

Of Debts and Debt Collection

by Anastasia

A novel-length post HBP HG/SS romance adventure. What if Severus returned, trained Harry for the final battle and worked to destroy the final Horcruxes? Story is complete and will be updated regularly.

The Sun Also Dies

Chapter 1 of 41

A novel-length post HBP HG/SS romance adventure. What if Severus returned, trained Harry for the final battle and worked to destroy the final Horcruxes? Story is complete and will be updated regularly.



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AN: I started writing Debts in late August of 2005 when, after reading book 6 for the second time, I threw it across the room and decided to write my own. My writing style evolved over the six months, so much so that immediately upon finishing, I set out to rewrite much of it with the help of a beta. Along the way, I discovered the style I have now, which has spawned work like Animated Night, which will be read aloud at Phoenix Rising along with an excerpt from a later chapter of Debts. Without the support of readers on my journey through Debts and its rewrite, I would have never carried on. To all of you who take a moment to let an author know that you enjoyed something, know that it does mean quite a lot.

Sometimes, everything...

Hermione Granger sat by the lake, staring at nothing in particular. She'd been there for hours, lost in her thoughts, occasionally coming back to the present long enough to only register the time by the position of the setting sun.

She had quietly slipped away from everyone who was still so stunned by recent events they had trouble completing whole sentences without breaking down. She came here as one of the only places she could be alone. Mourning, to some, was a social affair filled with time spent with loved ones left behind to puzzle out the why or how. For others, it was a time to exclude the world, turn down the lights, and think.

Hermione was in that latter crowd.

Life had just shifted, as if an earthquake had lifted her world and slammed it back down without any semblance of grace. At a time in life when she should be worrying about her future, she was fearing for one of her closest friend's life, mourning the death of a man she admired, and questioning her judgment of another she had admired despite popular opinion.

It all just didn't make sense. Questions crowded her thoughts, pushing for priority. The how and, more importantly, the why of what had happened devastated her. So much more was there; the reasoning so far, however, had escaped her. The logical part of her railed against it all and rejected reality. Like an autopsy of a body, she needed to deconstruct what had happened and understand. With a sigh, she tucked her head down, resting her forehead on her knees drawn up against her body.

Tilting her head, she could observe the mist gently rise over the lake's quiet surface. School owls silently entered and left the castle, swooping on the evening breeze at lazy angles. She thought briefly how ironic it was that nature and life continue in the face of something so obscene. Nature remained silent, unmoving, offering no judgment. It seemed so wrong that there was no noticeable change in the world, no outcry against tragedy. For a soul so significant to leave the world and another day to simply come and go as usual seemed almost cruel.

She had stopped crying hours ago. Emotions came hard at times as she grew older. Intelligence was a curse in disguise, she thought, as it influenced a person to analyze before feeling, guarding the emotions before the situation simply demanded a reaction.

Often, she thought that the walls she put up were unhealthy, especially when she thought of one Severus Snape.

How many emotional barriers had he put up over the years? She had been picked on in school for being studious and different, but nothing compared to the pain and exclusion he had endured. She didn't want to be like him, feelings hidden behind so many layers he'd probably forgotten how to show anything at all.

And now? Well, she just hoped there was a reason.

Looking back at the castle, she could see the lights in the Great Hall. Most likely, people were there speaking about their times with the late Headmaster. She knew she should rejoin them, but for now could only look out over the peaceful lake. She watched the passage of time as the setting sun fell slowly behind the trees, spreading its orange glow between the branches. The colors of red and orange soon gave way to blue and gray as the temperature dropped, sending a chill through her.

Slowly, with the measured movements of reluctance, she got to her feet. With a glance at the Astronomy tower, she took a deep breath and made her way back to the castle.

Members of the Order gathered in the Headmaster's office, some in quiet conversation and others in various states of mourning. The house-elves had brought tea and sandwiches, crying as they set down the trays.

Hermione sat beside the window, watching as Harry and now Headmistress McGonagall stood together while reviewing Dumbledore's Pensieve, hoping to find something to explain this travesty. She glanced at the empty perch where Fawkes would normally be resting and felt a renewed sadness at the sudden change.

Needing to feel helpful in some way, she asked upon their return after watching another memory, "May I help?"

Looking worn and slightly removed, McGonagall replied, "Of course." Turning to Harry, she said, "Harry, would you like to sit this one out and have some tea? You haven't stopped at all today."

"Yes, I guess so." His eyes rose to meet Hermione's as she grasped his hand for a moment. They exchanged a significant glance. Harry gathered himself some tea, but passed on the sandwiches. Eating just hadn't been on his list lately.

"Alright, are you ready, Hermione?" McGonagall asked while straightening her hat and taking a deep, steadying breath.

"Yes," Hermione replied, feeling a twinge of grief at the prospect of viewing Dumbledore's memories when he should be sharing his stories himself.

Lowering their faces to the pool, McGonagall chose a more recent memory from that year, hoping to find some clues.

"Albus, please guide us," she whispered.

With a lurch, the two witches found themselves in the forest. They watched as two robed figures moved deeper in the thick, untouched wilderness. Mist illuminated by the moonlight flowed through the trees, revealing the movement of the slight breeze. As the figures moved, they disturbed the flow, diverting it to move around them in tendrils.

"Headmaster, with all due respect, I've tried to find out what he's up to, but he will not reveal his plans."

"Severus, you must continue your work. You know how important this is."

"What if I don't want this responsibility any longer? I can't take much more."

Desperation showed in his voice, and a wave of fear passed through Hermione. *Professor Snape uncertain? This is very serious.*

Dumbledore stopped and turned to face Severus. He paused for a moment, then seemed to make a decision.

"Severus, you must. There is no other way. You cannot lose your position as spy for the Order," Dumbledore said in an authoritative tone.

"Release me from this. I cannot..." Severus' voice failed slightly, allowing gravity to come to the surface. Hermione gasped and held McGonagall's hand tightly. So much pain, guilt and failure behind his words...

"Severus, please listen..."

"No," Severus interrupted, almost moaning. "I cannot do what you are asking of me. I refuse."

At this, the two witches watched quietly, hanging on the pause in the air.

Hermione could see Severus hanging his head, hands balled into fists. He was slowly shaking his head from side to side. It seemed to her that the only thing holding him there was a sense of responsibility to the old wizard, some undeniable bond.

Dumbledore gazed at the forest floor as if contemplating the leaves, then raised his eyes to meet Severus'. His tone when he finally spoke was now stern. If there was enough light, Hermione supposed the twinkle had left his eyes.

"Severus, you remember the night you came to me years ago, do you not?"

"Yes, of course I do."

"And do you remember what passed between us?"

"Yes."

Hermione noticed how much pain was in Severus' voice. His tone had quieted from fierce defiance to knowing he was losing a battle in slow motion. She was reminded of a small child being scolded in the gentlest of ways, reminded of their duty and where they failed. She could tell he knew exactly where this conversation was going and hated every step of the way.

"Severus, look at me. That night I took you in. I stood for you and saved your sanity and possibly your very life from a certain sentence in Azkaban, did I not?" Dumbledore said.

Severus kept his gaze steady as he responded, "Yes, sir."

"I have watched you grow up since you were eleven. Your soul and heart were misguided for a time, but are still true and good. I trust you with my life and need you now to..."

Suddenly, Severus interrupted, raging and pacing back and forth, "I am exhausted and slipping! Making that vow to Narcissa was a devastating error and will cost us all!"

A strange wind rose around Severus in a twisting pattern, accelerating in time with his ragged breathing. Strands of light passing around his hands seemed to catch Dumbledore's attention for a brief moment. Hermione and McGonagall glanced at each other, both silently acknowledging what they both noticed.

"I am of no use if I am making mistakes! You don't understand!" he roared. Severus took on the look of someone about to make a grand statement and damn the consequences.

"I am tired of being pulled between a psychopath and playing a pawn in your grand plan for Potter! You are just as power hungry as the Dark Lord, using people to serve your greater purpose!" Severus yelled accusingly.

Throughout Severus' rage, Dumbledore gazed quietly at the younger wizard, unflinching at the accusations he threw at him.

Hermione could see his chest rise and fall as Severus took a sideways glance at the great wizard. He seemed to clearly understand his outburst was severe and awaited the reaction. He looked resolute, straightening himself and looking Dumbledore square in the eyes.

"I do understand your position, Severus; however, you must understand mine. This is larger than both of us," Dumbledore said in a startlingly calm tone.

"You do not understand anything about me," Severus said viciously. With so much venom in his words, there was no need to raise his voice.

Hermione shifted her feet as she watched her normally reserved Potions master losing control. She realized now what Dumbledore was asking him to do and couldn't imagine the inner turmoil he felt.

Raising himself up straighter than usual, Dumbledore had an air as if he'd heard enough.

"That'll do, Severus," he stated quietly.

Severus was poised as if awaiting an impending attack, his head bowed slightly. He was still breathing hard with rage and rooted to the spot. Even in the darkness of the forest, Hermione could see the anger and pain evident in his eyes.

Dumbledore looked at the younger wizard. "Severus," he began in a stern tone, "I am no longer requesting this. It is no longer up for discussion."

Hermione could see something change in both wizard's faces. Dumbledore's took on a look of resolution while Severus' eyes widened slightly with the dawning realization of where this was leading.

"Severus Snape, I am calling on your wizard's life debt to me."

Looking shocked in a way Hermione never thought she'd see, Severus stood motionless for what seemed forever.

He seemed stunned.

When he went to speak at first, his voice failed, catching as if he had no breath to start. Hermione was stunned to see for the first time that her Professor was at a loss for words.

Trying a second time after a pause, she heard him say quietly as he lowered himself to one knee in front of Dumbledore.

"My life is yours. I will do whatever you ask of me."

Hermione and Minerva expected the memory to end at that point; however, the forest only faded away. They found themselves in the castle with a battle raging all around them. Death Eaters were dueling with students, hexes and curses flying everywhere. Hermione was startled to see Severus race by and then understood.

"Professor, somehow we have this memory, but how is it continuing?" Hermione asked, instinctively ducking as a spell flew past her.

"Hush and follow!" McGonagall called to her as she followed Snape.

Severus bolted up the stairs, shoving a dueling Death Eater and student out of the way. Running headlong up the tower stairs, he used the stone wall to steady himself on the way up. He burst through the door with his wand stretched out before him.

Severus swept his eyes over the scene before him and then looked as though this was his worst nightmare come to life. Dumbledore surrounded by Death Eaters, slipping down the wall and looking near death, but at the same time, a look of polite peace on his face.

Draco turned to look at Snape with his wand still raised, shaking badly, and pointed off to the side. Total and complete failure was written in his eyes. No one needed to probe his mind to know the height of both panic and desperation he had reached.

Shocked, Severus' thoughts could be heard, "*The boy will not... he can't... I should have known...*"

"*Severus...*"

Hermione and McGonagall exchanged a surprised expression to find they were hearing the exchange of thoughts as they passed between Snape and Dumbledore.

"Remember your promise, Severus. You must do this. You cannot break the vow. You have a debt to me. Save Draco."

"No... I can't. I can take them. Please, I can't do this anymore."

"How are we hearing Snape's thoughts? This is clearly different." Hermione could tell this was not a usual Pensieve memory. This was a memory of thoughts and feelings between Snape and Dumbledore.

The silent conversation of thoughts continued with rising desperation while Draco and the Death Eaters looked between Dumbledore and Severus.

Aloud, Dumbledore said, "Severus... please."

Again, the thought rushed to his mind, *"Severus, you must."*

"No... I..."

Hermione and McGonagall both flinched along with Severus when they heard the voice of Dumbledore suddenly bellow in his mind; *"SEVERUS, DO IT NOW! DO IT, YOU COWARD!"*

Hermione gasped loudly, throwing her hands to her face and looking at McGonagall with widened eyes.

"No, Albus," McGonagall whispered.

Immediately, the expression on Severus' face hardened as he raged in his mind; *"DON'T . CALL . ME . COWARD!"*

Aloud, he roared, *"AVADA KEDAVRA!"*

Hermione was again tucked in the window seat in the Headmaster's office, a thousand questions flying around her as McGonagall recounted the documentation of what they had just seen.

Sighing and looking quite tired, Minerva took her seat and looked around at the crowd in her office. "It is what we saw," she said, "It is there if you want to see for yourself. Severus did what both his Unbreakable Vow and his life debt to Albus required of him."

Tonks stepped forward. "I have heard of some recording of events occurring when a life debt is both incurred and repaid, to serve as proof. Dumbledore must have known this."

"I still don't believe it," Harry stated, his arms crossed tightly across his chest. "Snape is still nothing but a traitor."

"Harry, please, I saw the look on his face when Dumbledore was asking him to do this. He was only doing as he was told, and Dumbledore in the end had to provoke him," Hermione argued. She was painfully aware of the looks on the other Order members' faces as they watched the exchange. She was still defending someone they still didn't trust, even with the information they found.

"I don't care what anyone says. If I ever see that rotten bastard, I'll kill him!" Harry spat and stormed from the room.

Hermione drew back to her seat along the window, saddened to see her friend in such turmoil.

"Don't worry, Hermione; he's very emotional right now," McGonagall said sadly as she patted Hermione's hand. Hermione stared out the window, her forehead pressed on the cold glass and the damp draft on her face.

A thousand thoughts passed through her mind. She replayed the memories over and over and closed her eyes in an attempt to process everything. When she opened her eyes again, a chill passed through her. Confusion passed over her face as she thought she saw a movement out in the darkness. As she sat up straighter to get a better look, her heart froze at what she saw....

Severus Snape was staggering across the lawn.

A Strange Homecoming

Chapter 2 of 41

Strange reunions.

Disclaimer: 'Of Debts and Debt Collection' is a fan fiction based on the characters in the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling. No money is made from this work in any way.

Severus Snape staggered towards the light of the only place he knew as home. Staggering was a vast improvement, he thought with revulsion, over the crawling he had done only hours earlier. He had been severely injured by Buckbeak, and his attempts at finding enough healing plants in the forest had only managed to slow his death from the magical creature's attack.

"I've become nothing more than a pawn in a dying old man's game, left to linger between a madman and the Order."

He had sent Draco on to return to the Dark Lord, telling him that he needed to remain behind to spy on the Order. Keeping track of all of his lies was becoming difficult these days, and the only man who knew him completely was now dead at his hands. With this on his mind, he sent Draco off to an almost certain death. The goal had been reached but it was Draco's failure. In the mind of a maniac that was an inexcusable offense, pure and simple, and the price would be high.

The bleeding was worsening, and his only hope was to reach his private lab to obtain proper healing potions. Each step caused the wounds on his back and legs to open, allowing more blood to flow at an alarming rate. His torn left thigh refused to flex past a certain point, giving him a lurching motion at best. Severus' robes hung in tatters where the Hippogriff had torn into him relentlessly, even so much as to lift him to the treetops before dropping him and going for Draco in the end. There was a little-known entrance near the greenhouses he used when summoned. Not far for someone in good health, however he knew he was far from that state, and fading. Staggering degraded to listing to one side, and he fell to his knees as the ground rushed up suddenly.

"How appropriate."

His pride wounded almost as much as his physical form, he submitted to holding himself on his hands and knees, breathing forcibly. Even when near death, he was self-conscious, choosing to fight with every fiber of his being to avoid being found in such a state. His black curtain of hair hung in strings around his face, swaying with each failing breath. A dim part of his mind remembered how the beast grazed his head lightly with its beak, apparently razor sharp enough to slice him open. He watched with disconnected fascination as thin strips of his black hair produced perfect drops of dark red, balancing for a brief moment before falling to the lush grass below.

"After deceiving a diabolical psychopath too many times to count, to fall to a Hippogriff must be life's pure irony at its best," he thought, gritting his teeth and refusing to lie down. He started to shake from blood loss, and his eyesight began to lose focus. The ground was becoming more and more welcoming, extending itself to offer rest, possibly forever.

His thoughts drifted to when he'd be found, and by whom. Would anyone care? He had no family, and who at Hogwarts would care for a murderer?

A wave of coldness passed over him, interrupting his thoughts and replacing them with the disturbing realization that he was rocking involuntarily. His heart was beating, it seemed, three times as hard with no effect, and was missing randomly. Breathing had become a conscious effort, and a rising fear that couldn't be ignored whispered to him softly, telling him that darkness would soon be here.

"This is it. No glorious fall in battle for you. You're going to die here on the Hogwarts grounds of all places. Did you really believe that returning to Dumbledore would save you from what you deserve?"

