of creating more infections. Over the next six days, a slightly altered version of this potion is given to kill the 'magical parasite' introduced by the first and finally commence the basic purpose of the Strengthening Solution. As you can see... it is very easy to accidentally...if not intentionally...poison someone."

Hermione jerked the mug to her face, tossing the liquid quickly down her throat.

"Good girl. Now start packing."

Hermione coughed, struggling to speak and swallow at the same time. "Excuse me?"

"Since classes end this week for the holidays, Dumbledore is planning a pathetic get together at Headquarters for the Order."

"I had to spend the entire summer there. I'm not going back for a *holiday*."

"You really don't have a choice... and neither do I."

"You're spending the hols in Sirius' house?" Hermione asked skeptically.

"It's work, Hermione. Not a holiday. Either way, I believe there will be an Order meeting as well."

"Since you're staying there, I can only assume Sirius will be there as well?" Hermione asked with a frown.

Severus' eyebrow arched in response. "What does it matter to you?"

"Only trying to gauge how unbearable this week will be," Hermione sighed, finally rising out of the bed. "As much as you'll despise every moment of it, I must admit that I'm relieved. But in many ways, your presence will be unbearable as well."

"Why is that?" He laughed darkly.

"You'll just be there. It won't be how... it was here. I dread the idea of having you so near and being forced to pretend that there is nothing between us."

"I'm certain we'll find ways to... bear it."

Hermione snorted disbelievingly, turning to walk out of the bedroom. Snape caught her by surprise before she was able to leave the room.

His cool fingers closed around her wrist, pulling her into his arms. Holding her tight against him, he looked down into her surprised face.

"Are you... all right?"

Hermione smiled shyly, nodding her agreement.

"What number am I down to?"

Bewildered, it took Hermione a moment to realize what he was referring to. "I... lost count."

Snape frowned. Curling his hands around her jaw, Snape drew her face up to his for another slow, drawn out kiss.

Author's Notes: No, I am not ignoring the other subplots. Pansy and Remus and our favorite psychopath are due next chapter. I must thank those of you who voted for my story in the first round of the 2008 TNL Awards. Winning Best AU has been an honor!

-My beta, **melusin**, has been aces with her work on this story.

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book ii. Line 995.

Next Up: It's the week of the hols, and omniscient Dumbledore believes a bit of Christmas celebrations are just what the Order needs... at Sirius' house.

Chapter Twenty Six - The Hell Within Him

Chapter 30 of 36

It's the week of the hols, and omniscient Dumbledore believes a bit of Christmas celebrations are just what the Order needs... at Sirius' house. Hermione and company have now found themselves thrust together against their will, with disasters at every turn.

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: Angst. All of it.

-**Melusin** has been an incredible beta. I send my many, many thanks.

Hermione's arm aimlessly shot out to grasp the rim of her seat. After a moment of second-guessing the unpredictable action, she clutched at her queasy stomach instead. The Knight Bus blasted through the streets of London, issuing an insane amount of noise that never failed to shock Hermione, to the complete obliviousness of Muggles. She watched her luggage roll up and down the center aisle, stomach swaying with their rhythm. Hermione almost wished that she had told the Headmaster that she desired nothing more than to stay at Hogwarts for the holidays.

If the Order wanted to gather and drink in Sirius' dreary house for foolish enjoyment, she didn't see why she should have to tag along. Hermione simply wanted things to continue as they had. She'd really started to enjoy her time down in the dark, wet dungeons of the castle accompanied by her fearsome Potions master.

Well... her *entire* time spent there might not have been as wonderful as she wanted to believe it had been. There was the night that the two of them had fought to the point where Severus...

Hermione sighed, shaking her head. She was going, so there was no point in sulking about it. She was also not being entirely honest with herself. Perhaps she would have taken her request of staying at the castle to Dumbledore... if Severus wasn't spending his holiday in Sirius' house as well.

Dumbledore bid him to stay, and Snape was required to obey.

At least she'd have Ron, Harry, and Ginny with her for company...

"Is he talking to you, yet?" Ron whispered in Hermione's ear.

"No," she gulped in response. Hermione knew immediately what...to whom Ron's vague question was referring.

"Wow, you've really ticked Harry off this time."

Hermione frowned, turning to look at the blur of houses and shops passing by her window. She groaned, recalling everything that had been said during her row with Harry in the Gryffindor common room.

Hermione felt no desire to apologize, but she would at least attempt to be civil with Harry, hoping he would extend her the same courtesy. Yes, civil, and heed Severus' warning against butting into other people's personal lives.

Severus *was* right. If...no, not if...*when* her relationship with Severus became common knowledge to all, Hermione would never allow Ron or Harry to speak to her the way she had spoken to Harry about Lavender.

Hermione recoiled in her seat, sighing heavily after that last thought. She gritted her teeth in regret, finally feeling a bit of well-deserved shame over her actions. Perhaps Harry did deserve an apology, after all.

It hadn't been a full hour since Hermione and her group had boarded the Knight Bus, but it felt unbearably longer. Finally recognizing the colored haze of houses passing by, Hermione enthusiastically thrust herself out of her seat, only to regret it a second later when the bus came to an abrupt stop. Her luggage hurtled down the center aisle, smashing against the back of her legs.

Ginny, Ron, and Hermione shakily attempted to get off the Knight Bus a few streets from Sirius' house. Walking down the narrow steps with luggage in tow, Hermione was still distracted by her thoughts and worries.

"Wotcher, Hermione!" Tonks familiar greeting barked out of the Auror's mouth in warning. The cage containing Crookshanks slipped out of Hermione's hand, bouncing once on the bus' steps before being caught in Tonks' grip. "Not feeling well?" Tonks asked with a smirk, grabbing Hermione's elbow to support her.

Hermione forced a tight smile. "Just a bit tired still... I mean..."

Tonks turned to Hermione, curious of her meaning before focusing on the fading marks on Hermione's face. Catching Hermione's eye unexpectedly, the Auror snapped her head away with an embarrassed cough.

"Perhaps the Knight Bus wasn't such a good idea," Tonks mumbled.

Hermione sighed, suddenly wary of this coming week.

As they approached the two houses on either side of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, Hermione dreaded the idea of entering. She was slightly prepared to confront Harry, but the idea of sleeping in such close quarters to Sirius made her palms sweat.

Harry had already been escorted before Hermione's bags were even packed. He was always escorted by himself, now, and with enough Aurors at his side to give the impression that he was the leader of a small army.

Hermione morosely expected a similar picture to come true in the near future, given the way this war had been escalating.

Once number twelve squeezed into view, Tonks waited on the threshold, ensuring that the students under her care were safely inside the house before she went about her business.

A wispy, monotone voice barked in the darkness the second the door was closed behind them. "Hello!"

"Merlin's balls!" Ron yelled reflexively. He jumped back at the sight of a petite, shadowed figure standing eerily still in the entrance hall, tripping over the troll's leg by the door. Madam Black's curtains ripped open, filling the house with her high pitched screaming.

"Luna?" Ginny laughed in disbelief.

The Ravenclaw slowly stepped into the light. "She's not very happy to see you, is she?" Luna breathed, her voice miniscule against Madam Black's vicious roar.

Luna silently observed Hermione, Ron, and Ginny struggling to draw the curtains back across the portrait without the slightest inclination to assist them.

Once the house was finally silent, Hermione wasted no time in grabbing Luna by the arm to drag her into the kitchen and demand an explanation.

"Luna," Hermione spoke once they were all seated at the long dinner table. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm on a holiday... aren't you?"

"What? No... I mean, yes, *I am* spending the hols here. What I really meant was, *how* did you get here?"

"Harry invited me, of course. He said he wanted me to join... I don't remember the name. It was a bit rude of him to ask me questions when I was reading the Muggle dictionary... but his description sounded similar to the DA we had."

"*You're* joining the Order of the Phoenix?"

"Don't be mean, Ron," Ginny scolded.

"No...I'm not...I'm just... surprised, that's all."

Hermione hissed impatiently, slapping her hand on the surface of the table. Ron quickly understood her familiar demand for silence and snapped his mouth shut. "Have you spoken to the Headmaster about this, Luna?"

"Oh, yes. He's the one who gave me the address, saying that Harry requested I come at once. Will the vampires be attending the party?"

"Party?" Ginny laughed. "Why would vampires come here?"

"Well, there *is* going to be a party," Hermione corrected Ginny matter-of-factly. "Not only does Dumbledore want the entire Order together for a meeting, but he also wants Mrs. Weasley to plan a Christmas party for us."

"How do *you* know?" Ron asked.

Oh...*shit*. As much as Hermione enjoyed being the only person in the room with the most up-to-date information, she needed to remember not to do this when Severus had been the one who'd informed her.

"Er... Sirius told me."

"Of course he did," Ron conceded grudgingly.

Hermione didn't want to be the one to ask this next question, but she knew she wouldn't feel at ease until she did. "Speaking of which, is he here by the way?" The only other person she cared to learn the whereabouts of was Snape. If she had to ask about one of them, at least this group would think she had valid reasons...however false...to ask after the owner of the house.

"No," Luna hummed, "just me and Harry."

Hermione tensed in her seat, sensing a similar reaction from Ginny.

An uncomfortable silence was about to descend onto the small group when sounds of someone entering the house vibrated in the entrance hall.

Mrs. Weasley burst into the kitchen, arms stretched out towards the small gathering. "Oh, my girls," she cooed.

Hermione and Ginny rose from the table to step into the motherly embrace.

"I hope you've been well... Sweet Nimue, Hermione! Your face!"

"Mum," Ginny groaned in warning.

"I mean," Mrs. Weasley corrected shakily. "You...um...look well."

Hermione shook her head. She smiled, hoping it would dismiss Mrs. Weasley's exaggerated concern. "What matters is, I feel well."

Mrs. Weasley hugged her once more. "Yes, yes, dear. Well, the lot of you do look good. I've missed you terribly. I know you've had a horrid trip, so upstairs you go, all of you! Get some rest while I prepare some food."

"Oh, Mum," Ron groaned petulantly, his shoulders slouching against him. "We don't need a nap."

Mrs. Weasley grabbed Ron by ear, lightly pulling him out of his seat. "Don't argue with me! Up to bed."

Luna released a sudden bark of laughter. Ron warily gazed at the Ravenclaw, ears turning red.

"Ah, Hermione, dear, just one thing. I hope you don't mind, but I gave Luna here your bed..."

"I argued, but she yelled at me," Luna interrupted strangely.

Mrs. Weasley naturally puffed up in anger, furious at the lack of respect in Luna's statement, but upon meeting the blonde's misty expression, she rolled her eyes reluctantly instead.

She seemed to have the same reaction to Luna that everyone else did.

"Luna has never stayed here before, so I couldn't give *her* her own room. Besides, you're the oldest, so I was hoping you wouldn't mind."

Hermione's face suddenly lit in a bright smile. *Perfect*, she thought. "You don't need to explain. I don't mind at all." Feeling eyes on her, Hermione turned, catching Ron's suspicious and accusing stare.

"Good, Sirius will be delighted. He has exhausted considerable effort cleaning up his mother's master bedroom, just for you."

And with that, Hermione's tiny moment of pleasure vanished.

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"Time for bed," Hermione commanded, snatching Ginny's book out of her hand.

The three girls had been lounging in the dusty Black family library, unproductively attempting to amuse themselves as they passed the time away. There was no denying the shared sense of relief to finally be finished with exams. Even Hermione welcomed the opportunity to take a much-needed break from schoolwork, but there was little to no entertainment to be found *here*.

Hermione might have been able to enjoy this room for endless hours, but she realized the seriousness of their situation when Ginny and Luna had grudgingly buried their noses in books as well.

Ron and Harry's absence wasn't a coincidence. Harry and Ginny had been avoiding each other at all costs, forcing the group to split in an effort for Ron and Hermione to keep both parties company.

"Did you just tell me to go sleep?" Ginny asked, eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"To our...yours and Luna's room. I think we've inhaled enough dust for one evening. Besides, Luna's been reading that book upside down for the past hour..."

Luna flipped her book to look at the spine, checking to see if Hermione's statement was true.

"... and I have a surprise."

"OH, I was waiting for this!" The Ravenclaw jumped from her seat and nearly ran in her flight from the library, clamoring loudly up the stairs.

"What have the two of you planned?" Ginny was extremely anxious, most likely fearful at the thought of a forced confrontation with Harry.

Hermione was still gazing at Luna's empty seat, openly staggered by Luna's enthusiasm. "We didn't plan anything. This is my surprise. Get up!"

"Then how did she know?"

Hermione shot Ginny an exasperated look.

Ginny rolled her eyes, acknowledging their common thought of, 'How does Luna know half the things she knows?'

When they entered the room, Luna was already sprawled out on her bed, supporting her chin in her hands.

Hermione figured that tonight would be the perfect occasion to do this. Christmas was a few nights away, and number twelve was still relatively empty. After Mrs. Weasley had stuffed them with food, she immediately returned to the Burrow after first giving the group harsh instructions against leaving the house. Order members would soon begin their coming and going, with some of them staying the night now and again. Hermione listened to all this, immediately recognizing that Mrs. Weasley was alluding to Sirius, Lupin...and Snape.

Thankfully, none of them had arrived, yet. It was just a house full of students who were determined to get up to no good.

Hermione reached behind Ginny's four-poster and pulled out a plain brown sack she had hidden there while everyone was distracted with unpacking their bags.

Hermione reached in and, to the girls' amazement, pulled out a wine bottle.

"You brought booze!" Ginny gasped.

"Shhh!" Hermione eyed the door, snorting when she realized there was no one here to yell at them. She kicked off her shoes and joined Luna on the bed. "Close your mouth and join us. We're having a much-needed 'girls' night'."

Ginny's shock was entirely justified. This seemed extremely out of character for someone like Hermione, who always appeared very prim and proper. Hermione actually had a few bottles stashed away but not for these purposes. She'd started her collection during her stay in the dungeons two weeks previously. In a piqued fit against Severus' refusal to give her clothes, Hermione had snuck into his wine cabinet while he had been in class. She hadn't taken the bottles so she could drink them herself. Part of this was revenge, but a stronger force in Hermione hated how much Severus drank.

And the type of man he was when intoxicated.

The less alcohol he had readily available, the better. Or at least that was what Hermione was trying to convince herself.

This had been a last minute idea. After everything that had happened between Hermione and Harry in the common room and the scandalous exposure of what Ginny had been keeping on her shoulders, Hermione believed they deserved it.

Before long, Hermione's plan appeared to have succeeded. Thoughts no longer on the war and other solemn concerns, the girls relaxed on Luna's bed and discussed the most ridiculous topics that popped into their minds.

"Dammit!" Ginny swore at her clumsiness. She pulled the wine bottle from her lips before completely swallowing the swig. Dark, purple drops dribbled down her chin, staining the duvet.

Ginny snorted at some private thought before her expression went serious. "Would you ever do it with an older man?"

"Ginny!" Hermione gasped, unsuccessful in keeping herself from snickering.

Luna released a quick burst of laughter.

"That is totally inappropriate," Hermione forced herself to say between laughs. A part of Hermione was being utterly open. Sometimes it was hard for Hermione to remember that these girls were only a year behind her. She also hadn't yet made the connection that she could answer Ginny's hypothetical question with a definite 'yes'.

"Who, then?" Ginny continued.

All three girls covered their mouths and giggled until sighs and silence calmed them.

"I had the hots for Remus when he was Professor Lupin," Ginny admitted, her face blazing scarlet.

"You weren't even twelve, then!"

"Yes, I was! And don't act so superior. When you were twelve, you were drooling over Lockhart!"

"Ugh!" Hermione screamed into her hands. "Don't remind me! But to be fair, he wouldn't have been so... appealing if he hadn't written those books."

Ginny smiled knowingly. "He didn't write those books..."

"You know what I mean!" It was Hermione's turn to blush. "I feel sick when I remember how I acted in his classes."

"Well, I congratulate you, Hermione. I hear your poker face in Defence class is spot on." Ginny made a move to stand on the bed and bow, but Hermione grabbed her ankle in a huff. The red-head toppled over, dropping the wine bottle with another curse.

Luna caught the bottle easily. She swallowed a few large gulps and wiped her mouth with her own pillow. "Professor Binns..." Luna sighed dreamily.

Ginny and Hermione's mock cat-fight promptly cut off.

"Luna... Professor Binns is a ghost." Hermione's tone was humorless.

"Exactly. Imagine how old he must be... all that he has seen... And it's so typical of me to desire the unattainable." Luna sighed dreamily, falling back against the bed.

Ginny cleared her throat uncomfortably.

Luna sat back up with a snap. "Can ghosts take their clothes off?" she asked suddenly.

Hermione and Ginny returned to their fit of laughter.

*** **

An alley cat screeched in the distance, its growl echoing passed their miserable excuse of an hotel window. Collected dustbins upturned in a crash. Pansy reacted to the noise by pushing Remus back onto the bed with an uneasy whimper into his bare chest. The shabby bed whined under their weight.

Remus humored her, allowing the two of them a few more minutes before he would attempt to leave once more.

"You don't have to go."

"We both have to." Remus sensed her exhaustion and believed a time-consuming lecture was unnecessary.

Pansy sighed into his chest. "Right." She possessed the willful stubbornness to put up a fight, but Pansy decided it was a lost cause. If she hadn't needed to make an appearance at home, she would have made more of an effort to keep Remus in their hotel room at least one more night.

"I want to be with you longer, yes... but I don't like the idea of you being in the company of the Order for so long."

He stiffened under her. "Why not?"

"You're not going to... say anything... right, Remus?"

He swallowed hard. Carefully gliding his hands up her back, Remus rolled her off him. "Don't start this again."

Before he was able to make a full escape, Pansy jumped onto her knees, grabbing him by his tattered robes. "I know you... You haven't done anything wrong!"

Pansy's anxiety was warranted. These past couple of days she had sensed an escalation of guilt in Remus over the difficult choice he had made in the Forbidden Forest.

The choice of doing nothing when he had learned that Hermione had been captured.

A heavy weight had certainly been released for the both of them when news of Hermione's rescue had reached their ears. She'd been found relatively unharmed...considering where she had been, that is.

But Snape had been the one to bring her back to Hogwarts, and it shamed him.

Remus didn't have anything against Snape, really. He didn't like him, but that didn't automatically mean he had to hate him, either.

Remus pitied the bastard, actually. Regardless of the hell Remus had lived through, he was morbidly comforted at the thought that he hadn't been dealt the worse hand in life.

But typical to his nature, he couldn't stop second-guessing his actions, especially his intentions behind the actions. He felt like a coward.

And worst of all, he felt like a failure. At least Snape had something to show for his involvement in the Order.

Pansy might not have known all this, but she feared correctly that he would do something senseless...like apologizing...and risk revealing their relationship.

It was already unpleasant enough that Hermione knew.

"Don't speak of it to her," she begged. The reasons for her trepidation were written on his face.

Because Hermione knew about their relationship, it was be so like Remus to take advantage of the opening to unburden his conscience.

Remus silently pulled away from her. Gathering his things, he quickly pecked her on the lips with a whispered, "I love you," without acknowledging...or denying...her requests.

*** **

Harry was grateful when Ron finally left him alone to go to bed. He had appreciated Ron's effort to keep him company, but Harry wasn't in the mood to be sociable. It hadn't been Harry's intention to drag Ron into his melancholy, but most likely he had. He'd appeared just as anxious to flee the kitchen as Harry'd been to be alone.

It had been very difficult at school...having Ginny so near.

But here...

There was limitless privacy in this house, and it made Harry remember the stolen minutes they had shared in the darkness of these rooms. Bodies pressed tight against each other, whispering...

He cringed, chastising himself. Thoughts like this were a betrayal of Lavender. It disturbed Harry that he had to continually force himself not to imagine the 'what-ifs' he had lost.

For there had been a time when he had desperately missed Ginny only *in the moment*. Despite how much he had craved to be at her side the second her face entered his thoughts, Harry calmed himself with the remembrance that it would only be a matter of time before they could be together again. These were the thoughts that had kept Harry sane those first few months after he had tried to cut all ties from her.

Not now, he would chant whenever he caught the intoxicating scent of her shampoo as she passed by. *Later*, Harry groaned when he gazed too long at the sway of her hips when she walked.

It had tortured him to stay away when he had first broken things off, but Harry knew it was necessary. Having Ron and Hermione tailing him into battle was already distressing enough. But at least he could comfort himself with the knowledge that they had chosen this war-filled existence from the moment they'd decided to befriend 'The-Boy-Who-Lived.' It wasn't as if Harry had surprised them one random day with the knowledge that he was Voldemort's life-long enemy.

They knew that history even before Harry himself did.

Ginny knew all this as well, but her situation was different....

Harry had been the one to selfishly pursue her last year. And why? Because he ultimately recognized the type of irresistible young woman she had become...and only after she had finally reconciled herself to never attaining him. Harry had grown used to ignoring the indiscriminate girls flinging themselves at him merely because of his notoriety. He had inattentively included Ginny's childish crush into the mix.

Then Ginny grew up, and her timid reactions along with her immature crush melted away.

She had become a catch in Harry's mind.

And in typical boy fashion, Harry hadn't wanted her until she had begun to date someone else.

So Harry pursued her. Loved her. Worst of all, he had encouraged her to love him. It was predictable that Ginny's passions would inspire her to want to fight along side him. Harry was just too stupid...too selfish...to let that stop him from starting the relationship.

Just when the very idea of being apart from Ginny became almost too much to bear, Harry had ended it for her own protection, stubbornly ignoring her pleas and cries. She didn't have a choice in the break-up.

So, certainly she should have a choice in deciding to wait for him.

Harry knew she was justified, but a part of him begrudged Ginny for refusing to wait. She had shown all the signs of heartbreak, but had been quick to date when the new year had begun. No doubt it was the only way she could attempt to get over him.

Gritting his teeth, Harry cursed under his breath. After pulling his hands roughly through his hair, he punched both of his fists into the sides of his armchair. He needed to stop thinking things like this. Maybe he'd had a chance to win Ginny back...but that was all in the past, now.

Harry was with Lavender now, so he needed to stop thinking of what could have been. Ginny was lost to him forever, and he needed to learn to love another.

The door groaned loudly behind Harry, interrupting his self-centered thoughts. He tensed at the sound of someone stumbling clumsily into the kitchen. Uneven footsteps padded on the flagstones until they were stopped by the sound of a stool scraping. The scraping was proceeded by a mumbled, "Blast!"

Harry's heart jumped into his throat, blood rushing to his ears. It seemed that despite his efforts to avoid Ginny, she had managed to corner him in the worst way.

Alone...and in the dark.

Harry turned, peeking over his shoulder and around the armchair to see if he'd remained unnoticed beside the hearth. Unfortunately, he was fully lit by the fire, and Ginny's face snapped up at the change in shadows.

Her eyes narrowed heartlessly.

Without saying a word, she turned her back to him, rummaging through the cupboards in search of whatever she had come here for.

Harry struggled to ignore her huffs and the ruckus of cupboard doors slamming a bit too loudly. But it was no use. He felt like a coward just sitting there pathetically ignoring her like a child.

Feeling slightly drained, he made as much noise as possible in getting up from his seat, warning her of his determined stride across the kitchen. He didn't look up until he'd braced himself against the counter that separated them.

Ginny, however, wasn't above the silent treatment. Harry was an arm's reach away, but she kept her attention focused on struggling to pull a cork out of the green vial in her hands.

"I'm... so sorry." Not knowing what else to say, Harry decided to admit to the first thing on his mind. Remembering Luna's multiple warnings...which he had thoughtlessly ignored...Harry continued, mortified at the cracking in his voice. "I never wanted to hurt you. The very idea that I could kills..."

Ginny slammed her hands down on the counter with an angry scream. She cried out again when broken glass from the forgotten vial cut into her palm.

Harry naturally extended his arms to help her.

"Why her?" Ginny recoiled away from his concern. Searching for her wand, Ginny refused to meet his eye as she went about clearing the broken glass. "You couldn't even stay with me, but you can marry her?"

Harry knew that she was angry with him for giving Lavender what he had denied her.

The future.

But there was so much more to it than that. It wasn't about preference, or even desire anymore.

"She's pregnant, Ginny..."

"Ginevra!" Ginny swiped her wand through the air, eyes blazing. Her lower lip trembled, and in her attempt to control it, fury took control. She shakily pointed her wand under his chin. "You call me Ginevra." She punctuated her demand by stabbing him in the throat.

Harry froze, afraid of her penchant for hexes. He couldn't believe how much Ginny's actions were hurting him, but then he suddenly realized he had no right to verbalize that to her.

"You left *me*, Harry. With some pathetic excuse of not wanting some lovesick girlfriend to follow you blindly into battle..."

"It wasn't an excuse! Do you honestly think Lavender would stand beside me against Voldemort?"

"NO, I DON'T! So I ask again, why would you want to be with her when I would gladly die for you?"

"Because I don't want you to die, DAMMIT!"

Ginny jumped at his reaction, finally lowering her wand.

Feeling like he had revealed far too much, Harry succumbed to his childish desire of kicking the counter. "I didn't plan this. I don't want... What *do* want is to be responsible for my own mistakes."

"Shut up! I don't want to hear it." She bustled away from him, washing her injured hand in the sink. "Gods, I am such an idiot. You'd think, after all you have put me through, after *this* that I would finally stop loving you and hate you the way I should... the way I want to..."

"Please stop." Harry knew he didn't have the self-control to hear such things without reacting.

"Oh, I intend to."

Harry heard the finality in her voice, and it sent a burning shock down his back. She whirled towards the exit. Her face showed her dismay, her anguish, but also her determination to finally walk away...out of his life...and never look back.

Harry would chastise himself the next morning, and many mornings after, regretting the move he was about to make. But it was already apparent that no matter how noble or good intentioned he tried to be, ultimately he always acted brashly.

He was disgustingly selfish.

Harry lunged across the kitchen before Ginny was able to reach the door. He didn't give her a chance to argue or even consent. But Harry yanked Ginny by her injured hand, forcing her to cry out.

Searching her face, Harry wanted nothing more than to make the look of resentment directed at him go away. He couldn't stand the idea of her feeling any emotion resembling that. No, not about him. Inhaling sharply, Harry slid his hand behind her neck and harshly pressed his lips to her resisting mouth.

Ginny moaned but quickly grew angry at her reaction...and even more so at his.

This felt far more natural than it should. Harry allowed his body to press against her.

When Ginny was able to struggle a fraction of space between them, she yanked her hand out of his hold. Her balled, bloodied fist socked him clear across the jaw.

Harry was so staggered by her action and the pain behind his eyes that he fell back, faltering until he clutched at a stool to steady himself.

"You... *arsehole*," Ginny hissed at his back.

He clutched his face, his vision and thoughts dazed by the blow. By the time Harry was capable of standing up straight to turn around, Ginny was already gone.

*** ** *

Nothing he did was ever enough.

Snape stood before the door to number twelve, Grimmauld Place. Hand clenched on the doorknob, Snape pressed his forehead against the knocker rather than open it. He stared at the floor, greasy hair curtaining both sides of his face, spreading an added veil of black to the night surrounding him. He *loathed* the idea of entering this pit of hell again.

No... nothing, Snape said to himself again. And it wasn't self-pity he felt as he thought this. His bones ached with a deep seeded irritation towards all who called this place a haven.

If only he could remain a ghost among them. It was one thing that he felt total apathy to the lot of them, so the least they could all do was extend him the same courtesy.

It would be another thing if they all hated him. One blessed thing. And it was something else entirely if they had unconditionally trusted him. Snape wouldn't mind if he fell into either one of those groups...that way everyone would leave him the bloody hell alone.

Nothing he did for Dumbledore or the Dark Lord satisfied either of his masters...nor their followers. He was too sinister for the Order and far too cautious for the Death Eaters.

Snape banged his head against the door, chuckling grimly. His careful existence in both of these worlds was exactly what he had hoped to achieve.

The perfect spy.

But Snape was recognizing that there was a new emotion...one he had never felt before...progressively developing within him. It grew parallel to the quantity of planning and deception in his life, deception which incessantly crawled towards a never ending peak. For the past twenty years, his duties had constantly escalated.

Yet, it all had to end... someday. Which found Severus eagerly anticipating the inevitable fall upon reaching his unforeseen peak.

He tried to imagine where he might end up after the fall...and couldn't find an emotional response.

Snape decided to gladly focus on his anticipation for the fall again.

Turning the doorknob, Snape's lips curled over his gnashed teeth. He suppressed the snarl he was longing to release, instead releasing his frustration on the door by kicking it closed with the heel of his boot.

Madam Black's portrait did not scream at his disturbance. Notwithstanding the Order's efforts, Snape remained the only wizard here who actually did know the spells...Dark spells, that is...which would pry her frame from the wall. He had elatedly demonstrated this to her one day. Since then, the old crone had refrained from shouting at him, so he left her hanging to irritate all but him.

He paused in the entrance hall, listening for any sounds in the house. Snape exhaled at the options before him. Crawl up the stairs to sleep in one of Black's rooms or trudge into the kitchen with the hope that it might be empty?

Snape admitted to himself that he was feeling particularly thirsty. He hadn't been able to stock the cabinet in his temporary bedroom...yet.

Kitchen it was, then.

He silently glided down the narrow hallway. Upon reaching the door, Snape rolled his eyes. Not until he was moments from entering the kitchen did he notice the presence of a fire within.

Fearsome sneer already prepared, Snape added an exaggerated hiss of disdain, plowing through the door in his billowing splendor.

"Good morning, Professor," sang a feminine voice beside the stove.

Oh, for the love of...

Good morning, indeed. It was nearly five, and she should have been asleep.

As if answering his unspoken question, Hermione responded, "Sorry to be in your way, sir. I...couldn't go back to sleep."

Snape grunted in response. Walking silently behind her, Snape threw open one of the magically age-restricted cupboards and snatched a bottle of firewhisky. Sensing her unnerving presence behind him, Snape scowled, darting around the counter to sit as far away from her as possible.

He needed to get away from Hermione or he would be tempted into making it *very* clear that he was angry to see her.

Hermione continued about her business preparing food, facing away from him. Snape took the opportunity to continue glaring at her back. He sloppily filled his tumbler, tossing the fiery liquid down his throat. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, Snape leered as his eyes drifted lower. Her dressing gown looked very attractive on her...and it irritated him. He couldn't help but wonder what she was wearing underneath.

Snape tossed back more alcohol. Tilting his head to the side, he scowled at her bare feet through his greasy hair.

If he could imagine such things, then no doubt other men could as well.

One in particular came to mind. His hand clenched around the bottle at the thought.

Snape was also annoyed with her for not being more cautious...she was putting herself in a situation to be easily happened upon by Black. Here, in the kitchen, and alone.

He swore under his breath, relaxing slightly on his forearms. Snape appreciated that wasn't entirely... fair... and decided not hold his last opinion against her. What was she to do? Cower behind a locked bedroom door every minute she was awake?

Absolutely not.

The last thing Snape wanted was for Hermione to be put in a situation that would force her to interact with Black. However, he was more averse to the idea of her playing the role of a victim without putting up a good fight.

Snape snapped out of his musings, glancing warily out of the corner of his eye as Hermione dragged one of the stools over. She settled it on the floor on the opposite side of the counter... directly across from him. Without glancing in his direction for a sign of approval, she placed a plate of scrambled eggs and toast in front of herself...and settled an additional plate of food in front of him.

He grimaced. "What is this?"

Hermione seemed to sense his mood and looked at him with delicate humor in her eyes. "It's food, Professor. Eggs, to be precise."

"Impertinent," Snape muttered under his breath. "We both can see that these are eggs, Miss Granger. What are they doing in front of me?"

"It would have been very rude of me to eat in front of you without offering, sir. But please don't take it personally. I intentionally made extra in case my Kneazle decided to fight for his share."

Upon hearing himself mentioned in the conversation, Crookshanks jumped onto the counter. He seated himself as far away from the two humans as possible, glaring hateful at the man who dared to insult his food.

Severus looked disgusted at the presence of the cat. "That is terribly unsanitary."

Hermione smiled, shoulders shaking slightly as she tried to suppress a laugh.

"He just wants a snack... no different than you." Hermione hadn't meant to spit out that last part. She couldn't help eyeing the glass in Snape's hand disdainfully, either.

"Manners, Miss Granger," Snape hissed, voice full of venom. Reactions like that were out of the question while they both were in this house. Her every move needed to be thought out with the anticipation that anyone could be eavesdropping.

Behavior like serving him a plate of eggs.

"I apologize, sir. But there is nothing disrespectful about offering you food, so you might as well eat it... Professor," Hermione responded to his unspoken reprimand. "Please, after all that you have done for my health, and my... escape... any little act of kindness on my part is of no consequence."

Hermione caught Snape's eye... and grinned widely at him.

Severus released a loud growl of foreboding, pinching the bridge between his brows. His reaction wasn't exaggerated, either. He knew what she was trying to tell him...the decision she had obviously made.

Hermione had resolved to be *nice* to him in front of the others. And no one would think anything of it, considering he had supposedly been taking care of her.

The thought was horrifying. He wanted to yell at her but didn't want to give her the satisfaction of knowing she was getting under his skin.

Eyes still closed, Snape lowered his hand onto the counter, blindly reaching for his tumbler. His fingers curled around what felt like curly hair instead.

His eyes flew open, shocked at the sight of Hermione leaning over the counter, her face very close to his own.

Before Snape could scold her for her senseless act, Hermione pressed her warm lips to his cheek.

Snape's natural reaction was to inhale and send a searching look at the kitchen door.

"*Sit back*," he hissed under his breath.

"Everyone's asleep," she responded just as quietly. Her lips brushed against the stubble of his upper lip as she spoke. The hairs on the back of Severus' neck rose for a multitude of reasons.

The heat of her face and breath burned his chilled skin.

Black pupils dilated with thinly controlled fury widened dangerously. "Now."

Hermione gave him one quick peck before leaning into her chair and tucking into her meal. The appearance of tranquil indifference she exuded was slightly impressive. She didn't look like a student who had just snogged her unwilling professor over a plate of eggs and toast.

Shaking his head, Snape snorted and reached for the bottle of firewhisky. Smirking, he noticed Hermione stiffen as he filled the crystal tumbler once more.

The bottle almost toppled when he rested it on the counter with more force than necessary. Snape frowned, searching her face.

What is this?

It took him a moment to comprehend that she was upset. Her eyes were pink and puffy. But he hadn't even said anything hurtful...yet.

Snape knew he was a bastard to her at times, but a strange burning sensation filled him at the idea of someone else hurting her. A significant component of that originated from possessiveness, he knew. But another part... It fumed at the idea that anyone else *could* have such an effect on her emotions.

It felt absurdly disgusting for him to admit that he very much reveled in the idea that he...and only he...could have such a strong position in her... life... where hurt and sorrow came into play at times.

But if anyone else...

That was when he noticed the piece of crumbled-up parchment sticking out of her pocket.

It bore the Hogwarts seal.

Snape lunged over the counter. His tumbler flew out of his hand, spraying that hideous cat with the fiery alcohol. Hermione startled at his movement and the violent hissing of her Kneazle. Only too late did she realize that Snape had snatched the letter from her dressing gown.

Hermione gasped and made a move to snatch it back. "Please don't!"

Severus' jaw clenched. That was exactly the type of reaction he *did not* want to see.

He raised the letter out of her reach, but she only lunged further, her arm failing to take it out of his hand. Snape's mouth curled into a sneer. His free arm shot out, grabbing Hermione by the wrist with a pincer grip.

Snape yanked on her arm to bring her face closer to his.

She visibly tensed at the smell of alcohol on his breath.

"Keeping secrets from me, then?"

"When I can," she snapped.

"What did you say?"

Hermione whispered in a pained tone. "You don't want to read that..."

Like hell, I don't, Severus thought.

Snape released her hand, turning a loathsome gaze at the parchment in his hands.

Ignoring Hermione's sigh of apprehension, he read:

Dear Miss Granger,

I hope this letter finds you well. I have been indisposed as of late, so I apologize in not personally checking up on you after your ordeal. I had no doubt that you were in competent hands and well out of danger. I am also sending this note as a friendly reminder that although classes have ended and you are no longer within Hogwarts' walls, I still expect you to continue working on the Advanced N.E.W.T experiment that I assigned you at the beginning of the year. It appears you have been ignoring it as of late, and your specimens are beginning to wither. You are an incredibly bright and gifted student, so I have no doubt that you will use this break from classes to the best advantage.

Best of luck,

Headmaster Dumbledore.

All Snape could see was red.

Blood red.

He snarled, his fist crushing the parchment into pulp. Fighting to remain silent, his nerves tensed in response, forcing his breathing to escalate.

Snape silently glared at Hermione, making it clear that he knew *exactly* what Albus truly meant by his vague instruction.

Hermione dropped her forehead into her hands. "Don't make this harder for me than it already is." She extended her hand, not looking at him as she waited for him to put the letter into her palm.

Swallowing, Snape reached for his wand instead. With a subtle snap, his wand was put away while the parchment soared in the air and across the kitchen. It landed in the hearth and ignited into a vigorous fire not a second later.

Hermione merely sighed in response. "I told you you didn't want to read it."

"Do you think this is funny?"

Just then, as if this situation couldn't get any worse, the kitchen door swung open. Hermione and Severus had been too distracted in their discussion to notice the steady footsteps of someone approaching them from the entrance hall.

Sirius stepped into the kitchen, his expression brightening at the sight of Hermione.

"Hermione!" Sirius suddenly noticed Snape, as well the tense electricity in the air. "Are you all right?"

Hermione did not bother to mask her exasperation. "Yes, Professor Black."

"Well, um, now that you're here, I can ask, how do you like the room I prepared for you?"

Hermione noticed Severus' body tense at this. She cringed.

"It's adequate... for a gloomy old room, that is. But thank you, Professor."

Sirius laughed, not hiding his pointed glance at Snape. "You're not in school, so please try to get comfortable in my home. And make me comfortable as well by forgetting all that 'professor' nonsense."

Hermione swallowed visibly. Casually wiping the tips of her fingers across her hairline, she met Snape's narrowed eyes and grimaced guiltily.

"If you insist... Sirius."

Snape thrust himself away from the counter. He stormed through the kitchen door in the same manner...and with the same feeling...in which he had entered.

Author's Notes: :Sigh: It hasn't been a full twenty-four hours yet at number twelve and things don't look very... optimistic. Much more to come. It was enjoyable to write but this is all filler! Harry's and Sirius' stories are very much due.

-I send my gratitude to my beta, **melusin**, for her thorough and fast work.

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book iv. Line 20.

-Next up: Life at number twelve is filled with twists and turns for its inhabitants. Hermione and Harry attempt to patch things up, and learn a few interesting things along the way. Old habits die hard, and Hermione is *still* determined to prove a few things to Snape. How will he react?

Chapter Twenty Seven - Their Fatal Hands No Second Stroke Intend (Part 1)

Chapter 31 of 36

Life at number twelve is filled with twists and turns for its inhabitants. Dumbledore's letter fresh on her mind, Hermione confronts Sirius. Old habits die hard, and Hermione is still determined to prove a few things to Snape. How will he react?

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: I know, I know... I deserve a flogging for the long delay. I apologize!

-Chapter carefully beta'ed by the very talented **melusin**.

By the third day, Hermione was thoroughly fed up with the uncomfortable atmosphere that had become number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

She hadn't spoken to Harry since their argument in the Gryffindor common room. Hermione couldn't blame him exactly, but that didn't mean she was required to tolerate his silence for longer than absolutely necessary.

Hermione had given him all the previous day and evening to cool off...or whatever it was Harry did in order to calm down...before she had finally decided to set aside the time to confront him.

It had been unproblematic for the two of them to avoid each other since she had slept most of the day. Hermione hadn't been able to break out of the odd sleeping routine she had acquired in the dungeons. After the tentative conversation with Sirius in the kitchen, Hermione had finally fallen into a deep sleep around seven in the morning.

"That had been totally unnecessary," Hermione said to herself with a frown. Severus shouldn't have left her alone with him despite his anger. Thankfully, Sirius hadn't attempted to harass her in any way, but he had wanted Hermione to describe exactly what she'd liked about the room he had prepared for her.

The only reason she'd been able to escape the irritating conversation was due to a need for sleep that everyone in the house seemed to believe she was desperately lacking.

Hermione hated feeling fragile.

Molly still appeared to pity Hermione for her run in with the Death Eaters a few weeks prior and hadn't interrupted Hermione while she'd slept through most of the day. But regardless of Mrs. Weasley's good intentions, every hour or so Hermione had been jostled by the continuous reprimand of, "Get back down here and leave the poor girl be!"

Hermione had finally awoken energized on the third day of her stay in this despicable house with the resolve of soothing the tense environment if she was to be forced to stay here another week. Besides, she didn't enjoy the idea of spending more time than necessary in Madam Black's very own bedroom. Hermione knew the sheets and duvet had been changed prior to her arrival, but that hadn't made it any less weird.

"All right?" Hermione asked Ginny cautiously upon entering the kitchen for dinner. Hermione immediately took her usual seat across from the redhead and noticed Ginny's despondent appearance.

"Yeah."

"No, she's not," Luna corrected blankly.

Ginny sighed, rolling her eyes. "Shut up, Luna."

"All right. Can you pass the butter, Hermione?"

Hermione was about to ask the two of them what the devil was going on but instead quickly snapped her mouth shut as the boys made their entrance into the kitchen. Hermione had already rightly assumed that Harry was the reason behind Ginny's mood, so she didn't want to make a fuss of it in front of him. But that was only one reason why Hermione silenced herself.

The other reason was shock at the sight of Harry's split lip and swollen jaw.

Wide-eyed, Hermione shot a puzzled glance at Ginny, but the redhead was already making it a point to look away.

"Butter!"

"What...oh, sorry, Luna."

Hermione tried to get Ginny's attention again but was only gifted with a sharp kick in the shin.

Unsurprisingly, Harry had proceeded to ignore her all through dinner. He seemed to be ignoring everyone, actually. He sat at the far corner of the long table concentrating only on his plate. Sirius and Ron would attempt to draw him into a comical conversation from time to time, but Harry didn't even make an effort to pretend amusement.

Going to be a long, long holiday...

After dinner, Hermione reluctantly succumbed to the weary routine from the summer. After making herself a pot of tea, she retired to the Black family library and surrounded herself with an array of books.

She hadn't been shocked when no one tried to join her... but she was strangely relieved.

Hermione had always found solace in books when she had far too much on her mind, but tonight she couldn't shake the sense of foreboding. Sirius was making an effort not to hover around her, which was both a reprieve and a vexation. She'd seen him act like this before. It was some strange habit of his whenever he knew his previous encounter had been on the verge of barbaric. Sirius would attempt to give Hermione the space he knew was needed... until he did or said something completely inappropriate...again...out of whatever anxious desperation that seemed to constantly haunt him.

Hermione's face grew hot as that aura of foreboding inundated her. Thinking of Sirius made her think of Dumbledore's letter, and Hermione wasn't the least bit eager to complete her 'assignment'.

What does it even mean? she thought to herself. What did Dumbledore really want her to achieve by befriending Sirius? A friendship? A... romance? *Merlin forbid.* Hermione would never consent to that. But the Headmaster was obviously in need of some information that he himself couldn't attain...which didn't faze her the more she thought about it. Sirius loathed Dumbledore now... so much so that he had completely stopped trusting him.

Hermione sagged into the settee with a weary sigh. She could understand Sirius' reservations. She certainly didn't hate the Headmaster, and in many ways she still trusted him when it came to wanting what was best for their success with the war... but a part of Hermione ached with disappointment at her being manipulated into the mission she'd been assigned. A mission that had turned out to be something entirely different from what had been asked of her at the beginning of the school year.

Hermione could see the reasons behind Dumbledore's worries when it came to Sirius. Harry's godfather constantly appeared to be on the brink of cracking. His emotions and feelings had been reigned in so tightly, and there was no one he trusted enough to whom he could speak openly. But then again, Dumbledore seemed to require a solution to the very problem he had created.

But at the end of the day, Hermione knew she needed to do something..*oh, gods, just get it over with.*

Slamming her book shut, Hermione picked up her empty teapot and headed for the kitchen to brew another.

She honestly didn't want more tea but rather needed a reason to join Sirius in the kitchen. Hermione wasn't certain, but she had a feeling that he had stayed there after dinner. Since last night, Hermione had noticed that Sirius always either locked himself in his room or lolled about in front of the kitchen hearth.

Head held high, Hermione plowed through the kitchen door. Her movements were a tad forceful, but she needed to guarantee that nothing in her manner revealed her hesitancy.

She missed Severus more than ever.

Sitting by the hearth, Sirius visibly perked up at the sight of Hermione, shooting her a toothy grin. As if second guessing his display of enthusiasm, he promptly straightened out his smile and nodded once in greeting.

Sirius started at the sight of a chair and end-table hurtling towards him from Hermione's side of the room. Raising his hands to cover his face, he flinched again at the sound of wood colliding with flagstone.

Flabbergasted, Sirius silently watched Hermione place a fresh pot of tea on the table between himself and her new seat.

"Honestly," Hermione scolded, "you couldn't possibly think that I'd attack you with *furniture*?"

By the time Sirius had lowered his arms from their shield of his face, Hermione was comfortably seated in the chair she had Summoned from the kitchen table. Leaning towards the small stand that separated them, Hermione poured herself a cup of tea and nodded her head for him to do the same.

Sirius uneasily rearranged the collar of his robes. "No, of course not. Not with furniture at least... but if you *had* attacked me, I know I would have deserved it."

"You're a glutton for punishment."

He dared to smile arrogantly. "Only if I'm being punished by your lovely hands, Hermione."

Hermione snapped her face away, humming in disappointment. "Sirius..."

"No...right. Sorry. And about that time in my office..." The legs of the chair creaked with his endless fidgeting. They both remembered that time in his office very vividly. Sirius had harshly held Hermione to him, forcing a kiss on her that he knew she hadn't wanted. Who knows what would have happened if Severus hadn't interrupted?

Sirius clenched his eyes shut, turning his face completely away from her. "I'd apologize if I knew it would mean anything... but..."

"You've already apologized a dozen times," Hermione answered brusquely.

"... Yes... I told you... I don't know what to do. This isn't me. You know this isn't me. I just can't... stop... Some of the horrible things I think..."

Hermione tsked disgustedly in interruption. "For goodness sake! I don't want to hear it. You're a lazy oaf; that's what your problem is."

Sirius whipped his face around, dumbfounded by Hermione's insult and unaware of how to take it.

Slamming her cup on the table, Hermione continued, "If you continuously tell yourself that you're a horrible person, then it's just that much easier to act like one. Call yourself something else for a change! And don't look at me like that; you know I'm right."

"I..." Sirius shut his mouth and nodded solemnly.

Carefully, Hermione dared to change the subject. "How are things with your... watch?"

Sirius' eyes widened. "I don't think we should talk about that." His hand disappeared into his pocket, shielding his timepiece as if it had just been threatened.

"I think that's exactly what you need, actually. I already know the fundamentals of how it works. Every turn gives you exactly one hour of...life...and without it, you would..." Sirius' tension had become so severe, Hermione thought it best not to finish that sentence. With genuine sympathy in her voice, she asked, "What are you so afraid of?"

"Please, Hermione..."

"Maybe... Have you ever thought that someone could help you? After everything you have told me, I wouldn't even think of recommending you seek the help of Professor Dumbledore...even though that might have been your best option, initially. But has it ever occurred to you that... /... could help you? There has to be some way to rid yourself of this burden."

Sirius paled. Eyes filled with shock and repressed hope glared back at her. "Don't you ever say that."

Hermione reflexively leaned forward. The evidence that she had struck a nerve hadn't alarmed her; if anything, she was more curious than ever. "Say what exactly? What's wrong?"

"I refuse to allow myself to believe that... I cannot talk about this. Not to you."

"Why not to me!" Hermione hadn't intended for her voice to sound so hurt. It confused her to admit to herself that she actually was. "I would say I deserve your confidence more than anyone else. After everything, you at least owe me that."

"I know." Sirius harshly rubbed his hand across his brow, hoping to hide the pain in his face. "It's just very difficult for me to admit...some things. Not just to you but to myself. And I fear...I fear I won't be able to live like this for much longer. Things need to... They need to change."

The more Sirius spoke, the steadier his face and voice became. A recognizably ominous appearance overtook his expression before he said with more conviction, "Things *will* change."

"Sirius..."

His brutal features vanished at her gentle reprimand. Sirius was suddenly horrorstricken. "I'm going to bed." Hands shaking, Sirius clumsily thrust his cup and saucer onto the table where it toppled and crashed to the floor. After a quick, mumbled apology, Sirius hesitated in picking it up before finally turning away to flee the room.

Hermione jumped up from her seat, crossing the kitchen before Sirius could reach the door. "No... Please don't be angry."

"I'm not!" His hands came up quickly, in hopes of grabbing her arms to stress his sincerity. But before he allowed himself the temptation of touching her, he sighed and forced a reassuring smile. "I'm very tired. Thank you for your concern. But..."

Hermione wavered, fighting her impulses with the situation presented to her. Shaking her head in pity, she allowed herself to reach out a hand to cradle his jaw.

Sirius' entire body froze, completely lost as to a proper reaction.

Softly raising his face, Hermione gently asked, "Why are you being so... stupid? You know the main source of your conflict is your inability to speak about your problems and ask for help. Harry is so like you sometimes... I can only imagine what his dad must have been like. I know I can help you... if you'll just let me."

Her movements urged Sirius to meet her eyes where a smile and comfort were waiting for him. But Sirius clenched his own tighter instead. He tentatively raised his hand, fingers lightly touching her wrist. His effort of restraint was obvious to them both.

"You know," he whispered quietly. Carefully, Sirius opened his eyes, training his vision on her sleeve. "My daydreams have been entirely different from what they were ten years ago. I went from spending my days salivating over the death of Wormtail...to imagining glory in assisting the Order in battle against Voldemort...to..."

"Yes?" Hermione urged, very intrigued. They were standing alarmingly close to each other, considering how past interactions had ended every single time the two of them were alone in a room together. But Sirius wasn't frightening her now, nor were his words dripping with forced arrogance.

"I imagine just being normal. I wouldn't even mind spending the rest of my life in this wretched house if I only I had someone.... someone to share it with. But I now see that's impossible."

"Don't say that," she breathed. In her sympathy, Hermione's body leaned into him slightly, enabling him to smell the tea and sugar on her breath.

Sirius jerked back. "Don't you *dare* give me false hope..."

"I'm... not. Regardless of how I may...or may not feel...it's important to me that you remember I will always be here." Hermione gently clasped both hands around his jaw once more, hoping to calm whatever rage seemed seconds from building. "Which means you will always possess my confidence... Perhaps if you showed me your watch, I could..."

Within the same fraction of time Sirius' face had gently leaned into her palm with aching intensity, he'd pushed past her and exited the kitchen without another word.

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Hermione glanced at the clock on the mantle, rolling her eyes with a groan. Her 'quality time' spent with Sirius in the kitchen had been hours ago. At nearly four in the morning, she still wasn't tired enough for sleep.

Usually, reading for hours on end soothed her mind to the point of exhaustion but not tonight, apparently.

At least with Molly spending her nights at the Burrow, there wasn't anyone here who could scold Hermione for it.

Never drinking that much tea again...

Hermione slouched in her seat, groan slightly muted as she covered her face with a book. She wasn't the least bit sleepy; this was true. But even if she had been,

Hermione would have forced herself to stay awake until a certain someone arrived just before dawn.

Severus... Ugh... I'm acting like such a dolt.

She hadn't seen him since their first day here...when she had received Dumbledore's letter. Hermione hoped he wasn't still angry with her about that. But even if he was, she didn't care, and she certainly wasn't going to apologize for it.

She had enough to deal with without worrying over Snape's unrealistic annoyances.

Tapping her foot impatiently, Hermione couldn't stop fidgeting as she listened for any sounds in the entrance hall. A deep, humming laugh rumbled in her throat. Rolling her eyes at her own stupidity, Hermione vividly recalled the various instances she had spent lolling in the library last summer while she had waited for Snape to arrive. All that time she had wasted sitting in this very same spot simply for the chance to follow him upstairs.

Stomach fluttering, Hermione smiled to herself as she remembered those first encounters. It was maddening to think that she had even dared to attempt such a thing.

The forgotten book slid down her chest, landing with a heavy thud on the flagstone. Hermione jerked upright at the high-pitched creaking of the front door's protesting hinges echoing in the entrance hall.

All she could do was sit there, holding her breath, ears burning while whispered footsteps smoothly rose up the stairs.

It was him. She didn't even bother peaking through the door to double-check. It amazed Hermione that she could easily recognize the exact pattern of Snape's long-legged stride.

Quick, precise, and yet eerily silent. Like a ghost... Is that how he knew it was me who was following him?

She rose from the settee, the corner of her mouth rising into a smirk. Hermione hadn't intended to repeat history, but she wasn't going to turn down an opportunity such as this. She almost felt like an entirely different person from last summer...largely due to the man in question.

Now there was only one way to find out.

With a swish of her wand, Hermione extinguished every candle in the library before opening the door. Holding her breath, she eyed the discolored ceiling, listening for any sounds of movement in the landings above her.

Mindful of every step, Hermione carefully stalked up the stairs until she reached the second landing. She desperately craved to be finally sneaking up on Snape...no matter how unlikely it seemed.

Except this time her...their...situation was very different. She wasn't just a nosy student to him anymore...

Her breathing grew shaky as she eased her body down the corridor towards his room. Exactly as she remembered, this area of the house was always agonizingly cold. Wand stiffly raised out in front of her, Hermione wished she had put on her slippers before leaving the library.

Just when Hermione believed she might have the upper hand, halfway down the corridor the floor protested beneath her. Inhaling too quickly, she froze. But Hermione had no reason to fear discipline if Snape caught her. Most likely, he wouldn't insult her or send her back down teary-eyed and humiliated.

Most likely... Hermione grudgingly admitted to herself. There's no telling what mood she might find him in.

So what *would* he do?

Her heart was racing so loud and fast, Hermione feared he could hear her breathing.

Wand hand leveled, Hermione quickly turned the bend before the courage that had brought her this far failed her. Unsurprisingly, the second corridor was completely empty. Empty, dark, and very cold. The only light available was a faint glow that wavered from beneath his bedroom door.

Hermione braced herself for the unexpected. She knew he was right here... probably watching and waiting.

The hair on the nape of her neck raised seconds before a tall, black-cloaked body lunged at her from the shadows. Hermione bent over with a gasp, ducking under his arm and thrusting herself towards the opposite wall.

She smirked, elated that she was finally able to do something right.

His back now facing her, Snape braced his hands on the wall he had initially intended to pin her to. Chin tilted towards the floor, Severus slyly eyed her through strands of his hair.

"Amusing," he hissed.

Hermione's smile evaporated at the sight of a predatory gleam in his eye. He wasn't angry. Apparently, he was humored at her move but determined to win, nonetheless.

Knowing she was watching him intently, Snape took his time to stand to his full height. His deep voice whispered raggedly, "Don't play with me, little girl..."

"I am *not* a little girl."

"Prove it." Half-way through a slow turn, Snape lunged again.

Back pressed flat against the wall, Hermione was already prepared for such a move. She murmured a brief hex, staggering him for a moment as he collided into a conjured shield.

It wasn't exactly the hard wall that had once sent Sirius sprawling back on the floor, so Snape easily disarmed it.

Before she was able to completely thrust herself out of his reach, Snape's arm snaked out, snatching her by the waist. Frustrated at the idea of losing this battle, Hermione whipped her wand up under her chin...right when Severus attempted to wrap a restraining forearm around her throat.

He hissed, yanking his injured hand away. In his pain, Hermione managed to slither her body out of his hold. Breathing heavily, she threw herself deeper into the corridor towards his bedroom door and pressed her back against the wood to keep him in her eye line.

Elation had been Hermione's preliminary reaction at the idea of managing to hex a man who was known for deflecting the most advanced spells.

And she hadn't turned into a quivering, mumbling mess, either. Hermione certainly had reason to be proud.

Severus slowly turned to face her, all humor gone. Tilting his head to the side, Snape forced his hair to shield his face as he grandly lifted his arm in the air, turning his forearm over to inspect it. His robes were ripped all the way to his elbow. Pasty white skin blazed in the darkness between folds of shredded fabric. There was a clean red line about four inches long running vertically on his wrist. And blood.

That was when Hermione realized that she had used a Slicing Hex on a Death Eater.

Oh... good God. She hadn't meant to cut him... had she?

Hermione's heart escalated in fear again. "Severus?"