The spy in him felt someone's eyes and he panicked, forcing himself to his feet by sheer adrenaline and searching for his wand. As he looked up at Dumbledore's office window, the sky slid sideways as if on a ship. By the light from the window, he could make out a face staring down at him with an alarmed expression. Before he could consider who it was, the sky suddenly spun left, then upwards, landing him back on his hands and knees. When his arms gave out and his shoulder hit the ground, the cool grass felt almost refreshing on his face.

As his eyes slid shut, more faces came into the light and he heard someone scream his name.

"How is he, Poppy?" Minerva asked.

The two witches stood in sight of where Severus Snape lay. The pale moonlight shining on him from the adjacent window did nothing to brighten his already pale complexion, now worsened by so much blood loss. Hermione Granger had stationed herself next to his bed, looking down at him as if she was willing him to breathe.

"Not well, I'm afraid." Taking a deep breath, Poppy continued, "You know that I've seen Severus several times after returning from being summoned, but nothing like this. He's far worse and a Hippogriff's bite has some properties that prevent quick healing. He has a large cut to his head, four broken ribs, his left thigh has a foot-long slash nearly to the bone and his back has too many cuts to count."

"Yes, I have heard from Hagrid about that." Looking closely at the mediwitch, Minerva whispered, "Will he survive this time, Poppy? You can be honest with me."

"I don't know. It all depends on his will to live, nothing more." Tearing up, Poppy looked over at Severus as she said, "I feel torn about all of this. I can't get out of my mind what's happened. What kind of life does Severus have to look forward to?"

With a somber smile, Poppy said, "No matter what I say, he'll try to walk out of here as soon as he wakes up, he's so dead set against being doctored. He's always fighting and won't listen to me."

Smiling slightly, Minerva placed a hand on Poppy's shoulder and said with hope, "I think I have a remedy for that. Please take a break."

"Thanks, Minerva. I shall."

Hermione had watched Severus' chest rise and fall with a steady rhythm for the past hour. As she stood watch, the moon rose, bathing the room with more light than even the torches could provide. She was the first to reach him as he lay on the lawn, his eyes half-open, seemingly staring directly into her soul. She had never seen him as anything less than imposing, so the sight of him like that shook her deeply.

"No, Severus, listen to me. We need you to stay," she had pleaded as the others hurried across the lawn. Somehow, using anything other than his given name didn't seem right. He had looked at her briefly, but made no move to correct her. In a way, his failure to do even that frightened her more than the worst of his injuries.

She had moved his blood soaked hair out of his face and pressed it against his head, trying to console him in some way. She wasn't sure he had heard her until he looked up and nodded slightly before losing consciousness again. He was so wounded that they had levitated him together to the hospital wing, stunned at the amount of blood. Madam Pomfrey was extremely pale upon seeing him and quickly worked to stop the bleeding. Three hours later, he lay unmoving. Madam Pomfrey said he was stable and there was nothing more to be done except wait.

"He'll need to stay in bed and rest for quite a while," she said, "something he's not talented at in the least bit. I can hurry the healing along a little, but otherwise he'll need to heal almost like a Muggle."

Minerva gazed at Hermione, who was staring intensely at Severus, and considered. Hermione may still be a student, but would soon be eighteen. Even sooner due to her use of the Time-Turner. Contrary to how sickly Severus looked even in good health, he was only thirty-seven, just a child in wizard's years.

"So much so early in life, Severus," she thought to herself.

With that, she moved over to Severus' bed, noting how Hermione stiffened slightly, as if expecting to be sent away.

"I won't leave him," Hermione said without looking up from her vigil. "He deserves to have someone here when he wakes up."

"I have no intention of forcing you to leave, Hermione," Minerva said quietly. "In fact, I'd like to ask you a favor if I may."

Sitting by the bed, Minerva took Hermione's hand in hers. Looking down, she contemplated the young witch's hand in hers and the contrast of ages. Most of the staff and Order did not know that Albus was much more than a Headmaster to Minerva. They had been very close. Feeling torn about Albus' death with his murderer beside her, no matter what the circumstances, was more than she could easily bear. Her sorrow was deeper than she had ever felt; yet in her heart she knew he was slipping away since the time his hand was injured. He wouldn't share the story even with her, and now she'd never know.

Considering Severus, she felt a different kind of pain. For someone so young, he looked so worn. Something in her felt a need to rectify that injustice. When she looked up

she realized Hermione was watching her, expecting her to speak.

"Hermione, Severus is difficult to put it nicely. Until now, I'm afraid, you've only known him the way he wishes to be seen; strong, unaffected and, above all, unbreakable. I knew Severus as a child here at Hogwarts and he was very much like you."

At Hermione's surprised expression, Minerva said with a knowing smile, "Ah yes, he loved, and still loves knowledge. He spent endless hours in the library, tucking himself in the very corners you inhabit so much."

Minerva stood and gazed out the window with her hands clasped behind her back. "Unfortunately, children are cruel and Severus suffered greatly, teased for being studious and different. One great defense is to instill fear, so Severus moved towards the Dark Arts. He has a great mind, Hermione, just like you. Even at this young age, he is also a very powerful wizard."

Straightening herself, Minerva continued, "That being said, he is stubborn, nasty, unforgiving and calloused. He values his pride above all else, and will most likely refuse to be taken care of properly. Hermione, Severus has proven that he will not listen to Madam Pomfrey in the least sense. Whether certain members of the Order are ready to admit it, this man has done quite a lot for the war. I do believe he will at least tolerate you."

Hermione listened patiently to her words and nodded while looking at Severus. "Yes, I'll do whatever is needed."

Minerva smiled, relieved that she accepted. *"Of course, she has no idea what she's getting into,"* she thought to herself.

"Excellent. You may stay for a few minutes, but must get yourself something to eat from the kitchens and sleep for a time. Madam Pomfrey will take over for you. I shall leave you now."

Hermione looked back at her former Professor and noted that she'd never seen him in anything but black robes. She looked at his pale chest visible between the bandages, and the bruising starting to form. She placed another blanket on him and then rose to go get some dinner.

"Stubborn, nasty, unforgiving and calloused," she said aloud while looking down at him.

Smiling slightly to herself, she turned to leave.

The morning sun filtered through the stained glass windows, washing the usually dark room with intense light. One beam was traveling across the floor inch by inch, making its way over to where a four-poster bed stood. After a time, it reached the bed and crept up the sheets moving over a peacefully sleeping body.

"He looks so peaceful when sleeping, doesn't he?" Hermione said mostly to herself while arranging new bandages on a table for the next changing.

"Yes, I'd say so, although I think we can stop giving him the sleeping potion this morning," Poppy said. She was checking in on how Hermione was doing after a week with the sleeping patient.

"Just wait until he wakes, you won't think him so peaceful then," Poppy thought with an inward grin.

Hermione nodded, "Just the pain potion and changing bandages then?"

"Yes, you're doing a marvelous job. Keep it up. The wounds look good," she said with a glance at Severus. "You know where to find me if needed."

Hermione nodded and walked Madam Pomfrey to the door. Returning to the bedroom, she sighed and looked around the room. She had brightened things up considerably, having the house-elves clear away the clutter and open the drapes. It was such a lovely view and a shame, in her opinion, that he kept it shut out. Hermione glanced at the clock and noticed it was time to change the bandage on his thigh. She hadn't had a problem with it so far, but began to wonder what could happen should he wake up.

She worried her lip as she moved the bandages to the bed. She surveyed his condition. "Still thin, even with the nourishment potions. How high can his metabolism be? I'll need to change the wraps soon..."

She grinned, remembering how the girls would whisper in class about what was under all those robes, prompting her to roll her eyes before attempting to concentrate on her work.

His voice was another matter.

It didn't matter what he was saying; he could be reciting the train timetable backwards and it would be pure ecstasy of sound. Something about the depths it could reach, achieving a rolling motion all its own.

"If those girls could see this, they'd just about pass out," she muttered to herself, humming as she pulled his leg into her lap.

Spreading healing balm on the deep gash that ran from high up near his hip to his knee, Hermione doubted walking was in his immediate future. She concentrated on replacing the bandage perfectly, winding the tape around his leg to ensure it'd stay put.

She failed to notice one thing; her patient was glaring at her.

Sleeping was not a talent Severus possessed, which explained why he roamed the castle most nights, the sport of catching students out after curfew his only pastime. Nightmares of the things he had witnessed and done over the years haunted him mercilessly. He ceased actively seeking sleep long ago, simply allowing exhaustion to dictate when he would rest.

He felt groggy, as if swimming back to the surface through murky waters. He was dimly aware of something touching him, applying something soothing on his leg. No one except Poppy had successfully doctored him, and that was after threatening to hex some important bits off if he continued to refuse. Since then, he'd avoided her whenever returning from the meetings injured, choosing to deal with it himself. Severus attempted to open his eyes, fighting the morning sun to adjust. Looking down to investigate just who at this moment held his leg, he jerked in surprise.

His surprise quickly slid towards horror at who it was.

"Miss Granger, unhand me this instant!" he rasped, his voice raw from disuse. He tried to move away, but found that his body refused all commands without blinding pain.

Startled, Hermione jumped up and dropped his injured leg, causing him to hiss in pain as it fell back on the bed.

"Well, if you hadn't scared me!" she cried, watching him stare at her with clenched teeth as he waited for the pain to subside.

"Just what in the world do you think you're doing? Where are my clothes?" he demanded, looking around the room. "And what in Merlin's beard have you done to my rooms? Close those blasted drapes!" he shouted, squinting against the light with one eye and glaring with the other.

"Prof..., umm," she sputtered, trying to figure out what to say.

"Ah, back with us are you, Severus?" Minerva said sweetly.

Both Hermione and Severus turned at the same time as Minerva entered the room.

"Minerva, would you explain to me why Miss Granger is here, and why I am almost completely unclothed?" he demanded, clearly out of his element.

"Yes, of course, Severus. But first, let me send for some tea and toast. You must be hungry for real food after all this time and we have much to discuss, yes?" Minerva said evenly.

Remembering recent events, he changed his tone, "Yes, I suppose we do."

"I insist on some clothes, even a prisoner deserves that much," he called as Minerva left the room to Floo the kitchens. He gathered up the sheets in an attempt to cover himself and sneered at Hermione as she tried hard to suppress a smile at his modesty.

A house-elf popped in and, upon seeing Severus, squeaked loudly. She quickly placed the tea service and breakfast trays down while never letting her eyes off of him.

"Well now, tuck in," Minerva said. She seated herself by the bed and gestured for Hermione to take a seat as well.

Taking a deep breath she began, "First, let me be clear. You are not a prisoner. We've all witnessed your conversation with Albus and what happened on the Astronomy Tower. Tonks has verified the memory as a record of your debt to Albus and you've been cleared." A deep wave of sadness passed over her and she felt lost at that moment.

Returning to herself, she continued, "Hermione found you on the castle lawn and has been tending to your wounds this past week-

"Week?" he interrupted with a stunned look on his face. His eyes flew to Hermione.

"Yes, a week," Minerva repeated, taking a sip of tea and ignoring his reaction. "You've been unconscious since then. Hermione has been taking care of you, and quite nicely I see."

Minerva leaned a little, looking at the bit of his leg still visible. Hermione noticed that she could almost see him blush slightly as he jerked the sheet over further. Luckily, he had yet to notice that she washed his hair with a flowery shampoo. That, of course, would not last long as the man refused to take care of himself in that respect. Thankfully, she stopped herself short of braiding it to keep it back, thinking she would like to avoid being hexed into oblivion.

"Now," Minerva continued, "You've got quite a lot of healing to do and Hermione will be looking after you. No arguments, Severus. I'll leave you to rest."

Minerva stood and regarded him over her glasses.

"Oh, and Severus? If I hear of you giving her trouble, you'll have me to answer to, understood?"

Severus crossed his arms and while hunching his shoulders answered, "Fine, as long as she keeps quiet and leaves me alone."

"Agreed. Hermione, you're doing well, I'll check in on you later," Minerva said and turned to leave.

After Hermione smiled and went into the adjacent room to fetch another potion, Severus raised his head and called, "Minerva?"

Minerva stopped and stood in the doorway.

"I don't know what to say about all of this," he said quietly, taking time to be able to look at her, "There aren't words to adequately express how sorry I am."

She looked at him there, his soul laid open to her, apologizing.

"Something Severus never does," she thought to herself.

Trying to think of what Albus would want her to say, she looked him in the eyes and, after thinking for a moment, said simply, "You did what had to be done."

She nodded slightly as if to affirm her thoughts, and left.

Hermione returned to the bedroom and stood in the doorway; the potion forgotten in her hands.

She watched as Severus faced the window and rubbed his palm across his eyes before running his fingers through his hair.

"Sir?"

When he turned to her with the same irritated expression as usual, she was surprisingly relieved. Whatever had just passed between McGonagall and Severus was obviously disturbing. Hermione didn't know if she was ready just yet to address how complex everything had become in recent days. He was watching her reaction, as if determining her motives for even being in the room with him at this point. A long, uncomfortable silence passed; the kind that demanded interruption.

"It's time for you to take this, sir," Hermione said, cautiously entering the room.

"And just what is this?" he asked, raising an eyebrow and taking a brief sniff of the bottle's contents. "Planning to drug me again to have your fun?"

"What?" Hermione gasped, "I was taking care of the wound! And this is for the pain!" She could feel the color rise in her face at the injustice and cursed herself for allowing him to play her so easily.

Severus observed her reaction with growing amusement.

"Sir, you need to take it. The previous potion will wear off soon," Hermione ventured, hoping he'd just cooperate to get rid of her. "Madam Pomfrey has written this schedule and "

"You can just discard that right in the lake for all I care; I'm not taking anything," he stated with an air of finality. "I'm fine."

Angered that he'd disturb her perfect care record, Hermione crossed her arms and glared at him. "Sir, with all due respect, you need to take this. Now, please."

Severus raised an eyebrow at her attitude and simply responded, "No."

"Sir, please," she pleaded.

"Miss Granger," he began and rolled his eyes with disgust, "I am a fully grown wizard, and can take care of myself just fine without someone hovering over me. Now, if you'll remove yourself from my sight, I'm going to take a bath."

Hermione was seething. "Oh, really? Are you now?"

His eyes shot up at her, a look of surprise at her tone was there for a moment, and then was gone.

"Yes, really. Might I suggest you watch your tone? Now, run along, find your little friends, and leave me alone," he growled as he dragged his leg to the edge of the bed and then began to shove himself up with more effort than he planned. He tried to remain as silent as someone with broken ribs could be out of pride. By the time he was sitting up, he was severely out of breath.

"No, I think I'd like to see this," she said as she took a seat by the bed and crossed her arms.

"Splendid, now I'm a spectator sport," he thought while gritting his teeth. He'd need to breathe soon and could only hope that a groan wouldn't escape along with the exchange of air. Most of him wanted to shout at her, hurling insults until she left the room, but another part wanted to fight with her. No one had ever hoped to match him word for word, and it looked like she was going to put up an interesting fight at least. Quite entertaining.

"Well? Just when are you planning to go get that bath of yours? We have a schedule to keep, you know?" she said while holding up the clock and tapping the face. "You're going to eat a full lunch today."

Hermione was stunned at how she was daring to speak to him, and that he hadn't verbally torn her apart yet. She had forgotten to address him as 'sir' too many times to count. Some strange voice in the back of her mind wondered why he was actually tolerating her; obviously he could have thrown a bigger fit. She decided to see just how far she could go.

Muttering under his breath, Severus sat with one leg hanging off of the bed. Gradually, he moved the other leg to the floor and in one motion made to stand.

"See?" he said, trying to breathe and not groan in pain. He was putting all of his weight on his right leg to avoid touching the other.

"Now, the show is over. Go on and leave."

"Walk."

Severus stared at her incredulously, "What?"

"Well, walk. You don't think the bath is going to travel out here, do you?" she said, doing a spectacular job at suppressing a grin.

"Miss Granger, I demand that you leave!" he yelled, trying to point at the door and keep his balance at the same time.

"Oh, with all due respect, sir, I will not." At his look of building rage and wavering balance she continued, "Headmistress McGonagall has tasked me with your care and that's exactly what I'm going to do, whether you like it or not. If you don't believe me when I tell you that you're too weak and injured to walk, then see for yourself."

With a slight smirk, she settled back into the chair and repeated, "Walk."

Severus stared at her in disbelief, and then narrowed his eyes as if he was going to literally take hold of her and throw her out. He was even more shocked when Hermione completely ignored him and made a shooing motion with her hands. Her complete audacity both infuriated and fascinated him.