Snape steadily raised his chin. His deep set eyes burned in a way Hermione had never seen before. This time when he lunged at her, Hermione was too frightened to move. Snape grabbed Hermione by the arms. With two quick movements, her wrists were pressed harshly against the door as a knee slid between her legs, kicking them apart.

Hermione whimpered and buckled, but Severus easily managed to hold her upright.

His face was too close; Hermione couldn't quite make out his expression. Snape was breathing heavily from the exertion of the last few minutes; the heat from his skin and breath raised gooseflesh along her chest and arms. Seconds dragged as Severus remained in that position, silently looking down at her.

Finally, Snape edged his face towards her, turning his mouth to speak directly into her ear.

"That wasn't very... nice," he hissed, voice dangerously calm.

Hermione's heart hammered in her throat. She hadn't the faintest idea of what to do or say. He looked and sounded angry, but his body was painting an entirely different picture...

Snape carefully edged his knee deeper between her legs. The hold on her wrists was almost painful, and he was entirely conscious of it, too. Eyes hooded, Snape continued watching Hermione absorbedly as he pressed his chilled lips against the hot skin beneath her ear.

Hermione's body immediately began to relax all around him. "Déjà vu," she breathed.

"That depends," Severus drawled. "Were you as...aroused...the first time you found yourself in this position?"

Hermione slightly struggled against Snape's hold, unsurprised when he easily let her wrists free. She leaned into him, edging her hands between the folds of his cloak until she was able to wrap her arms around his lean waist. Snape's stomach tensed at her touch.

"I didn't fully recognize it for what it was, then... but yes, Severus."

Hermione was aware of his body responding to those last two words humming out of her mouth. She drew him closer. "This was where we had our first kiss."

A dark, teasing chuckle shook in his throat. "You call that innocent peck on my cheek a kiss?"

"It wasn't the vicious onslaught you bestowed on me in the dark corridors of Hogwarts... but innocent as it may have been... it was still my *our*...first..."

"Indeed..."

Snape's strong arms quickly came around her waist. With a fierce yank, he slid her body up the wooden door until her face was level with his own. Hermione squeaked in surprise and excitement. Her limbs naturally reacted to the position, and before she was aware of the movement, her legs were wrapped around his hips. Face and neck flushed, Hermione couldn't draw her eyes away from his concentrated gaze, which revealed more than he intended.

Yes, it was her first. Her first sign that she was not only delusional but completely smitten by him. He didn't understand it, and Snape wasn't even certain if he cared to... but that hadn't changed the fact that he'd enjoyed every moment of it.

"But you must admit..." she whispered, words cut off by a ragged exhale. Snape was no longer interested in reminiscing about the past. Restless hands held Hermione up by her thighs and bum. When those cold lips returned to her neck, Hermione circled his shoulders with her arms, pressing her chest into his neck. "I've become a little better at this."

"Perhaps," he said gruffly against her skin. "But my previous warning still remains: don't ever be stupid enough to practice on me."

"I knew you wouldn't really hurt me."

"The fact that you just said that is proof you're still ignorant of many things."

Hermione bristled. "How can you say...?"

Extracting a hand from beneath her robes, Snape groaned impatiently and snatched her by the chin. "Hermione?" Jerking her face forward, Snape forced her to meet his serious expression.

"What?"

"Shut. Up."

In Hermione's shock, Snape finally allowed himself to do what he had wanted from the moment he'd recognized her footsteps on the landing.

He devoured her.

Hermione gasped a stunned moan against Severus' eager lips, returning the zealous kiss. With his hardness pressing insistently between her legs, and his hands fishing for any opening he could find in her dressing gown, Hermione easily lost all sense of discretion and auditory perception.

All too soon, Snape drew his upper body away, turning his ear towards the corridor for signs that they had been heard.

Hands digging into his back, Hermione bit her lower lip in aggrieved patience. She brazenly jerked her hips forward to recapture his attention.

Snape whipped around to face her, his eyes narrowed.

"As you know... I-I have my own room... now," Hermione whispered nervously.

Sliding his hands up her waist, Snape pulled back slightly to grin down at her. He stroked the outline of her jaw with the back of his index and middle finger. "Are you inviting me, Miss Granger?"

"Anytime you wish it, you are invited... but not now..."

Severus stiffened at her hesitation. Misunderstanding her meaning, he harshly narrowed his eyes once more.

Noticing this, Hermione's thighs clenched around his hipbones in earnest. "What I mean is... I no longer share a room..."

Snape's serious expression melted into a cunning smirk.

"... So no one will miss me," Hermione continued. Pausing to catch her breath, she forced herself to spit out the remainder of her innuendo. "If I am gone... for any stretch of time."

Smirking suggestively, Snape drawled, "And what have I told you about tempting me, Hermione?"

"I'm not... tempting you. That is..."

Snape extended a dexterous finger to her neck, slowly twirling a curl around his index finger. "I'm going to hold you to that."

Before Hermione had time to give him a definite nod of approval, the bedroom door was thrust open from behind her. She instinctively tightened her legs and arms around him at the loss of leverage, but Snape already possessed a good hold on her.

He easily carried Hermione into his bedroom, kicking the door closed with the heel of his boot.

Unconcerned with the ceremonious tour that she half-expected, Snape walked straight to the four-poster he had never used.

Hermione released a nervous laugh as Severus playfully tossed her on the bed. The moment she was flat on her back, he wasted no time in unbuttoning his robes. They both paused when he mindlessly reached for a cufflink that was no longer there.

"And those were my good set," Snape muttered, arching one brow.

Hermione made a move to inspect the injury she had caused him.

"Don't fuss."

"At least let me clean it!"

"Later." Feeling her eyes still on him, Snape paused in the removal of his shirt to send her a teasing look. "Not afraid of a little blood, are we?"

"Of course not." Not knowing what else to say to fill the silence, Hermione blurted, "I was afraid you were still angry."

"I am," Snape responded simply.

"You don't seem angry with me."

"I never said I was."

Hermione jerked to stand before him, annoyed and confused. "I don't understand. You're angry but not with me... assuming we are discussing the Dumbledore letter incident..."

Snape loomed over her, one hand roughly yanking at the ties of her dressing gown. "Hermione," he said in the same exasperated tone he had used in the corridor.

"Shutting up," she sighed, limply sitting back.

Severus chuckled throatily, forcing away her sour mood as he edged her to lie back against the bed.

Hermione exhaled from the pleasure of finally being alone with him like this, her arms wrapping around Severus' bare shoulders. She mewed loudly as he pressed his body weight against her.

This was exactly how she'd imagined spending the hols at twelve, Grimmauld place.

By the time her dressing gown and nightdress were tossed impatiently to the floor, Hermione was a mumbling mess. Fingers gliding through his hair, Hermione's back arched as Snape licked and nipped down her collarbone, dipping between her breasts. "Severus," she groaned, voice full of need and brave enthusiasm. "I want... I want to see..."

"What?" Severus responded fervently, nipping at her ear in encouragement.

"I want to watch you... stroke yourself."

Snape stilled for a moment, but Hermione knew by the twitch of his cock against her inner thigh that the request excited him.

"Is that all?"

Hermione wiggled restlessly against him, nails raking down his chest and hip bone. "I couldn't stop thinking of it, really...in the dungeons. Listening to you shower and wondering what you were doing..."

Severus raised himself on his elbows. Slowly removing a stray curl from her forehead, he smirked down at her. "What do I get out of it?"

Hermione smiled, pushing his hair behind his ears. "Whatever..."

Snape interrupted her with a slender finger placed gently against her bottom lip. "Do not speak without thinking. Choose your next words very carefully, Hermione..."

"I am." She swallowed. Breathing heavily, Hermione eagerly licked at the pad of his finger. "Anything. Whatever you need, Severus... I'll do it."

Burning, intense eyes held her gaze.

"Anything," she repeated more insistently, lifting her shoulders off the bed to kiss him roughly. "I'll do it."

Some time later, those were the exact words Severus repeated to himself as a deep, guttural growl escaped him while he issued on her naked flesh.

Author's Notes: This was short, only two scenes. Much more to come, of course. I must thank and apologize to those at Potter Place, especially Livvy, with recommending this story for the Wish List. Technically, the twelfth day of Christmas isn't until the sixth, so I'm not that late!

-As usual, I send all of my gratitude to my beta and mentor, **melusin**, for her time and assistance with this story. Now for some shameless pimping: I also want to congratulate her brilliance at winning two slots over at the SS/HG Awards for "What Goes Around" and "Cuckoo in the Nest" on LJ. The 4th Annual OWL Awards have begun, and I recommend all to check out her stories eligible for nomination as well as the many incredible authors archived. Link: <http://owl.tauri.org/users.php?uid=8210>

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book ii. Line 712.

-Next Up: Chapter Twenty Seven - Their Fatal Hands No Second Stroke Intend Part 2: In Hermione's attempt to confront Harry, she learns much more than she could have

ever expected. Always one to settle old scores, Severus visits an old 'friend'.

Chapter Twenty Seven - Their Fatal Hands No Second Stroke Intend (Part 2)

Chapter 32 of 36

Life at number twelve is filled with twists and turns for its inhabitants. In Hermione's attempt to confront Harry, she learns much more than she could have ever expected. Always one to settle scores, Severus visits an old 'friend'.

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: This is the second half of chapter twenty-seven. Please be certain you have read the previous chapter before continuing.

-Story beta'ed by the incredibly brilliant **melusin**.

"Hermione?" Luna called. Her monotonous voice fluttered tentatively across the kitchen.

The two of them had been the last to finish breakfast and therefore delegated the responsibility for clearing the table and washing the dishes. Lacking the help of Mrs. Weasley today, neither of the girls knew the underrated magic used for cooking multiple dishes simultaneously, which also meant a lack of effective household cleaning spells.

Hermione tossed a pan encrusted with egg residue into the water-filled sink. "Yes, Luna?" Hermione hadn't intended to sound so impatient, but it was a hard habit to break when conversing with this girl. She genuinely liked the Ravenclaw, regarded her as a friend even, but Hermione still retained very little patience for some of the mindless ramblings that came out of her mouth.

That...and Hermione had only achieved about three hours of sleep before she was forced to flee Severus' room in time to sneak down to her own.

True to form, Luna didn't initiate eye contact before beginning the conversation. "Did you burn yourself with a curling iron?"

"Of course not," Hermione answered automatically. "I don't own one seeing as I have no use for it. Besides, like every other wizarding structure... this house doesn't use electricity...WHY?" Soaped dish in hand, Hermione whirled around to eye the Ravenclaw once the absurdity of the topic ultimately struck her.

Luna continued scrubbing down the huge dinner table, unconcerned that her lengthy hair was tangled around the rag. "It just didn't seem likely that someone in this house had given you a love bite, so I thought I'd ask."

Hermione was appalled. "I do *not* have a..."

"It's right under your left ear. But I was the only one sitting beside you so you don't have to worry... no one else noticed it."

Hermione threw open the cupboards, searching for the cleanest pan with a reflective surface. Lifting her wild hair away from her neck, she gasped. Severus would never have done such a thing intentionally. He was virtually obsessed with ensuring that the two of them showed no evidence of their relationship. On a second glance, Hermione determined that the purple discoloration resembled a bite mark more than anything.

She remembered the precise moment she had received it, too. At the crest of her orgasm, the pain and Severus' struggle to suppress his own groan had been the utmost combination of sensations.

Luna kicked over the mop bucket, spreading soapy, darkened water across the flagstones.

Pulling all of her hair over her left shoulder, Hermione reached into a cabinet and placed the graying mop into the Ravenclaw's outstretched hand. Hermione was anxiously itching to go straight upstairs and glamour this thing out of sight. "Er... Luna?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

"No problem!"

Before Hermione reached the kitchen door, she couldn't resist turning around to enquire, "Um... why didn't you ask who it was?"

Throwing the used rags into the empty bucket, Luna frowned, finally meeting Hermione's eye. "I'm sorry," she apologized, genuinely concerned. "Was I supposed to?"

With a roll of her eyes and a laugh, Hermione left the kitchen confident that Luna wasn't one to gossip.

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"For fuck's sake," Snape barked in aggravation, therefore more noisily than he intended. Slamming his empty tumbler onto the rickety table he sneered, "My denial of your offer out back wasn't a challenge... or an invitation."

The provocatively dressed witch winked at him and sashayed her curvaceous body into the booth Snape was occupying. Folding her arms under her breasts, she leaned onto the table with the notion that he'd enjoy the view.

"I'll knock off ten Sickles and throw in a blow job." She smiled drunkenly, flaunting a repellent display of lipstick-stained teeth.

"I wouldn't even pay ten Sickles," Snape sneered.

He wasn't wearing his hood low over his brow for nothing. The dim-witted slag was drawing unneeded attention to him. Snape smoothly dipped a hand into his cloak

pocket. With a violent flick of his fingers, a Knut bounced off the table and hit her in the face. "But I would pay you to *go away*."

Issuing a loud shriek, the woman forcibly pushed herself away from the table. Snape easily righted the bottle of whiskey she'd attempted to overturn.

In a raspy, venomous voice the prostitute spat, "All you had to say was that you were a fucking queer and saved us both the time!" Stumbling in her effort to rise, the witch quickly turned in the direction of another table occupied by a solitary wizard.

Snorting in amusement, Snape noted that despite his insult and her drunken clumsiness, the woman had managed to pocket the Knut.

Pinching the bridge between his eyes, Severus groaned with a slight shake of his head. The trouble he was forced to tolerate just to enjoy a drink by himself....

It wasn't as if Snape particularly found prostitutes abhorrent. He'd employed a middling share in his lifetime, but he'd never seen the appeal in the alleyway variety. If the witch didn't belong to an established brothel, they weren't worth his time...or his money. The main feature he'd enjoyed about hired witches was their diligent and business-like approach to sex, resulting in the significant lack of emotional complications that was the usual consequence of fucking women who sought him out of their own accord.

Snape smirked slightly to himself. *Complications... like Hermione*. But that was one *complication* that he enjoyed...very much.

As long as Snape possessed Hermione, he had no inclination or need to pay for quick, uncomplicated sex. He was beginning to believe that he was thriving on the turmoil she had caused him as of late. And this particular...appreciation...for her was precisely one of the reasons he had come to this seedy pub tonight.

Precisely on time, the side door swung open, revealing yet another dubious patron attempting to mask their identity beneath a black cloak, intentionally purchased oversized. The wizard ordered a drink at the bar and slid into the seat the uninvited witch had just vacated.

Without glancing up at the expected addition, Snape elegantly refilled his tumbler.

"The climate is very warm as of late..." the wizard rasped with a tentative air.

The two men were perfect opposites. One was very tall and lean, his posture almost as straight and rigid as the wood braced against his back while the other hunched into himself, insulting his already stocky physique.

"Not nearly as warm as the Ministry," Snape responded blankly.

At the end of this coded exchange, their tense body language eased somewhat.

Severus lifted his chin and eyed the man across from him. With one arched eyebrow, Snape initiated the conversation.

Scratching nervously behind his ear, the man muttered, "I *do not* want to know what you will do with this information."

"I certainly don't intend to inform you."

With a nod of approval, the wizard's attempt to readjust his robes altered into a motion of removing an item from his inner pocket. He quickly scribbled a bit of nonsense onto a stray napkin before delicately placing the long, worn quill on the table. Snape noted that only under very close scrutiny could one discern the thin piece of parchment wrapped around the quill's shaft.

Tossing liquor down his throat, Snape extended his foot out from under the table. The man stumbled in his effort to rise, robes caught under Snape's dragon-hide boot.

Snape spoke, sharp and menacing. "If I discover you have lied to me, I'll be paying someone else for the address of *our* residence." Halfway through his sentence, Snape looked up, piercing the terrified man with his hollow, black eyes.

After an exaggerated nod, the informant was released and the quill safely tucked away within Snape's robes.

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"You misspelled 'apologize'," she scolded, affectionately digging her chin into his shoulder.

Harry muttered a swear-word to himself but glanced back so Hermione could catch his encouraging smirk.

It was exactly the type of action needed to inform her that she wasn't presumptuous in coming into his room uninvited. Harry wasn't about to kick her out, but he also wasn't going to instigate their inevitable confrontation.

Bracing her hands on his shoulders, Hermione sighed and leaned her temple against his. "Why did Ginny hit you?"

"Did she...?"

"Of course she didn't. You know Ginny doesn't gossip. It's just... obvious."

Harry went rigid, so Hermione was mildly prepared to hear him murmur, "...kissed her."

"Dammit, Harry!" Ignoring his flinch, she cupped her palm, smacking him firmly on the ear.

"OUCH! I know... I know... I feel terrible already, so...don't."

Hermione didn't even know how to begin discussing *that*. Essentially, she couldn't find the patience to.

The return of her chin on his shoulder signaled a change in topic. "Letter to Lavender?" Hermione asked pointedly.

"Yeah." Harry's voice was harder than stone.

"Is she still upset about...?"

"Forget it. We don't have to get into it."

Leaning her face against his once more, Hermione spoke forcefully, "I'm sorry."

Harry whirled around, stunned.

"I am. You were right, I shouldn't have interfered."

"Er... thanks."

"Sure thing...Harry!" Hermione interrupted herself with a shriek, her attention diverted by the shock of recognizing the object sitting only an arm's reach away on the desk in front of them. "Is that...?"

"Ah... yes." He uneasily ruffled his hair. "It is."

Harry appeared to be in possession of Headmaster Dumbledore's Pensieve.

"What are you doing with it?" she demanded shrilly. As if truly hearing her own question, Hermione blanched, lifting her hand in the air and clenching her eyes shut. "Wait, never mind. I don't want to know." Gritting her teeth, Hermione forced herself to walk towards the door, but she turned back around just as quickly. "Gods, never mind. Yes... I do."

Taking a deep, calming breath, Hermione marched straight towards Harry's four-poster and sat down with deliberate movements.

"I did *not* filch it," Harry droned blankly, crossing his arms.

Hermione exhaled. "Of course not! I couldn't imagine you doing such a thing." Her relief was apparent, however. "I take it Dumbledore has assigned you to review... some things."

Harry gazed at the door nervously and finally decided to cast a Silencing Charm on the room. "Many things. But I don't even know what I'm looking for, exactly. There's just so much... decades of memories and not all of them his."

"I thought you've seen everything there was to see on the Dark Lord?"

"I have. This isn't about him, anymore..." Harry cut her off, turning to busy his attention at the grimy window.

Hermione allowed him his silence for as long as she could maintain keeping her mouth closed before she did the predictable. "What is it about? Or should I ask, 'who'?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "You can't solve this for me."

"I wouldn't presume to. And I admit right now that I'm insanely curious for curiosity's sake. But... *you know* you can talk to me, Harry. Maybe... it'll make more sense to you once you explain it to someone else?"

Harry couldn't see the harm in it anymore. It was a bit disheartening for him to admit that if he'd been talking to anyone else, say Ron or Sirius, he wouldn't have had the tolerance to bother.

Hermione had always been very quick at absorbing details without needing things repeated or explained.

Harry sent another series of wards at the door. Rising from his writing desk, he went to sit beside Hermione, frightening her with the schooling of his features.

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"Sweet Merlin," Hermione gasped after Harry had finished his tale. She felt dazed. "*You are* the chosen one."

Harry snorted in disgust. "Don't say that word, please."

"Surprisingly though... it all makes sense."

Leaning forward, Harry braced his elbows on his knees. "Why am I not surprised *you'd* think so?" *That's my Hermione*, Harry thought to himself. He groaned again when she excitedly sprang from the bed.

Warily, he watched her pace about his room. Her bottom lip was currently being devoured, so he had reason to fear that the discussion wouldn't be over until her input was heard.

"Listen, growing up how you and I did," Hermione continued, ignoring his jibe, "as Muggle-borns, I think we can faithfully approach magic without taking it for granted...unlike the majority of the wizarding population. It *is* a wonderful and intensely mysterious reality. For something like magic to exist, it makes sense that it naturally balances itself out in order to sustain itself. To sustain order itself."

"You're not helping, Hermione. I need to end this balance, remember?"

"Ah. Right...but it's just so perfect! Imagine... probably since the beginning of time, there has always been a Dark Wizard and his opposite. I bet we could even find Biblical evidence of this... I wonder if Professor Dumbledore ever thought to create... like a 'good wizard' family tree?"

"Hermione!" Harry was beginning to regret telling her anything.

"Sorry, sorry! Okay... so! As far as Professor Dumbledore can presume, he received the largest chunk of his seemingly endless supply of magic one random day; therefore, the previous 'good' wizard had died. Due to fate, magnetic forces, the magical balance...what have you...Professor Dumbledore spent a significant portion of his life and energy in defeating Grindelwald...unaware that the man was also the current Dark Wizard and therefore his opposite."

"Er, right..." Harry closed his eyes as he listened to Hermione rant, feeling queasy watching her endless pacing.

"And in killing Grindelwald, Dumbledore simultaneously completed his 'purpose', therefore enabling the next Dark Wizard to absorb his full potential of magic...in the same way that the Headmaster had received his...who is obviously the current Dark Lord."

"Voldemort," Harry corrected, leaning forward to eye her strangely.

Hermione flinched at hearing that name and not for same reasons she had years ago. Swallowing, she nodded. "Right... now, before either you or the Dar...Vol-Voldemort had any knowledge of there being a balance, circumstances were already set in motion that guaranteed you two would be enemies... which gives evidence to the fact that the balance does exist."

"Yes, Hermione," Harry conceded impatiently. "I don't need proof that it exists!"

"Wait. That means that before you are strong enough to kill Voldemort...Oh, Harry..."

"The Headmaster is already extremely ill."

"My gods...." Hermione attempted to approach the bed but halted when Harry raised his hand.

"I am *not* discussing that. Continue like you were before if you want to continue talking. You still haven't come to the main point."

"Yes," Hermione agreed wretchedly. "This...balance...sounds perfect. I don't see how you intend to stop it... and whether or not *you should* is an entirely different issue."

Harry jumped up from the bed, insulted by her reasoning. "What's the point of defeating Voldemort if some other sick bloke is going to pop up later and replace him?"

"Point? The *point* is that it needs to be done. He's hurting people right now, Harry. Muggles and wizards are dying every single day because of that man and his cult-like

agenda."

"I KNOW that! But Dumbledore's theory does make sense. If something in my actions can make it possible for there to never be another madman like him, then I should attempt it."

Frustrated, Harry watched her chew at her lip again while she furiously shook her head.

"This is so... scary. It's a balance for a reason, Harry. Even if you stopped the... creation of future Dark Wizards, who's to say that power wouldn't release in another way. Perhaps even more terribly."

"I need to try."

"How?"

"Simple. I need to find the next Dark Lord... the one who would receive Voldemort's power once I have defeated him."

Hermione was afraid to ask, "... and what happens once you find him?"

Harry snorted through his nose as if the answer was more than obvious. "He needs to be destroyed. It is essential that I get to him before Voldemort is killed. That's the only way this could work. If Dumbledore's theory is correct, the generation of 'chosen ones' after that aren't even born yet."

After an unnerving silence, Harry stressed, "This will work, Hermione."

To her credit, Hermione managed to resist arguing. "I hope... I hope it goes exactly as you have it planned. Um... any ideas on who?"

"Yes," Harry answered with care, as if his mind wasn't completely made up. "I mean no! That is...after some memories I have viewed up until now, all signs pointed to the same man Dumbledore assumed it was twenty years ago, but he had been proven wrong. As far as we know, it can be anyone."

He grimaced at the worried look she sent him. Harry nodded his head, allowing Hermione to spit out whatever she was holding back.

"Dumbledore had very close interactions with Voldemort...and you. Voldemort was obviously captivated by Grindelwald's... politics, and it influenced his own. If the pattern repeats itself, most likely it is someone you know or know of. Someone you may even know intimately...."

"Yeah." Harry had always acknowledged that, but he didn't enjoy dwelling on it. He would cross that bridge when he came to it. Turning from her, he said, "I'm tired. I think I'll have a lie down."

Thankfully, Hermione recognized his need for privacy and an end to this conversation. She left, and neither felt it necessary to stress the importance of the extreme secrecy regarding everything that had just been said.

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That girl would be the catalyst to his predestined demise.

Snape easily distinguished that evocative certainty spread a black shadow on his future...but still he maintained a brisk pace as his legs carried him to the location that had been purchased for a small fortune.

For some time, Snape had been very conscious of the role Hermione seemed to play in his...life...and it irritated his sensibilities that he retained no desire to put an end to it.

It was this madness that steadied his breathing for the long trek through this rural scattering of country houses. Traveling by night, of course, was the only option if Snape wanted to stealthily slip into Macnair's home. That and journeying by foot.

The self-important wizard maintained an Apparition detection that covered a kilometer in diameter, but not once did Walden think to set up his wards to detect those approaching his home the Muggle way.

Lip curling, Snape paused in a snow-mudded lane in front of the small cottage. He stood there for some time, quietly picking apart the various nocturnal sounds around him, ensuring that not one emanated from within the dwelling. For a man who despised everything Muggle, it was ironic for Macnair to live in a home that had belonged to one of his very own victims. The ex-Ministry executioner's efforts to hide from the Aurors' detection appeared to have succeeded...until now.

Snape had craved this for a very long time. Macnair had been a pain in the arse since Snape was a new and eager recruit, but not until now did Severus feel...justified. And not until now had the man been worth the effort.

In every way that Severus possessed Hermione in his bed, he was reminded of Macnair. The wizard's handiwork was everywhere.

Hermione's scars didn't repulse Severus in the least. In fact, the experience of receiving them and their presence on her body had aged Hermione significantly, and it suited her. Gone forever was the fragile, innocent student sullied by her corrupt Professor.

When he had initially begun his affair, she was merely a passing fancy, a distraction to be used for warmth in his bed and not worth the effort to emotionally maintain for any stretch of time.

Now... she was a woman and a comrade in the Order. But at the rim of his psyche, all Severus could envision was retribution against those who'd threaten to seize or injure what rightfully belonged to him.

Every time Snape undressed her, he was reminded of what that bastard had done...reminded that Macnair still lived and breathed free of punishment for his offenses against Snape.

These thoughts bolstered Snape to dare to enter from the front of the house. But he wasn't worried. Severus had always worked to the best of his potential alone. No one, not a single member of the Order nor Death Eaters had ever witnessed the way Severus could slip into a dwelling undetected nor watched him cast the complex spells used to shield his actions. Snape enjoyed being admired for his skills, but he would never reveal his secrets, and he especially wouldn't warn potential threats of the alarming extent his powers seemed to take.

Where the average witch or wizard leveled out in their magical abilities, Severus continued to surpass his own expectations.

Door securely closed behind him, Severus sneered at his surroundings.

Pathetic.

The interior more resembled the Room of Requirement than it did a home. From floor to ceiling, wall to wall, it was piled with every type of expensive 'treasure'...magic and Muggle...that a greedy pig like Macnair would believe himself to need.

Quietly edging his lithe body around and under the cluttered furnishings, Snape eased down the hallway, his senses informing him as to which room Macnair was asleep in.

In a matter of seconds, the door was pushed open and ropes sprang from the tip of Snape's wand, tightly securing his fellow Death Eater to the gaudy four-poster in the middle of the room.

Swiftly glancing around to take in his surroundings and possible exits, Snape sneered once more at the resemblance this room had to the rest of the home.

With Macnair securely bound and magically rendered unconscious, Severus was beginning to feel a measure of the heady excitement that had brought him here start to wane.

Pointing his wand, he hissed, "*RENNERVATE!*"

"Fuck me! FUCK! FUCK ME, NO!" Macnair howled in terror, instantaneously aware of his predicament before comprehending who was holding him captive. He fought to control his breathing, but his hysteria at the threat of death was nearly impossible to overcome for a coward like him.

Snape stepped into his eye-line and drawled. "Do you remember the warning I gave you before the attack on Hogsmeade?" He didn't look at Walden as he spoke but fiddled instead with the various trinkets strewn about the room.

"Wha...? SNAPE? What the fuck do you think you are doing? You can't do this!"

"I told you," Snape continued, "that there are no games, no pretenses in a duel. A fight is a fight... to the end."

"Our master will have you destroyed!" The house was freezing; the fires had died out hours ago. Still, perspiration managed to drench Walden from head to toe.

Snape groaned, rolling his eyes at the wizard's predictable threat. "He'll never know."

"I never thought you'd take a bit of friendly competition so seriously!" Mockingly, Macnair dared to spit, "*Luciustrained* you well, after all."

"This has nothing to do with Lucius, nor our brothers, nor the Dark Lord." Finally turning around to eye his captive, Snape smoothly folded his arms, his expression hauntingly emotionless. "If you were an Order member, or Dumbledore himself, I would be standing where I am now. I *do not* enjoy having anything I am determined to keep threatened with removal."

"You... You're mad."

"Perhaps. I've always considered that possibility myself...."

"What do you want! There, I've said it! I am begging for my pathetic, fucking life. Happy? You win!"

Snape chuckled throatily, tilting his jaw to shield his amusement with his hair. "No. No, no, no it's not that easy. You see, I had every intention of quietly slipping into your room and snapping your neck while you slept. But then I realized... I wouldn't be nearly as satisfied unless you were aware of it first."

Before Snape had finished his sentence, his wand whipped soundlessly through the air.

Macnair screamed. The flesh of his thighs ripped open, blood spraying the ostentatious duvet profusely. The ties around his lower body were now free, but he couldn't force his limbs to obey him. "FUCK YOU! You fucking, Mudblood-loving bastard!"

"Exactly."

Macnair quieted in comprehension before shrieking, "The Mudblood? This is about that disgusting, filthy, Mudblood!"

In his rage, Macnair was able to draw upon whatever vestiges of wandless magic he possessed. An hour-glass shaped Chinese vase on the dresser exploded, blasting shards in Severus' direction.

Snape ducked, but it was pointless. His cheek suddenly began to feel cool. The pain would come later. Carefully tucking his wand into his robes, Snape jerked his face to Macnair, silently glaring at him through his greasy hair.

"No... get the hell away from me! What are you doing! DON'T YOU FUCKING TOUC..."

Walden's scream was interrupted by the snap of his vertebra dislodging from his spine.

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Hermione jolted from her comfortable position in front of the fire at the sight of Minerva blustering into the kitchen. Mindlessly shoving her school books to the side, Hermione froze at the sight of Professor Snape being dragged behind her Head of House with a graceless tug of his robes.

"What happened?" Hermione gasped.

Severus glanced at Hermione to acknowledge her presence and groaned. "It never ends..." he muttered under his breath.

Dragging a chair from the kitchen table, Minerva shoved it roughly behind his knees and barked, "SIT!"

Hermione couldn't move from her awkward position in the middle of the kitchen, nor could she tear her horrified gaze away from Severus. He looked terrible. Blood covered the whole right side of his face and neck; a deep, angry gash trailed down his cheekbone. Half-expecting to be shooed away, Hermione kept silent so as to not draw attention to herself while she curiously monitored Snape eying his fellow Order member maliciously.

He did not, however, yell at either woman.

Snape waited until Minerva casually turned her back to him before he submitted to her demand. With an exasperated groan he lowered himself into the seat. In an instant, she was upon him. Snape relieved his frustration with endless cursing when Minerva grabbed him by the jaw.

He continuously jerked his face out of her hold, but she was relentless.

Hands on her hips, Minerva tsked, staring down at Severus like she would a rule-breaking student. "If only Albus were here to help me tame you...."

"I am not a pet," Snape snarled.

"Shut up. I wouldn't bother if I didn't know you so well. You were just going to raid the cabinet to dull the pain and possibly pass out before cleaning this. You already scare the wits out of the students as it is, so we don't need to add a hideous scar down the side of your face to make it worse...KEEP STILL."

"Do refrain from screaming at me, Minerva. There are children in the room."

Hermione bristled. Forcing her expression to appear impassive, Hermione finally approached her Head of House. "I'll help you, Minerva."

"Very well," she replied without hesitation. "We can't just clean this with magic. Boil some rags, will you?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Oh, be quiet."

Ignoring their argument, Hermione continued on her determined march across the kitchen. She Summoned an iron pot and some tea-towels to the sink. While the water boiled on the stove, Hermione threw open the cupboards in search of a proper healing salve.

"Did either of you hear a damn thing I just said? *Ido not* want or need the help of a student."

The iron pot floated in the air in front of Hermione as she rounded the counter. Coming up beside them, she leveled the pot onto the kitchen table by Severus before finally turning to acknowledge that he had been speaking.

"Then you are in luck, Professor Snape. Because you're getting the help of an Order member instead."

Minerva smirked openly. Unintentionally making the situation worse, she asked, "I hope you don't mind, Hermione, but there is some business I need to take care of for Albus...?"

Hermione quickly dipped a finger in the water to gauge the temperature. "Go ahead. I'll be fine."

Severus growled, sharply turning his face away from the two of them.

Once Minerva had exited through the kitchen door, Severus snatched Hermione by the wrist.

"This isn't game," he hissed.

Hermione yanked her hand back, busying herself with wringing out a hot, wet cloth. *I know that.* But she's right. You're neglectful regarding your own wounds. So please, if you don't mind... hold your tongue so I can concentrate or else I won't refrain from cleaning your cut roughly."

Severus was staggered into silence; the rigidity in his back fell slack. Lip curling, he allowed Hermione to wipe away the blood that had encrusted his skin.

Hermione could feel his eyes on her so she spoke as if he has just engaged her in a conversation. "I particularly like the appearance of your face as it is and don't desire it to be needlessly sullied. I'm very good, so there won't be any mistakes."

Severus' eyes narrowed at the sight of Hermione tapping her wand against her throat. She leaned in close to him, gently gliding a crusted strand of hair behind his ear. She lowered her face to his.

"Hermione," he whispered warningly.

"Shh." Freezing, cold, air blew out of her mouth.

Severus closed his eyes without realizing it, relishing the sensation of icy wind pressing against the extensive swelling on his face as she continued blowing at his cut.

"Feel better?" she hummed with a slight laugh in her voice.

Snape grunted in acknowledgment.

"What the hell do you think are you doing?" The voice screeching by the door was clearly appalled at the scene he had just witnessed.

Neither Hermione nor Severus were shocked by this development. The odds were certainly against them. Knowing that no reaction was the best defense, Hermione continued as she was.

"Are you lost... again?" Snape sneered at Black, turning slightly so the over-excited wizard could see his wound.

"This is my house!" Sirius shot back childishly. Turning a worried gaze to the young woman perched alarmingly on the arm rest of Snape's chair, he called, "Hermione?"

"Yes?" she answered irritably. "I'm very busy at the moment, Sirius. Can this wait?"

"Harry wants to speak you... in his room." Sirius extended his arm behind him, pushing open the kitchen door and gazing at her expectantly.

She dabbed her pinky in a jar of healing salve. Gently sliding her finger over Severus' face, she snapped, "Tell him I'll be there as soon as I have finished with Professor Snape's injury."

"I think *Snape* could wait," Sirius spat.

Hermione slammed the jar onto the kitchen table, finally turning her full attention to Harry's godfather. "Dammit, I'm busy, all right?"

Severus showed no reaction to Hermione's outburst, knowing it wasn't a dramatization. With Hermione's thigh and hip nearly pressed into his side, Snape smirked at how close he was to her in Black's presence. He extended his hand, brushing her elbow with the back of his fingers to gain her attention. "You may leave if you wish, Miss Granger."

He had only said this to hear the response he knew she would give.

"No, it's all right, Professor. I've nearly finished."

Glancing up through his disheveled hair, Snape sent Black a knowing and vindictive smirk.

"Thank you for sending my message to Harry, Sirius," Hermione said pointedly, arching an eyebrow.

Sirius wanted to argue. And he would have, if Hermione hadn't stubbornly held his gaze with her impassive expression. By the time he finally left, Hermione was shocked to realize that Snape had Summoned a bottle of firewhiskey and a tumbler during the distraction.

Before Snape was able to bring his tumbler to his lips, Hermione made an insulted sound, smoothly plucking it out of his hand.

"What do you think you are doing?"

"I'm giving your liver some much needed rest."

"My *liver*?" Snape scoffed.

Hermione rolled her eyes, remembering that a Hangover potion not only livened a dull mind but cured the body from the harm that would have been the result of the alcohol's poison.

"Wizards and their dependence on potions," Hermione muttered, rising from the chair to gather the soiled rags. Dumping everything into the pot, she carried it back to the sink for another boil.

"Don't you dare insult potions," Snape sneered as he reached for the bottle of firewhisky once more. "They can heal anything... almost."

Hermione was aware of Snape coming up behind her before she felt his presence very close at her back. Without turning around she hummed, "How does it feel? I didn't even think about giving you a Pain Relieving Potion..."

"I'm fine," Snape hummed.

She stilled at the feel of his hands on her shoulders. Severus gathered her riotous hair in his hands, moving the mass off to one shoulder. Breathing deeply, Hermione closed her eyes, anxious and half-expecting him to initiate intimacy by lowering his lips to her neck. All the same, she couldn't believe that he would...with his reservations about being caught.

Snape's arms whipped in the air around her. Something cold and smooth glided into the dip between her collar bones. Looking down, she inhaled sharply, her fingers sliding against her skin to inspect the braided silver chain.

"Happy Christmas," Severus muttered into her ear.

Lifting the necklace away from her skin, Hermione spluttered, "Severus! This is beautiful! But... it must have been expensive...."

"Perhaps, but that isn't what should make it... special."

She whirled around, her gift twirled around her fingers as she glanced up at him shyly. "I know."

He was silent a moment before asking, "Do you?"

"Yes... it's Muggle made."

Hermione had been so enraptured with studying her gift that Snape felt no need to mask the sharp narrowing of his eyes.

"Indeed."

"But... Christmas isn't until tomorrow...."

"It's almost four in the morning."

She rolled her eyes in agreement. Suddenly looking distressed, she whispered, "It's beautiful. Thank you."

Snape chuckled darkly. "You weren't expecting a gift from me."

Hermione didn't meet his eye.

Sending a quelling glance at the kitchen door, Snape dared to step nearer. Carefully edging his hand between the folds of her dressing gown, Severus curled his fingers firmly around her waist, pulling her closer. "Good. Then that can only mean you have refrained from purchasing some useless rubbish on my account. I receive enough ridiculous gifts from the staff and students as it is. Besides, I am...inadequate...at expressing genuine gratitude and would have sorely disappointed your efforts."

"That hardly seems fair."

"I cannot help it. Truly."

"I know. And I wouldn't change you for anything."

Snape's thumb had strayed unknowingly while he spoke. Fingering the hem of her night dress underneath, Snape's expression went serious. His thoughts briefly acknowledged that the garment was daringly short. He was able to easily slip his hand underneath.

Hermione braced her hands on the counter behind her, pushing herself on her toes in order to reach his jaw with her mouth. Overwhelmed by his presence, she opened her knees, gliding the flesh of her thigh insistently into Snape's already busy hand.

Snape briefly closed his eyes at the feel of her chaste kiss. "Not here..."

Before Snape could completely extract Hermione from his person, the kitchen door he had been attentively monitoring seconds before flew open.

Snape's neck snapped violently. He wished, more than ever, that looks could truly kill.

Sirius Black stilled in the doorway, disbelief and mortification emanating from his body.

Author's Notes: Uh oh....

-Many thanks to my wonderful beta and mentor, **melusin**.

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book ii. Line 712.

-**Next Up:** Sirius confronts Harry about Snape. It's Christmas day and that can only mean one thing...party time! Unfortunately, overworked Order members and ready available alcohol do not mix.

Chapter Twenty Eight - The Rising World of Waters Dark and Deep

An anticipated argument between Sirius, Snape, and Hermione. Sirius confronts Harry about Snape. It's Christmas Day and that can only mean one thing—party time! Unfortunately, overworked Order members and readily available alcohol do not mix.

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: Should I even bother anymore with content warnings?

-**Melusin** beta'ed this very quickly. I am in awe of my gratitude for her.

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"What the FUCK?" The three of them had been dumbly staring at each other for a few agonizing seconds before Sirius had finally exploded.

This isn't happening. Hermione's heart pounded in her throat. She'd allowed too much time to pass before saying or doing something that could've salvaged the situation. Only wanting to thank Severus for his gift, Hermione had foolishly taken their intimate moment for granted.

"Hermione!" Face scarlet red, Sirius' mouth opened and closed awkwardly. He attempted to phrase the appalling questions racing through his mind. "Did you... did I just see you kiss...?" His face twisted in revulsion, unable to finish that sentence.

Please... don't let this be happening.... Hermione had never felt so at a loss for action. Sirius was still standing in the doorway. Upon his careless release of the knob, the door swung inward, knocking him on his backside. Sirius was too mortified to notice. When he'd started shaking his head slowly, Hermione had become conscious of her continued frozen stance...a stance that was still very close to Severus.

Severus.... Her face snapped towards his when she realized he had yet to say or do anything. He was still staring at Black, but his expression no longer possessed the viciousness it had when Sirius had stumbled into the kitchen moments before. Eyebrows slightly furrowed, Snape seemed to be carefully contemplating something.

He's calculating, Hermione told herself. This wasn't good.

Feeling Severus' arm move slightly, Hermione realized he'd just finished saturating the room with silencing and locking wards. Hermione needed to take control of this before Severus did. She clumsily took a step forward; her mannerisms and tone of voice cowed in apology. "Sirius, I... please try to understand...."

Severus' anger returned when she stepped away from him. He didn't yank Hermione back; instead, he took two large steps to insinuate himself between her and Black. "Don't explain yourself to him."

Sirius yanked at the hair at his temples, pulling long, wild strands loose from his plait. "I thought I was going crazy!" Sirius refused to acknowledge Snape, instead directing all of his resentment at her. "Did you know that? Do you have any idea how conflicted you've made me?"

Hermione flinched at the quavering in Sirius' voice. She didn't want to hear this.

Sirius took another step forward, which was countered by Snape taking one back. Hermione was virtually wrapped in the folds of Severus' robes.

"I thought...I *knew* something wasn't right between you two... but I never imagined...." The sadness seemed to explode out of him, top lip pulling over gnashed teeth. "Get away from him, Hermione! The bastard must have slipped something into your drink...no, the Imperius!"

It all happened so fast. Sirius hurled himself from the door. With his arms reaching to yank Hermione out from behind Snape, his slim body lunging around the counter. Sirius missed her shoulder, his fingers curling into her hair. But before Hermione's pained scream had died off, Snape had grabbed Sirius by the arm, twisting it behind his back.

"That was *insanely* stupid." Severus' expression was a disconcerting mixture of fury at Sirius' accusations and amusement at the madman's anguished groan.

"Get your filthy hands off me! I won't let you do this. Not her! Not Hermione." He refused to submit, lunging for Hermione, but Sirius wasn't strong enough to throw Snape off.

Severus viciously twisted Black's arm harder behind him. "You're a bloody idiot if you think I'd let you touch her in my presence... Especially now. If you'd managed to hurt her..."

He wasn't able to finish his threat. Severus snarled at the thought of Black's hands on Hermione and decided to show the man what he had in mind. Snape quickly dipped his hand into Black's cloak pocket.

Hermione's heart had been racing for so long, she didn't know what to do or say. She'd jumped back when Severus had pulled Sirius off her. Hermione was grateful that Snape would do anything to protect her, but she couldn't bear just standing on the sidelines, watching his vicious taunting while restraining Sirius face down against the counter.

"You perverted bastard!" Sirius snarled at Snape. "She's your student, for fuck's sake!"

Severus chuckled sadistically. "If I'm perverted, then that would make you a criminal. At least *wanted* her consent before I attempted to put my hands on her."

Extending his arm, Snape dangled the black pocket watch in front of Sirius. The cool metal spun on its chain, centimeters above the water-filled sink.

"NO! SWEET MERLIN, DON'T YOU DARE FUCKING DROP IT!"

Severus laughed openly.

Hermione paled. She'd never heard such a sound come out of his mouth.

"You wouldn't! Dumbledore'd have your balls for that!"

"He wouldn't ever learn of it."

"ENOUGH!" Both men started, turning in surprise at Hermione's unexpected outburst. "Knock it off, both of you! I'm *sosick* of this! When are the two of you going to grow up?"

"Don't even think about it, Hermione." Severus scowled at her, knowing what she was intending to do. His hands were still holding Sirius' face down on the counter, even though the man was too distracted to resume his struggling.

"Wha...why the FUCK is Snivellus calling you 'Hermione'?"

"BECAUSE I'VE BEEN SEEING HIM!"

"God dammit!" Severus cursed at the ceiling. This was all pointless to him. She was only giving him more work in the end.

"No, Severus. I can't do this anymore! I'm exhausted from trying to fend off...I am not in love with you, Sirius. What's more, you have no hope... no hope at all of changing that." Hermione leaned against the counter, aligning her face with his. "And for as long as I'll be... with Severus, I can't imagine ever feeling such emotions for anyone else."

"How touching," Severus drawled blankly. "Feel better now you've got that out?"

Hermione shot him filthy look.

"No..." It took a moment for the two of them to comprehend that Sirius had been repeatedly mumbling to himself. Snape had finally let go of him, but Sirius was still crouched against the counter, his face scrunched in mortification. "Of all...not him."

"Sirius," Hermione called soothingly. Severus removed himself from the protective position he had maintained between them, quietly edging himself behind Hermione. She exhaled, relieved that he was allowing her to speak like this to Sirius. "Please, stand up. Now, look at me. It's important you hear this..."

"Indeed it is... *OBLIVATE!*"

"Severus, no!"

It was too late. Sirius stared back at them, face and mind blanker than a fresh piece of parchment.

*He didn't... Severus didn't just do that....*Hermione stared at Sirius, shaking her head in incredulity.

"You never listen to me when you should."

Hermione whirled around, her eyes narrowed accusingly. "What have you done?" All Hermione could feel was anger at Severus and an increasing sense of dread. For reasons unknown, Hermione sensed that they had just made things much worse. "I can't believe... you didn't just do that..."

Snape emotionlessly looked down at her. "You only have thirty seconds left to implant new memories. Take care of it." Spinning on his heel, he headed straight for the door.

"Me?"

Snape paused in the doorway, squaring his shoulders before he slowly turned around.

"Don't you remember, Miss Granger?" Snape spoke in mock casualness, but his eyes were wild. "Before Black entered the kitchen... I'd already left." Severus pointed his wand at Black's back, prompting her to continue the fake memory from there.

"Pansy...."

The young woman who'd just been summoned jumped, the excited pitch of her mother's voice pulling Pansy out of her reverie. She'd been chewing madly at her nails, enduring the tedious holiday at home. Today, like every other day and night, she was sitting by herself in the drawing-room of Parkinson Manor, aloofly staring at the portraits, waiting until her parents decided to trouble themselves with her.

It was very early Christmas morning. The traditional decorations had been put up by the house-elves, and piles of gifts awaited her under the tree. In years past, Pansy had always been eager to distract herself from the coldness of her family by the opulent number of jewels and fur-lined cloaks she'd received.

Not this Christmas, however. There was only one thing...one person...she wanted, and he....

Pansy straightened her back at the sound of high heels clicking across the marble floor of the entrance hall. "Yes, mother?"

"Turn around when you're speaking to me, girl!"

She did as instructed. "I'm...I apologize."

Mrs. Parkinson sniffed in acceptance. Beckoning her daughter with a sumptuous curl of her fingers, the severe woman threw her chin in the air before declaring, "We've had some news."

*And I should care?"*Really? Pleasing news, I should hope?"

"In a manner of speaking... yes." When her daughter failed to jump in anticipation, Mrs. Parkinson waved the letter with an impatient flip of the hand.

"Oh?" Pansy wearily accepted the parchment. She didn't want to read it. Her heart plummeted at the skull and snake emblem on the seal.

"Our beloved Theodore has been promoted."

Pansy swallowed back the desire to retch. She kept her gaze trained on the letter in her hands, eyes moving to give the appearance of reading. Knowing she needed to meet her mother's level of excitement, Pansy exclaimed, "Marvelous!"

"Indeed! We're been invited to a celebra...memorial dinner at Nott Manor this very evening. We cannot celebrate, yet... considering."

"Considering what, mother?"

"Don't act daft! It's all right there in front of you. There is reason to celebrate Theodore's good fortune, of course, but we cannot say such things to anyone else outside the family considering the... circumstances... in which he's been promoted. The death of our soldiers should never be celebrated! No matter who might benefit from it. Naturally, the Nott family would think it fitting to host the memorial dinner."

"Who was killed...?"

Pansy's mother sharply turned away with a snort of disgust as she screamed for the house-elves to prepare her breakfast. Left alone, Pansy retreated back to her seat by the fire, daring to read the letter still clutched in her hands.

"... his death will surely be met with proper retaliation. Our cause to purify the wizarding race must continue uninterrupted. All Muggle putridity of known Mudbloods will be eradicated in time! Therefore, Mr. Theodore Nott will take over Mr. Walden Macnair's post and also be bestowed the honor of a seat within the Dark Lord's inner circle. Mr. Macnair's position wasn't an easy one, but if anyone can take over in monitoring Greyback's efforts within the Werewolf infantry, certainly our Theodore can rise to the...."

Why? Angry, frustrated tears smeared Pansy's make-up. *It's not fair! Why him?* Willing her emotions to calm, Pansy ripped the letter and threw it into the fire.

Never... never had Pansy said or done anything in the last year that would have benefited Nott or the Dark Lord's agenda.

And yet, her life kept spiraling further from her control, all the while growing more intolerable. Pansy didn't deserve this...*right?*

She needed to speak to Remus. He needed to know. But Pansy hadn't spoken to him in nearly two weeks. Other than the Black family home, she had no idea where to reach him... nor did she know if it was even safe to reach him.

Pansy cringed from the idea of spending the evening with her fiancé and his family.

As if her relationship with Remus wasn't precarious enough.

"I just don't like it, Harry," Sirius snapped in a counter-argument. Wincing, his fingers glided across his forehead in an effort to soothe the strange, dull headache he'd been suffering since speaking to Hermione that morning.

She'd been so... kind and soothing to him. The remembrance of it almost tapered his mood, but then Sirius recalled the episode that had angered him in the first place. Leaning forward in his seat, he glared at Harry, willing his godson to put down the quill and give him his full attention. Sirius had been surprised to find Harry in the Black family library, seated at his old writing desk with an array of wizarding history texts stacked around him. When had the boy taken such an interest in schoolwork? "She's too... *natural*... with him," Sirius continued the argument they'd been having for the last twenty minutes. "And *I know* he enjoys it."

Harry sighed, conceding the point. "I'm sure if I thought I saw what you did, then I wouldn't like it, either."

"Thought?" Hermione was practically sitting in the greasy bastard's lap! She held the git's face close to her own, blowing at his wound." Sirius spoke about the incident like it was the most disgusting thing in the world, but he failed to admit to Harry that he would've given anything to have Hermione demonstrate such intimacy with him.

"Oh, come on, Sirius." Harry finally pushed his writing material to the side. "This is *Hermione* we're talking about. Her snapping at you while she was trying to focus on healing an injury sounds pretty in character. I'm surprised she didn't hex you."

"I'm telling you, there is something...funny...about those two."

"She would've shown the same concern for any of us, and you know it."

Sirius' eyes flashed. "Snape is *not* one of us."

Shaking his head in disappointment, Harry turned away and took up his quill once more. "If you're going to turn this into another conversation about the evilness of 'Snape-The-Death-Eater' then you can stop right now. I won't listen to it."

"Turning into a Snape lover, too, eh?"

"He did save her life." A wispy, flat voice descended on the two men, her tone matter-of-fact.

Perplexed, Harry and Sirius glanced around, but there were no other occupants visible in the library.

The entire house vibrated as rushed footsteps thundered down the stairs. Trainers squeaked against the tiled floor of the entrance hall seconds before Ron burst into the room. Holding the door open, he worriedly searched the walls until finally acknowledging Harry and Sirius' presence.

"I heard her," Ron insisted, brows furrowed.

"In the very least, I'm certain Hermione and Professor Snape have developed a friendship by now." Luna spoke with surprising politeness, as if she'd just been asked the question she was now answering. "I know I would feel overwhelming esteem if such a man spent his time nursing me back to life."

Ron relaxed slightly before yelling, "Get out of the paneling, Luna!"

A few seconds of silence passed before she answered him. "Just a sec!" she yelled, her voice muffled as she spoke through wood and wallpaper. "Found it!"

All three men displayed very different reactions to the scene before them. The wall beside the fireplace separated seamlessly along the patterned outlines of the wallpaper, swinging open as if on hinges. Sirius was appalled; Harry smiled indulgently, and Ron continued fidgeting with an unusual combination of relief and nervousness as a dust-covered Luna Lovegood stepped into the room.

Sprinting to her side, Ron extended his arm for leverage as she stepped down from the ledge. He stiffened, stifling a whimper while she took her time plucking spiders out of her disheveled hair.

"I never gave you permission to go nosing about my house!"

Luna turned her back to Sirius as she put all her weight into closing the trap door. "Don't be angry with me because it never told you its secrets... maybe, if you'd address the house with a little respect for once... and Hermione will eventually resent you if you target Professor Snape."

"No one asked for your opinion!"

"Don't yell at her!" Ron snapped.

"Quiet!" Harry wasn't in the mood for interruptions. He had work to get done. Whipping around in his seat, Harry regarded Luna pointedly through narrowed eyes.

She nodded once. "Right. I think we've been dismissed."

Still glaring daggers at Sirius, Ron extended the hand at his side without thinking, which Luna quickly filled with her own. "Since Snape isn't here, it might be safe to go upstairs. I'll show you the attic," Ron grumbled.

Luna brightened, grinning shyly as if she'd just been gifted a box of chocolates.

"At least warn me before you disappear..."

Sirius continued staring at the door the strange couple had just exited from. "When did *those two* happen?"

Harry laughed. "I don't think they have. Not yet, at least. Luna has a... er... knack for getting herself into trouble. She's oblivious to the wrong things. Ron's become protective, that's all."

Sirius turned to face Harry, who'd picked up an old ceramic paperweight from the desk. "I always loved James' sense of humor."

Harry snorted through his nose. "I never knew you could buy a statue of a dog taking a shit."

Sirius smiled while he watched his godson twirl the paperweight in his hands. Eyes hazing over, he suddenly remembered the greeting Harry had given him when he'd entered the library earlier. *'Hello, stranger'*. "Regardless of the... tension as of late, I do see and speak to you almost every day."

Harry immediately picked up on the issue his godfather was skirting around. "I see a man called Sirius Black... but I don't see you."

Sirius could feel Harry analyzing his reactions, so he turned his face towards the window.

"How long have you been... disconnected from Dumbledore?"

Sirius growled. "I see he still fills you in on the latest gossip."

"No," Harry answered calmly. "He didn't say anything. I just...can tell."

"The old man hasn't always treated me this way."

"I know. Overnight, the Headmaster's entire perception of you changed. And he's stubbornly maintained his resentment ever since."

"It's not polite to lie to your godfather, Harry." Sirius stood up so suddenly his chair upturned.

"What?" Harry couldn't understand this sudden anger.

"The Headmaster's *perception* of me, as you say... yes, it changed overnight. He went from indulgent to..."*He suddenly started hating me in the middle of my seventh year. And he allowed me to rot in Azkaban for twelve years... for a crime he knew I never committed.* "That happened almost twenty years ago... so don't pretend that the senile old man isn't gossiping about my past!"

Harry didn't attempt to stop Sirius from fleeing the library in an infuriated frenzy. He'd slipped up. In just wanting to share... to get Sirius to open up... Harry'd mistakenly brought up instances that he had viewed in Dumbledore's Pensieve.

"Look at the time! I cannot believe I'd arrive here so late..."

"Happy Christmas, Mrs. Weasley," Hermione and Luna sang in unison upon the woman's entrance into the kitchen.

"Hello, girls. Happy Christmas...merciful heavens!" Mrs. Weasley gaped at the spread of various dishes lining the counter and kitchen table. "You didn't have to go to the trouble, Hermione! I could've whipped something up in time."

Hermione laughed. "Me? Cook all this? Not likely." Hermione turned to the distracted blonde at her side. "This is Luna's doing."

Dusting icing sugar on an angel cake, Luna didn't react in either gratitude or embarrassment to Hermione's compliment.

"*Luna?*"

"Yes?" Luna answered politely, misinterpreting Mrs. Weasley's disbelieving gasp.

"I...didn't know... Well, it looks wonderful. Thank you, my dear."

Luna's mouth twitched into an awkward smile. "It's a plain menu, I know. My mother hadn't taught me much before she died, but my father never complained about the meals I was able to put together."

"Oh, that's right... just you and your father. I had forgotten... That must have been a lot of responsibility for such a young girl."