He was losing both his balance and strength to stand, and the bathroom was at least ten feet away. Calculating his stride, that meant either putting weight on the mangled leg about five times, or hopping. That was out of the question as there was no way to perform the motion with any dignity, never mind while wearing nothing but a flimsy robe, night clothes, and bandages.

"I'm waiting."

He took one step and, as predicted, his leg immediately buckled, landing him in an awkward split.

Hermione was there in an instant and caught his upper body, grazing all of the cuts on his back and squeezing his broken ribs together.

This all caused him to do what anyone else would do.

He screamed bloody murder.

Minerva selected a school owl to correspond with the Ministry regarding Severus' condition and plans to stay at Hogwarts. They had requested a full inquiry into the details of the life debt and the events of that night. She had so far refused to have him appear in person, stating simply he was cleared and was in no condition to be disturbed. Tonks had taken the case, testifying to the life debt and doing an excellent job at placating their need for information. Humming softly to herself, she reached for a large tawny owl to attach her letter.

Suddenly, all of the owls startled and took flight, flying at her in all directions while aiming for the way out. At the same time, she heard a horrible scream filling the air, reverberating off the walls of the owlery, and echoing to the ceiling. Feathers were everywhere, and dust from the droppings clouded her sight. The inhuman sound was coming from the direction of Severus' rooms.

Minerva dropped the note and ran out the door, batting straggling owls out of her way. She ran through the halls, holding her robes up to clear her legs as best she could. She burst into the bedroom and surveyed the arrangement of bodies on the floor.

Hermione was pinned under a sprawled and unconscious Severus while his leg was bent underneath him, the gash reopened and bleeding on the stone floor.

Hermione was in the process of shoving him off of her and failing.

"Headmistress, I he was trying to walk and well fell," Hermione stuttered, trying her best to explain the state of her patient.

"I can see that, Hermione, now please help me get him back in bed. That's it, grab him under his arms. Come now, he won't bite. Now, one-two-three, up and over," Minerva coached as they dragged the unconscious wizard back onto the bed.

As Hermione worked to stop the flow of blood, she was startled to find him awakening again.

"Insolent girl, can't you keep your hands off me for one minute!" he yelled as she pressed the cloth into the wound.

Hermione didn't think it possible for someone to yell through clenched teeth like that.

"Now, who would like to explain to me what in the world happened here?" Minerva asked both of them sternly, her hands on her hips.

Severus shifted his eyes in Minerva's direction and then allowed them to drift up to her hair.

"Minerva, why are there feathers in your hair?" Severus suddenly asked, looking up at her innocently.

Hermione noticed a smirk along with the alternating looks of pain on his face as she worked on his leg.

"Severus! Please!" Minerva cried in frustration, plucking feathers out of her hair and brushing dust from her robes. "The two of you need to come to an agreement and work together, understood?"

Hermione thought it seemed odd to be scolded alongside him, but then realized that he, too, was a student at one time.

Minerva practically growled in frustration and turned for the door.

Hermione watched her fuming Headmistress leave and then stole a look at Severus.

She was startled to not only find him looking back at her, but that he was suppressing a smirk.

She didn't know if she should be happy or very, very afraid.

"Miss Granger, are you going to stop staring at me, or is this going to go on all day?" Severus growled, quickly losing the devious grin at Minerva's frustrated departure.

Hermione was brought out of her thoughts. "Yes, almost done, sir." She finished up cleaning the wound and stood, still unnerved at seeing that look upon his face and worse yet, in her direction.

"Fine. Now leave me alone. Go find something to do that requires you far from me."

"Sir, the potion "

"I told you I'm fine," he said, gritting his teeth, "now get out!"

"Fine! I'll see about lunch then!" she shouted, stomping from the room and slamming the door.

"Stubborn, nasty," she mumbled to herself as she went to Floo the kitchens for lunch.

"Finally, peace," he muttered and laid back. The pain was coming on with alarming intensity, but he wasn't about to admit it to anyone, let alone her. He glanced at the potion sitting on the nightstand and for a moment considered taking some.

He'd rather suffer.

Running his hands through his hair he noticed two things. The first that it was not greasy for once in his life, and second, that in the fiasco his head wound had opened and he was bleeding again.

"Damn," he muttered and glanced at the bathroom door again.

Hermione returned and stated, "Lunch will be here soon, and then you're scheduled for a nap. No excuses."

She pointed to a parchment where a schedule was neatly printed.

"First, do not speak to me like a child, Miss Granger, and second "

"Why is there blood on your hand?" Hermione interrupted with concern on her face and approached the bed. "It's your head again, isn't it?" she said, moving to touch him.

"It'll be fine," he mumbled and swung his head to avoid her touch.

"Yes, sure and I guess you'd be happy to just bleed all over everything then, right? I'm getting sick of you and your bravery act! Why can't you just let someone take care of you? I swear Madam Pomfrey was right. You are better knocked out!"

A voice in the back of her brain was screaming at her to stop, that he'd surely go mental on her now.

"Oh really?" He felt strangely calm, considering her outburst.

"Yes, and she was spot on too."

"Why are you here?" he asked evenly.

Hermione blinked at the sudden, careening turn in the argument. He looked satisfied at her perplexed expression and regarded her with a calculated gaze, awaiting her next move.

"I've been asked to take care "

Severus swiftly interrupted her, "Miss Granger, let's not insult each other's intelligence. Why are you here?"

"Because I care and want to help," Hermione said seriously.

Hermione watched him try to fathom how anyone would care. It was obvious to her that he didn't completely believe her. When he narrowed his eyes slightly and looked into her eyes she did not look away, almost hoping he'd see that she was telling the truth. It saddened her that he was so suspicious that anyone would care enough to help.

While a heavy curtain of silence fell between them, Hermione waited.

Either he had chosen to no longer fight or ceased to care because Hermione heard him mutter, "Fine."

She watched him for a moment. Her attention was drawn to his hairline, where a small trickle of blood was starting to travel down his forehead.

"Will you let me clean the wound again, sir?" Hermione asked in an even tone.

Even as he intercepted the trail of blood before it could reach his eyes, he stated, "No."

When she saw his eyes flick towards the bathroom doubtfully, she ignored his refusal and said, "I think that using water, rather than magic, would be best. I can do it here."

After considering for a moment, Severus sighed in frustrated defeat, "Fine."

Hermione brightened as she concentrated on transfiguring the nightstand into a water basin. At first, she thought he would refuse and start up another round of argument, but watched as he leaned over and reached for the water. She could tell that even performing that small movement produced a tremendous amount of pain, not that he would ever admit it.

She set about washing the blood out of his hair as he tried to hold his head over the basin. Grabbing the shampoo, she started massaging it in small circles, starting at his

temples, and moving slowly inch by inch along the sides around his ears and meeting in the back. She then started along his forehead, taking care around the cut and paid special attention there to clean the blood away. Using larger circles and adding more of her nails, she worked on the back of his head down near his neck, moving back up and towards the top again.

The motion of running her hands on his head brought her back to when she found him on the lawn, blood coming from just about every major part of his broken body. All she could do was stroke the side of his head and smooth the hair down while the others came to help. At the time, she hadn't realized that she was screaming for them to come faster, to do something. Nothing like that had ever happened to her, and to think that someone was literally dying in her arms tore her world apart. She was a problem-solver at heart, and if she failed it would kill her.

She was lost in those thoughts as she worked the lather more than necessary, repeating the pattern and massaging his scalp, telling herself it was for healing purposes. He was even leaning into her hands slightly as she worked. Something she didn't think would be possible for him.

Suddenly, she felt him tense under her hands.

In one movement, he pushed her roughly away, somehow managed to lunge for the opposite nightstand, and grabbed his wand.

Hermione saw the murderous look on Severus' face and followed his line of sight....

Harry Potter was standing in the doorway with his wand raised, and a look of complete rage on his face.

Reunion

Chapter 3 of 41

Some duels don't require wands.

Disclaimer: 'Of Debts and Debt Collection' is a fan fiction based on the characters in the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling. No money is made from this work in any way.

AN: Thanks for the reviews. I must thank Ariadne, who is my trusty Beta and darn good friend.

Harry stood in the doorway, his wand shaking as he pointed it directly at Severus.

"Try it," Severus growled, almost wanting him to strike. His voice barely betrayed the tremendous pain from throwing himself to retrieve his wand. The room blurred for a moment before refocusing, mostly due to the adrenaline now pumping through his veins. His heart beat wildly.

"Harry! NO!" Hermione screamed. She launched herself to her feet and rushed at Harry. "Please! You saw it in the Pensieve! He did what he had to do!" she reasoned frantically, trying to force his wand down.

"Hermione, don't defend this worthless bastard! Get out of the way!" Harry raged, trying to push her aside.

"*Stupefy!*" Harry roared and swung his arm around Hermione. The spell immediately bounced away from Severus, crossed the room, and destroyed the dresser, sending splinters of wood everywhere. All of the pictures fell off the walls, sending the occupants screaming out of their frames with their arms up over their heads. A considerable amount of sawdust sprinkled Severus' wet hair. He remained in the same place on the bed, looking almost comfortable, propped up on his right elbow and holding his wand casually. Harry had a look of raging frustration and was breathing hard. His wand hand trembled.

"Come on, Potter, surely you can do better than that? After all, I'm a wounded man lying in bed," Severus teased with a bored voice, provoking Harry further.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" Harry yelled, shoving his shoulder against Hermione. The spell again rebounded wildly, this time heading straight back. Harry and Hermione managed to avoid a direct hit, but the bedroom door did not fare as well. With a loud crack, it blew off its hinges, cart wheeled end-over-end, and came to rest across an armchair in the sitting room.

"Oh, please, you're boring me with this," Severus sneered. "Just like a Potter to attack an injured man. Your father knew he never had a chance against me alone, so he always chose to have his gang around to ambush me."

Harry moved to cast again, even as Hermione wrestled with him.

"Potter, haven't you learned anything yet? You haven't a chance against the Dark Lord! Do you seriously expect your series of sad spells advertised well ahead of time is going to be a match for him? I can hear your thoughts across the room without even trying," Severus mocked. "It's a shame you didn't take after your mother. You had to grow up to be just like your worthless father!"

Hermione placed herself directly between them, pushing Harry back out the doorway. When Severus mentioned Lily, Harry froze, then surged forward, completely out of control.

"SHUT UP! You don't know anything about my mother! Don't you dare talk about her!" Harry yelled.

"Harry, stop!" Hermione cried. She had one foot up against the doorway, trying to block him from getting around her. Every time she turned to call her wand, he tried to slip past her.

A smirk of amusement spread across Severus' face at the nerve he had touched. "Oh, but I did know her. She was kind and intelligent and deserved much more. Even in death, she showed nothing but love, dying to protect you. And look at what you've become ... nothing but an arrogant prat. I have news for you, Potter; you are heading towards certain death," he said, regarding Harry with disgust.

"*EXPEL...*" Harry began, but was cut off as Severus' wand moved a fraction. Harry was suddenly jerked upwards by his ankles and hung in the air. His wand slipped from his hand and clattered onto the stone floor.

"Let me go!" Harry screamed, his face turning bright red. He swung his arms uselessly as he raged, "I'm going to kill you!"

"Going to kill me, Potter? Oh, my mistake. Here, please continue," Severus said in an apologetic voice. Suddenly, Harry was unceremoniously dropped headfirst to the floor in a heap of robes and limbs.

"Professor Snape, please!" Hermione yelled and called her wand. With a devious smile, Severus shrugged his shoulders in an apologetic motion.

"You don't know anything, you liar! You're the reason they're dead! You told Voldemort about the prophecy!" Harry roared, his face filled with pain and anger. Hermione held Harry's wand hand down and pointed hers at Severus.

"Enough! Both of you, stop!" Hermione cried and finally wrenched Harry's wand from his hand. She noticed that Severus paid her almost no attention. The only indication that he was aware of her wand was a slight twitch of one eyebrow, nothing more. It was more of an irritated expression than anything even remotely near concern.

"Yes, that part is true," Severus said, ignoring Hermione. "I didn't know who the prophecy referred to, though. Had I known, I would have never told the Dark Lord."

Hermione noticed that Severus was no longer holding himself up very well. He still appeared remarkably calm, even with bits of wood all over him and his hair in a mess of half-dried tangles.

Severus looked to consider for a moment before he said in a quieter voice, "Your mother refused to give you up to the Dark Lord, even though..." Severus trailed off. When he spoke again, his voice entered a dreamlike state, "She could have lived, but chose to save you. She should have listened and put you aside."

"How do you...?" Harry asked slowly, his anger migrating towards curiosity. Hermione, as always, was one step ahead. Her face held an expression of dawning realization.

She distractedly lowered her wand. The tension in the room became unbearable.

"Because," Severus began, pausing long to think before looking up at them both. "I know because I was there."

"Lily, he wants the boy; let him go!" Severus pleaded with Lily as she clutched Harry to her chest. As a reward for his alerting him to the prophecy, Voldemort brought Severus with him to watch him take care of the problem.

Lily and James had been cornered in a back room before James began to fight for his family's life. The duel had traveled through the rooms, settling in an adjacent bedroom. Severus had instructions not to interfere, as Voldemort wanted to handle them himself. He was ordered to keep Lily restrained while Voldemort went after James.

The walls were half-destroyed from dodged spells. The ceiling hung in tatters, and flames had begun to take hold above, raining burning fragments of wood down around them. Lily and Severus both twitched as the sound of Voldemort casting a killing curse in the other room reached them. Somewhere several windows exploded with incredible force. All of the walls shifted slightly, indicating that a collapse was imminent.

Lily became both frantic and determined at the same time. Harry, silent until now, began to scream.

"NO! He'll have to kill me first! Reason with him, Severus! He's just a baby!" Lily cried, now begging him to intervene.

"Lily, I can't. The prophecy states that the boy is a threat! Leave him and you'll be spared! You can have other children!"

When Lily violently shook her head, Severus took hold of her shoulders. "Let him go; it's your only chance!" Severus pleaded with panic rising in his own voice.

Lily and Severus both crouched as a wall nearby blasted inward, slamming wood and furniture across the room. The silence that fell in the other room could only mean one thing.

"Please!" Severus tried in a hoarse whisper, true fear striking his heart. *What have I done?*

"Give me the child," Voldemort said in a cold voice as he strode into the room.

Lily screamed as she clutched Harry even tighter against her, directly over her heart. "NO! He's just a baby. He's no threat to you!"

"I'm warning you, now stand aside!" Voldemort sneered as he stepped closer and raised his wand slowly.

"My Lord, perhaps we could use her. She is quite talented at Potions and could be an asset," Severus reasoned carefully, trying to keep his features schooled while pleading for Lily and Harry's lives. "The child cannot possibly be a threat..."

"Enough!" Voldemort roared as he spun and thrust his wand against Severus' throat. Severus could see the mix of terror and utter despair on Lily's face. Voldemort had already cast a spell preventing Apparition on the house, effectively sealing any escape.

In a quiet voice, full of the kind of anger made worse by detached calm, Voldemort hissed, "You dare to question me?"

It was the type of cold, almost casual question that could easily be mistaken for normal. However, when utilized by the truly deranged, the tone meant so much more. Behind those simple words lurked the promise of torture, or if one was lucky, a quick death.

Severus took a step backwards and flicked his eyes to Lily before stating, "No, my Lord..."

Without warning, Voldemort roared, "*CRUCIO!*"

Severus fell in a heap and was thrust into a dark world of searing pain. It rolled in waves, washing over him and never quite receding. Some part of his mind registered the smell of burning upholstery and that the flames must be approaching.

Dimly, he heard Lily continue to scream for her baby's life.

"Never once did she plead for her own."

The dead silence was startlingly empty. Severus had a slightly removed look about him as he told the story, while Harry's face held a mixture of confusion and disbelief. He stared at Severus, seemingly lost in the words, his wand forgotten.

Hermione's heart broke at the thought of Severus living with the knowledge that his mistake cost his first love her life. She caught his eyes for a moment, expecting to see regret. What she saw there instead was resentment before he swept his gaze to Harry.

Severus broke the silence. "I was already spying then," he said with force, as if to drive home the point that he was, indeed, working for the Order even before Harry was born. "In return for Dumbledore's protection from being sent to Azkaban, I agreed to become a spy and made an Unbreakable Vow."

He looked up at Harry with revulsion spreading on his face as he said, "I vowed to protect you."

"That can't be true," Harry said in disbelief.

Severus' face darkened dangerously.

"Oh? And why in the world would I make up something like this?" Severus snarled. "Do you believe for one moment that I enjoy being bound to protect you? The son of a man I hated more than anything in this world?"