"It wasn't so bad. There was an unfortunate three-tongued-Acarina infestation in Britain's wheat supply that year, so..." Luna shrugged.

Mrs. Weasley blankly regarded the Ravenclaw before opening her mouth. But at the feel of a restraining hand on her forearm, Molly turned to Hermione instead.

"Remember what I told you?" Hermione prompted with a smirk.

Rolling her eyes, Molly muttered in recollection, "Right, right. 'Don't bother asking'."

Hermione nodded once and winked. Sometimes, it was just best to let Luna talk and not ask for detailed explanations once she'd finished.

Molly and Hermione helped Luna arrange the platters to make room for place settings. Not long after Mrs. Weasley's arrival, Ginny and Ron announced their entrance into the kitchen by the incredible amount of noise, typical of quarreling siblings.

"Hi, Mum," they both sang meekly under their mother's disciplinary glare.

"When's the party?" Ron asked his mother absently, heading straight for a huge platter of fried sausages.

"We'll have the Order meeting in here first then move everyone into the library for some music and drinks... DON'T touch the food yet, Ron! We've just arranged it!"

Ron snapped his hands back. He groaned, disappointed, until an arm extended in front of him holding a small plate of food. Luna'd apparently expected this scene and had put some sausages aside for him.

"Excellent!" Eagerly taking the offered plate, Ron quickly bent down without thinking and kissed Luna on the cheek.

Luna quietly looked up at him. Ears and face turning scarlet, Ron distracted himself by swallowing the food.

The other women in the room tactfully turned their backs to hide knowing smiles and pretended nothing had just happened.

Within an hour, the kitchen was brimming with Order members, each of them talking excitedly as they caught up since the last meeting in August. Despite the reproachful

glares from Molly and Minerva, many failed to see the harm in drinking before the meeting began since there'd be a Christmas celebration, regardless.

Hermione stood guard behind the kitchen counter to avoid the Weasley ruckus at the dinner table. Despite Fred and George's enduring efforts, Hermione was unwilling to imbibe alcohol before all of the important business had been covered.

She tensed every time the kitchen door swung open. This instance, Hermione relaxed once she'd realized that only the Aurors had arrived. Hermione had yet to encounter either Sirius or Severus since that horrid argument this morning, and her anticipation of their inevitable meeting was agonizing.

We Obliviated him... Even though Severus had technically been the one to cast the spell, Hermione recognized she'd had an equal hand in this unlawfulness. She'd altered his memories. For one blessed moment, right before Severus had acted rashly, Hermione'd believed her cautious rapport with Sirius had finally come to an end.

She muttered to herself, thoroughly conflicted. Hermione was infuriated with Severus for doing such a thing without consulting her beforehand. Worst of all, her better senses grudgingly admitted that a small portion of her ego had been... flattered. Flattered that Severus believed her capable enough to finish the mind alteration on her own.

"Hermione," a pleasant voice hummed in greeting just as a body slid next to her behind the counter.

She turned casually but started once the identity of this individual hit her. "Remus!" Hermione practically jumped into his arms.

The wizard stilled before returning the hug with equal warmth. Chuckling softly, he patted her back and pushed her at arm's length to get a good look.

"I didn't think you'd attend today." There was so much Hermione wanted to say to him, it was overwhelming. "We've been expecting you, but you never came, and then we were told that you couldn't get away! How have you been faring with...oh, my god! You look terrible. Who's been tending your wounds?"

Remus sent a wary glance to the dinner table then gently shushed her. "So many questions! But I should expect that from you, shouldn't I? I've been faring tolerable well, considering...well, there's a time and a place to speak of such things. But you! Oh, Hermione when I'd heard about your cap..."

"You're right," Hermione interrupted. "There *is* a time and place to speak of such things. Not..."

"...here. Of course." Remus' gentle smile faded. He looked straight into her eyes and insisted, "We'll discuss it later."

"Of course."

"Tonight."

Hermione nodded eagerly. Yes, they did have much to discuss. Not only the true story behind Hermione's captivity by Death Eaters but also his illicit relationship with one of their daughters.

"And what is so secretive that it must be talked about in private?" Sirius was trying to speak playfully and teasingly to his best friend but couldn't abstain from sending Hermione a critical glare.

She'd been so distracted in greeting Remus, Hermione hadn't noticed Sirius' entrance.

Insulted at the insinuation and fed up with the roller-coaster ride of the last twenty-four hours, Hermione glared at Sirius and hissed, "Many things, as the word 'private' implies...and which you should certainly know. Shall we ask *you* details of your personal life so everyone can hear?"

"I didn't mean..."

"Enough nonsense. I'm starving." Remus led Sirius away from Hermione's ire and towards the food. Hermione caught Remus' apprehensive gaze across the room, accidentally meeting the condemnatory eyes of Tonks. Recognizing Hermione's detection, the Auror sharply turned away.

Oh, for goodness sake!

She sighed. With a set up like this, Hermione expected tonight would have a much more fascinating end. Right as that thought crossed her mind, her co-conspirator finally arrived. Severus plowed into the kitchen in all of his surly grandeur, sending the door crashing against the adjacent wall.

Moody's wobbling eye had been fixed in his direction sometime before the expected ruckus. He growled at the very sight of the black-robed man. "Always the dramatic entrance. One of these days, you're going to kill an innocent bystander with the door knob!"

"I'm counting on it," Severus sneered through his greasy hair.

Hermione bit her cheek to keep from laughing.

Snape sensed her presence beside the stove, which was one of many reasons he'd headed in that direction. Detecting Hermione's stifled snort of laughter, he carefully regarded her with the intention of spitting a snide remark...until unexpectedly diverted. Severus' eyes trailed the length of her figure, indicating his approval of her new dress with the cocking of his brow.

Hermione's cheeks burned red. "Good evening, Professor Snape."

Severus pulled his cloak over his shoulders, elegantly resuming his route behind the counter. Taking advantage of the disorderly environment, Snape passed behind Hermione, his fingers skimming the small of her back. "Miss Granger."

She raised a cup of tea to her lips to conceal the slight hitch in her breathing.

As much as she didn't want to, Hermione forced herself to ignore Severus' search of the cupboards for his favorite drink.

"Honestly, Severus!" Minerva scolded after detecting the hollow sound of a cork popping loose from a bottle. "You promised me you wouldn't indulge tonight."

Severus smirked nastily and poured himself a glass of wine. "I promised you I wouldn't indulge in Firewhisky. You should have had the sense to be more specific."

Professor McGonagall glared.

"When is this ridiculous charade to begin?"

Ignoring his jibe, Minerva answered, "Now, actually, seeing as everyone's arrived."

Severus stilled. Slowing pulling the wine glass away from his mouth, he turned to the Deputy Headmistress, his scowl heavy with accusation.

McGonagall swallowed under his gaze and immediately changed the subject. "Good work, Hermione. With one more coat of healing salve, the scar will fade further, and he'll be back to the dreary wizard we know and love."

Hermione wasn't completely used to the newfound straightforwardness Minerva had been showing her as of late, especially when it was at Severus' expense. Nodding,

Hermione softly murmured her thanks, unintentionally speaking over Severus as he muttered 'cow' to her Head of House's back.

Hermione turned to her professor and spoke with concern. "Everything has been so... so much has happened, and I'm ashamed to say I'd forgotten your injury. May I?"

After a brief moment of contemplation, he rested his wine glass on the counter. Without glancing around the kitchen for prying eyes, he surprisingly kept silent and slowly bent down to her.

Hermione raised her hand to his face, completely free of hesitation. Pushing his hair out of the way, she gently probed the slightly raised flesh along his cheek bone.

They both detected a few scandalized whispers coming from the direction of the dinner table.

Catching her eye, Severus ominously stared down at her. "We're being... discussed."

"I know."

"Doesn't it bother you to be gossiped about, especially in relation to me?"

"No," Hermione responded confidently, ignoring his attempts at sarcasm. She lowered her hand once she was satisfied with how his wound had healed. "Minerva's correct. I need to apply a bit more salve...later. If you'll let me?"

Snape nodded.

"Does it bother *you*?" Hermione asked, pursuing the subject.

He smirked. "So long as we're not displaying anything inappropriate, I quite enjoy it."

Hermione turned to hide her frown. She could sense her friends...and Sirius...watching the two of them intently, but they all knew not to intervene or comment. Hermione had heard the rumors, and after the enlightening conversation with Luna a few hours ago, Hermione was going to take advantage of it.

No one criticized her casual friendship with Minerva. If it wasn't improper for Hermione to have one with her Head of House, and if it wasn't unacceptable for Sirius to openly pursue her with amorous aspirations, then Professor Snape was fair game as well.

Busying herself with serving a plate of food, Hermione tried to draw Severus' comment out of her head.

"... I quite enjoy it."

The weighty dread she'd been carrying since their confrontation with Sirius this morning deepened. The majority of Severus' actions and motivations seemed to center on what amused him in the moment; what pleased him in the moment; what angered him in the moment. Even though the incident with Sirius had enraged Snape, she knew he'd enjoyed it all the same, if only for the opportunity to enact a bit of revenge.

Hermione wasn't willing to be tolerant...nor act as an accomplice...to such actions any longer.

Food in hand, she returned to his side and stilled at the feel of his breath against her neck as Snape observed her intently.

She caught the quick dart of his eyes in the direction of Sirius before he spoke. "Your efforts appear to have been... satisfactory."

"Is that your way of saying, 'good work'?"

"Don't get insolent with me. But yes, that is my way of saying that...what's this?" Severus glared down at the plate Hermione'd just positioned in front of him.

"Dinner. You *do* tend to forget to eat once you start drinking," Hermione jeered before making a move to walk away.

"I have not finished speaking to you, Miss Granger," Snape barked at her back.

Whereas the majority of their whispered conversation had drawn eye after curious eye, the irate voice of the dreaded Potions master naturally compelled everyone to snap out of their snooping.

Hermione turned with a sigh, arms crossed over her chest. "Yes?"

"Yes, *sir*," Snape corrected viciously, pointing at the floor directly by his feet.

Scowling, Hermione returned to her previous position at his side.

"Mind your tongue in front of others, do you hear me?" Severus snarled very low so only she could hear.

"Is that all you wanted to say to me... *sir*?" Hermione asked coolly.

"No, it is not." Snape sent an uneasy glance around the room before fixing his eyes on the plate of food she'd prepared. It took a bit longer than expected, but once Severus' expression schooled into his mask of impassivity, he finally returned her steady gaze. "As I was saying... your work appears satisfactory, so I doubt we need to worry on that score. But I would also like to enquire as to how you are faring from the... encounter?"

"You would?"

His eyes narrowed at the uncertainty in her voice. "Yes. *I would*."

"It still... worries me. But I think I'll get over it. Thank you... for asking, I mean."

He grunted in acceptance.

At the sound of Minerva tapping a fork against her glass, Order members ceased their conversations and turned their full attention to Dumbledore's second in command.

"Quiet, please. Enough... shut your mouths, for heaven's sake! I'm calling this meeting to order."

Minerva was undisturbed by the worried glances sent her way and actually anticipated Remus' question. "What is this? Aren't we waiting for Albus?"

McGonagall tidied her bun before looking at everyone sternly. "No, we're not... QUIET PLEASE, I'll explain." Once there was silence, she continued, "As most of you know, the Headmaster has been... unwell. He's not young anymore, not even by wizarding standards. Albus is too ill to attend, and under his advice and judgment, I'll be chairing the meeting tonight...no, I'm not getting into this, and I swear to Merlin if any of you ask me one more question regarding the matter, you'll be hexed within an inch of your life!"

The livid, frightened, and confused glares sent in her direction didn't trouble Minerva in the least so long as she received the silence that was expected. "First, and

foremost...reports. Moody, if you please..."

All of the Order members dutifully adjusted their seated and standing positions to face the Auror.

For one fleeting second, Hermione could have sworn Moody had fixed his roaming eye on Snape before he started speaking.

"I'm not getting into a discussion over the raids. Despite the unavoidable losses, everything on that front is looking as..*promising* as such vile acts could possibly be. If you want gory details, purchase a blasted paper!" Pausing for effect, that nauseating eye swiveled round the room before Moody continued, "But there is one... very recent... incident that you might not read about tomorrow morning. We've just received some news from the Ministry. The body of a notorious Death Eater has been recovered at a Muggle-owned cottage just outside Lincoln as well as the body of an Auror."

"A poor excuse of an Auror," Severus added.

"He was an Auror, nonetheless!" Moody spat. "Our informants suspect that Joseph Savage received an anonymous tip off to Macnair's location and went to apprehend the Death Eater. A duel ensued, and both died from their injuries."

"Macnair?" Hermione barked without thinking. Catching Severus' attention, his silent, reproachful glare chastised her into emotionless quiet.

"Ah... yes," Moody answered awkwardly after a silent exchange with Minerva, which reminded the Auror that Macnair was the Death Eater who'd kidnapped Hermione. He continued, now even more suspicious as to these deaths. "It's still under investigation, but nothing will come of it, either way. Savage had been under scrutiny for some time and was never very... popular."

Severus snorted knowingly. "Numerous allegations of rape must've become tedious to cover-up."

"Allegations made by the dregs of Knockturn Alley! Their testimonies are as reliable as... a revel-loving Death Eater, I should say," Moody growled.

"That's enough!" Minerva screeched, revolted at the subject matter of their insults.

Duly chastised, Moody began explaining the tedious process of recovering the vast amounts of stolen Muggle treasures found in Macnair's dwelling, followed by the Ministry's attempts at returning it all to surviving family members, if any.

Hours from now, Hermione wouldn't be able to remember everything that had been said during the meeting.

Macnair is dead. She kept repeating to herself.

Macnair was killed in a duel last night... which Moody seemed highly suspicious of. And Severus had arrived covered in blood... like he'd been in a duel.

Covered in blood... with a Muggle necklace as a gift.

A flash of light, reflecting off the surface of metal....

Hermione's hands fisted against the counter as some forgotten memory assaulted her. Her eyes glazed over in her attempt to follow the memory before it pulled away from her consciousness.

A flash of light, reflecting off the surface of metal.... She had been lying on her back, freezing in muddy snow while Macnair had repeatedly sent Slicing Hex after Slicing Hex down at her flailing body. Hermione remembered the continuous flashes of orange light blasting from his wand. She had known to anticipate more pain when the orange light reflected off something silver... a silver chain... wrapped around his neck.

... *What?*

Should she feel relieved or insulted? Was she glad Macnair was dead?

Hermione mindlessly fingered the silver chain around her neck. No... she couldn't imagine wishing death on anyone unless she was willing to complete the task herself. Would she have had the nerve to kill Macnair, if given the chance?

It was a question Hermione didn't have an easy answer for. And she refused to judge Severus' actions until she'd gathered all the facts first.

Before Hermione was fully prepared, it was her turn to report.

Hermione cleared the itchy dryness from the back of her throat, unable to meet the expectant stare of the roomful of Order members.

Her *real* mission had been given to her in the privacy of Headmaster Dumbledore's office days after the last Order meeting; therefore, only Dumbledore would receive *that* report. Hermione sighed, suddenly feeling more ashamed as to how she and Severus had been handling Sirius.

Today, the Order would get the watered down version.

"So tell us," Moody asked, voice rasping with skepticism. "What information have you gleaned from your spying at Hogwarts?"

Hermione glowered. *Very well, then.* "I've had a bit of contact with an... informant... from Slytherin House. What many of us have feared has taken place: a vast majority of the sixth and seventh years have received the Mark."

The kitchen was in an uproar.

Hermione could sense Severus, motionless in reaction to what would seem like betrayal, but she was determined to smooth this over for him.

"Why haven't you told us before about this?" Moody demanded, spitting his accusation at not only Hermione, but the Slytherin Head of House as well.

"I didn't think I was obliged to," Hermione responded calmly. "It is required that the identity of the new recruits remains anonymous, even from the inner circle and each other... unless given explicit permission, otherwise. Many of them would be killed if it was known that they discuss their Death Eater involvement amongst one another."

"We should have received their names long before tonight!"

"Well... I apologize if you're under the impression that I'll be handing over their names at all. I don't have specifics... just a general idea of how things are faring within Slytherin. According to my informant, even a number of those who have taken the Mark are still on the fence as to where their loyalties lie."

"You are duty-bound to at least tell us the name if this supposed informant."

"No, I am not. Not only is the name inconsequential, but this person has trusted..."

"INSOLENCE! Complete, irresponsible disobedience!" Moody thundered. Speaking over a number of voices, many which were in agreement with him, he bellowed at the Head Girl, "If I have to pour Veritaserum down your throat myself..."

A booming, ferocious voice pierced through the havoc. "I BELIEVE," Snape basked in the stunned silence before continuing, "that Miss Granger was speaking before she was so rudely interrupted."

The kitchen froze, saturated in deafening silence. A few still possessed the desire to argue. Hermione could see it in their faces. But not one of them dared to match themselves against Snape.

Flushing, Hermione cleared her throat before speaking again. "Ah... thank you, Professor. As I was trying to explain...."

Hermione could have sworn she detected a voice whispering somewhere in the vicinity of the dinner table, ripe with accusation. "See!" the voiced insisted. "What did I tell you?"

"I think... that was the most amazing thing I have ever witnessed!"

"Ginny," Hermione scolded.

The redhead leaned forward in her chair, eyeing the numerous occupants of the library before rushing on. "I know this sounds mad... but for the briefest of moments...and I mean brief...Professor Snape seemed almost a bit...."

"Dashing," Luna finished.

Hermione violently shushed them. "Knock it off. None of the professors enjoy being gossiped about, least of all Professor Snape."

Ginny leaned back into her seat, a knowing smirk on her lips.

Hermione rolled her eyes with a shake of her head.

Professor Snape's... outburst... in her defense was only going to splatter fuel onto the already existing rumors surrounding their *friendship*. Hermione had a strong suspicion he'd been fully aware of that, too, before he'd screamed at Moody.

This party is getting out of hand, Hermione said to herself with a frown. She wanted to have a good time, and thanks to Mrs. Weasley's extravagant Christmas decorations, it was almost easy to forget she was trapped inside number twelve... *however...*

The timing for celebrations felt disturbingly inappropriate. *Macnair*... Mindlessly fingering the chain around her neck, Hermione shook away the swarm of distressing facts her mind was eager to analyze.

She'd give it a rest, for a few hours at least.

Hermione had been sitting at one of the many Conjured tables. The one closest to the exit, and for the past hour, only accompanied by Ginny and Luna until Tonks was inebriated enough to forget the little scene between Remus and Hermione. It was only a matter of time before the feisty Auror sought out the company of her favorite girls.

Hermione sparingly sipped at her cup of spiked punch, fully aware that the numerous empty glasses on the table belonged to Tonks and Ginny.

She cringed as their jokes rose in volume and vulgarity. At least they blended easily with the rest of the crowd.

Tonks made a blurry-eyed remark about her cravings for stronger poison but acknowledged that she was clumsy enough sober. She didn't need to accelerate her tendency towards destruction with the use of alcohol.

Sitting by himself in a dark corner, Snape was the only one who dared to sample all the alcohol available, figuring it was his due for being forced to attend this ridiculousness. Alternating between a tall wineglass and a heavy, crystal tumbler on the end table beside his armchair, Severus was also the only wizard who was making the act of drinking appear almost elegant.

"How many more drams of whisky will it take for the lot of you to start dancing?" Fred griped, jumping up from his seat. He turned to George, dipping into a low bow and holding out his hand.

The party amused themselves with the sight of the Weasley twins awkwardly waltzing around the Conjured dance floor, both struggling to lead.

"You won't persuade anyone if they need to match *that* rubbish," Tonks chided with a loud laugh. "Admit it! You both intentionally act the fool to cover up your fear of approaching a girl!"

"Did I hear a challenge, George?"

"That was a challenge laced with a hint, mate, if ever I heard one...."

Fred and George gawkily waltzed next to the table containing the only available...and reasonably aged...women in the room, excluding their sister, of course.

George stylishly bowed between Tonks' and Luna's chairs with an exaggerated flip of his hand. "May I?"

"I think you boys have definitely surpassed your limit." Tonks sniggered good naturedly, rising from her seat.

"Pardon me, madam," George said in mock misunderstanding, "I'd fear for my life, knowing your reputation for grace. This dance is for Luna."

Luna rose from her seat without a word and led a disorientated George back to the dance floor.

Hermione and Ginny had been laughing so hard, Hermione wasn't aware that Fred had taken advantage of the opening to grab her hand without protest.

Looking down at his bowed head, Hermione willed her laughter to cease in her attempt to speak sternly. "I'm not one for dancing."

"Nonsense!" Fred sang.

With a quickness of wit that originated in mischief rather than books, Fred and Ginny wickedly glanced at each other over Hermione's shoulder. Ginny leaned over the table to pluck Hermione's cup out of her hand at just the precise moment Fred yanked Hermione to her feet.

Fred smiled devilishly, smoothly edging his hand onto Hermione's waist.

"I must disagree, Hermione. You see, I think you possess quite... the figure... for dancing. Have I told you how splendidly you've grown... up?"

"Fred!" Hermione was far too amused to scold him seriously. "You can't speak to me like that!"

Fred gracefully spun her around and pulled her flush against him. "Why not? You may be a family friend, but you are most certainly not my sister."

"Here, here," George sang as he mirrored his brother's movements and pulled Luna closer as well.

"Oy!" Ron yelled a bit sloppily. "Watch it!"

"Don't pretend to be jealous, little brother. We all know that ship has sailed."

"Fred!" Hermione gasped again.

"Relax, Hermione," Tonks jeered good naturedly. "You know he's playing. Besides, it's not like you can't have a bit of fun and flirt a little. You're not in a relationship or anything...."

Relationship....

At just the right moment, which in some way also happened to be a moment too late, Hermione slyly stepped to the side to glance around Fred's shoulder. She focused on the darkened corner of the room where Snape was sitting alone.

She caught the sharp movement of him sitting back quickly, effectively hiding his face in the shadows.

Sensing her distraction, Fred slid his hand further down into the small of her back. Hermione had not noticed his forwardness until Ron yelled again.

"If you don't want to watch, we could always take this upstairs!"

Grinning widely, Fred grabbed Hermione's wrist and turned in the direction of the door. Whether or not he had been joking the entire time would have finally been determined if he had continued in his attempt to pull Hermione out of the library.

Not that Hermione would have allowed it, of course.

Fred had only managed to drag Hermione two steps when he flinched in pain. He spun around, clutching the back of his neck as he turned to glare at Ron.

"That was low, you prat! Who'd hex a wizard with his back turned?"

"What are you on about?" Ron appeared sincerely confused.

Frowning, Hermione had a hunch as to the identity of Fred's attacker. Just as she yanked her hand out of Fred's grasp, while the two brothers argued loudly over what had just taken place, a shrill voice rose over the music and stilled all conversation in the room.

"Fred Weasley!" Mrs. Weasley screamed from the kitchen. "Do not make me come in there! Where'd you learn to speak to witches in such a way? You're not too old to have your mouth washed out with soap!"

Fred paled.

Despite the seriousness of Mrs. Weasley's threat and Fred's crimson face, the entire party couldn't help ending the uncomfortable silence by bursting out in laughter.

At around half past midnight, the majority of the partygoers in the library were thoroughly sloshed.

Even Luna's protruding grey eyes seemed a bit glossier than usual.

Hermione had carefully monitored her intake of the punch. This may've been a party, and like everyone else, she was here to have a good time, but the idea of losing control of her mind and senses did not present the slightest appeal.

She was only willing to admit that she may have been a teensy bit tipsy.

Hermione had to confess, though, she was grateful that all of her friends were too pissed to pay much attention to her. When the opportunity presented itself, she stood up from the table, stretching her back with her arms raised high above her head. Giving the impression of needing to walk sleep off her legs, Hermione casually slipped out into the Entrance hall.

Hermione hadn't intended it, but for the last half-hour she'd caught herself staring at Remus. It wasn't an appreciative stare, more of a searching one. His typically shabby appearance was so extreme now that he looked completely homeless. From her conversation with Pansy, Hermione'd gathered a few basics as to Remus' current duties. He'd been working and living with the Werewolves out in the Forbidden Forest, persuading them to fight for the Order rather than the Dark Lord. Hermione had been analyzing all this while the man in question had been sitting on the receiving end of her vacant stare.

It wasn't until Tonks displayed an obvious prickle of testiness that Hermione finally excused herself from the party.

To top it off, she still couldn't believe that Remus was having an affair with Pansy. It was almost... surreal.

She hadn't known it, but Remus had spent a good portion of the night working up his courage to speak to Hermione about the very same subjects she'd been assessing.

Noticing Hermione's flight from the intoxicated brouhaha, Remus quietly followed her into the kitchen.

"Um... Hermione...?"

She wasn't the least bit surprised.

"Yes, Remus?"

"Can I... speak to you... please?" Remus nervously glanced at her.

"Of course." Hermione sighed, at a loss where to begin. "So, Pansy told you...?"

Remus started and sent a Silencing Charm at the door.

"Yes, when she discovered me in the forest. I didn't know about your... attack... right away. Even if I'd been completely aware of where they'd taken you... it would have been almost impossible to follow. Oh, Hermione... I should have contacted the Order."

Hermione softly shushed him. It was disheartening to learn that Remus had known she'd been captured and had decided to do nothing. But in many ways, he was right. "It would have complicated things for Professor Snape. As you can see, it's worked out fine in the end."

Remus narrowed his eyes. "Apparently. The two of you do seem to be getting along just fine. More than fine..."

Hermione cut him off. "I hope you didn't intend trying to intimidate me into keeping *your* seventeen-year-old, black-haired secret?"

"I-I would never do that."

"But you obviously need some type of reassurance. What do you want, Remus? A wand oath?"

"You would do that...?"

"Actually, I had hoped that you would know me well enough to realize that I wouldn't needlessly spread damaging rumors. I haven't *wouldn't*...even tell any of this to Ron or Harry. It isn't only *your* secret that I'd be revealing."

Remus leaned against the counter, exhaling a sigh of relief. "That it, then?"

Hermione nodded, sending him a reassuring smile and exited the kitchen.

Her head hurt.

It had taken all of her energy to refrain from admonishing Remus' poor decision in fraternizing with the very young daughter of a murderous Death Eater.

She wished them a 'happy ending', but....

"I am not a hypocrite," Hermione muttered, forcing herself to let the matter go.

Hermione's ears prickled. She groaned, acknowledging that this night was far from over as recognizable footsteps followed her up the stairs.

Hermione entered the bathroom, stepping back knowingly as the slim frame of a black-robed wizard slipped in right behind her.

Snape pressed his back against the door, closing it with his body weight.

"I take it you would like to have a word, Professor Snape," Hermione drawled irritably.

Snape didn't respond. Clenching his jaw, he quietly sent a series of Silencing spells over his shoulder. "What," he finally snapped, "*was that?*"

"First Remus, now you! Doesn't anyone trust me anymore?" she whined.

"You are misinterpreting my question. Do not scream at me again." He pushed himself away from the door. In only a few steps, he loomed over Hermione until her bum was pressed against the sink. "I'm beginning to notice that you are keeping an obscene amount of secrets from me, and I don't think I like it."

"You're one to talk! I do not regret what I said during the meeting. If you wanted to know who in Slytherin I've been speaking to, I would have told you. All you had to do was ask."

Severus crossed his arms. "Very well. Now I'm asking."

"Pansy."

"Ah... how can I forget? You two must have had quite a chat during your little hike through that blasted forest!"

"In a sense... yes."

"And what of Lupin?"

"That... also had to do with... Pansy."

Severus' eyes widened. When his mouth opened, Hermione cut him off. "No, I don't think so! Now, it's my turn to enquire about a few things you might have been keeping from me. Where were you last night when you received that injury?"

Severus didn't answer her. His stance relaxed a bit as he sent her an amused smirk.

Hermione had the dreadful intuition that his amusement was answer enough.

"Please tell me. D-did you duel against Macnair, Severus?"

"I'd hardly call it a duel."

Hermione nodded in acknowledgment and shakily asked, "And what of the Auror? Shall I assume that wasn't a duel either?"

Severus' smile grew wider. He braced his palm on the sink and leaned into her. "What *do you* think?"

Hermione cringed and closed her eyes. *You knew*, her own voice insisted. *Don't pretend that you didn't know.*

"You... you killed them." This was... sick. He'd... murdered two wizards. If it was self-defense, Hermione wouldn't think twice about it. But murder?

Severus could see the dozens of questions and accusations warring behind her expression.

"Don't rationalize it into anything more or less than what is obvious." Severus' voice was grave. "Yes, I killed them, Hermione."

"Why?"

"It was only a matter of time... for either of them. Two men who deserved death received it. Regardless, Macnair knew far too much about certain activities of mine. He was watching me far too closely for my own comfort."

"What...I mean... Was there an argument... a struggle? It was self-defense," she insisted matter-of-factly.

Snape calmly raised a hand to her face, twirling one of her curls between his fingers. "No," he whispered. "I sneaked into Macnair's house while he was asleep, bound his limbs before he awoke, and snapped his neck..."

"I can't..." Hermione really didn't need to know the details. She looked up into his face, searching for the answers he wasn't giving her. His pleasure only increased at the sight of her curiously appalled expression.

"Can't you see how... difficult it is for me to rationalize the man you *are with me* with..." Just saying those words made her realize how much she wanted him, nevertheless. Hermione covered her face with her hands and leaned her forehead against his chest before continuing. "...with the Death Eater."

"I told you not to rationalize it."

Hermione was wildly shaking her head now.

"Whatever is the matter, my dear?" Snape's arms tenderly wrapped around her waist, but his words were mocking. "Were you coddling the assumption that I have never murdered before?"

"Don't call it that! I knew you might need to kill out of necessity... but, ultimately, that's not who you are anymore."

Snape chuckled darkly. Gently cradling her chin in his palm, he raised her face so she'd see his ridicule. "Are those tears for me?" He softly slid his thumb across her damp cheek.

Hermione socked his hand away. "You *are* a monster."

"Ah, but I'm *your* monster."

Hermione pushed away from him, but Snape only drew her closer by the waist. Finally managing to capture her flailing arms by the wrists, Snape jerked Hermione up to sit her on top of the sink.

"Deny me," he commanded ominously, sliding his hand under her dress.

Hermione didn't want to hear that. "What are you saying?" Kicking away from him, she pushed her back flush against the mirror. Severus grasped her inner thighs and yanked her back to the edge of the sink, insinuating himself between her legs.

"Deny me, Hermione," Snape whispered in a soft mock whisper, eyes feral. "Shove me, punch me, hex me for all I care... it won't stop me."

And she did. With a pained cry in response to his callousness, Hermione slapped him hard across his healing wound.

Hair in disarray against his face, Severus' eyes closed as he waited for the peak of pain to subside. At the feel of Hermione snapping out of her shock, he grasped her wrists before she'd managed to dislodge herself from his hold.

He looked the same as before. Not angrier. And certainly not subdued.

"Severus...."

He clamped his hand around her jaw, pulling her face very close to his.

"Yes, punch me," he continued with a smirk. "But you only need to *tell* me to go away... you only need to command me leave you alone... and I will."

Hermione finally stopped fighting against him. Comprehension was visible in her eyes.

Severus' arms drew tighter around her. His expression was still wild, but it also held no anger. Excruciatingly slowly, his fingers trailed up her thigh. Hermione's knees clenched against his hip-bones as his arousal pressed hard between her legs.

"Deny me," Severus demanded again, mouth and breath skimming down her neck. He carefully slid his middle finger under the elastic of her knickers so she'd be aware of his every move and intention. Feet curling around his arse, her shoes fell to the floor once he began tugging her knickers down her thighs. The unfastening of his trousers was completed much more quickly.

Overwhelming heat pressed between her inner thighs. Snape lowered his forehead onto Hermione's shoulder as he waited for her to answer him.

"I can't...I don't want to." The last word escaped her throat in a high pitched gasp as Severus finally pushed the tip of his cock into her.

Snape's throaty chuckle rumbled into a long, drawn out groan. Grasping her by the bum, he yanked her closer, forcing himself even deeper into her wetness. His hand slid over the buttons, trailing down the front of her dress before ultimately ripping the garment open. Overwhelmed by his slow and steady thrusting, Hermione threw her head back against the mirror.

Snape reveled at the sight of her exposed flesh. Curling his hand around her necklace, he pounded into Hermione with a new energy. Eyes hooded, Severus spoke through gasping breaths. "I hope... you weren't under the impression... that *this* was your Christmas g-gift."

Hermione's eyes flew open.

He tugged at the silver chain, silently instructing her to raise her head. Hermione wrapped her arms around his shoulders to steady herself against his vigorous movements. In the midst of heavy pants and growls, Severus whispered into her ear, "I'd do it again... for you."

He only needed to speak to Harry.

That was the reason he was inside his room. After everything that had taken place at the meeting and the Christmas party, Sirius felt an even greater need to discuss Hermione's... *involvement*... with Snivellus.

That was the reason he was inside his godson's room.

And he most certainly wasn't snooping.

At least, Sirius tried to convince himself of that.

Harry had excused himself from the party early, and Sirius was expecting the boy to be in bed. But Sirius had easily detected his absence from the doorway and had entered regardless.

Sirius didn't know what he was looking for. But he hated being in the dark, especially in his own home. He just knew that his godson was hiding something from him.

That was when Sirius saw it. The Pensieve sitting on the desk. Dumbledore's Pensieve had been in his own house all week, and he'd never known.

The thought made him very angry. His godson should have told him.

His racing heart warred with his breathing. When both began to grow irregular, he clutched at the watch through layers of robes. He didn't have much time... frozen in the middle of the room, Sirius hesitated until a noise in the hallway sent him into action.

Quickly descending on the desk, he threw open various drawers until he finally located a brown box filled with small glass vials. Hand shaking, Sirius raised his wand around the swirling surface, drawing any and all memories that might relate to him in any way.

Finally, he'd have his answers.

Author's Notes: Smell that? It's DOOM! I know this was a lengthy delay... again... but look how long this chapter is, so cut me a little slack! (Expect the same for the next.) And it is SO awesome that some of you had predicted a few details that were uncovered this chapter. As an author, it makes writing a mystery/suspense very exciting.

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book iii. Line 686.

Next Up: Hermione's sneaking about leads her to Sirius' room, where she discovers the unthinkable. Hermione fails to follow Severus' advice and finds herself in the clutches of a Death Eater... Severus visits the Headmaster's office to investigate the man's declining health, only to realize things are not what they seem.

Chapter Twenty Nine - His Red Right Hand (Part 1)

Chapter 34 of 36

Hermione's sneaking about leads her to Sirius' room, where she discovers the unthinkable. Hermione fails to follow Severus' advice and finds herself in the clutches of a Death Eater... Severus visits the Headmaster's office to investigate the man's declining health, only to realize things are not what they seem.

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: I never thought I would say this... but this chapter has a **dubcon warning** involving Hermione. This fic, which I have affectionately named 'monster,' has demanded this to be done. Feel free to give me your honest opinion.

-I understand that if I updated more often this fic would be easier to read. Some recommended chapter rereads are Seven, Twelve, and Fifteen (Part 2).

-My beta, **Melusin**, is full of awesome.

It had taken Ginny a few agonizing, hazy moments to realize that the pained, groaning sounds filling her bedroom had been issuing from her own mouth.

If she could only make it to the bathroom and locate a hangover potion, she'd rid herself of the disorientating pounding against the inside of her skull.

Every inch of her body was sticky with sweat. Disgusted, Ginny made a move to roll over, simultaneously kicking the covers away. Her arm flailed out, socking something warm and yielding.

"Ugh!" a groggy voice moaned.

Ginny froze. *Oh. My. God.* Cringing, she finally opened her eyes in the hope of identifying the owner of the stomach she had just pounded with her fist. She dreaded the obvious.

She recognized that trail of pubic hair in an instant. In a matter of seconds, an array of reminiscences spotted on some unreachable horizon of her memory. She recalled intentionally drinking carelessly, in search of that moment when dignity and convictions take a back seat to denied pleasures. Ginny remembered Harry's furtive glances from across the room, his table just as littered with discarded bottles as her own.

Then tender words. Apologies. Sooner rather than later, the two had found a bed. Ginny had clutched at his shaking shoulders, soothing Harry while he cried as he took her... tears and promises...

"DAMMIT!"

Shocked into alertness by the sudden scream and jerk of the mattress, Harry shot up in bed.

"Of all the...BLOODY HELL!" Ginny flung back the bedclothes. Putting distance between them seemed essential, more important than shielding her nakedness from his view.

"Don't..."

"Let go of my wrist, Harry," Ginny muttered through clenched teeth. Her back was facing him, but given the plea in his voice, she could easily imagine his distressed expression.

"I don't regret it."

Ginny roughly yanked her hand out of his. "I don't care."

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Severus had been so consumed with his own pleasure that he all but cursed once he'd grasped the obscene extent of Hermione's moaning. His sudden awareness of their combined volume was so startling that he bit the inside of his cheek. Anything else would have alarmed her and probably killed the moment.

Hands clutching either side of her hips, Severus eyed the arching of her back and loathed the idea of demanding Hermione to control herself.

Luckily, the majority of the Black household had been so worn out from the party the previous night that most of them had turned in early this evening. Or, like Hermione and Severus, they'd simply used such reasoning as a convenient excuse.

After two more intense, drawn out movements, Severus released a groan very unlike the previous. This groan heavily echoed his opposition to what he was about to do. He needed to manage this before they got completely carried away...more so than they already were.

Snape leaned forward, pressing his chest against Hermione's spine, and grudgingly removed one hand from her bum to press it against her mouth. Unintentionally sinking deeper... much deeper... he nearly came as her wetness clenched around his cock. Severus tensed, willing the pressure in his bollocks to ebb away.

After a few almost unbearable seconds, Snape exhaled raggedly and pressed his jaw against her sweat drenched hair-line. "You're quite a little... howler... aren't you?"

With his hand clutched over her mouth, Severus wasn't really expecting an answer. The only noise filling his poignant silence was Hermione's attempt to calm her uneven breathing through her nostrils.

Severus slid out of her, and Hermione whimpered into his hand.

"If we were in my chambers, I'd command you to scream louder, but that simply wouldn't do here. If you cannot control your volume... I fear we must stop."

Hermione defiantly muttered against the palm of the hand restraining her. He could practically hear her eyes rolling in their sockets. Exhausted, she made a move to fall onto her stomach, but Severus wasn't having that.

Returning his grip to either side of her arse, he yanked Hermione back onto all fours.

"What was that?"

"I...what?" Hermione panted.

"I noticed your mumbling. Repeat what you just said."

Hermione cringed before glancing at him over her shoulder.

"I didn't...I was talking to myself."

"Say it." Severus voice was stern. The only indication that he wasn't irritated was marked by his shallow, teasing thrusts between her thighs.

Hermione faltered before speaking. "I said, 'Shut... shut up'."

Severus didn't respond right away, clearly expecting her to continue. When Hermione jerked her face to avoid meeting his expectant stare, he chuckled throatily. "I know very well that wasn't all."

His hips moved forward, increasing into a steady rhythm that was escalating her heart rate once more. He stopped suddenly and demanded, "Say it, Hermione."

"Shut up... and f-fuck me... harder." Her voice wasn't anywhere near the exasperation she'd felt when that phrase had slipped out her mouth moments earlier. Severus couldn't see her face or throat, but he could easily imagine them flushed in mortification.

He wasn't having that, either.

Snape surprised Hermione by roughly pushing his body weight upon her, urging her flat against the mattress. Severus pressed his heated chest against her sweat-slicked back, sheathing his length in her wetness. He only needed to faintly touch the inside of her thighs with the backs of his hands for them to part. With one hand clutched tightly against the headboard, Severus' onslaught was merciless.

If he'd wanted her tame and silent, he certainly wasn't going about it the proper way.

Licking the rim of her ear, he asked very quietly, "What do you want me to do?"

"I-I told you..."

"Say it."

"... Harder."

All mortification was gone with that one word. Again, Severus couldn't see her face, but he easily imagined her eyes clenched tight as she squeaked that stimulating command in a high pitched mew.

Right when that sought after tightening in his bollocks returned, Severus reached up to hold a much needed hand against Hermione's mouth.

But then, at the worst possible moment, reality demanded his attention. The groan that escaped his mouth this time comprised a beastly combination of euphoric release and agony. Snape's muscles naturally convulsed, brutally driving his cock past the hilt. Hermione's scream of pain warred with his own.

"Shit," he snarled, cautiously pulling out. Grasping Hermione by the shoulders, Severus quickly flipped her over to face him and brushed her disheveled curls away. Steadying his weight with his right arm, Severus frowned as he studied her face intently. His fingertips smoothed across her forehead and down her temple. Pain subsiding, Hermione returned his steady gaze.

Only a few moments of sanity left before..." "I'm being..."

"I know." Hermione attempted to smile weakly, accepting the apology in his eyes that would have been very difficult for him to verbalize. She leaned up to kiss him, and Severus tilted his chin down to mirror her movement...until another wave of fire spread up his left arm.

"Fucking hell!"

Snape flung himself off her so fast that Hermione flinched back with equal abruptness. Whatever concern his expression might have held before was now fully replaced by that apathetic determination, which had become both his savior and his burden at times like these.

Hastily dressing, Snape was disturbingly aware of Hermione's unblinking observation of him. He refused to openly acknowledge it, but her concern was clear, nonetheless.

"Don't be here when I get back," Snape growled over his shoulder. His neck jerked impatiently as if he were irritated that she hadn't already thought to leave.

"What?" Hermione demanded. Glancing at the mask grasped in his hand, she dared to ask, "Where are you going?"

"No idea."

"I doubt that."

"Don't pester me!" From the corner of his eye, he could see Hermione sharply turn her face away. He repeated his previous warning. "Don't be stupid. Stay in your room. Do not be here when I return."

"What are you expected to do tonight?" The pitch of Hermione's voice told him she wasn't hearing the warning behind his words.

Severus whirled around, Death Eater robes snapping loudly. With only a few rapid steps, he descended on her. One hand wrenched the bedclothes away while the other yanked her out of bed. "Bloody Gryffindor stubbornness! Don't you listen to a thing Moody says? It's the end of the month, and I have... quotas... to fill."

Hermione moved as he'd instructed, but her expression was still masked in useless concern. He preferred fear. Fear would guarantee she'd listen to him.

"Do as I say, Hermione."

"Please... be careful."

Expelling a snort of disgust, Snape flung himself away and left the room.

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Despite Severus' attempts to frighten her, Hermione did not go back to her room. But in the very least, she'd managed to leave his.

Severus had been gone for hours, and Hermione was making herself sick with anxiety. Snape had always been very good at keeping the occupants of number twelve from noticing his comings and goings. Hermione had only witnessed a handful of his arrivals in this house...never his departures.

This was his life, Hermione told herself. He was a Death Eater...a very good Death Eater, if such a thing existed...so she shouldn't fret over the dozens of possibilities that might prevent his return. Hadn't she witnessed enough of his arrivals from the Dark Lord's summons to find security in his safety?

But each time has been so different. Hermione assumed that his post-summons moods varied depending on the tasks expected of him. She'd seen him listless, cruel, violent... even randy.

With a shake of her head, Hermione willed those thoughts back to the corner of her mind.

"Don't you listen to a thing Moody says? It's the end of the month, and I have... quotas... to fill."

Severus wasn't aware of it, but Hermione knew exactly what his task tonight entailed. The Dark Lord depended on Snape to locate and... exterminate... all Muggles who had relatives in the wizarding world in the hope of eradicating Muggle-born births...and eventually all Muggle-borns altogether.

This can't go on for much longer.

After a useless attempt to study and an over-consumption of tea, Hermione resumed her pointless wanderings of number twelve. She didn't know how many times she had passed by Sirius' bedroom, but the door suddenly caught her attention.

It was ajar. Hermione jerked to a halt as a startling awareness struck her. She couldn't remember ever seeing *this* door left open.

Walking up to it, Hermione braced herself against the doorframe and called, "Sirius?"

She was surprised to receive no answer. He'd obviously just been here. Parchment and clothing were scattered all over the floor, and every candle was lit. Hermione frowned at the state they were in. Sirius hadn't been maintaining them, and many of the candles were dangerously close to falling onto the various books and paper littering his writing desk.

With a flick of her wand, Hermione rearranged everything into tidiness.

Her quick spell work also revealed a few items that seemed to have been purposefully hidden.

One book in particular caught her attention.

What in the world?

Hermione had had no intention of entering the room before now. Her shock had been so immense that she promptly crossed the messy floor to prove her trepidation false.

No... Hesitantly reaching out, Hermione pulled the heaviest and oldest tome from the stack. In the brief second needed to open it, she'd instantly slammed it shut and pushed the ghastly thing away. That brief second was all the time Hermione had needed to identify its content, and once she had, she couldn't bare the idea of touching it.

Why is this here? Oh, gods... Sirius... is this what you've been hiding?

"What are you doing?" Sirius barked from the doorway.

Hermione jumped with a squeak and whirled around, right arm flinching in the direction of her wand.

Sirius stormed past Hermione, swatting at the items on his desk and forcing the book back under its cover of parchment.

Hermione faltered. "I noticed that your door was open, and I wanted... I wanted to see if you were all right."

"Your concern for me led you to rummage through my belongings?"

"Sirius... I cannot believe... What on earth have you been doing in here?" She hadn't even grasped his insult. Her face still reflected the terror of what she had found in his possession.

Up until that point, it hadn't crossed Sirius' mind that she'd truly understand what the book was.

"GET OUT!" he shrieked.

Hermione did not need to be told twice.

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This is bad...

This is really... really bad.

Hermione had gone through all the logical routes of possible assistance. At least, they seemed logical in the muddled upheaval her mind was enduring. She didn't know exactly what her discovery meant, but she damn well knew she couldn't keep this information to herself.

The moment Hermione had fled Sirius' room and the door had been locked behind her, Hermione had flown through the house. Where was everyone?

Harry's room had been empty. He was the first person who she thought should be aware of Sirius'... personal activities. After pressing her ear against Luna's room, Hermione had detected an abundance of intimate laughter. It sounded like Ron. If Ron was in there that could only mean Ginny wasn't. She had been tempted to knock, but could those two truly help her? There was so much they didn't know to begin with, and Hermione didn't think she had the time to explain the complexities surrounding Sirius' pocket watch.

And Remus and Molly had left to spend the evening elsewhere.

Dumbledore had been another important contact on her list, of course, but after Minerva's admission as to the state of the man's health, Hermione saddened at the idea of burdening him further.

That obviously left the remainder of the Order: Minerva, Tonks, Moody... the list went on. But they all had their own duties and concerns, none of it originating at number twelve. Sirius' welfare was Hermione's mission.

Severus...

Sirius' activities and overall wellbeing was his responsibility, as well. Hermione knew she needed to speak to Snape first.

Resisting the temptation to return to his room the instant his name entered her thoughts, Hermione finally managed to enter her own.

Under normal circumstances, she would have thrived at the idea of having an entire bedroom to herself... but not tonight. Hermione didn't feel the least bit safe.

Sirius was only one floor below her, and it was evident that he was in a beastly mood. Every few seconds, random doors and cupboards slammed in cantankerous fits of rage, vibrating against every window of the house.

Hermione didn't know if her fear of him was rational or not.

Horcruxes... Perched on the foot of her bed, hands folded tensely in her lap, Hermione couldn't stop repeating that one word.

Those were the type of books Sirius had been spending the majority of his time reading? The fact that they'd been hidden could only mean that the tome Hermione had touched was especially precious... or damned. Possibly both.

Horcruxes...

Hermione needed to speak to Severus. Somehow, Hermione knew this was pertinent information for her Potions master.

He might already know what Sirius is intending to do with such... vile knowledge. That would explain Severus' wary cruelty towards him But even if that were true...which appeared certain the more she thought about it...Severus still needed to know. More importantly, Snape should be aware that *Sirius* himself was conscious of Hermione's recognition of the book.

Sirius had kept his activities secret for a reason. Now that they were no longer secret...

That last thought had made up Hermione's mind.

Fighting the guilty cringe that was upsetting her stomach, Hermione marched up the stairs to the second landing.

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One step forward... continually followed by two steps back... Severus exhaled sarcastically as he repeated one of his favorite personal criticisms. Such was the life of *avell* intentioned Death Eater. The existence of such a creature had seemed possible twenty years ago.

But twenty years was a very long time. *Albus, you're such a fool.*

"WHY?"

The shrill screaming was still ringing in his ears. In just wanting to get his duties over with, Snape hadn't remembered to cast a Silencio before he'd started tonight. Why do all Muggles screech that same blasted question?

"WHY?"

The most trusted spy of the great Albus Dumbledore and the Dark Lord's most valued Death Eater had never possessed the answers to such questions.

And I was an even bigger fool to believe you...

By the time Severus had reached the top of the stairs at number twelve, he vaguely comprehended that he couldn't remember entering the house, let alone the lengthy Apparition from the remote Muggle neighborhood, he'd been... visiting.

Severus had managed to stagger into his room only hours before dawn. He wouldn't have entered his room so carelessly if he hadn't been craving the harsh drink that awaited him in his personal cabinet.

His blood was hot. Insufferably hot, and it needed to be cooled down. This had been the fiercest trial of will he had ever forced upon himself. Beyond the necessary executions, he hadn't thoughtlessly maimed or ravaged anyone tonight. He ripped his robes off his shoulders. Notwithstanding his own sweat and a bit of blood, Snape didn't feel the necessity to shower.

His bottle of wine sang to him as did the idea of collapsing into the armchair in front of the fire.

Severus should have been... proud... of himself for holding back as he had. But he wasn't. He couldn't appreciate such maudlin satisfaction as long as his Mark still singed and his blood still boiled with his denied instincts.

If Macnair had managed to survive, Snape would have gladly attempted to torture him again at that moment.

Regardless of the fact that Hermione didn't like it, Snape knew his constant doses of near toxic downers were indispensable. Pupils dilated, Severus paused, mid-step, his attention suddenly pulled away from his destination.

This happened to be the night he never made it to the drinks cabinet.

Severus froze by the bed, a ghost of a perverse grin pulling at the edge of his mouth.

Didn't I tell her... demand her to leave?

*She never listens to you...*a vicious voice in his head replied.

No. She doesn't.

His hand fisted into the bed-curtains.

She enjoys angering you.

Severus' twisted smile faded.

You warned her. You went through great efforts to warn her. Can you even remember the last time you bothered?

His top lip drew back over clenched teeth.

Yes. I did warn her.

Not once during his internal dialogue did Severus look at her face. It didn't feel essential at the moment. But if he had, he would have noticed that Hermione's sleep was a fretful one.

The minute he'd recognize the outline of a body upon his bed, Severus' eyes were immediately drawn to her legs. Shapely, bare legs that led up to tiny knickers and a flesh colored nightgown that was bunched around her waist.

"Stupid girl."

The one insult Snape knew Hermione loathed hissed out of his mouth in a soft caress.

It was his lowered, breathy speech that alerted her to his presence. Her eyes fluttered open, and within seconds, she'd identified the distinctive outline hovering beside the bed.

"Severus!" Hermione flung herself onto her knees, throwing her arms around his neck.

"I told you not to stay," Snape murmured into her ear. He wasn't reprimanding her. Severus seemed on the verge of laughter. His arms quickly closed around her. He held her tighter than necessary, his touch impatient.

"I was... worried..."

"Such a useless emotion." Severus released the harsh clench of her bum, fingertips barely touching her as he slid his hands up the length of her spine. "We have a... problem," he said quietly, "don't we?"

Hermione slowly pulled away. His greasy hair, filthier than usual, shielded his face. Raising her arm to brush it away, Hermione cringed at his rough clasp of her nightgown. By the time she knew to be on the alert, Snape had already ripped the flimsy material while expelling an enthusiastic groan.

Hermione's natural impulses ruled her actions. She clutched at her chest, keeping whatever minimal clothing she could against her.

"A problem that I've made great efforts to avoid," Severus continued, avoiding her attentive gaze and ignoring her tensing against him. He pushed her hands away, reaching for her shoulders and yanking what remained of the nightgown down her arms.

Hermione was certainly frightened but not totally unaware.

"For some reason, you seem to believe your Gryffindor impertinence is endearing..."

"Severus... wait," she whispered carefully, grasping his wrists. Intentionally hooding her lids and parting her mouth, Hermione believed she could reclaim him if only he'd meet her eyes. For one relieved instant, she thought it had worked.

Severus lightly trailed the tips of his fingers across her hand. "I, however, *do not*," he snarled suddenly, breath hot and violent upon her face. "My words, my warnings... my demands don't seem to mean much to you, do they? Let's find something that will..."

Hermione couldn't perceive the moment it had happened, but the hand she had been delicately holding seconds before now held her by the left ear, fingers clenched into her hair. No sooner than she had comprehended his ominous words, a grotesque groan vibrated in Snape's throat as he shoved her, face down, against the mattress.

"Not like this!" she finally screeched.

One hand held her in place as the other unfastened his trousers. The room was too dark. Hermione knew the body of this man belonged to Severus, but never had the tall, dark outline of a wizard frightened her to this extent.

"And you said, you'd never deny me..." Snape ridiculed.

"Not like this, Severus!" Hermione cried at the top of lungs, clawing anywhere she could steady her grip. Kicking her leg back, she finally managed to injure Severus' knee-cap seconds after he'd ripped her knickers away from her hips. Using his weight as leverage, Hermione kicked harder, flinging her body onto her back and pushing herself against the headboard.

"You're with me," she shrieked at the top of her lungs, as if the increased volume would make him really listen. To finally see. This man was nothing but a shadow.

The dark figure ripped his shirt off his back, chuckling nastily as he lunged upon the bed and managed to gain hold of her ankle.

"Severus... You're with me!"

He yanked hard, dislodging Hermione from her clutch on the headboard, sliding her unwilling body across the mattress. "You're not there anymore... You're with me!"

But Snape was *there*. He still hadn't met her eye. Only one thing was capturing his focus. Grinning licentiously at her struggling, naked body, Snape pressed his hand upon her mouth and completely fell on top of her, finally managing to spread her thighs.

Not knowing what else to do and not possessing her wand, Hermione wrapped her arms around him and dug all ten fingers into the flesh of his lower back. Crying from the effort, Hermione jerked her hands up the entire length of his spine, nearly retching at the feel of flesh and blood building under her nails.

Snape arched away from her, releasing a horrid sound she'd never heard him expel before. His fingers curled into fists, struggling against his urge to scream further. Eyes clenching, his body folded into himself, finally losing all of its intimidating force.

She held her breath. Edging very, very slowly, Hermione managed to pull herself out from under him.

Snape didn't move to stop her retreat. Curling up even further, Severus lowered his face into the duvet. Bands of blood ribboned down his spine and soaked into the hair at the back of his neck.

Heart pounding in her chest, Hermione uncertainly observed the strange twitching of his muscles and limbs. Realizing he was attempting to lift himself by his unsteady knees, Severus seemed to finally accept the will of his body that demanded him to completely collapse on the bed.

Hermione had been too terrified to run, afraid that she would draw attention to herself. Her very nerves were locked, and she believed Severus could sense this.

Snape's hand gently slid across the mattress. He was muttering unintelligibly, biting into the bedclothes. Right before he blindly reached to lightly place his fingers on her bruised ankle, Hermione caught the faint, garbled words that sounded almost like, "thank you."

She flinched away before his hand managed to curl around her aching flesh.

He sighed, long and deep, his breath cracking when he inhaled. Severus struggled to drag his body across the bed. Finally, finally, he caught her eye before reaching for her frozen body, once again. The distrustful look she gave him stilled his movements. But once again, he dared to place his shaking hands upon her.

Hermione's muscles tensed. Sensing her urge to flee, Severus lowered his face into the bedclothes beside her thigh and groaned, "Gods, don't. Pl...stay. Don't leave. Don't leave..."

Not uttering a word of reassurance or possible revelation as to her emotions, Hermione tentatively placed her hand on the crown of his head.

Severus exhaled sharply at the contact. Burying his face into her thighs, Snape wrapped his arms behind her knees and clutched them against his chest.

They stayed in that same position for who knew how long. As if snapping out of some trance, Hermione finally glanced down and truly took in the sight of the man draped across her lap. She cringed. His blood was everywhere. She could heal his flesh, but his intricate tattoos were forever ruined. Unable to stomach the sight of the open gashes across his back, Hermione carefully reached for her wand on the bed-side table.

"Leave it," Severus said suddenly, his grip tightening.

Hermione cleared her throat before speaking guardedly. "I was only getting it to clean your..."

"I know. Leave it."

*** **

Hours later, Severus woke up filthy and alone.