"Think, Potter! I've had the opportunity to kill you a thousand times. I could have easily killed you not more than ten minutes ago. I have the power to dispose of you in ways unknown to civilized wizarding society, and why haven't I? Do you think I've enjoyed being tortured by the Dark Lord for failing to deliver you?"

Silence fell. Harry had no answer, it seemed, and instead had taken to simply staring. Hermione remained between them, poised should either one choose to start up again. Severus shot her a look as if to say she must be joking to dare point her wand at him.

"Minerva was our Bonder," Severus stated. He lifted a hand and gestured beyond them.

"That is true," Minerva stated as she walked into the room, neatly stepping over the mass of broken wood strewn across the floor. She and Severus exchanged a look before she surveyed the room. She had been in her office when the charms warning of the use of dueling spells had sounded. It wasn't difficult to decipher what it meant.

"Now," she said, allowing her eyes to settle for a moment on each guilty party. "Am I to expect that every time I enter these rooms, I shall be greeted with fallen patients or destroyed furniture?"

"Harry burst in, and well, things just..." Hermione started, shooting a frustrated look at Harry, and then to Severus, who gave her a look of innocence. *He's very talented at slipping out of trouble, that one.*

"I'm sorry. I'll leave," Harry said. His face still held a detached expression.

"I do think that would be prudent, Mr. Potter. Perhaps when Severus is up to it, we can all sit down to discuss this. Until then, he requires rest, nothing else. Agreed?" she said, looking at Harry and expecting nothing but an affirmative answer. Her tone also meant that this incident would not be forgotten.

"Yeah," Harry muttered.

Hermione watched as Harry shot Severus a look of hatred before leaving. Part of Hermione wanted them to come to an agreement to work together and combine their talents. Considering what had just happened, though, she worried that the possibility of a partnership was extremely remote.

"Now, Severus, I see your lunch has arrived," Minerva said, and with a wave of her wand, repaired the dresser, replaced the pictures to the walls, and relocated the door back to its proper home. "Please tell me you two can manage a meal without more drama?"

"Yes," Hermione and Severus answered almost simultaneously, again feeling uncomfortable under McGonagall's critical eye.

"Oh, and Severus?" Minerva asked. She waited while he shoved his wet hair out of his face. "Make sure you watch that attitude for just a few hours, understood? Try being nice to Miss Granger for once," she suggested, giving the slightest of nods at him as she left the room.

Severus was dumbfounded. The way Minerva had given him that look made an impression that left him stunned.

"Sir?"

Severus jerked out of his thoughts, glaring at her as he winced in pain.

"I'm sorry, sir, I didn't mean to startle you," Hermione apologized. The expression on his face, though, intrigued her.

"I'm sorry for Harry..." she began. Suddenly the nightstand became fascinating.

"It is not your place to apologize for the likes of him," he said quickly, sneering at the thought of her feeling responsible for Potter's actions.

Hermione shrugged. She had no excuse for the way Harry acted; however, part of her couldn't blame him for his feelings. "That was ... I mean ... how did you? Well ... I mean...."

"Miss Granger, I may be skilled at Legilimency, but you are not making sense," he said, a bit harsher than he intended.

"Well, sir, I mean ... fighting Harry without even getting up and wounded was well ... impressive," Hermione said carefully, afraid of his response to a compliment.

"Yes, well," he said, then, after clearing his throat and straightening a little, continued, "I do believe you're one of the first to recognize my skill."

"Except Lockhart," Hermione said with a grin.

Severus nodded. "Indeed. That pompous fool was in desperate need of an ego adjustment."

Silence stretched between them as Hermione couldn't help but catch his gaze. Once there, she was surprised to find that she couldn't look away, even though the amount of time seemed rude. Severus' face, however, held a calm but intense expression. His eyes narrowed slightly, and he looked to be considering her.

Hermione blinked and mumbled, "I'll just ... go fetch lunch and be back shortly."

"Yes, of course." He did not remove his dark eyes from hers.

She shook her head and moved to the door.

As Hermione brought the tray, she caught a look on Severus' face, as if he was waging some internal war. It quickly disappeared once he saw her. Lunch passed peacefully with both of them successfully avoiding each other's eyes.

"What is on your..." he began and hesitated. *Am I seriously doing this?* "What is on your schedule, Miss Granger?" Severus finished, sighing with a twinge of defeat.

A hesitant smile spread on Hermione's face at the prospect of at least a semi-cooperative patient. "Ah, let's see... It says for you to take a nap, sir."

She glanced at him cautiously, suspicious of the shift.

Knowing the answer in advance, she asked anyway, "Do you want a sleeping potion?"

"No, I'll be fine," he said and leaned back. In true Slytherin fashion, his intention was to let it appear as if he was allowing her a victory. In truth, he was exhausted.

Hermione helped arrange the sheets over him. When she went to straighten up, she avoided his eyes, fearful of getting lost once again. He had a penetrating gaze that felt like she was being examined from the inside out. The realization that she was close enough to feel his breath struck her, and she pulled away.

He watched her with a look in his eyes that both drew her to him and made her want to run at the same time. It was as if some force meant for the moment to occur, refusing to allow it to pass unnoticed. Slowly, she withdrew and moved towards the door, keeping her eyes on him as an uneasy silence stretched out between them.

"I ... um, will be in the sitting room if you need anything."

He nodded, appearing both tired and intensely interested. Hermione stood with her hand on the doorknob for a moment before closing it completely.

Hermione had left the room an hour ago, but Severus could not calm his thoughts well enough to even remotely consider sleep. He was currently trying to differentiate dreams from reality enough to grasp exactly what was occurring between them. Part of him wanted to push her away, to believe that she couldn't possibly want to get involved with him, that it was too strange of a situation. He could tell from reading her emotions that she felt something towards him. Whether it was the need to take care of him, or true attraction, had yet to be seen.

Various reasons why it could happen invaded his thoughts as well, pushing doubts aside. If he read Minerva's expression correctly, it was agreeable with her for some strange reason. His suspicious nature questioned her motives, as he could find no reason why she would want to help grant him happiness, in any form.

"Sir?" Hermione asked as she ventured into the room cautiously. "Are you awake?"

"Yes."

"I was thinking that you might want to move to the other room and read."

Severus nodded with his best air of indifference.

After finishing with a bandage change, Hermione helped Severus to the sitting room. They had become quite good at walking in time, so Hermione could act as his crutch. His breathing became labored as his ribs hurt tremendously; however, he had absolutely no intention of letting her know. Several times she insisted on stopping, as he would simply hold his breath rather than make a sound. Once in the room, she set him down and gathered some books for him to read.

They had passed several hours in companionable silence. Every so often, Hermione would steal a glance carefully in an attempt at reading his expression. She noticed that his brow would come together slightly whenever he took a deeper breath or moved even a fraction. It was difficult to watch him for too long unnoticed, as he was painfully aware of anyone's eyes on him.

After watching Severus carefully breathing to avoid making a sound yet again, Hermione fetched the pain potion and stated, "You're taking this."

His eyes widened as he responded casually, "Oh, you believe so? I believe we've already established my position quite clearly."

Hermione dropped the politeness and asked, "And give me one good reason why, other than stubborn male pride?"

Both eyebrows shot up in surprise at the way she had spoken to him. He lowered the book and said in a calm voice, "I need no reason to explain my actions or my refusal. It is my pain."

"You can't breathe correctly and you're not fooling anyone. You're only spending more energy to keep your pride, rather than allowing me to take care of you."

He glared at her. "Bravery does not become you."

"There is nothing brave about insisting that your little act is completely useless, not to mention childish," Hermione countered. She figured that if he was going to tear into her for her lack of respect, it certainly would have happened by now.

"Miss Granger, I have spent my entire life being insulted in various ways and have been ridiculed by the best. There is nothing you can say that will change my mind."

She shook her head slowly as she said thoughtfully, "I figured you would be intelligent enough to see the logic. I guess I was wrong."

His eyes shot to her, then narrowed.

"Interesting angle, Miss Granger. A failure, but interesting."

Hermione thought for a moment. He hadn't completely destroyed her yet, cutting her to pieces with sharp words that would bring anyone to their knees. Something flashed there. He was holding back.

At her irritated expression, he added while gesturing towards her with the book, "You should be glad that I am in a good mood."

"Yes, you're very threatening right about now," Hermione said, rolling her eyes before even thinking. He was acting so childishly that she had slipped directly into the way she would fight with Harry or Ron.

"You are playing with fire, Miss Granger, and are on my last nerve. Do not attempt to take part in a battle of wits or dissect my motives with wordplay. You will not win."

"Am I playing with fire? Or am I simply beating you at your own game?" Hermione stated with the coldest stare she could come up with. "Not as enjoyable when the opponent hurls it back, is it?"

Severus suddenly struggled to rise, growling, "How dare you...."

"Oh, getting up again, sir? Want to take a walk?" Hermione asked with mock concern, crossing her arms and holding her ground. She roughly shoved the voice in her head aside. It was now screaming and waving at her to stop, that she couldn't possibly be doing this. Basically, to shut up.

"Miss Granger," he growled in a dangerous tone, "I am warning you. You forget who you are speaking to."

"And you, sir, are forgetting that I have taken care of you for eight days! You have only been awake for one of them! I hardly think it's difficult to take a simple potion! I'm only here because I care!" Hermione hurled back at him.

"I never requested such an immense sacrifice on your part. Clearly, your overwhelming Gryffindor drive for recognition is at work here. Well, I am fine and can manage on my own. I don't need anyone."

Hermione was beyond furious. "Really? You didn't seem to be doing too well on your own out there on the grounds!" She was yelling now but didn't care.

He froze, his hands still positioned on the arms of the chair where he was attempting to push himself upright.

"If I hadn't looked out that window, you'd be dead. Admit it," Hermione said quietly. She set her jaw and glared at him.

There, I said it.

She waited for the tirade to start; however, he only leaned back in the chair.

Instead of exploding in rage, he regarded her with the type of respect usually shown to a worthy opponent. Incredibly, he nodded, as if awarding her silent points.

"I cannot deny it," he said slowly.

Hermione was breathless, as if she had run up a flight of stairs. She found that her hands had been balled into fists, her nails cutting into her palms. At first, she didn't register what he had said.

"Did I actually win?"

He shook his head. "Not the battle you may believe you are fighting, no."

She looked at him questioningly.

"I am not taking the potion."

Hermione groaned. She had thought that Harry and Ron were thick at times, but Severus Snape was by far the worst she had ever come across. Ever.

"I'm going to the library for a few hours," she announced, trying to disguise her frustration. She was actually going to seek permission to hex him into submission, drug him for another week or two ... anything.

"My soul shall suffer greatly from the loss of your companionship. I shall count the seconds until your return," he mocked.

While attempting to give him a proper glare, she was confused by what she saw there. He was again studying her with a calculating gaze, as if he was trying to figure her out. It was there for a moment, then gone, replaced by his usual irritated expression.

Breaking the contact, she moved quickly to the door.

As she turned to close the door, she heard him say, "Hermione?"

Shocked that he had used her given name, she took a moment to respond. "Yes?"

She almost thought he wasn't going to speak. The door handle clicked under her fingers as she nervously fiddled with it. The sound of her name coming from him was stunning enough; what came next was memorable.

Severus looked at her sincerely as he tilted his head in a gesture that imparted unspoken respect, however small.

He then looked her in the eyes and said simply, "Thank you."

Sins of the Father

Chapter 4 of 41

Some wounds never heal...

Disclaimer: All characters belong to JK Rowling. No money, fame, glory etc are made from this story whatsoever. It is nothing more than a tribute and expression of my admiration of the world that is Harry Potter and the characters within, especially a certain snarky Potions master...

AN: Every chapter deserves a "thank you" to my beta, Ariadne. May she always be happy to be paid with sneak peeks at my work. It certainly is free. ;-)

"Oh, Hermione," Minerva laughed. "Do you know how many times Poppy has wished she could take things into her own hands? He is a stubborn one, but I doubt you'd be able to get one over on him, injured or not."

She observed the look on Hermione's face and said thoughtfully, "You know, I do believe that you and Severus could have something special together, in time."

Hermione felt as if she had been found out, that the confusion she felt over the odd feelings and unbelievably strange silences she had endured that day must be plainly visible on her face. Minerva studied her with a knowing smile.

"Oh, don't look at me like that. You may not see it now, but you two have quite a lot in common from a personality point of view. As I have said before, Severus is a complex soul who's been through quite a lot. He'll require a fair amount of coaxing to come out from behind his well-built facade."

Minerva rose and gazed around the office. Sighing, she said with a nod, "In the end, Severus is just a man with all the faults that go along with that misfortune."

She returned Hermione's warm grin, saying, "Let things move at their own pace, Hermione. If it's meant to be, he will come to you. A man like Severus will need to make his own destiny."

Hermione didn't really want this surreal conversation to continue, so she nodded.

"Is there something else?" Minerva asked.

Hermione's mind drifted back to the duel. "Yes - it's just - when they fought, it was as if Professor Snape was training Harry."

Hermione's face held an expression of sadness and concern. She tried to choose her words carefully. "I don't know how prepared Harry is for a duel with Voldemort if he can't control his emotions. Professor Snape had him completely unnerved and even dangled him up in the air. Every spell was nonverbal."

Minerva gazed at Hermione and considered for a moment before saying, "Hermione, the similarities between Severus and Voldemort have not gone unnoticed."

At Hermione's shocked look, she continued, "No, Hermione, I am referring to his talents and relationship to Harry. Severus is a very powerful wizard, even at this age. He is a very skilled Occlumens and Legilimens, as you know. Most importantly, Harry hates him with a passion."

"I think a discussion with Severus is in order."

Hermione and Minerva returned to find Severus lounging in an old leather chair, his back to them. He seemed unaware of their presence as he looked towards the windows. Books were performing lazy circles and complex patterns in the air, weaving in and out, barely missing each other. Every few seconds, another book flew off the shelf and joined the rest, creating its own pattern in the mix without interfering with the others. At least twenty books comprised the growing cloud, moving in a silent dance. They beat their covers like wings, angling to orchestrate perfect turns, the sound of their softly fluttering pages filling the air.

Minerva started forward, but Hermione stopped her and pointed out something. Not only were both of Severus' hands resting on the armrests of the chair, his wand was, indeed, on the table.

An incredible display of wandless magic, Minerva thought in amazement.

They stared in wonder as he added even more books to the mix. He raised his hand, and the books immediately swirled upwards, following a cyclone pattern. He tilted his head up, watching them perform their dance.

"Enjoying the show?" Severus said suddenly, startling the two witches.

"I apologize, Severus, it's just what you were doing was---" Minerva began.

"Was what?" he asked, regarding them with suspicion. As he lowered his hand, the books obediently floated in an orderly fashion back to their places. Hermione noticed they were even in alphabetical order.

"Severus, you must know that performing wandless magic, in itself, is impressive, but that type of display requires great talent," Minerva said, clearly impressed.

Severus snorted and waved Minerva's compliment away. "It's nothing more than a juggling act I played in school to pass the time."

"You did this in school? What year did you start?" Hermione asked.

Severus looked both surprised and suspicious at the attention to his game. "Second year, I suppose. Why?"

Minerva and Hermione took a seat on the couch, looking at him with great interest. Severus, on the other hand, had no interest in being stared at so closely and turned defensive.

"What is so interesting? It's just a useless game," he said, glaring, with his arms crossed.

Can't just accept a compliment, can you? Hermione thought.

Severus' eyes swept to her.

Her heart seized. *Can he? No...*

He was still watching her. Something told her he could at least pick up feelings, even without casting the spell. She tried to look at Minerva without catching Severus' eyes again. Somehow, he was able to both keep Minerva engaged and disguise the fact that he was terrorizing Hermione by glancing at her for split moments in time.

Hermione found some measure of relief by staring at the bookshelf. She nodded in agreement, even though she wasn't really hearing what Minerva was saying. They could be discussing shipping Harry off to Romania to live with dragons for all she knew. Still, he watched her, daring her to acknowledge him.

Finally, she angrily met his eyes, telling him to quit it.

Faint traces of amusement and victory spread across his face, infuriating her.

"Severus, are you listening?" Minerva asked irritably.

"Of course, Minerva," he drawled, "You said you had come to discuss something with me concerning Potter. Particularly the ~~altercation~~, as you so eloquently put it, that occurred today. I believe you were expressing frustration with his actions."

Somehow, Hermione managed to not laugh. *He must have been amazingly sneaky in school.*

Minerva eyed him suspiciously before shaking her head and moving on. "As you know, he has yet to gain control over his emotions, and so, when challenged, fights on pure instincts. From Hermione's account of the altercation, the more you taunted him, the more he lost control."

"Arrogant prat thinks he can just attack anyone he pleases. We should all fear if we are resting our hopes on Potter."

"Exactly, Severus. Even though Harry is growing to be a powerful wizard, his emotions are a major weakness. His hatred towards you clearly put him at a disadvantage, allowing you to easily defeat him, even when wounded. In light of this, I feel that it would be beneficial if, when you are well, you were to duel with Harry. In a safe environment, of course."

Severus leaned back in the chair and looked into the fireplace, contemplating her suggestion.

Minerva pressed further, stating, "Severus, I needn't remind you of your Vow. I know this request is stretching the boundaries. However, I do believe that helping Harry to defeat Voldemort is in all of our best interests. Don't you agree?"

His first reaction was anger at the expectation that he try to share knowledge with such arrogant prat, but then contemplated further *Yes, this may be quite enjoyable. He is growing arrogant, just like his father, and needs to be taken down a few notches. As it stands now, the Dark Lord will kill him easily.*

He said while trying to suppress a smirk, "Why, Minerva, I'd love to. We will start tonight. Potter has proven that he cannot best me even while I'm lying in bed. I hardly think that my injuries are of any consequence. The Dark Lord is not going to wait much longer, and getting Potter up to par will take time," he said, both sneering at Harry's lack of abilities and proud of how he had leisurely fended him off. A devilish grin spread across his face. "We will use the Great Hall. There is more room, and fewer things to destroy."

Minerva was uneasy about the look in Severus' eyes. Taking a deep breath, she said, "Agreed. However, there will need to be rules. You cannot simply attack Harry out of your own dislike for him or his father. Your feelings are well known, and I am confident that you will keep them in check."

"Of course, Minerva, of course," he said innocently.

A chill ran through Hermione when she observed Severus' eyes come alive at the opportunity to duel with Harry. She feared that Severus' past with Harry's father would cause him to take his aggressions out on him. His temper was positively terrifying and easily piqued when dealing with Harry. Her thoughts then somehow wandered completely off track to how incredibly attractive he was when planning something so positively wrong.

She loved Harry as her best friend, but it was true; he was becoming far too sure of himself. He was definitely too emotional to face Voldemort if a little teasing could send

him over the edge. Unfortunately, Severus was just what he needed. *As long as this doesn't destroy them both.*

"Harry, try to keep your emotions in check. Even in his weakened state, Severus is a very skilled and powerful wizard. He has agreed to not practice Legilimency, but cannot help himself from detecting your emotions. Later on in your training, Severus will, in fact, use all of his skills against you, understood?" Minerva asked Harry, clearly worried about what was to come.

Severus sat near the High Table, his wounded leg resting comfortably on another chair. He stared intensely at Harry as Minerva spoke quietly to him. Since his juggling act apparently was both interesting and unnerving, he had enchanted goblets to leapfrog across the table, knowing that Harry could plainly see that Minerva had his wand. He could sense a slight amount of fear coming from Harry as he entered the room, but so far he was doing an excellent job at keeping it under control. *Hatred, however? Yes, that particular emotion was rolling off of him in waves.*

Severus scowled at the sight of Tonks and Remus taking their seats along the side of the Hall, then watched the goblets complete another lap around the table.

Minerva announced, "Rules of this engagement are as follows: All spells are allowed with the exception, of course, of the Killing Curse. Severus has also agreed not to practice Legilimency. Madam Pomfrey is here to heal if needed. Since this is the first duel, either party may call it off at any time. In the future, there will be no end until one of you is incapacitated."

"Ready, Severus?" she asked, handing him his wand.

Scowling, Severus said, "Always."

"Harry?"

"Yes, Headmistress," Harry said, staring at Severus with complete hatred.

"Alright, then... begin," she announced, stepping quickly out of the way.

Severus swung his wand a split-second after the last syllable died on Minerva's lips, sending a spell to slam Harry square in the chest. Severus casually leaned back in his chair for a moment, then released the spell, leaving Harry panting on the floor. Hermione glanced at Minerva to find her looking down with a look of desperation on her face. She imagined that she, too, was trying to keep from interfering. Tonks and Remus both looked vengeful.

"Potter, do you think this is a joke?" Severus taunted as Harry tried to catch his breath on the stone floor. "In the time you have laid there, I could have killed you a thousand times! Now, get up and fight me!"

Harry glared at Severus with pure rage. He shoved himself to his feet, screaming, "*Stupefy!*"

Severus blocked the spell wordlessly, neither moving from his position, nor even registering on his face that anything was happening.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Harry tried again, now striding towards Severus. Severus' face, however, still held an expression like he could be taking his afternoon tea at that moment. The spell was again rebounded back, bouncing off the floor and to the ceiling. Stone fragments rained down, creating a light cloud of dust between them.

Severus grinned, which only served to infuriate Harry more.

Harry was about to cast again when Severus moved his wand slightly, cutting Harry's wand arm. He lurched sideways in surprise, clutching his arm to his chest. Madam Pomfrey rushed forward, but Minerva put her hand on her arm saying, "Only if Harry asks, Poppy." Poppy looked stricken, but nodded.

"Potter, do you think you have the leisure to allow *any* time whatsoever to pass between attacks? Think this is a waltz, do you?" Severus mocked, looking triumphant. "Ready to give, Potter?" he said, in a more academic voice.

"NO!" Harry roared, then yelled, "*Sectumsempra!*" He appeared to pour all of his hatred into the spell.

Severus' eyes widened. He silently blocked the spell, but failed to take care in how it was deflected. The spell flew down the aisle, hit the floor just short of where Harry stood, then bounced upward, spiraling to the right. It continued through one of the windows, exploding glass and tearing a nearby banner and torch from the wall.

"That just may be passable for effort. However, you'd do well not to use my own spells against me," Severus warned, ignoring Harry's approach. He glanced at Hermione for a moment, observing the concern on her face.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" Harry cried, this time giving no indication he was going to cast a spell.

Severus was caught off guard, but still blocked the spell. It screamed towards where everyone was gathered, hitting the wall just above Hermione and blasting stone all around her. She threw herself to the side, scrambling to avoid the falling debris.

Severus thrust himself to his feet, threw down his wand, and pointed at one of the tables pushed aside for the duel. Severus then made a grand, sweeping motion using both arms. The heavy table rose sharply into the air, swung sideways, and flew across the room. It picked up speed and corrected its flight to slam into Harry, throwing him more than ten feet away.

"Enough!" Minerva shouted, calling both of their wands to her.

Showing no concern, Severus sat down again. Remus began to levitate the table off of Harry, and Poppy's face held a pained expression as she quickly set to work on his arm.

Hermione slowly approached Severus.

To anyone else, he would have appeared to be in deep thought. On closer inspection, Hermione could see his hands gripping the arms of the chair.

When he made no acknowledgment of her, she knelt in front of him. "Sir?"

"Aren't you going to see how the *Golden Boy* is?" he said bitterly without looking at her.

Hermione glanced over to see them helping Harry up. "He looks like he'll be fine to me. I'm more concerned about you. Why did you throw your wand? Harry could have done anything to you."

"You really wish to know?" He tilted his head in an attempt to shield their conversation from the others.

"Yes, I do."

"When I saw you almost injured, for a split-second I saw James standing there and---" he trailed off.

"Yes?" Hermione whispered.

"For a moment I came very close to killing him, and that, of course, is certain suicide. I threw my wand to protect both of us."

AN: Please review :)

Nothing at All

Chapter 5 of 41

Aggressive motivation.

Disclaimer: All of it belongs to JK Rowling. No money is made here. All hail Jo.

A/N: I must always give thanks to my beloved beta, Ariadne.

"Are you all right, Harry?" Minerva asked as she looked Harry over. Poppy started to work on his arm as Remus and Tonks crouched next to him.

"I'm fine, just frustrated is all," Harry said, looking tired and embarrassed.

"Harry, listen to me," Minerva began. "There is little chance you will be able to beat Severus, so please accept that. Even a fully grown and healthy wizard would have a tough time taking him down." They both turned to look over at Hermione and Severus. Hermione appeared concerned, and Severus looked like he was about to rip the arms off of his chair.

"I can't help getting so angry. He just drives me over the edge," Harry complained as he shook his head.

"Harry, if I may have a word?" Remus said, stepping forward and taking him aside. "Harry, you know by now that Severus was well not popular in school," Remus said quietly. He shrugged his shoulders as he looked toward Severus, saying, "Yes, I am just as guilty. I did little to stop James and Sirius from torturing him. Severus is the product of the relentless stalking and merciless teasing of much of his seven years here. He is talented at fighting because your father made him that way. Understand, Harry, that when he sees you, he sees James and cannot avoid that. Severus may be a contemptuous bastard, but put yourself in his place for a few minutes and you just may understand why he is this way."

Harry crossed his arms and looked doubtful.

"Harry, Severus is your key to learning how to really fight and to understand Voldemort. He is the only person who has consistently fooled Voldemort and lived. You have to admire the man for that," Remus said.

Harry looked at Severus again, but with less anger in his eyes.

"Yeah, I suppose you're right... but he's still a git," Harry said with a smirk.

Remus nodded and patted Harry on the shoulder. "I'm afraid he was like that before he got here."

Hermione looked over at Severus. "Sir, are you all right? You haven't touched your tea."

She noticed he was still in a state even fifteen minutes after the round ended. The house-elves had brought some tea while they healed Harry. Severus, to Hermione's dismay, seemed to find enjoyment in sending goblets flying after them. A slight grin crept onto his face as the elves ran from the room, waving goblets away with their empty trays.

"I'm fine," he said distractedly, taking glances at Lupin and Harry at the end of the room. It didn't take a sharp eye to figure that they were speaking about him.

"Miss Granger, please inform the headmistress that I am growing tired of waiting and to get Potter ready again. Oh, and if the werewolf wants to be a coach, he can be a target as well," Severus growled, not taking his eyes off of Lupin and Potter.

"Um, yeah, of course," she said looking at him strangely. She, of course, only intended to deliver the first part of the message.

"Severus, are you sure?" Minerva called, looking at him with concern.

"Yes. Potter, come here," Severus demanded.

Harry didn't move at first, looking suspicious. Slowly, he grimaced and walked over.

"Mr. Potter, to put it plainly, that last effort was dismal. You will need to focus and act with a thousand times more intensity. As you have noticed, this is no school-time duel. You should not treat it as such, or I will eat you alive and enjoy every minute of it. I will throw everything in my power at you, without mercy. You will fail, quite often, so get used to it. Swallow your idiotic pride and listen, for once, to someone who knows. In the end, you *will* learn," Severus finished with deadly intensity.

Harry's hand gripped his wand tighter.

Severus then allowed a smirk to creep onto his face as he leaned forward. He tilted his head as if sharing a secret with Harry. "Want to know an interesting piece of information? Hermione is quite a nurse. Yes... I could get used to *her* being around.... What do you think of that?" Severus said in a lustful whisper.

Harry's expression quickly shifted from obedient listening to wide-eyed surprise, then moved completely over to rage. He stepped backward with his wand outstretched as Severus struggled to stand, forgetting how imposing he was at his full height. He stared at Severus blankly for a moment, then appeared to clear his thoughts.

Harry aimed at Severus' chest, screaming, "**STUPEFY!**"

Severus deftly blocked the spell, sending it in a graceful arc to crash into the floor near where Remus and Minerva were standing. Hermione and Tonks looked stunned as they moved to press themselves along the wall in an attempt to stay out of the way. There was no stopping this.

"Harry! Severus!" Minerva cried, "I haven't called another round! Stop this instant!"

"Potter has something he'd like to settle! Don't you, Potter?" Severus roared, waving his wand in a grand motion, as if yielding the floor for the *Golden Boy* to make a speech.

"Shut up, you greasy bastard!" Harry shouted.

"*SECTUMSEMPRA!*" Harry tried again, now so close to Severus he could reach out and touch him.

Severus could barely stand, but it looked as if pure arrogance kept him upright. Looking bored, he not only blocked the spell, but aimed it back at Harry where it slashed him across his chest. Harry staggered backward, clutching at shirt. Severus, meanwhile, had taken his seat again and repositioned his leg up to its former home on the other chair. To everyone's amazement he leaned his arm on the nearby table and idly twirled his wand in his hand.

"Think, Potter! If I know exactly what you are going to throw at me I have absolutely no trouble blocking you! Keep your mouth shut!" Severus shouted, furious at Harry's lack of effort.

Harry held one hand to his chest, where blood was threatening to soak his shirt.

"*STUPEFY!*" Harry yelled, set off-balance as he aimed his wand. Severus again rebounded the spell, striking Harry hard enough to throw him to the floor.

With an exaggerated air of boredom and disappointment, Severus released the spell.

"Oh, Potter, I give up," Severus said as he stood and stretched.

Harry gasped on the floor. He rolled to his side and stared up at Severus.

"You've bored me to near death, and I fear I may never recover. Maybe you should think about what I've told you, especially that last part?" he said, shaking his head.

Severus leaned over Harry, and said in a condescending voice, "As it stands now, you don't stand a chance. Never fear, though. It is now my mission to help you. Believe me when I say, you will learn, or else."

As Harry looked up at him with pain and hatred in his eyes, Severus said in a deadly tone that no one could overhear, "Now, if I hear one more spell out of your mouth, I will cut you into little bits and owl you to the Dark Lord myself. Keep. Your. Mouth. Shut. *That* is the key."

Severus stood back up and declared to the room, "Tonight's events are finished. Potter's assignment is to practice nonverbal spells and shield charms. Until then, this is a waste of perfectly good magic."

"I think you need to start walking on it to try to get the muscle back. Madam Pomfrey said the healing potions should be taking effect. Your ribs should be better in the next day or so, and you can use a cane," Hermione said, admiring her work and replacing the bandages.

Severus grunted a noncommittal response without looking up from his book. The fact was, he was exhausted, and without any pain control he was in danger of groaning with every movement. Pounding Potter may have been enjoyable, but made every inch of him scream.

"Sir, maybe you should turn in. You've had quite a day," she said, glancing at the printed bed time on the schedule resting on the nightstand.

"Are you trying to tell me to go to sleep, Miss Granger?" he said without removing his eyes from the book. He turned a page, seemingly ignoring her, before saying irritably, "I assure you I can put myself to bed quite confidently without you."

"Please?" she tried.

"Leave me be, Miss Granger."

Hermione straightened. "You must be tired after that so-called duel."

"Are you attempting to bait me, Miss Granger? Let me assure you, that 'so-called duel,' as you put it, was in Potter's best interest. He is by no means prepared to face even the lowest-ranking Death Eater alone. He has survived to date by pure luck and arrogance."

"And so you believe that beating and humiliating him is the best way to teach him?"

"Yes."

Hermione stared at him, even though he refused to look up from his book, "So, your teaching methods will consist of simply bouncing him around the room rather than helping him learn?"

"He did learn, Miss Granger, and do not raise your voice to me, " Severus warned, barely flicking his eyes towards her. He knew that ignoring her drove her over the edge.

"Tell, me, Professor, what exactly did he learn? That your motivation still hasn't changed?"

He couldn't help but glare at her. "Do not follow that path of thought, Miss Granger. I am warning you."

"Oh, I will follow it, sir. Warning or not. You hate Harry only because of what his father did to you," Hermione accused.

"Miss Granger..." he growled warningly.

Hermione ignored him and pressed further. "Admit it. That display was nothing but some sort of strange revenge against Harry's father."

"He will not survive. Potter's arrogance and foolishness of emotion will earn him nothing but death."

"You're avoiding the truth, sir. Something I didn't think someone like you did. I think you know what you were doing."

Severus spat, "What *you* are avoiding is the dark reality of life, that what Potter is up against is the very gaping tear in morality that is the Dark Lord. He will kill your dearest friend in the most foul way possible and enjoy every single moment. Perhaps the Dark Lord will be kind enough to allow you to watch, to listen to your dear hero beg for the sweet release of death."

A look of disgust crossed her face.

Severus snorted. "You, along with the rest, seem to believe that some formal invitation-only duel will take place. Perhaps on these very grounds ... maybe in spring so the birds will sing in the background. The Dark Lord will strike Potter dead, or, if he is in a better mood, tear his throat out and talk soothingly to him as he bleeds to death on the very grass where he may have studied for his OWLs."