His stomach roiled. He flung himself over the side of the bed and retched upon the floor. Body convulsing uncontrollably, memories of the last few hours hit him without warning, and the retching began anew.

Gasping great gulps of air, he rolled onto his side, reaching for the nearest piece of cloth to wipe the sick off his mouth. A flesh-colored garment torn to shreds pressed against his face. Recognizing the scent of the ruined nightgown, he hurled it away with a snarl.

The bed was cold and damp with his blood. He must have passed out after... after...

Reverting to the habits of his schooldays, Severus clutched a pillow to his face and screamed.

It wasn't supposed to happen like this...

After... everything... Snape knew he shouldn't have been surprised to wake up and find Hermione had left.

But a part of him had taken it for granted that no matter what happened, she never would.

Severus scrunched his eyes and willed himself to get up. *We'll deal with this... later.*

He convinced himself as much, anyway.

The Headmaster was expecting him today, and Snape still needed to complete a potion before their meeting.

Shakily rising out of bed, Snape finally managed a shower, all the while refusing to inspect himself in the mirror.

He didn't need to know what his back and shoulders looked like. He didn't want to know. He was just... satisfied... it had ended the way it had. Not until last night had Snape realized he had been denying himself another much needed addiction.

We'll deal with this later. We'll deal with this...

*** **

"Enter," a voice responded weakly to his knock upon the Headmaster's office door.

Severus didn't bother masking his frown as he entered. Routine guided his actions. He concentrated on carefully placing the mug of blue, misty potion in front of the old man.

"It's so good to see you, Severus."

"Is it, now?" Severus always gave the same response. Then Albus began rambling niceties, and Severus was more than willing to block it out of his consciousness. The Potions master rounded Dumbledore's chair to begin their routine examination.

"You're not listening, my boy. I said no more..." Albus sympathetically patted the hand on his shoulder. "I've merely been waiting for you."

Severus had heard such pleading before. With a firm dismissive grunt, he gently moved the wrinkled hand away and pulled open the collar of Dumbledore's flamboyant robes. His breath stopped at the sight he found.

"Impossible," Snape muttered.

"Severus... Sit down. Listen to me."

"It should not have spread this quickly!"

"It's meant to be this way."

Severus pounded his fist upon the desk, nearly knocking over the potion he had just spent so much of his limited energy in making. "Not if you've been taking your doses regularly..." Severus cut himself off. Frustration cleared from his expression as an appalling yet logical thought became clear. This would explain Dumbledore's ever increasing fatigue and his rapid decline in health.

Snape stumbled backwards, nearly tripping over the corner of the desk.

"Albus, what have you done?"

The Headmaster sighed in response to the dramatic tone of Severus' voice.

"I'm tired, Severus. I'm tired of fighting the inevitable."

The Potions master didn't have an immediate retort. Squaring his shoulders, Snape moved to face Albus completely. Placing both hands in front of him, he leaned across the surface of the desk and truly took in the sight of the decrepit, frail man. Albus couldn't even hide the fact that sitting up was straining his body.

"You're giving up," Snape accused. "You even reek of death."

"Remember what I told you. We both knew Peverell's curse was imminent. There was no cure, only a means to slow it down."

"Foolish, senile old bat! If that was your wish, why couldn't you have told me? You know what happens when you stop the doses part way through treatment. You know what kind of potion this is!"

"You would have prevented me."

All fight drained from Severus' face as quickly as it paled. "It's come to this." He fell into the chair behind him. "I cannot believe... you've... you've tricked me. You tricked me into killing you myself."

"It was my decision..."

"It was by my hand!" Face grimaced in revulsion, Severus allowed himself to fall forward, face cradled in his hands. It was a true testament to his frayed nerves that he allowed himself to sit in such a vulnerable position. "What the hell is happening?" he muttered to himself.

Everything he touched seemed to spiral out of control. Spiraling to ruin and death.

Dumbledore pretended he hadn't seen or heard this man in his moment of weakness. "When the time comes, Harry is going need your help."

"Damn the boy!"

Albus chuckled weakly. "And when the time comes, I have complete confidence you'll end up on the right side of this war."

"So you've doubted me?" Severus sat up straighter, the sneer forming on the end of his mouth quickly replacing his brief despair.

"Not your loyalties, son. In that, I have depended upon... but you've become a ghost of your former self. I believe you've completely lost sight of our mission."

Severus snorted.

"Forgive me, please," Albus wheezed. "I did not expect to shackle you in service your entire adult life. It wasn't supposed to happen like this. I accept my responsibility with the hand life dealt you. If I had known what would be the result of my past negligence towards you..."

"I don't want to hear this."

"...who knows what your life might be like now."

"I've listened to this speech before, old man! I've already given you my forgiveness. My loyalty. What the hell else do you want from me?"

"More forgiveness, I suppose." Albus slumped upon the desk; his breathing slowed to labored gasps.

"Albus? Albus!" Severus flew from the chair. "Dammit, open your eyes!"

But he couldn't.

"Is this what you called me in here for? To watch you die?" Cursing wildly, Severus carefully pulled the Headmaster up from the chair and dragged his thin, limp body to the center of the office. He stretched the wizard upon the floor, hoping it would improve his difficulty in breathing.

"Bloody hell!" Severus spun towards the fireplace and snarled at the green flames. "Mungo's! Headmaster Dumbledore has collapsed."

Within moments, the office and entire seventh floor were in chaos.

Lime-green robed Healers poured in through the Floo. Severus' position beside Headmaster Dumbledore went from diligent monitoring to insignificant bystander as he was continuously shoved to the farthest corner of the office.

What the hell is happening?

He was more than capable of giving them a stubborn fight, but Severus couldn't gather the incentive. He allowed himself to be jostled about, but Snape absolutely refused to leave the office until he knew exactly what they were going to do and to where they were going to move the Headmaster for treatment. Severus remained seated on the floor, hands on his knees, forehead braced against his arms.

It wasn't supposed to happen like this... Damn you, Albus.

*** **

Even near death, the old man still managed to have his way.

In a brief moment of consciousness, Dumbledore had made it very clear that he refused to be moved from the castle. If the Hospital Wing was good enough for his students, it was more than adequate for him.

"Get some sleep, Severus," Minerva muttered to the dark figure sitting beside Dumbledore's bed.

"Fuck off, Minerva."

It was a tribute to their strange friendship that Minerva did not curse in return. Instead, she patted the Potions master on the shoulder before quietly leaving the two men alone.

Severus closed his eyes and sighed. Dumbledore had asked for forgiveness...again...and Snape wasn't sure he had any left to give.

He had let go of his vengeful grudge many years ago. He had let go of his vengeful grudge many years go. He had let go of his vengeful grudge many years ago... Snape had been repeating this for the past hour.

I accept my responsibility with the hand life dealt you. If I had known what would be the result of my past negligence towards you...

If only it were that simple, old man.

With those last thoughts on his mind, Severus returned to his obsessive mantra. Nodding off, his sober mind hurled into the past.

Snape cursed his idiocy. He should never have let down his guard, especially around her.

He and Lily had been studying. His thigh burned with awareness as they perched together, unbearably close, upon a dead log by the lake. All week, he'd been alternating between ignoring the tart and relentless teasing, so Severus wasn't surprised when she finally asked for his help with Potions. His last obscure thought wondered what excuse she'd give Potter this time before she sneaked into his dormitory...

Then Black was upon them.

The dog shoved himself between the two, unconcerned that his blow injured Lily as much as Snape. In that quick instant, Black had snatched the Advanced Potion's text right out of Snape's hands.

Lily mindlessly wiped dirt off her face with the back of her hand, all the while screaming for Sirius to back off. The three of them had done this before. Today was merely one of the many instances where Sirius had attempted to steal that blasted book from him. Whether it was from spite or jealousy, all Snape knew was that each time Black had put his greasy paws on his book, he'd always managed to master one of his personal spells.

Wand outstretched, Sirius shoved Lily back to the ground and hovered Snape's text over the water.

Like an idiot seventh year, Severus had let down his guard, his main concern focused on saving his precious book. Snape turned his back on Black, flicking his wand at the text to prevent it from plummeting into the dark waters.

"SECTUMSEMPRA!"

He should have known better than to turn his back on Black...

Severus' consciousness fell to another place for the briefest of moments, stunned at the spell he'd just heard snarling with the deepest loathing a man could possess. Lily's uncontrolled, petrified screaming forced his mind to center. He was still standing dumbly, overlooking the lake. His movements stupid, Severus turned around.

Mid-spin, Snape's equilibrium completely abandoned him as a stinging pain like he had never felt scorched up his back. The ground seemed to jump out at him, socking him in the knees.

Sirius had used Severus' own Sectumsempra spell against him. Touching the back of his neck, Snape realized where the cold, exposed feeling of his back originated. He didn't know how to describe the sensation under his fingertips. Wet came to mind, wet and... open.

The next thing he knew, the screaming had died off while he struggled against swallowing mud.

He recalled endless fields of black. Severus' mind seemed to be moving a million miles away from his body, aware that the two were no longer connected.

He suddenly heard faint whispering in his ear. Snape raised his hand to swat the irritating presence away. He just wanted to be left alone, to rest a bit. The black had felt natural to him: comforting. Face down in the mud, he sputtered in his attempt to draw breath.

But he could still hear that whispering inside his ear. Inside his head. The voice was tender. Remorse that was not his own flooded him with each forced intake of breath.

A steady breeze blew across the bare skin of his back. His back? Why was his back bare?

A wrinkled hand trailed the length of his open wound.

He was bleeding. He remembered; Sirius had attacked him. And someone was healing his wound, with a benevolent incantation, sorrowful whispers of a prayer that sounded almost like a song.

Was he dead? No, there was too much pain, pain that doubled as his face pulled out of the mud. Severus was floating with no hands holding him. Fighting to regain complete consciousness, his eyes fluttered open and closed in exaggerated movements. The grass moved rapidly beneath his vision, followed by the stone steps of the castle.

Someone was running beside him and crying. Was that Lily? Yes. He'd made her cry enough times to recognize those hiccoughs of grief. She had always been such a clingy shag.

Just as his face passed over a Hospital Wing bed and lowered upon a pillow, Severus blacked out again.

*** **

Someone was breathing next to him. Ten steady breaths then a long sigh. Another ten steady breaths, followed by two sighs. Ten steady breaths and a loosening of their nasal passage.

They needed to die.

"Unless you are incapacitated in another bed," Severus rasped thickly, "I suggest that you breathe in another wing of the castle."

Silence.

The hard breathing had stopped, but the presence was still there. He needed to know who it was. Severus attempted to balance his weight on his forearms, but his sore body fought against him, and he fell back against the bed.

"Try not to move too much," said a concerned voice.

Severus' blood ran cold. The owner of that voice had no right to speak to him in such a way.

Not now. Not anymore.

Severus willed his crusted eyes to open. Dark, fuzzy colors swirled around him before finally connecting to form coherent pictures.

What the FUCK was he doing here?

"Are you lost, Headmaster Dumbledore?"

Dumbledore had the grace to divert his eyes. Severus struggled to name the expression the Headmaster fought to hide. Was that... no... shame?

Snape gritted his teeth.

"Do you remember what... happened out by the lake, Severus?"

Snape struggled to rein in what he truly wanted to spit out while mockingly answering, "I'm certain Black has already given you a very accurate explanation of my attack."

"The only version of events I am interested in at the moment is yours."

Snape's snort was full of cynical disgust. "Why now?" he sneered. His anger grew in relation to the Headmaster's increasing discomfort.

"I have spoken to James this morning... I've come to an understanding of the events... true events, that have taken place between James, Sirius, and yourself."

"I couldn't care less what you know or think, now."

"I've been... wrong in my previous assumptions."

"Why are you still standing here?"

"Please forgive me, son."

Face alit in rage, Snape lunged into the sitting position, only to cry out in agony as the muscles of his back protested.

"Don't! Don't you dare call me that, you old fool. What right do you have to speak to me as though you haven't ignored me for the past six years!"

"I just... I need you to know that I was wrong. I was...am wrong in my treatment of you."

"Bastard."

"Severus, please..."

"Bastard!" Severus had finally managed to sit up. His pale, thin face shadowed by unhealthy hair glowered back at the Headmaster so severely that the old man snapped his mouth shut.

Severus raged, half-speaking through clenched teeth. "Do you honestly think you are making things better? How dare you unload your conscience on me! Does this change anything? Does it take my humiliation back? Offer me dignity? Your very presence mocks me. When I'd sought after...wished...for your assistance, you cast me out of your office. Now when I wish for you to leave, you remain standing before me. Your apologies mean shit!"

Dumbledore shook his head sorrowfully. "I mean every word I am saying. You have no idea how sorrowful I am."

"No, no, no," Snape laughed madly. "There you are very wrong, old man. I do believe you... every word you are saying. I can see it in your face. But you have not begun to feel the pain you claim. Now that I know you actually give a damn, I will seek my revenge... on you."

Dumbledore didn't know what else to say. Face filled with shame, the Headmaster slowly left the Hospital Wing while Snape continued taunting morbid promises at his back.

Promises he had kept.

A few months after that particular incident by the lake, as families united in celebration for the arrival of their N.E.W.T results, Severus had enjoyed an opulent summer at Malfoy manor where he'd received the Dark Mark.

Two years later, the Potters were dead.

Snape hissed, his mind hurtling back into consciousness.

Remaining immobile in his seat, eyes rolling back, Severus' forearm burned to scorching black. He held his breath as the pain consumed him, eagerly anticipating the crest.

Just when the ache had reached its peak, Severus exhaled the precise moment it subsided. He didn't remember the movement, but he had grabbed the pillow his neck was perched against, clutching it to his chest.

Pupils dilated and breathing heavily, Severus' fists clenched into its soft center while he stood entranced by the vision of the completely static body of Albus Dumbledore.

Albus fucking Dumbledore.

He'd been this man's puppet for so very long.

But the end was near; he could taste it.

Snape's forearms flexed as the pillow pushed away from his chest.

It would be so...

Severus stepped closer to the old man's hospital bed.

... easy.

Author's Notes: Each chapter is getting more and more difficult to write, but dang is it fun. The majority of these scenes and the rest of the chapters to come were written over two years ago. With the new material my muse has been flinging at me, this has been one strange WIP. Thank you, loyal readers, for your much appreciated dedication!

-I'd be lost without my beta, **melusin**.

-Big thanks to **ILoveSnow** and **Alooshka** for their encouragement.

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book ii. Line 174.

-Next Up: Total devastation. Voldemort demands a very faithful servant to present him the next Dark Lord.

Chapter Twenty Nine - His Red Right Hand (Part 2)

Chapter 35 of 36

Hermione's sneaking about leads her to Sirius' room, where she discovers the unthinkable. Hermione fails to follow Severus' advice and finds herself in the clutches of a Death Eater... Severus visits the Headmaster's office to investigate the man's declining health, only to realize things are not what they seem. Voldemort demands a very faithful servant to present him the next Dark Lord.

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: I'M BACK!

This chapter is dedicated to my devoted cheerleader, Mazzy, who has pipped my fic all over the interwebs and shown me such awe-inspiring support for this endless WIP.

Albus fucking Dumbledore.

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... easy.

"Forgive me, please," Albus wheezed.

Bewildered, Snape released his grip on the pillow, carefully eyeing the old man before him.

Albus' eyes were still closed, body immobile. But Snape could still hear him; he could still see his despondent face speaking in his head.

"I did not expect to shackle you in service your entire adult life. It wasn't supposed to happen like this..."

Severus staggered, knocking the back of his knees and gracelessly falling into the chair behind him.

If Snape could go back and change things, change the choices he had made all those years ago, would he? If he could do it all over again, would Snape have made that irrevocable promise to Dumbledore, swearing his loyalty to the old man and his allegiance to the Order?

More voices rang in his head, unwanted images of incidents he'd hoped to have forgotten long ago.

Snape had taken a monumental chance by coming back here.

He hadn't set foot on Hogwarts' grounds for three years. Not since his final day as a student. He had left these walls, eager for the power and limitless possibilities that awaited him as a valued servant of the Dark Lord.

Snape had a great number of things he wanted to accomplish, but he soon realized that a servant never truly seizes control over his destiny.

So here he was, running up some blasted hill, out in the middle of the Forbidden Forest, to meet the very last wizard he wished to implore for help. Although the information had been forced out of him under extreme duress, Snape had already revealed everything he knew. But that wasn't what this meeting was about...

A flash of light sent him plummeting to his knees.

"Don't kill me!" It slipped out before Snape could stop it. Bile coated his tongue at his own self-disgust.

There was no point in pretending he still possessed any measure of self-respect. He'd knelt like this on hundreds of different occasions for the Dark Lord. But somehow, this was the first time Severus had truly felt like a pitiful servant.

Eyes trained on the muddied ground, Snape concentrated on the rustling of robes as the wizard stepped closer. His breath sped up, faster and faster, fully aware that Dumbledore could simply kill him and be done with it.

"That was not my intention."

"You must... do... something." Snape's face twisted as he listened to the desperation behind his words.

"Must I?" Dumbledore asked coolly.

"If you don't, the Dark Lord will kill the Potters!"

"Remember to whom you are speaking!" The air crackled as Albus roared with controlled anger in response to Snape's bellow. Satisfied at the unintentional cowering of his former pupil, Dumbledore continued, "Such a request is strange, indeed, Severus. I really did not imagine that you would care about their fate, one way or the other."

"This isn't what I wanted. Enough... useless... blood has been shed by my hands. The wrong blood--I tire of seeing myself coated in the filth of strangers."

"Well... aren't we noble?"

"I did not come here to listen to your sarcasm, old man! I've given you information that could cause my death. Do with it what you will."

Teeth bared, pale skin aglow in the dark, Severus rose from ground with a snap, and turned his back on Dumbledore.

A loud crack echoed across the hush that had fallen around the forest. A spark of light saw Severus sprawled upon the earth, wide eyes gazing up at the disquieting image of Dumbledore bearing down on him.

"I did not say we were finished..."

"Release me--"

"Silence! Do you have any idea... Can you even begin to comprehend what you have done? Intentionally listening at the door to Professor Trelawney and I... to the prophesy..."

"Of course I know what I've done, or else I wouldn't be here."

"Relaying... word for word... putting that information in Voldemort's hands!"

Severus clenched his eyes. He wasn't hearing any admonishments he hadn't already said to himself over and over... "I had no idea the prophesy was about them."

"You have sentenced the Potters to their deaths!"

"And it should have been yours!" Severus wailed at the top of his lungs.

Dumbledore faltered. Something unknown clicked into place, and he released his grip from the young man's robes.

Severus rose onto his knees, face engulfed in that grotesque loathing he had displayed to Dumbledore once before.

"You will never get it, will you, old man? All of this..." Severus ripped at the left sleeve of his robe. "Everything I have done for the... Everything has been in the anticipation that finally, one day, I would see your demise! When I listened at that door, all I knew was that I was hearing a prophesy meant only for your ears... meant for your benefit!"

Anger and cruelty Dumbledore could manage easily. But his own creation, face red and voice choked with stifled wretchedness, finally caused the Headmaster to take one unsteady step back.

"... No more."

"This death sentence should have been yours!"

Much was said after this, but none of it necessary to remember. Despite Severus' pleas, and regardless of Dumbledore's precautions, only a speck of time passed until mother fate stepped in on the night Voldemort visited Godric's Hollow. And those two wizards were forced to meet again.

Severus couldn't stop fidgeting in his seat. They'd been discussing this for hours, dancing around, but never voicing the inevitable.

He was lost. He didn't know where he belonged anymore.

Glancing uncertainly around the Headmaster's office, Snape rasped, "This isn't what I... It wasn't supposed to happen like this..."

"If you are trying to make me feel worse than I already do--"

"DON'T! The reasons I finally decided to answer your summons...none of this is about you. Not anymore..." Snape glanced down at his bare left arm. He'd had his sleeve rolled up all day, obsessively monitoring his flesh for any changes.

"Don't carry around your own Mirror of Erised, Severus. You'll waste your life away..."

"I'd hoped... I thought that maybe in his death, I'd be rid of it."

"I don't know what else I need to say or do to convince you... but Voldemort is not dead."

Snape hissed. His hands clenched into the armrests to keep himself from lunging across the desk. Watching the sordid tattoo burn black, Severus yanked at his sleeve with a snarl, finally accepting its continued presence.

"So do you agree...?" Dumbledore asked carefully. His expression revealed his caution, but his words had been sincere, just as everything he had been explaining and pleading for the last hour had been.

The two men were not friends. Once enemies, their fates had driven them towards this uneasy truce against a common foe.

"I have no desire to become a hero. But I will accept a second shackle if it will eventually remove this other from my arm."

"I cannot make any promises, nor will I pretend to know when he might return."

"The Death Eaters are regrouping this very night, and the idea of returning to them... that life..." Snape couldn't help the dry retch that croaked out of him. "Is there any other way...?"

"This is the only valuable service you can offer me. And trust me when I say, I would be nothing, nowhere, and totally in the dark without your assistance."

Whether it was intentional or not, Dumbledore had succeeded in stroking the aching ego of a very proud young man.

"Very--well... I'll spy for you."

"I have no idea for how long it will be, Severus. You may be asked to accomplish a number of challenging... challenges. But I promise you, working for the Order will return your dignity. You will do this for me--with me?"

"Anything."

"ENOUGH!"

His muscles rigid with anger, Snape regarded the unconscious body of Albus Dumbledore once again. Wetness trailed down the outside edges of his wrinkled eyes.

Eyes narrowed, Severus pointed an accusatory finger and repeated with conviction, *Enough.*"

*** ** *

"My Lord." Kneeling on the floor, Severus bowed so low that his face nearly touched the floorboards.

"You have made me wait. So this had better be good," Voldemort hissed.

"It is time, Master. We must act now. As I speak to you... this very instant... Dumbledore lies helpless on his deathbed. He's moments away from..." The words were tumbling out of Snape's mouth quicker than he could comprehend them. Adrenaline pumped through his veins so hard and fast that he was growing dizzy in his agitation.

A part of him--that small part that mourned the loss of the eager, genuine man he used to be--wanted to cut the tongue out of his own mouth.

Voldemort screeched, moving violently with a speed Severus had not seen him accomplish in a very long time.

"It is too soon! When Dumbledore dies, Potter will receive his--has Black made any progress with his watch? Before I can achieve true immortality, my successor must take his foot out of death's door!"

Severus had assumed much, but he hadn't expected this revelation. "Black...*the next* Dark Lord?"

His head flew back, neck nearly snapping at the blow to his jaw.

"GET UP!" the Dark Lord snarled down upon him. "If you hadn't said those blasphemous words with such disbelief, your punishment would have been more severe than you can imagine."

"Forgive me--"

"SILENCE! *There will always be one, and only one, Dark Lord..*By securing Black's immortality, I am merely guaranteeing my own."

"Of course, my Lord. Black can never hope to achieve even a fraction of the power you possess."

"*And yet*, you have failed in the task I asked of you."

Severus stiffened. "No, Master--not yet! He possesses the desire, of that I'm certain. Your books have completely saturated his mind. But I fear he does not possess the final motivation to complete that... ultimate... step."

"I would have thought that by now, his desire for the Mudblood would have been motivation enough to improve his...*living* conditions."

"He possesses the motivation, yes," Severus repeated carefully. "But he needs a sacrifice, one he will be eager to make." As those final words spat out of Severus' mouth, he dared to lift his reverently tilted jaw without permission. Meeting the wild red eyes of the Dark Lord, Severus completely opened his mind to an extent he had never attempted or wanted--until now.

The pale, scaly creature returned the Potion master's stare, face twitching monstrosly in glee.

"I *knew* sparing that pathetic creature's life would be beneficial to me... in the end. You were wise to hold him for me. Do it! Tonight, Severus."

"Yes, my Lord."

*** ** *

Severus sat stiffly upon his four-poster at Spinner's End, his mind heavy with all that had happened in such a short amount of time.

Wormtail had sensed his presence. The rat's muffled screaming pleas for food hadn't stopped since Snape had set foot in the house. But Severus had long grown accustomed to that sound. It was almost comforting at times.

Finally achieving a moment of contemplative silence, Snape had begun to... question... his motives. Especially the motives behind his actions of the last twenty-four hours.

Ultimately... he didn't have any. How was that possible?

He knew his own nature all too well. Snape easily shifted from total indifference to either bloodthirsty anger or sadistic amusement. And he reacted in situations depending on which emotion was strongest.

But, why? Where was this all leading? What did he ultimately hope to achieve?

Severus didn't want to admit it, but for the second time in his life, he was lost.

And a knot in the pit of his stomach seemed to incessantly twist the longer he went without any word from Hermione.

He hadn't expected to wake up alone after such a night, and her continued lack of communication was--unsettling--to say the least.

Severus jerked out of his trance when Minerva's feline Patronus meowed at his feet. His jaw tightened listening to her message. The last thing he wanted at the moment was to stand vigil beside Albus' hospital bed, surrounded by dim-witted Order members.

If he hadn't been... hoping... to speak to a specific Gryffindor, Snape wouldn't have bothered.

*** ** *

"Why've we been called here?" Tonks whispered to Moody.

"The Healer suggested we all needed to hear this. Said he'd only explain it once."

The entire Order was gathered around the Headmaster's hospital bed. The air suffocated them with agitation and the irritating odor of disinfectant. For longer than they were prepared to accept, each individual had greatly depended on this man. But now, as the last bits of life and magic drained from Albus' decrepit body, the Order's entire world seemed on the verge of... They didn't know what, exactly. A precipice was approaching, the consequences of which remained to be seen.

Many warily gazed at one another from the corner of their eyes. Behavior today was strange, distorted.

Sirius had walked into the room with a swagger not seen since his school days. Several thought his attitude too belligerent for an occasion reserved for somber reflection.

But he returned those disapproving glances with condemnations of his own. His eyes were uncomfortably knowing, like he had just recently learned everyone's darkest secrets...

Harry was a total mess. He didn't know whether to crumble in desolation or fly a few laps around the Quidditch pitch. His head had been pounding unbearably since the Headmaster's collapse, but his nerves pulsed, eager for some unknown excitement that awaited him.

Everyone was surprised to see Hermione taking this the worst. She seemed almost dazed upon her solitary entrance. Her swollen and bloodshot eyes were a rare sight indeed, considering she'd always emanated such a strong, unaffected presence. What was even more troubling was the spectacle of her running straight into the open arms of Harry, practically hiding her face beneath the folds of his robes. She hadn't moved since.

And no one missed the flinch she had displayed when Sirius had tried to intercept her.

The Healer stood expectantly at the foot of Dumbledore's bed. Perspiration beaded his brow. Retrieving an embroidered handkerchief from his inner robes, he wiped at the moisture multiple times before finally asking, "Everyone's here, then?"

"Yes," Moody lied, not expecting a word in defense of the unmistakable absence of a certain black-robed wizard.

The Healer nodded and went straight to business. "Are any of you aware of the potions Headmaster Dumbledore has been taking?"

Unnerving silence was the response he received.

"What's wrong with him?" Minerva finally asked.

"I've never seen a case like this before." The Healer thumbed through a stack of parchment. "Magic, older than the books I'd studied--well, that's neither here nor there. It isn't the cause of his illness that worries me as much as the... treatment... used. Or what Headmaster Dumbledore mistakenly believed was a treatment. This man has been poisoned. An illegal potion has been detected in his system."

Everyone shouted and gasped to different degrees, save the one man who eagerly waited for the exact moment to speak.

"So I repeat, are any of you aware of the potions Headmaster Dumbledore has been taking?"

"Why don't you ask *him*?" Sirius snarled, his righteous fury directed at a presence behind the Healer's back.

Minerva glanced quickly at Snape's sudden, unlucky appearance before demanding, "What are you on about, Sirius?"

"Didn't you know? Snape's been force-feeding the Headmaster his own grisly concoction for months!"

"That doesn't mean--"

"Tell them, Harry," Sirius demanded.

Harry removed his concentration from the distressed woman in his arms to gaze at his godfather. "I'm not sure..."

"*You've* seen Snape feed a strange potion to Dumbledore. You told me this before! How many times have you arrived at the Headmaster's office right when Snape had finished administering this... *potion*."

"I have seen...a few times, but--"

"Murderer!" Moody howled, frightening those around him. Years of suppressed resentment released all at once. He would have tackled the Potions master if Remus hadn't physically held him back. "I warned Albus, for years, but he never listened to reason... Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater!"