Hermione only stared at him. *Damn him, but it's true.*

"Nothing further, Miss Granger? Reality too harsh? Well, please forgive me. I am not here to garner your approval. See, I am the voice of reason. I am the one who must say that life is not all love and happiness. Because I know. Because I have seen what the Dark Lord is capable of, and Potter is heading directly into his path utterly unprepared. I cannot allow that."

"I never argued that Harry is not prepared," she said quietly, "only that your methods..."

Severus snarled, "My method is the truth, Miss Granger. I will not soften myself to placate the likes of you."

Hermione froze. "The likes of me? And what exactly is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that you are blind to the fact that what I do is necessary. That I am the harshness that must balance the light. Without me, Potter will continue to believe that he is invincible, and will certainly die."

She crossed her arms and stared down at him.

"So, that is your answer?" she asked. "You won't back down and at least try to teach in a dignified manner?"

"There is nothing dignified about dueling with a madman. Those who care for social graces in a time like this will be destroyed," Severus stated.

Hermione countered, "That may be true, but you can't keep avoiding the fact that you are taking pleasure in it. That's not teaching."

Severus waved his hand dismissively. "It makes no difference. The outcome is the same."

"So you admit it."

His eyes tore into her. "I admit nothing."

"James Potter is dead. Let Harry be his own man," she said crossing her arms.

His eyes narrowed in obvious rage, possibly at the very mention of the name. When he spoke, it was in a slow, determined manner. "Must you constantly make damning statements about things you know nothing about?"

"Must you be so stubborn as to try to seek revenge against Harry for something he didn't do?"

Severus dismissed her. "This conversation is over, Miss Granger. Leave."

"No."

He stared at her incredulously. "What?"

She leaned towards him as she gathered the bandages up, stating, "No, I will not leave. Every time you think you are about to lose an argument you try to end it."

"I do not have the patience or need to explain myself to you. You are forgetting that I have no need to obtain your approval for any of my actions or motivations. I'll thank you to cease your attempts at trying to get into my mind. You will neither figure me out nor trip me into saying something that will expose myself."

"You're impossible! You know, I thought Ron and Harry were childish, but you take it to new heights!" she yelled. She forcefully shoved the last bandage into the box and slammed it shut.

Severus rolled his eyes. "Once again, you assume, incorrectly, that I care for your opinion. I may start counting the hours until your departure, as a prisoner might count the days to release!" When he saw her becoming enraged he added, "Or death!"

Hermione threw the box to the floor, sat down hard on the bed, and aimed to get in Severus' face as best she could. "Listen to me, you miserable man, I am here whether you like it or not! The headmistress asked me to help since you are so terrible you wouldn't allow Madam Pomfrey to do her job!"

Severus was furious and refused to back down. "As I stated before, I never asked for..."

Hermione yelled right over him, "YOU ALMOST DIED! DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND?" She took hold of his shoulders, balling his robe in her fists as she continued to rage, "SOME people do care about you, no matter how nasty to try to be!"

She was so close she could see the outline of his eyes as they jumped from side to side, reading her. His mouth opened slightly in confusion and a line appeared in his brow. He was speechless, and she found that part of her loved that she did that to him. A feeling of triumph rose within her.

"Who are these *people*?" he asked in a tone so quiet it startled her.

She had no answer. Her breath came in small, shuddering starts from arguing, and for some reason she couldn't swallow.

Hermione opened her mouth, but it took several seconds before the words would come. "I told you before, I..."

He was trying to rise without groaning in pain and hurting himself worse in frustration. Hermione put a hand on his chest and easily pressed him back down.

"Going somewhere?" she asked, only this time her tone was devoid of the taunting she had done earlier.

Hermione realized that she still had her hand on his chest and moved to take it away. Before she could, Severus reached up, grabbed her arm, and pulled her down so they were only inches away from each other. Whether the slight anger on his face was from frustration or because she had touched him was uncertain. She distractedly noticed that his breathing had matched her own. His eyes kept moving around her face in fits and starts. Finally, he settled on staring into her eyes and locked there.

Hermione found that the clock ticked very, very loudly.

When she didn't withdraw, he pulled her closer. The expression on his face said he had no idea what was driving him to do this, but he could not stop. Their lips barely touched at first, then remained still for a moment before Severus kissed her softly. He moved from her lips slowly, waiting to see if she would change her mind. When she closed the gap and kissed him on her own, a tangible sense of relief passed between them. They remained close in tentative silence for several minutes before Hermione sat up.

"I should leave," she said softly. When she saw something shift in his eyes she added, "You must be very tired."

He said nothing, releasing her hand with reluctance as she rose. After retrieving the box from the floor, she turned to look at him.

"Severus, I mean, can I call you..." Hermione said, breaking the silence. She made a note to get rid of that clock. It seemed to keep track of every awkward silence that fell between them.

"I do believe I could allow that."

"What did you say to Harry to make him attack you like that in the Great Hall?" she asked, waiting for him to comment on how she possessed a talent for asking the oddest questions at the most inopportune times. She certainly wasn't prepared to address what had just passed between them.

He thought for a moment, then looked at her with a terrible glint in his eye. "Just motivation. It was nothing at all."

Castle Warfare

Chapter 6 of 41

Silence is our friend.

Disclaimer: It all belongs to JK Rowling, and rightly so.

A/N: Thanks for the reviews. I appreciate every single one. :) Thanks again to Ariadne.

The gray morning light gradually infused life into the room where Severus slept. It seemed as if a curtain was being drawn back against the night, pulling the day along slowly with a reluctant, easing motion. Hermione wanted to avoid startling him, as she had no interest in finding out the first hex that would come to his mind, wand or not. She stood by the bed and reached her hand out to touch his shoulder, but stopped. Her hand hovered over him, shaking slightly from the chill in the air. Something in her wanted to watch him sleep. Watching him was all she could do while he was unconscious, willing him to heal quicker, to be all right. Somehow now it was different. She noticed that the crease in his brow never quite left his face. Part of her wondered if he could ever fully rest.

The sun rose, driving away the gray and filling in the colors of the room. As warmth poured in through the windows, throwing blocks of sun onto the floor, a wave of realization hit her. Severus Snape was not a morning person.

"Gods! I told you to close those drapes!" he yelled, seemingly unaware that she was right next to him. He swung his wand in their general direction, almost hitting her. The drapes obediently shut themselves with such force that one of the rails fell, allowing even more light into the room.

"No need to yell, I'm right here," Hermione stated angrily and rolled her eyes.

Looking slightly surprised, he muttered with one eye still shut, "I suppose you are."

Hermione tentatively moved to sit on the bed, watching his reaction. If he was going to regret kissing her, he would certainly let her know now. She looked at him and found the same slightly conflicted expression on his face.

"Are we..." she said, picking at the sheets. "Are we okay?"

When he didn't speak, she pushed the pattern of peaks she had nervously created in the sheets flat, fully preparing to leave. When she looked up, though, she found uncertainty in his eyes.

"Yes."

She didn't believe him and so she only sat there, frozen. It still felt like a total onslaught of embarrassment and awkwardness was imminent. His hair was atrocious, obscuring most of his face. Everything about him in that moment was different: his hair wild beyond comprehension, his shirt twisted from what she knew was a fitful sleep, the best he could hope for. Even stranger was the odd way he was looking at her and the fact that he didn't seem to care how he looked.

"So, you..." she started, and looked at the ceiling in frustration. "So, you wanted to?"

His only response was a guarded expression, along with the slightest of nods.

Hermione sighed. "Will you say something other than yelling for the drapes to be closed or one-word answers?"

An eyebrow moved.

She was about to get up when he spoke, "I did not mean for it to happen..."

The blood felt like it drained out of her face.

"However," he said carefully, "I do not regret it."

She was lost somewhere in between noticing how his hair had a bluish tint in the sun and the fact that he didn't want her to leave the planet. Hermione was a realist. Saying he didn't regret something was about as close to something nice as she was going to get out of him.

She leaned over slightly, still wondering if he was going to suddenly rage at her. He moved to raise himself up and, surprisingly, could do it without much pain. The healing was finally working. She only meant to give him a chaste kiss, something to confirm that he wasn't going to suddenly change his mind. Instead, she noticed that he was only waiting until she was close enough to grab her and pull her close again. This time, they kissed with the kind of confidence that meant they were both sure of their decision. His movements bordered on possession, telling her that he did want her there, before they finally needed to break for lack of air. The sun had risen further, throwing almost hot light onto them.

Severus realized he still had an almost frightening grip on her arm and quickly released her.

Hermione stood and caught her breath before saying, "Look, I'm going to have the house-elves bring you breakfast, and then I'm going to talk to Harry. He could use a friend right now after last night."

His face darkened. "Must you mention Potter at times like these?"

Hermione laughed. "Is that a way to tell me to watch my choice of subjects?"

"Somewhat. Yes."

"Well," she said with a smile and leaned over him. She felt brave, so she reached and pushed his hair at least partially out of his face. "At least that got more out of you than 'yes,' hmm?"

He watched her with a steady gaze, narrowed only because the sun was now in his eyes. A smirk played about his face as he said, "Remind Mr. Potter of his assignment."

"Hi, Harry, how... umm... are you?" she began, wondering why she felt awkward around him suddenly. *It may be because you have feelings for the man who beat the daylights out of him yesterday.*

"Come in, Hermione. So, how's it going with the git?" Harry asked with a grin, taking a seat. He chewed on a piece of toast, awaiting her reaction.

"Harry, please, he may be a git to you, but he's someone who deserves respect," Hermione said tiredly. She dropped herself into an old armchair and shot him a look.

"Oh, really? What is it with you?" Harry asked sarcastically. "You keep defending him when I saw what I saw, Hermione."

"Harry you need him. You're not..."

"I'm not what, Hermione?" Harry said suspiciously.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione finished in one breath, "You're not ready to face Voldemort if you can't win against Professor Snape."

She braced herself for his expected reaction.

Rising from his chair, Harry said seriously, "Friends are supposed to have faith in each other, aren't they? Not hang out with a traitor."

Sighing, Hermione began, "Harry, I am your friend, or else I wouldn't be honest with you. Your dueling skills need to be brought up before you even consider seeking out Voldemort. You can't possibly beat him now. Without Severus, I don't believe you'll be successful and I'm..." she stopped, and then spoke almost in a whisper, "I'm afraid for you."

She looked up at him sadly.

"He's Severus to you now, is he? Just what is going on, Hermione? Do you know what he said to me? He said he could get used to having you around," Harry said pacing in front of her. "Hermione, he's nothing but a greasy bastard, and will never be anything more."

"He said what?" she asked, looking confused. "Well, that doesn't sound bad."

Harry stopped pacing and looked awkward.

"Hermione, it was the way he said it, like you're his personal servant, and, well... more... in a nasty way," Harry said, trying to explain without getting vulgar.

A small "Oh" was all Hermione could manage. "Thanks, Harry. I need to go take care of something. I'll see you later. Practice your nonverbal spells, okay?" she said and quickly left the room.

"Run for your life, you greasy bat," Harry said with a laugh and closed the door.

Severus had finally woken up completely. He ran a hand through his hair. Stretching and rolling onto his back, he contemplated everything that had happened over the past day, his changing view of Hermione, and why she unnerved him so. He had never allowed anyone to get so close to him mentally, or talk to him the way she had, let alone win an argument. Of course, if anyone ever saw him being even remotely tender to her, he'd curse them within an inch of their lives. In the short time they'd spent together, he realized he felt something now. When he saw the rebounded spell fly towards her, he went completely over the edge. How close he had come to killing Potter then. At first, he told himself it was because it made him look careless, but his heart knew differently.

"Some nurse," he growled, dragging himself to the edge of the bed. He summoned the cane and stood. Hoping his leg was now healed enough to take weight, he took one step, preparing to drop to the floor.

When it held, he smiled slightly. *Not dead yet, are you?*

He slowly made his way across the room, taking small steps. He was nearly there when the door burst open.

"So it was nothing at all, was it? That thing you told Harry last night? You made it sound like I'm some sort of... possession?" Hermione yelled, stomping into the room with her wand drawn.

Severus turned around as Hermione approached and quickly found himself against the wall.

"I was only..." he started, mentally kicking himself for allowing the young witch to speak to him this way. "Hermione, please," he reasoned, attempting to calm her and still balance on the cane. It was amazing to him that he was still standing. "If you would lower your wand, we can discuss this, and..."

"Oh, we'll discuss, that much is certain," Hermione said sarcastically. She did lower her wand. Severus wasn't entirely thrilled with the general vicinity of where she was aiming.

Gods, she's beautiful when she's angry. He couldn't help but grin, even as he noted the latest altitude of her wand was not entirely desirable.

"And what is so funny, may I ask?" she practically growled.

"Miss Granger I mean Hermione it's simple. I merely wanted to incite Potter to focus so he'd fight with more intensity. I used what I knew would well anger him. I daresay it worked; however, Potter's skills proved to be less than satisfactory," he explained quickly, hoping to be able to now extricate himself from the wall.

"You find it entertaining to use me like that? To make it sound like I'm some sort of object? And what about the kissing? Was that *nothing at all* to you too?" she asked, with hurt in her eyes.

He took a deep breath and said, "Hermione, what I said to Potter is true, but not in the tone in which I said it. Yes, you are a very capable nurse, and I could get used to having you around."

"That's all? Nice to have around? Handy, am I?" she demanded, punctuating each question by poking her wand into his chest.

"Hermione, please, it's not as it sounds. If you'll listen..." he tried, clearly stunned. *Is this some kind of lover's quarrel? What in the blazes do I say to make her stop?*

She stopped and crossed her arms angrily. "I'm listening."

"Hermione, I do care for you," he said quietly, trying to get the point across without too much elaboration.

"What did you say?"

"I believe you heard me," he said a little too sternly and took a step forward away from the wall.

Hermione suddenly pushed him, almost causing him to fall. The cane fell to the floor. Hermione grabbed the front of Severus' robe, yelling, "Severus Snape, don't *you dare* get snarky with me! That act may have worked on thousands of students over the years, but it does not work on me! This is not your classroom, I am not your student, and you are *not* in control here, is that clear? Now, the next time you open that mouth of yours, you will say something nice to me. Not a halfway comment, not a shifty dance around the truth, something nice! Is that understood?"

During Hermione's rant, Severus could only stand rooted to the spot, his eyes wide in surprise. He had absolutely no experience dealing with women this way, and so had no clue what to do with an opponent he couldn't curse, hex, or intimidate.

"Well?" she said irritably, crossing her arms again.

It took a moment for him to collect himself enough to start as the angry witch stood before him, awaiting an answer. He noted that Hermione was trying to keep from grinning. *Admirable.*

Doing his best to straighten himself out, he said, quietly, trying to look her in the eye but failing, "I've found I do have feelings for you. I have enjoyed having you with me, and, frankly, I've never allowed anyone to get this close. I didn't intend to hurt you by what I said to Potter."

She thought for a moment.

Suddenly, Hermione leaned forward and kissed him gently. When he joined her, she swiftly ended it, grabbed a handful of his hair, and pulled him down to close the height gap.

"That was a dismal attempt at a barely acceptable explanation," she said, imitating his classroom demeanor and staring him in the eye. "But it'll pass. For now."

She grinned into his stunned face, let him go and strode out of the room, leaving him to lean against the wall in stunned silence.

Minerva was heading down to Severus' rooms, hoping to discuss Harry's training and to see how Hermione was doing. Turning the corner, Minerva saw Hermione emerge from the rooms, leave the door open, and stomp off in the opposite direction.

"Severus Snape, what have you done?" Minerva muttered.

She let herself in and entered the bedroom to find Severus standing against the wall. His hair was frightful and his face held unmistakable look of a man who had just been put in his place. She grinned to herself. *Never seen that look grace his face before.*

"Well, nice to see you up, Severus. Good morning," she greeted him with a smile.

Upon seeing her enter, Severus quickly bent and picked up the cane. "Good morning, Minerva," he muttered irritably.

Minerva grinned as he tried to tame his wild hair. "I saw Hermione leaving just now. Is there anything you'd like to tell me?"

"No. Everything is just fine."

"Oh, I see," she said taking a seat and smiling over at him. "You care for her, don't you?"

"Oh hell, Minerva, really..." he started, crossing his arms and brooding, "How can she possibly want me?"

"Severus, look at me," Minerva said sternly. "She cares for you a great deal. When she saw you out there on the grounds, she tore out of my office and got to you first. When we arrived, she was holding you in her arms, covered in your blood and screaming at us to help. All she could do was stroke your hair to try to console you in some way. She was pleading with you to live, Severus. In a way that I've never seen before. You were extremely close to death, and I fear that if you were lost, she would have just about died with you. She has obviously cared for you longer than you think. Much longer."

Severus looked at her in stunned silence as she continued, "Hermione sat by your bedside, refusing to leave, and then agreed to take care of you. As you already know, she looked after your every need for a week. Every single minute of the day revolved around you."

Minerva leaned forward and looked into Severus' eyes as she said, "If that isn't love, then I don't know what is."

After Minerva's description of Hermione's actions that night, Severus wore a shocked and confused expression, sitting in quiet contemplation while looking down at his hands in his lap.

"I had no idea she did all of that. I just thought..." he said.

Then he looked up at her.

"I just thought it was an assignment to look after me. I'd never think that anyone would dare volunteer to do it. Even Poppy is done with me," he finished, shrugging his shoulders.

"Severus, you know it is because you've tortured Poppy to no end while she's tried to doctor you," Minerva said grinning at him. "Unless you're unconscious, of course. She prefers you that way."

"Yes, so I've heard," he said scowling and looking away with his arms crossed over his chest.

"I think it's time you treated Miss Granger with respect, Severus. She deserves and needs that recognition, you know. She's becoming quite a confident young witch and should be treated as such, or beware the consequences," Minerva said with a smile, raising an eyebrow to ensure he caught her meaning.

"Yes, well, it's a little late for that, I fear. She... well, I may have..." he started, but failed at the words to admit he was wrong.

"I saw her leave, Severus, and looking quite angry, I might add."

Leaning forward, Minerva said quietly, "Tell me."

Hermione marched through the halls with no real destination in mind, just away from him. *Where did that come from? I've never yelled at anyone that much, let alone him. Not only that, but I pushed him too.*

She made her way out of the castle and down to the lake, settling near the same place she had sat after Dumbledore's funeral. Feeling a pang of sadness, she looked out over the calm water. Over the years, she had learned how to relax and slow her thoughts; critical to managing the stress of exams. Concentrating on the flight of a single raven, she sighed, letting out some tension. Time passed as she contemplated.

Now, what do I say to the man when I go back? I'm certainly not sorry, since he had that coming. Could he possibly have meant what he said? Now I've certainly scared him. Probably thinks I'm mental. Well then, we're a matched pair, because he's not much better in the sanity department.

"Hermione Granger, enough talking to yourself. Your patient needs his..." she said aloud, looking at her watch. "Lunch? Has it been that long?"

Getting up and brushing herself off, she took a deep, cleansing breath before looking up at his window.

Severus finished his account of his earlier "conversation" with Hermione. Minerva looked at him, trying to suppress a grin. "Oh, Severus, that explains the look on your face," she said, ignoring his glare. She couldn't help but chuckle a bit as she continued, "Oh, please admit it, you want her in your life. Truly, I do believe you'd do well together. I seem to remember a young man who was very similar to her."

"Why do you care, Minerva?" he asked, suddenly serious. "Isn't it quite odd to be playing matchmaker for the man who murdered someone so close to you?"

His sudden turn of tone shocked her for a second, causing her to hesitate. "Severus, I saw what I needed to see in the Pensieve."

Looking down, she quieted for a moment, then looked at him. "I know what Albus asked you to do was terrible, and have no doubt that he meant a great deal to you as well. Yes, it is strange to be around you, but I know in my heart that Albus would want you be happy. There is no way to change the past, but I think that he would have wanted to make the future more bearable for you. I think that Hermione could possibly do that for you, if you'll let her."

"Possibly," Severus said quietly.

"Now, to change the subject, my intention in coming here was to discuss Harry's training. Yesterday was... well," she said, trailing off as she searched for the right words.

"Interesting?" he said with a grin.

"Severus! Take this seriously, please!" Minerva complained. "It was brutal to watch, but necessary, I suppose. Harry needs to learn to fight under pressure and you certainly provide that piece nicely," Minerva said nervously, rubbing her hands together.

"Minerva, he needs to stop broadcasting his spells, or else the Dark Lord will have no trouble at all in killing him within seconds. Never mind that he practically screams them in his mind beforehand," Severus said, and then realized he said too much.

Minerva's eyes widened. "Severus Snape, you agreed to not use Legilimency!"

He simply shrugged. "Minerva, he is extremely easy to read. He needs to close his mind as well as his mouth. Speaking of which..."

Severus' eyes took on a terrible light. He leaned forward and shared what his actions would be should Harry dare utter a spell during the next duel.

Minerva was mortified, but agreed, "I trust you."

Severus was eating an early lunch, neglecting to abuse the house-elf in favor of entertaining his plans for Potter. He grinned, looking out the window as he ate, almost hoping that Potter would trip up. His grin widened into a genuine smile he was sure no living soul had ever seen, when he saw a certain witch moving towards the castle's doors.

"Oh, I see you've gotten your lunch," Hermione said quietly as she entered the room.

"Yes, my nurse seemed to have not only abused me, but moved up to abandonment as well," he muttered without looking up from his book.

"Severus, I didn't mean to act out, but I..." she said, but stopped as he looked up at her suddenly.

"No, no need to say anything," he said, and moved to get up from the table.

"Hermione, I'm..." he said, then took a deep breath. "I apologize for my choice of words."

She eyed him suspiciously, doubt in her eyes.

"Yes, it is sincere," he said, answering her thoughts.

"Stop doing that, Severus," she said crossing her arms.

"Doing what?" he asked innocently.

"You know exactly what you're doing," Hermione said, and couldn't help but smirk.

"Hermione, I am not reading your thoughts, if that's your point." Somehow he had managed to get close enough to take in whatever scent she wore.

She rolled her eyes, saying, "Really now? And that little game you played yesterday? The staring contest?"

Severus quirked a slight smirk as he reached up and tucked her hair behind her ear, "Takes two to play a game like that."

"I was not playing, you were what are you doing?"

"Nothing at all," he muttered. Hesitantly, he lightly kissed her, holding her close. Dipping his head, he lingered there, barely touching his forehead to hers. Severus cradled her head in his hand as they kissed, then moved to trail light touches down her neck and along her collarbone. Everything he did was well thought out and purposeful, sending chills down her spine as he moved along.

Resting her head on his shoulder, Hermione took a steady breath and said, "Severus Snape, you're killing me here."

"Do you feel ready for this, Harry?" Remus asked as they walked into the Great Hall. The tables were again pushed aside to make room for the duel. Minerva stood in the center of the room looking extremely worried.

"I think so," Harry said. He nodded without looking up as they walked. Remus had been helping him prepare for his next practice over the previous few days, and Harry had successfully cast several nonverbal spells. Of course, that was after a tremendous amount of concentration on his part and without a maniac Potions master about to hex him into oblivion.

When Severus entered the room using his cane, all eyes were on him. Every step of the way he glared at Harry, as if planning exactly how he was going to paint the walls with the young wizard. The sight of Severus walking again so soon seemed to unnervе Harry. When Severus arrived in front of him, Harry straightened and looked him in the eyes.

"Potter," Severus nodded. "Ready for a *silent* duel?"

"Yes, sir. I believe so," Harry replied with a strained sound of respect, as if it was painful to call him "sir."

"You 'believe so'? Not good enough, I'm afraid," Severus taunted. He leaned closer to loom over Harry, adding loudly enough to ensure Lupin could hear, "Remember my last words to you, Potter. Allow so much as one word to escape your lips and I will make you sorry you were born."

Severus regarded Remus with contempt, nodded in a curt greeting, and turned to stand in the middle of the room.

"Ready, Harry?" Minerva asked, looking quite nervous at the prospect of another one of these duels and, worse yet, after what Severus said he'd do *Albus*, *I hope I'm doing the right thing. He's still so young.*

At Harry's nod, Minerva looked to Severus. He nodded back to her with a terrible look in his eye. It took a moment for Minerva to compose herself. "All right then. Begin!"

Severus simply stood awaiting, Harry's first move. After a second passed, he sneered, "Potter, would you prefer I throw you about the room a few times as a warm up?"

"No, sir. I just..." Harry said, looking to be concentrating quite hard.

"Just NOTHING! Throw something at me!" Severus roared and started to stalk towards him. "NOW!"

Harry looked panicked, moving backwards in an arc with his wand raised and hesitating numerous times. Finally, when Severus was just a few feet from him, Harry managed to yell, "*STUPEFY!*"

Severus' face contorted with rage. He swung his wand, effectively diverting the spell to crash into the wall where it exploded, blasting stone out onto the middle of the floor. Dust clouded the room, but Severus could be seen moving slowly towards Harry with grim determination, his robes gray from the debris. Harry backed up quickly, but, even using a cane, Severus was gaining ground.

Severus bared his teeth like an animal about to pounce and make its prey very sorry before finally killing it. "I told you to keep your mouth shut!" he screamed. "SILENCE!"

Suddenly, Severus lunged forward, snatched Harry by the throat, and in one movement threw him to the floor. A strangled scream erupted from Hermione as she held her hands to her face, while Minerva signaled everyone to hold back. Severus knelt slowly with a look of great pain, and then pinned Harry's other arm to the floor. Harry fought to get free, gasping for air. Severus calmly reached over, picked up Harry's wand and roughly thrust it into his hand.

"Now, Potter. Get me off of you!" Severus shouted, glaring down at Harry.

Harry panicked, trying to pry off his hands and tearing at his robes.

"I'm waiting, Potter, or would you rather I convince you more?" Severus yelled, picking Harry up and slamming him back down on the stone floor.

"CURSE ME, DAMN IT! FIGHT!" Severus screamed still clutching Harry's neck. Severus had a look of great expectation in his eyes as he stared down at Harry's wand, willing him to strike. He could feel the consciousness draining out of Harry. *One more minute and we will both be dead, Potter. Do not make me back down...*

Harry's arm slowly rose and pointed his wand directly at Severus' heart. His hand shook with lack of oxygen, wavering from side to side as he closed his eyes. A look of hatred spread on his face when he opened them again as his arm faltered more, arcing to the right.

Severus suddenly released Harry and screamed in pain while clutching his chest. He hunched forward, looking murderous, as Harry gasped loudly for air and weakly pushed himself away. Harry slowly rose to his feet with his wand on Severus who, miraculously, was already starting to stand. He shoved himself up with the cane, never taking his eyes off of Harry.

Hermione remained in a shocked position, holding her hands to her face as Remus had his hand on her shoulder, offering some comfort. Poppy was clearly unnerved and near tears at what she was witnessing.

"Well done, Potter," Severus said, raising an eyebrow.

Harry nodded quickly as he struggled to catch his breath, rubbing his swelling neck.

"Now, let's try that without the strangling, hmm? Unless you prefer it that way?" Severus sneered. He started stalking towards him again.

Harry's eyes widened in disbelief that he was coming at him again. He stood frozen.

"Do it, Harry," Hermione said quietly. She was torn between wanting Harry to succeed and not wanting to see Severus hurt.

"Last chance to take a free shot, Potter. I will, by the way, be fighting back this time," Severus mocked, moving closer and raising his wand.

Harry held his wand out and level, but kept hesitating, trying to avoid casting aloud. Every time he hesitated, Severus drew closer, effectively breaking his concentration.

"Harry! Concentrate!" Remus yelled, trying to coach. He sounded more nervous than encouraging.

"Oh, poor Potter. Need your pet werewolf to coach you? Do you think for a second that you'll have a cheering section when facing the Dark Lord?" Severus teased, waving his wand over towards Remus and the others.

"Potter, if you don't bring me down now, I will tear you apart," he snarled in a deadly serious voice. He backed it up with a fierce look that told Harry he meant every single word.

Several times Harry started to cast, then almost spoke the incantation aloud. He shook his head while trying to regroup and keep a distance from Severus at the same time. Eventually, he was almost to the High Table when the first blow came.

"Fine, Potter, I warned you!" Severus arced his arm from side to side and small slashes appeared across Harry's arms, chest, and thighs. With every pass, more cuts came,

the last across the side of his face, knocking him to the ground, sending his glasses flying.

As Harry fell, he stabbed his wand out blindly and silently hit Severus with a Stunner. Severus fell backwards, reopening his leg wound. Blood from his leg spread on the floor at an alarming rate.

The hall fell silent as Harry and Severus lay on the floor. Severus pulled himself to sit up and crudely dragged his leg around to a more normal position. Harry remained on his side breathing heavily, his neck in light shades of purple and starting to bruise. He tipped his head to look up as Severus stared at him.

While the others were still out of earshot, Severus nodded and said, "Better, Potter. That was better."

Harry, stunned that Snape would compliment him not once, but twice, took a moment before saying, "Thank you, sir."

Harry knew that in one lesson, Snape had helped teach him to cast silently while fighting for his life, something that couldn't be taught in any classroom. While he still hated him as much as ever, he couldn't help but realize that it was a valuable lesson indeed and most likely the key to his success.

Tainted Dreams

Chapter 7 of 41

Tainted dreams and a calling.

Disclaimer: It all belongs to JKR, and rightly so.

"You've ruined it, Severus. How could you?" Hermione complained as Madam Pomfrey worked on Severus' leg. He had left a trail of blood through the halls, insisting on dragging his leg at an unnatural angle. They had placed Harry in a bed on the other side of the ward to keep the two as far apart as possible. After healing his cuts, Poppy cleared Harry to rest and to go in the morning.

"Well, I bloody well didn't plan it!" Severus growled, looking up at the ceiling. The pain was excruciating, but he had no intention of letting the two worried witches hovering over him know. All he could do was hold his breath to stifle a moan whenever they moved the leg or stuffed more gauze into the wound. Poppy was busy trying to heal him as well as she could while he allowed it.

"Hermione, could you fetch more of that healing balm for me?" Poppy asked.

"Of course," Hermione said and went to the storeroom.

"Severus, it seems the Hippogriff magic preventing my healing is wearing off. You should be much better in a few hours," Poppy said, then added with concern, "Breathe, son. You've held your breath for too long trying to not make a sound. Your thigh is mostly torn off the bone and you expect to tell me it doesn't sting a little?"

"I'm fine. Really," he said through clenched teeth, eyes narrowed.

"Severus, I can see right through you, just so you know. Here, drink this for the pain," she said irritably, trying to hand him a flask.

"I don't need anything," he said sternly, considering the discussion closed.

"Please, Severus?" she tried one last time and moved to put the potion to his mouth.

"No, Poppy. I said I'm fine! Leave me be!" Severus shouted, angry at the attention. If he wouldn't have had to crawl, he would have gotten out of bed and left.

"Oh really?" she huffed, and then brightened as she saw Minerva speaking with Hermione across the room. "We'll see about that."

As she approached the two witches, Poppy threw a look back at Severus and said, "I've tried, and, yet again, he won't take it. What is it with him?"

"You know, I could sneak up, hex him just a little, and then force him, Minerva," Poppy whispered, halfway serious.

Hermione laughed a bit too loudly.

"Poppy!" Minerva said, smiling. "Why, I'm surprised at you. You honestly think you're going to be able to sneak up and hex *that*?"

All three looked over at Severus, who was intently staring at them. He looked like he wanted nothing more than to be somewhere else.

"Was worth a try," Poppy said with a shrug. "What then? I can't properly heal him with him shouting at me and moving about."

"He's a man, Poppy. Clearly an incapacitation, even on a good day," Minerva said, patting Poppy on the arm to console her.

Hermione smiled as she watched Severus brooding. She gave a knowing look to Minerva, then asked, "Madam Pomfrey, if I may try?"

"Sure, Hermione," Poppy said and handed her the bottle. "I've also added a Sleeping Potion to the mix, hoping to knock him out so I can better work on the leg."

Hermione smiled sweetly at the two older witches. "Not a problem. One moment."

"Minerva, I don't see how she's going to get him to take it. Even so, he most definitely will be able to tell that I've added the Sleeping Potion," Poppy said, watching Hermione move confidently over to Severus' bed. He looked more and more irritated with every step she took near him.

"Oh, I think she may persuade him," Minerva said with a grin.

"I don't see what she can do that I haven't tried... oh!" Poppy said, as she caught Minerva smiling at her.

Severus narrowed his eyes and watched Poppy join Minerva and Hermione, whisper, and then laugh as all three of them turned to look at him. Minerva was even going so far as to shake her head and proceed to discuss him as if he wasn't staring right at them. Hermione took the bottle from Poppy and approached with a strange grin on her face.

"Severus, I'm told you refuse to take the potion. Is that true?" Hermione asked with a smirk. She crossed her arms and waited.

"Do not speak to me like I'm a child. If I don't want to take it, I won't," he growled. He leaned forward, adding loudly, "And that goes for the two of you over there as well!" He sat back and folded his arms across his chest, daring her to push the issue.