Arms folded, Professor Snape had remained motionless for the duration of this exchange. In the midst of a tense silence, seconds before Black or Moody leveled their wands, he impassively droned, "I take it I've been charged and convicted, then?"

Snape may have been asking the room at large, but his eyes fixed on one person in particular. Hermione had finally managed to pull herself away from Potter's arms, but she couldn't seem to make heads or tails at what was being said.

Something... foreign... inside Snape clenched at the cringe she'd displayed upon hearing the sound of his voice. Teeth bared, he growled to himself and dismissively shook that last thought from his head.

After Hermione had gazed long and questioningly at the Headmaster's fragile figure, she whirled around toward Snape, eyes chock-full of some horrid emotion he couldn't identify. But that alone spoke volumes... It was a look she had *never* given him before.

Snape's senses fractured, releasing an unnamed anchor he didn't know he'd been carrying.

He didn't need to see or hear anything from anyone in this room. Not anymore.

Fuck them all... Snape drew his wand.

"Moody, Sirius! Lower your wands! This isn't the way the Headmaster would want us to handle this!"

"Shut up, Potter. Severus Snape, you're formally under arrest."

Snape smirked sarcastically at Moody's attempt to threaten him. "Oh, I don't think so..."

"Finally, everyone can see you for the bastard you truly are..." Under different circumstances, many would have been revolted by the amount of joy Sirius displayed. But far too much had been revealed in such a brief amount of time.

"Enough, the both of you!" Wand drawn, Harry focused on Moody and Sirius' predatory circle around the impressive figure of Severus Snape. He didn't know whom to disarm first.

Everyone was screaming and protesting at once, demanding their voice be heard. So no one noticed when Hermione finally spoke up. Despite her effort, she had been too distraught to put true force behind her words. Her pleas went unnoticed by all, especially by the one man who needed to hear them.

All three men shouted hexes simultaneously. Sectumsempra was unmistakably one of them.

A wide gash ran up Sirius' wand arm, yanking at his aim and flinging his curse at Moody.

Distracted by the blood and Black's scream, Snape managed his escape with ease.

"After him!" Sirius demanded.

"Leave it," Harry said calmly, ripping away Sirius' torn sleeve and tying the fabric above his elbow.

"He's going to You-Know-Who! We can't let him--"

"*I said* let it be."

Sirius snapped his mouth shut.

Harry hadn't yelled or threatened. In fact, his voice had leveled out to an eerie calm, but the warning was instantly recognizable and couldn't be ignored. It reminded Sirius of someone in particular, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

Harry then directed that indisputable directive to Moody, but also spoke to the room at large, particularly the Aurors.

"The warrant on Snape is rescinded. He is merely sought for questioning."

"You have some nerve, boy!"

An undetected wave of his wand and a flash of light saw Moody flying back against the wall and all three Auror wands in Harry's hand. *Do not* call me 'boy'. While I hope and pray the Headmaster pulls through, we still have a mission to accomplish. At the Ministry, I'll mind your authority, Moody. But as a member of the Order, *you will obey mine.*"

"You *dare* to take his--?"

"OH, FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE, MOODY!" Minerva screeched, her voice choked by tears. "Was there ever any doubt? After everything you've seen, it only makes sense-- SIRIUS! Get back here! We'll worry about Severus later."

Sirius continued towards the exit, hissing over his shoulder, "Fuck Snape! I'm going after Hermione."

After a quick glance, it was acknowledged that the Head Girl was indeed absent, her departure as equally unnoticed as the Potions master's.

*** **

Rounding a corner, Sirius intercepted the very person he'd wanted to speak to all day. He thanked the stars he was able to stop Hermione before she'd reached the Entrance Hall doors. Regretting his treatment of her at number twelve, Sirius finally felt confident that present circumstances were tilted in his favor.

Reveling at the feel of having her in his arms, Sirius came to his senses once he bothered to appreciate the state she was in.

"Go away." Face swollen and red, tears incessantly trailed down her face.

"Hermione, love..." Sirius allowed her to pull away from him, but he refused to release his grip of her wrist. "Please... what is it?"

"I doubt he'd return to Spinner's--Where is he? Where would he go?"

Sirius shook his head, smiling gently. "You're not making any sense. Where is who--?"

Somehow, his own question was answered before he'd finished verbalizing it. Considering everything that had just taken place and who had fled the castle, who else would Hermione be running after; who else would she be asking for?

... Crying for?

His eyes darkened. "You're confused and distraught over Dumbledore's death," he insisted. "You need a lie down."

Hermione returned his stare with a blank one of her own. "What are you talking...? The Headmaster isn't dead, Sirius!"

"You know what I mean."

"RELEASE ME, NOW!"

Sirius grasped her shoulders, yanking her hard, as if the violence would affect her senses. "Where the hell do you think you are going at a time like this? You should be upstairs with everyone else!"

"I need to find him!"

"NO! After everything I've...dammit, can't you see he's evil, Hermione? He practically killed the Potters, and he attempted to murder the Headmaster!"

Hermione couldn't speak. Face red with tears, she continued shaking her head, stony determination in her eyes.

"I've known," Sirius gasped suddenly. "The two of you... somehow I've known..." His violence returned when she turned away. "NO! What can he give you that I can't? Does he really treat you *that* much better? What does he have that I don't..."

"A pulse!"

Sirius froze.

Teeth clenched, Hermione wrenched her elbow back, freeing her wrist. Just as quickly, her arm soared through the air, punching Sirius clear across his eye socket.

*** **

Severus couldn't even begin to describe the vicious thoughts and ideas pulsing in his mind, in his very blood.

He couldn't blink without recalling those eyes.

Those accusing, distrustful eyes, directed at him for the second time in the last twelve hours.

Everything was shit.

Now that the old man was a few breaths away from death, Snape couldn't see the point in any of *this*... Not anymore.

Even Dumbledore had given up. Given up on him. The bastard had used Severus' own potion, his very hands, to accomplish his death. No one would believe he hadn't slipped the Headmaster a tainted potion. He was the school's Potions master for fuck's sake.

Years of servitude... Twenty years of sacrificing his life, his will, and everyone was still quick to believe the worst of him. And for what? Without Dumbledore, he was nothing to the very people he had fought side by side with for the last two decades.

More importantly, he was nothing to *her*.

But what was it all for? What did he have to show for his lifelong sacrifice?

He was back at square one.

Severus hissed, holding his arm. Entering his bedroom at Spinner's End, he breathed deeply through his nose, fighting against the urge to destroy something, even himself.

With those thoughts in mind, he purposefully turned toward his bookcase. Lip curled, a sharp snap of his wrist flung open the hidden door.

A terrified whining issued from the darkness within.

Placing both hands on either side of the entryway, Severus slowly stepped forward, practically smiling as he looked down the pitch-black staircase.

"If you make me come and fetch you..." Severus didn't need to finish his warning.

"You-you were summoned too?" a pathetic voice asked. "But I'm n-never summoned with the rest of you."

"It was for your protection, but I doubt that matters anymore."

"What...? No... NO!"

Severus' arm burned twice as fierce. The Dark Lord was impatient to get this done.

Screaming, Pettigrew scampered up the stairs, attempting to plow through Severus and make a run for it.

Severus easily caught the rodent by the neck of his filthy robes.

Ignoring the wizard's wails and pleas, Severus dragged the rodent behind him, down the stairs and out the front door.

*** *** ***

She'd been crying incessantly since fleeing Hogwarts. Hermione'd hoped she would have arrived here so much sooner, but she feared Apparating in the state she was in. Finally arriving at the far side of Spinner's End, Hermione fell forward with a gasp, as if she'd been holding her breath the last ten minutes. One pained wail escaped her, making her aware of her own voice, and she squashed said dramatics with a gulp. Pushing herself off the pavement, she ran with all her might... hoping... praying...

Harry didn't seem too concerned about locating Severus... and he knew the wizard's Death Eater history. If Harry knew, then the Headmaster knew, too. Both had seemed to irrefutably trust the Potions master to some degree.

The accusations were false. They had to be...

That potion Harry and Sirius had witnessed Severus give the Headmaster... Hermione had seen it, too. She'd watched Severus carefully create it moments before he'd delivered it to the Headmaster. Moments before it was completed, Severus lowered his face along the surface. He whispered... he whispered an incantation...

An incantation that now seemed very similar to that first night as Spinner's End...when he'd healed the bruises upon her wrists.

An incantation that now seemed identical to the one he said over her prone, bleeding body when he'd healed Macnair's slicing hexes.

"Severus!"

Hermione pulled open the unlocked front door and stepped into a destroyed living room.

She already knew she was too late as she wailed his name once more.

Stumbling up the stairs, Hermione wheezed, her chest tightening painfully. Why hadn't she tied all this together before?

Something was wrong...

Exceedingly wrong.

Identical to downstairs, Severus' room was also destroyed, as if a vicious struggle had just taken place. Wand leveled shakily in front of her, she pointed it at the open bookcase to her left. Shining her wand light down to the bottom of the hidden stairway, Hermione could clearly see that it was empty.

What was going on? Where would Severus take Pettigrew... and why?

Severus needed her. She could feel it.

Analyzing everything that had happened in the hospital wing, Hermione vividly remembered Severus' face as the entire Order had turned on him. He'd been looking for some type of...reassurance...from her.

But she... feared... him, and selfishly so. Feared that he would revert back to the beast that had attacked her last night. Feared that he would retaliate for the serious wounds she had inflicted in her defense. But worse of all, Hermione feared that with one look he would dismiss her, toss her aside without explanation or apology. All these self-centered, pathetic notions had her sick with distress, and it had taken Hermione much longer to process the wild accusations made by the very people who had come to depend on Severus.

Snape had completely misunderstood. She was not horrified by him, only the situation he was placed in and the irrational reactions of those around her.

Crying out as if in pain, Hermione suddenly remembered that Severus hadn't put any effort into escaping until after he'd laid eyes on her.

*** *** ***

Sirius knew he was needed at the castle. He knew his godson and the remainder of the Order required his help regarding Snape. He was also fully aware that he should be standing vigil with everyone beside Albus' hospital bed.

"A pulse!"

He felt no regret for deciding to get pissed in the *Hog's Head*, instead.

Hypocrites and deceivers, all of them.

His godson included. Sirius grinned importantly to himself as he gulped another dram of whisky. Every time his thoughts returned to Albus' Pensieve, Sirius smiled indulgently. He'd seen everything... everything Albus had tried to hide from him and those around him. Every lie, every justification, every excused sacrifice.

Sirius was merely one of many.

Fingering the watch in his pocket, his heart suddenly started racing. Dumbledore feared the exact same thing Sirius' *guide*... wanted of him. Since he'd first fallen through the veil, that feminine apparition had incessantly goaded him, encouraged him...even shamed him...into taking that final step towards having a more... permanent existence...

"What does he have that I don't...?"

"A pulse!"

He had never considered it seriously until now. But how...?

Lost in this haze of intoxicated musings, Sirius tensed as a black-cloaked wizard unceremoniously pulled up a chair at his table.

"Can I help you?" Sirius asked.

"My...master...sent me here."

Sirius' lowered his glass. Fidgeting, he searched around to see if someone was watching them, if this was a trap.

He then picked up his whisky, swallowing it all in one go. Setting down his tumbler once more, Sirius stretched his left arm across the table, forearm facing up.

"I'll show you mine," Sirius said, "if you show me yours." He then pulled back his sleeve to expose his unblemished flesh.

Purposefully eyeing Sirius' arm, the stranger gulped his liquor and shoved his left arm into his robes.

Sirius stood up. "I think we're done here." Just as quickly, as he attempted to make his exit, the stranger yanked his elbow, forcing Sirius back to his seat.

"We're done when I say we're done...*Black!*"

It was an unwritten rule for patrons to mind their own business in the *Hog's Head* if they intended to leave the establishment in one piece. Nevertheless, a few heads cautiously turned in their direction, drawn by the ruckus and taboo subject matter.

"I've no business with your kind," Sirius snarled in a superior manner.

The stranger laughed by means of a snort. "I doubt that. Once you hear what I have to say, you're going to follow me out that backdoor and side-along Apparate to our... summons. And not because I dragged you unwillingly."

"Fuck off!"

"He can give you exactly what you desire, you know. And so easily." That last part hissed out of the ominous wizard's mouth, slow and enticing.

Sirius couldn't resist the temptation to ask, "Who?"

"*You know who*," the stranger answered meaningfully.

Sirius faltered. He looked at the man, then the patrons as if he were somehow on display. Face hot with embarrassment at his betraying thoughts, Sirius slammed his palm upon the table and said, face close, "No."

That wizard called to his back, voice knowing, "What have you got to go back to? Who'd ever want half a man?"

Sirius froze before taking a step towards the door.

Author's Notes: As you can see, my lost data has been recovered, and I have all my notes and uncompleted chapters back. I humbly apologize for the extremely long wait. I'm fully aware that in this story's absence, I have lost some readers, but I thank those of you who continue to read.

-I'd be lost without my incredibly brilliant beta, **melusin**.

-Thank you to those of you who have nominated my other fics *Bound to Happen* (Drama and Challenge category) and *Coveted Persecution* (Dark Fic category) in the OWL Awards. I am beyond ecstatic. Voting is currently open here: <http://owl.tauri.org/index.php>

-**BulletTimeScully** has created some awesome fanart based on this fic. If you haven't done so already, check out her creations here: <http://bullettimescully.deviantart.com/gallery/#Vain-Wisdom-Pieces>

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book ii. Line 174.

Chapter Thirty - Farewell Remorse; Evil, Be Thou My Good (Part 1)

Chapter 36 of 36

Believing the worst had already passed, Harry learns even more alarming information in regards to his duties. Sirius decides to alter the course of his fate. And Severus is driven to reminiscence on the night he claimed Hermione's

innocence.

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR and/or Daniel Knauf. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: I cannot remember the last time I submitted such a short chapter. I apologize if this disappoints expectations, but I'd been sitting on this for months. I know I'm over thinking this!

-This chapter is dedicated to the wonderfully talented **BulletTimeScully**, who had dedicated her time to create some marvelous, angsty pieces of fanart based on this fic.

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Sirius froze before taking a step towards the door.

"I can... feel..."

Harry awoke with a jolt. He gazed around the dark, empty hospital wing unsure if he'd been dreaming or if someone had indeed voiced the words he'd just heard.

"I can feel your presence... even in my sleep."

"Professor!"

In two steps, Harry had flung himself over Dumbledore, arms outstretched to keep himself from crushing the Headmaster's frail body. Albus' voice was barely audible, lips scarcely moving, as he spoke through a wheeze.

Lifeless blue eyes gazed up at Harry, who patiently waited for them to focus.

"I've burdened you with so much, haven't I, Harry? In the beginning..." He paused, inhaling deeply. "I'd been so certain that it would be better this way."

"I don't... I don't understand."

"You'll understand everything. *Everything*. And with more observation than I. The rot has damaged much more than my body... ah. Nevertheless, I'd like to tell myself that informing you of your responsibilities, little by little, was better than you receiving this information so suddenly at my death. Forgive me..."

"I have no grudge against you."

Dumbledore sighed, so hard it shook in his chest. "That feels... so good to hear. Oh, Harry, I... I should've never interfered last year. I was meant to die long before today... Godric was right..."

"Godric? Godric Gryffindor?"

"Portrait."

"Portrait...? Ah... I take it he's one of the ancestors...our ancestors in the Light?"

Dumbledore attempted to smile, nodding his approval at how quickly Harry was catching on, now. "Listen carefully. When the time comes... you'll have much more insight than I ever had. I almost worry about the Light having one so young... forgive me. What I mean is, I've given you my *opinion* on how to solve this. I do firmly believe that you should destroy Voldemort's successor first... but Godric has finally made me see that I have become arrogant in my wisdom."

Those last words exited Dumbledore's mouth in a faint, anguished whisper. Harry assumed the act of speaking was exhausting for the man.

Allowing a few moments of silence, Harry carefully added, "I must confess and ask for your forgiveness, as well. I'm almost... *I am*... excited... at the idea of having such... energy. But the idea of never speaking to you again..."

"Continue looking forward to it, my boy. 'Tis both a blessing and a burden. Enjoy it if you must. You'll know. I fully trust that of all people, you'll know if everything I have been training you to believe has been false philosophy or not."

Unable to stand the look directed at him, Harry dropped his chin, eyeing the misshapen flesh of Albus' left arm.

"Forgive me, Harry... but I must ask one last thing of you."

"What is it, sir?"

"Kill me."

*** **

Sirius coughed violently. He'd regretted this decision the moment he'd latched on to the arm of the ominous stranger whom he'd met in the ~~Hog's~~ *Hog's Head*. Mind and body reorienting itself from the Side-Along Apparition, Sirius had half a mind to flee. It wasn't the journey that had nauseated him so much as the realization that he had willingly followed a Death Eater to this unknown future.

What was he thinking?

"This way."

Sirius turned around, searching the darkness amongst the twisted trees to locate the owner of that voice.

Was this a trap?

Even if it was... he had already walked into it.

He continued questioning himself, but never once did he stop following the stranger through the Forbidden Forest. After what had seemed like nearly an hour, they finally reached a clearing amongst the trees.

The full moon illuminated the exposed area. A sea of black-robed wizards and monstrous masks silently greeted him. For reasons unknown to him, Sirius' instincts urged him to guard his back, to turn a suspicious eye back towards the darkness behind him. Something else was even more frightening than the dozens of unknown murderers mutely watching him.

Hair standing on end, gooseflesh spreading in every direction, Sirius drew his wand and took a defensive position, but not a second later, it had been Summoned from his unsteady grasp.

A cold, merciless chuckle was the only sound heard. Sirius froze, his free hand clutching his pocket watch through his robes. One by one, the Death Eaters silently fanned out towards the periphery, allowing a clear path to cut through the center. The amused laughter intensified in volume and ridicule as it drew closer.

Within seconds, Sirius found himself completely encircled by Death Eaters. He and one other wizard stood in the center.

For the first time ever, Sirius Black found himself face-to-face with Lord Voldemort.

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"MAD!" Harry said for a second time, throwing himself back, away from the person who'd dared to ask for something so horrible.

Deathbed wishes are known to be intense, nonsensical even. But refusing them can lead to even greater consequences.

Voice resigned, Dumbledore slowly raised a few fingers as if to calm Harry down. "I cannot be certain... I believe... your power will extend tenfold if you... take it... with your own two hands."

"What else, Professor! What else have you been keeping from me?*Hiding* from me?"

"Much else, as I'm sure you know."

"No."

"Harry, such interactions between the reigning wizard of Light and his successor is unheard of. We may even be the first. Considering everything I have encountered up until now... it cannot be an accident. It cannot... Fate is too crafty. She's too powerful. There are no accidents. No chances. No mistakes. Every choice has a consequence, be it good or bad. And every consequence gives rise to more choices... no accidents. No accidents..."

Eyes clenched tight, the Headmaster was ranting now. Harry returned to his bedside, vainly attempting to soothe and quiet the man's delirium.

Shoulders hunching in with complete misery, Harry cried, hating himself for wishing Dumbledore was already dead.

*** ** *

Fear.

The one reaction...emotion...Sirius knew should have consumed him by now never came.

His spine stiffened simultaneously with the suspicious narrowing of his eyes.

Clutching Sirius' wand between long, bony fingers, Voldemort trailed the tip down the side of his protruding cheekbone. They rounded each other with measured footsteps and yet with mannerisms void of aggression or defense.

At length, they seemed to stop in tandem. As if satisfied, the left side of the Dark Lord's face twitched by means of a smirk. Waving his arm through the air with an inflated flourish, he finally said, "Welcome."

"I am?" Sirius asked immediately.

The Dark Lord's sickening smirk intensified.

"Very much. You're more welcome here than with those who you once called 'friend'."

Sirius gritted his teeth at hearing such unwanted truth.

"This isn't mockery," Voldemort answered Black's unspoken discontentment. "You and I both know you are far from welcome with that faction any longer. It's been many, many years since you've been treated with even a small measure of respect, never mind fairness."

"Enough."

"But... I bet you never knew why?"

Sirius' expression contorted with petulance.

"As I thought," Voldemort ridiculed, his voice breathy with exaggeration.

"Despised by your family, were you not? You're nature was far too... unnatural... for them? Sirius Black, the Black sheep of the Black family." Voldemort released a booming laugh. "It's too perfect... almost Shakespearian. And yet," he added quietly, stepping closer, "was it any different in Dumbledore's camp?"

"Shut up."

"The very people whom you considered friends, who called you their friend, locked you away without a moment's thought."

"It didn't happen like..."

"Who came for you, Sirius Black? You remember, don't you? When you were first arrested... Ah, yes, I'm certain you can remember it. I can see it in your... face. All those years ago, you had been so certain, confident even, that at any moment, someone would knock on your cell door and vouch for your innocence. Point out the obviousness, that you'd never murder your best friends. That you would never swear allegiance to... me."

"*You know nothing.*"

"But no one came, did they? Not at your trial..."

Sirius nearly fell forward, his face clenching into pure anguish. "Devil..."

"...nor at your sentencing..."

"Vile serpent!"

"...Not a single word... all twelve years."

"I'VE SEEN DEATH, SPOKE TO HER EVEN. DON'T YOU DARE PRESUME THAT, AFTER EVERYTHING, I STILL FEAR YOU!"

In his rage, Sirius lunged at the Dark Lord. Shaky palm against scaly skin, Sirius clutched Voldemort's neck, unfazed by the hisses of angered horror surrounding them.

Voldemort said nothing. Did nothing. He returned Sirius' immobile glare, his face calm, before speaking with intense thought behind his words, "I'm not even certain how to go about killing you."

"Wha-What?"

"More importantly... I know I should be insulted, but I feel no desire to destroy you."

Voldemort said this as if such an idea were a novelty brought about by fervent wonder. Sensing Black's disturbed bewilderment, the Dark Lord seized his chance.

"Or, perhaps... the answer lies somewhere around here..."

Determined, slithering fingers pressed against the side of Sirius' thigh. He was too dumbfounded to move. Insistent, but non-predatory fingers pressed against his flesh... high... very high, and it disturbed Sirius' senses to the point of perverse curiosity.

But in one movement, Voldemort's hand had snaked in and out of his robes, and Sirius' one precious possession was now encased by boney fingers.

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"You smell... infected."

Severus grunted dismissively.

A loud, rhythmic hum filled his head, vision blurred. Grey and black swirling around the periphery of his vision; if he happened to look up, the brightness of the full moon added to the obscure colors. Severus jerked his head left and right, forcing his wits to consume the actions around him. His right shoulder blade hurt, and the nails on that very hand needed a trim.

"... And I'd just fed; now you're upsetting my stomach."

"What?" Severus snapped. At long last comprehending Greyback's presence, Snape realized what the Were was talking about. But the pain he felt was different. Rotating his shoulders, Severus tested his muscles and hissed against his will. Finally comprehending...remembering...the injuries that ran the total expanse of his back.

Flashes of the past night inundated him, along with a pair of terrified, brown eyes he'd seen... and seen initially not to long before that.

"I want to feel like I belong to you!"

"Your pus is revolting," Greyback said beside him, voice low with embarrassment.

"Then move the fuck away from me."

"I want to feel like I belong to you!"

"As much as I want to, you're standing in my circle, Snape. Get the fuck away from me before I clean your back with my tongue."

"I want to feel like I belong to you!"

"Silly girl..." he whispered. Severus bit playfully at Hermione's lip before lowering his face to her throat. His knees slid against the mattress as he positioned himself against her opening and slowly pushed into her. "... You already do."

She wasn't fully prepared, and Snape had known it. She might have cried out if her mouth hadn't been covered by his. Intently watching her, Severus took in the sight of her brown eyes flying open at the same time a high-pitched sound of negation issued from her throat.

Snape had barely entered her. She had been quick to draw away from his thrust with equal vigor.

"No?" he asked.

"No. Wait...no! What I mean is..."

Her chest was red and warm. He wanted to eat her. Tongue swathing her throat, Severus' passion intensified. It was impossible to turn back. Not when he finally had her... Finally had Hermione like this.

Severus pulled her closer to him, wanting every inch of their skin to touch. Much of what he did next she enjoyed. Her moist heat burned him. Called him. He pressed against her in earnest and received no further protest.

Senses on overdrive, Severus exhaled in exasperation. He had anticipated troublesome reactions from her, but he hadn't expected troublesome thoughts as a result. As much as Severus enjoyed the idea of claiming her innocence, the novelty was wearing thin.

"Am I... hurting you?"

A whimper, then a hesitant, "No... a bit."

His features darkened. Or at least, he felt like they had. Jaw tightening, his brow leveled while his eyes stared down at Hermione. Snape had been told on many occasion how he looked whenever his face was set this way.

"Good," he then admitted, reveling at her fearful expression. Feeling a palm of resistance against his chest, Severus snatched her wrist away, crushing it into the mattress. "One tends to continuously relive pain... rather than remember happiness."

"Don't!" He wouldn't have even registered her words if they hadn't held a degree of exasperation. She dared to scold him... here, as they lay like this. Such a thought was

incomprehensible. Severus despised the very idea of her mocking him. When her other wrist copied her previous movements, Snape pinned it down as well.

"Ah... have I made you regret coming to me now?"

"What...that's not what I...? Don't try so hard to ruin this!" she clarified, repeating an admonishment she'd given him once before. "And don't speak of us as if you expect it to end at any moment!"

Freezing on top of her, Severus' derisive smile faded as a contemplative crease formed between his brows. When she made a move to remove herself from beneath him, Snape wrapped his arms around her, binding her hands as he flipped onto his back.

"Severus...?" she called, voice insecure. It was a sound Snape had wanted to hear from her for some time. It surprised him to realize how much he didn't enjoy it.

"Shh," was all he said. He held her tightly, forcing Hermione to rest her body weight on top of him. Palming the side of her cheek, Snape brought her face to his, his chin mirroring other movements, probing for a better position to engulf her lips.

"A-ah..." It was the only noise Hermione made before pushing against him again. She failed in pushing him away, but was able to keep him from moving deeper.

"Hermione... I don't want to hurt you."

"You're not...not anymore... not yet, I mean... I'm just not..."

"You're not listening to me... I don't want to hurt you."

"Severus..." This time, apprehension.

"I am being honest. More so than I am accustomed. I have been... patient... and that is foreign for me. Make up your mind." He dragged his forehead against her throat and repeated in earnest, "Make up your mind."

She was still angry...or hurt. He could tell by the tense muscles of her jaw.

She had been so willing not moments before. So accepting of his intentions. Snape regretted his self-sabotaging words.

He had tried to ruin it.

"I want you here," he whispered against her ear. "I want you... Does it still hurt?" he asked, voice unsteady.

The sincerity of his question could have been challenged by his insistent movements.

"I...ye...yes."

Insistent, vigorous movements.

"Good."

As he expected, Hermione's reaction was quick. Expelling an insulted sound, Hermione's sensibilities couldn't help diving into control, and she made a move to pull away yet again.

But Severus held her even tighter against him.

He stilled beneath her, holding her by the forearms to force her calm, as well.

He wasn't breathing.

Hermione clenched her eyes.

One... two... three deep breathes pressed against his bare chest.

And still he remained immobile beneath her.

Hermione knew what he wanted...expected. He wasn't going to repeat himself again. Severus could sense how much she yearned to avoid the obvious, but she couldn't resist the will that compelled her to look him in the face.

Her cheeks burned so hot from embarrassment, as if she wanted to curl away.

Severus hissed. He'd pushed up into her, once and with enough force to complete what Hermione had been avoiding. "That pain belongs to me."

Her weight upon him intensified.

Sometime later, after more misunderstandings and awkward altering of positions, Snape was driven to further reflection. It wasn't until he had arched away from her amidst the throes of his release that she'd finally dug her nails into his back. Her teeth had then scraped against his throat in the careless manner he enjoyed the most. Why she'd reacted with such passion at the very end, Severus couldn't explain or understand.

"SNAPE!" Greyback snarled under his breath as low as he could, slapping the wizard upon the back.

With a shake, Severus inhaled one sharp, deep breath. On a whim, he decided to hold it, eyes clenched, disciplining himself to forget those last images that had burned across his thoughts, all the while reveling in the pain.

Author's Notes: As always, I send my intense gratitude to my loyal beta, **melusin**.

-Chapter title taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book iv. Line 108.

Next up: What is the Dark Lord planning to do with Sirius and his pocket watch? And what role does Pettigrew play in this? More importantly, what of Severus and Hermione?