"Oh, I see," she said in an interested voice, flicking her wand to close the curtains around the bed. Severus could hear Minerva and Poppy giggling at the end of the ward.

"Hermione..." he warned.

"Oh, Severus, take it just once?" she pleaded, smiling warmly as she sat next to him on the bed. She ran her hands over his chest, then up through his hair, raking her nails lightly over his scalp. She played with the top button on his shirt as he tried his best to ignore her. Leaning forward, she unbuttoned his shirt while kissing his forehead. She rained small kisses around his neck and along his collarbone, taking care to move very slowly.

A low growl escaped his throat.

"Hermione quit it they're right there. This is most embarrassing..." Severus whispered, trying to stop her from undoing his shirt completely. A struggle over the small buttons ensued, one which Hermione was winning.

She ignored him and dragged one fingertip down his chest, made circles along his sides, then back up to his neck. She could tell she was visibly giving him chills as he still tried to ignore her.

"Hermione, please!" he said in protest, but not doing a thing to truly stop her. Hermione pushed his shirt open and kissed his chest, moving her hand along his side and tracing his ribs gently.

"Oh, please don't be modest," she whispered, laying a single kiss on his chest then working her way up to trail along his jaw line. Hermione mentally congratulated herself on her bravery before kissing him deeply, pushing his shirt off his shoulders, and dragging it down so his arms were almost pinned to his sides by the sleeves.

Finally remembering himself, Severus gently broke the kiss and while practically gasping for breath, pleading, "Please!"

Hermione smiled and looked into his eyes. She found that he was truly mortified at the thought of being even remotely affectionate around anyone. She studied him for a moment before smiling and placing a hand on his face. "Have a fever?"

"You're killing me," he said quietly. His eyes were blazing.

She looked down at him and idly traced patterns on his chest. "I seem to remember that from somewhere," she said looking at him with an eyebrow raised.

Severus scowled and sighed deeply. He looked at the ceiling as if searching for patience.

When she reached for him again, he shouted, "Fine! Fine! I'll take it!" Lowering his voice he snarled, "Only because you're totally humiliating me in public. Let me loose and I'll take the damn thing."

With a smile of triumph, Hermione happily fixed his shirt. When finished, she patted him on the head and kissed him on the cheek. She could swear she saw him smile a little, but then it was gone. She handed him the potion and he took it without smelling it.

"Wonderful. Thanks ever so much," she said cheerfully. She opened the curtains and showed the empty flask to Minerva and Poppy, who burst into laughter.

Severus could only glare at the three at them as they approached. As he heard Poppy comment on how she preferred him unconscious, sleep overtook him and the scowl left his face.

Severus awoke hours later and stared around the room in the darkness. His leg certainly did feel better, and he assumed they must have done something right while he was asleep. Moving his leg slightly, he could tell it should be able to hold his weight. He was still astounded at what Hermione did to him earlier and smiled to himself, considering it safe since no one could see.

He could dimly make out Potter at the far end of the ward, sitting up in bed and levitating random items around him. Severus watched him for a while, then quietly moved to get out of bed. Thankfully, his leg held.

"Quite impressive, Potter," Severus said loudly, causing Harry to startle. The bed he was levitating crashed to the floor, and he swung his wand around, casting *lumos* to light Severus' face.

Harry regarded Severus with disdain. "Did you come over here to make fun of me?"

Within an instant, Severus was in his mind, moving about with ease. He saw himself killing Dumbledore, the funeral, and himself strangling the life out of Harry. Severus released the spell and stood straighter, crossing his arms across his chest.

Harry looked completely shocked.

The two of them remained that way for a moment, watching each other in silence. The moon had risen, pouring white light across the wing below each window. Severus moved forward into one of the stripes of light.

"Why are you doing this?" Harry asked suddenly, breaking the silence.

Severus responded carefully, "Potter, you are well aware I must because of the Unbreakable Vow."

"No. This isn't just about keeping yourself alive. You're taking this too seriously. What's in it for you?" Harry pressed.

Severus thought for a moment and said quietly, "You think for a moment that I don't wish him dead as well? My only regret is it won't be my pleasure to do it."

Harry nodded then asked, "Do you think I'll be ready... sir?"

"Potter, you may have learned, the hard way I might add, to keep your mouth closed, but your mind is still wide open," Severus said thoughtfully.

"Tomorrow, we practice."

"It's fine, Poppy. Leave it!" Severus complained, attempting to wave the mediwitch away for the fifth time. The morning sun was making its way into the ward, warming the

room and sending light reflecting off of the brass beds. Harry had left already, leaving Severus and Poppy alone.

"Don't make me hex you, Severus. I haven't had my tea yet this morning and I'm in no mood for your stoic act," Poppy said sternly and stared him in the eye to let him know she meant it. "Shall I call Hermione to persuade you?" she asked, hiding a smile.

"What? No, of course not," he said, fighting against nature to suppress the color rising to his face. He allowed her to finish inspecting the wound.

"You can go as soon as Hermione arrives to fetch you," she stated. She began to gather up her supplies, but stopped when she noticed how he rubbed his left forearm absently.

"How many times, Severus?"

He raised an eyebrow in surprise and looked away. "Four."

"Please don't go," she said gravely. "We may have our disagreements, but we need you here safe."

He furrowed his brow in deep thought, with a hand resting on his Mark. The light had gone out of his eyes and he suddenly felt so tired.

Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath.

"What will you do?" she said, placing her hand on his shoulder. She had a soft spot for Severus, having healed him too many times to count after the Marauders' random attacks. He would come to her late at night when no one would see, even breaking curfew, to avoid facing anyone. Often, he would suffer for days before seeking her help at all. Eventually, he became adept at many counter-spells and potions out of necessity. Every day was a battle for him to survive.

After a time, he looked at her. She had never seen him look so lost.

"I don't know."

"Good morning, Poppy. How is our patient this morning?" Hermione said, a bit too cheerfully for Severus' taste.

"You're late. Where have you been?" Severus asked accusingly.

"Now, it's not like you have a schedule to keep," she said sweetly, ignoring his attitude, "That is my job."

"Ah, Hermione, please take him back to his rooms. He's to walk with a cane to strengthen the muscle and rest," Poppy said, emphasizing the last word with a glare at him. "No lurching about."

Hermione tried to not grin too much. "Of course, Poppy. I'd be happy to take him off your hands."

"Stop discussing me as if I am not right here," Severus growled and roughly grabbed the cane to rise.

"Oh dear, no tea yet?" Hermione smiled, ignoring his outburst. "Come along then, let's go and try not to injure yourself on the short trip back to your rooms, would you please? Poppy's supplies are low," Hermione said, smiling over at Poppy, who was trying not to laugh.

"Where were you?" Severus asked as they moved slowly back to his rooms.

"Did you miss me?" she said jokingly, putting her arm over his shoulder as they walked.

"Yes," he said, concentrating on walking. After the first few steps, it had gotten harder to place his weight on the leg with each new stride.

Hermione stopped. "What?"

"You are not old enough to be suffering from hearing loss," he said.

Smiling shyly, she said, "I thought you might be angry about the potion."

"Oh, that? Yes, well that was quite devious. Very Slytherin, I must say," he remarked with the air that it had been nothing at all.

"Oh, so you're not mad about what I did then?" she said nervously, hoping to catch his eye to check his true feelings.

"Mad? Of course not, Hermione," he said waving it off. His eyes, however, had a mischievous glint to them.

Hermione was unnerved by that look.

They stood in a shadowed portion of the corridor just around the corner from his rooms. Hermione was so caught up in trying to figure out what he was plotting she didn't notice him set the cane aside.

Suddenly, he reached up and, taking hold of her shoulders, swiftly pressed her up against the wall.

"Severus! I um someone could come by," Hermione said nervously as she weakly attempted to push him off of her.

Severus' response was to lean into her, pinning her firmly against the cold stone wall. He took his robes and spread his arms, effectively surrounding her with nothing but blackness, his face, and his voice.

"Do you think so?" he murmured, and lowering his mouth to her ear, he continued, "I most definitely hope so."

He leaned to kiss her shoulder, leisurely moved across her chest, then took her mouth to his aggressively. The heat of his body against hers conflicted with the cold stone on her back, giving her chills. She couldn't possibly move, and, frankly, didn't care.

Hermione gripped his robes as if to keep him from ever stopping. He took her hands and interlaced his fingers in hers while staring into her eyes. He then held her arms up to the wall, growling, "Do you have any idea what you do to me? I cannot have a thought without you in it in some form. It's really quite irritating; you must know. Even my dreams are tainted with you."

Hermione mocked a gasp of surprise. "While we are on the subject: Are you aware that you, Professor Snape, are utterly unbearable?"

"Really?" he said breathlessly. "I see. That you must know is news to me, as I feel I've successfully surpassed 'unbearable' and moved directly into the realm of 'incorrigible.' A snarky bastard, if you will, to put it in child's terms."

Hermione couldn't help but laugh while trying to kiss him.

He murmured, with a glimmer in his eyes, "I have references if you'd like. Mr. Potter can attest."

"Must you mention Harry at a time like this?" she teased.

They suddenly heard footsteps.

"Severus, I need to speak with you when you're finished there, please," Minerva said loudly. She strode by without stopping and patted him on the back.

Startled, Severus broke their kiss and stumbled backwards, trying vainly to look like nothing was happening. His hair was wild, standing at all angles, and his robes were in disarray. He looked after Minerva as she glanced back and called with laughter in her voice, "Oh, and ten points from Slytherin for snogging in the halls!"

Hermione tried valiantly to avoid laughing out loud at the shocked look on Severus' face as he tried to recover his dignity.

His intense gaze fell on her. Barely containing herself, she said, while slowly moving out of arms reach, "Um, I'll go grab some breakfast for us."

He could hear Hermione's laughter as she turned the corner.

Smirking slightly, he grabbed his cane and made his way to his rooms.

"Good morning, Severus," Minerva said cheerfully, with a wide grin, as he arrived in the sitting room. "I see you're feeling better today."

"I'm glad you've found something to amuse yourself, Minerva," Severus said with a scowl as he sat across from her.

"Severus, I think we need to discuss yesterday, yes?"

"Minerva, you were well aware of what I intended to do," he started, getting defensive immediately. "Besides, it worked, didn't it? He finally got it."

"We hardly discussed you strangling Harry!" she complained. "It was quite extreme, don't you think?"

"Minerva, you know as well as I do that if the boy dies, so do I. I am not going to let that happen. Potter simply needed a wake-up call." Leaning forward, Severus lowered his voice and said with intensity in his eyes, "Did you wish for me to do it or the Dark Lord?"

Minerva looked at him in defeat, and sighed, "Fine, but that was quite enough. Do you think he's ready?"

"No. He still needs to close his mind to me. Minerva, I can hear his thoughts across the room. The Dark Lord will leap into his mind and kill him within minutes."

"Please, Severus? Can this be done without you two bloodying each other?" she pleaded.

He leaned back in his chair contemplating. "If I must, but I make no promises. I do believe that one full duel with both sides using everything is in order."

"Yes, I agree, but it would help if you didn't enjoy it so," she said, pleading with him to behave himself.

"Why Minerva, I'm surprised by you insinuating that I enjoy beating Potter," he said, feigning shock.

Minerva frowned at him, "Severus, you know very well that you do. I only ask that you control yourself."

"Minerva, this is not entertainment or a game. Without preparation he will die, and not a painless, instant death, either. It is easy to pass judgment from the safety of this castle on what it is like to face the Dark Lord. Believe me when I say he will not allow for any errors in the heat of battle. Potter has survived so far by sheer luck and the intelligence of his companions. If you want to send him to certain death in the interest of making his training less traumatic, then by all means, I shall hand him a book and be done with it. Is that what you wish me to do?"

"No, of course not. Severus, I only felt it was getting out of hand. I..." Minerva started.

Severus roughly snatched up his sleeve to reveal his Mark. Showing it to her, he said brutally, "Do you think that whenever I've felt this burn that complete and utter terror doesn't grip my heart? I have been cursed and left near death more times than I can count, and that was when I was favored by the Dark Lord! Do you have *any* idea what it would be like to be on the other side of his wand as his enemy?"

After a moment of silence, Minerva appeared to make a decision and said, "Agreed. I trust you will do what needs to be done during tonight's lesson." She then looked at him gravely. "Poppy told me."

"Nothing gets past you two, does it? I'll deal with that on my own," he sneered. He tugged his sleeve back down and dropped his arm down impatiently.

"Don't go. You'll surely be killed," she said softly, pleading with him. Her eyes began to tear up. "We need you here with us. Hermione needs you."

"What is there for me here, Minerva?" he said shrugging and looking away. "What use am I after sending Potter off to fulfill his destiny, whether it be life or death? I should have died with Albus that night. Besides, the Order still requires a spy."

"Severus, no. You mustn't," she said in a rush, "I forbid you to go. You've done more than your part. This has been going on too long and needs to end. You deserve to try to lead a life of your own without this burden."

He smiled wistfully at her standing before him, "Minerva, you sound like Hermione."

"Do I come close enough for you to obey?" The conflict in his eyes was almost too much for her to bear.

After thinking for a long while, he finally looked to her and said, mostly to himself, "Yes."

The Best I Can Do

Disclaimer: It all belongs to JKR, and rightly so.

AN: Just when you think it's safe. ;-) Thanks to Ariadne, my invaluable comma fairy.

"Good morning," Hermione said, sensing the strained atmosphere in the room.

"Ah, Hermione, I was just about to leave. Severus and I were just discussing Harry's progress and an agreed reduction in the level of violence," Minerva said with a glance at Severus, who had found something interesting to stare at across the room.

"Oh, I'm sure that won't be a problem, will it, Severus?" Hermione asked expectantly.

Ignoring Severus' lack of a response, Minerva rose to leave, saying, "Excellent. Until tonight."

Severus rose from his chair and, ignoring the cane, dragged his leg as he moved over to the window. The pain in his leg was nothing compared to his Mark burning over and over for most of the night. A chill ran through him at the thought of what Draco faced having failed at his task. Something else was also on his mind as a reason to not heed the call and...

"Severus?"

Brought out of his thoughts, he turned his head slightly. "Yes?"

Hermione approached and stood by his side, sharing his view. She had found, from watching him over time, that there were different levels to his irritation. There was his usual disdain of general stupidity and then another, which was more the result of contemplating something terrible. Only a trained eye could tell the difference.

"Your conversation with McGonagall it wasn't just about Harry, was it?" she asked.

A somber grin appeared on his face as he turned his head just enough to allow some view of his face. "Nothing that you need to be concerned about."

"I'd think that your leaving would concern me," Hermione said seriously.

If he was surprised, he gave no indication other than a slightly interested expression.

"Your Mark," she said, gesturing towards his sleeve, "I came to check on you last night and it was darker. As if it..."

"Burned? Yes, that is what it does," he said with disgust.

"Severus, the Order needs your intelligence and skill, and Harry needs you to help him train. Voldemort will surely kill you now. You've done enough."

Raising a hand, he said, "You can save the speech, Hermione. Minerva has already delivered the same sentiments quite convincingly."

Hermione stepped in front of him and looked into his eyes. His expression was one of deep conflict.

"What, exactly, am I to do? The wizarding world will never accept me, and I cannot teach here. My only purpose was being a spy for Dumbledore and now..."

"Your purpose is to send Harry out of these doors as prepared as you can, so when he defeats Voldemort, it is a victory for all of us, including you. Your knowledge and talent bring you far greater worth than you imagine. You're not just a spy," she pleaded, careful of pushing too hard and touching the anger running just under the surface. "If you haven't noticed, there are some people around that do care for you."

Hermione noticed that his expression softened slightly.

"No matter how much of a snarky bastard you aspire to be," she added with a faint smile.

He snorted, saying, "So my job is to bounce Potter around, is it?"

"No, not exactly. Let's at least try to keep the bloodshed to a minimum, hmm?"

"If I must," he relented with a faint smirk. After a few moments, he broke the silence, "Why?"

Thrown off by his sudden question, she hesitated. She knew what he was asking, even though he wouldn't form the words. A nervous laugh escaped her before she found her voice. "I have to admit, I had a crush on you like some of the other girls."

"Crush? On me? Preposterous," he said, clearly stunned.

"Yes. A crush. Now, if I may continue?" she said irritably.

He scowled at her admonishment, but motioned for her to continue.

"After a while, I simply admired your intelligence. Men my age just aren't mature enough, and no one has ever shared my love for knowledge quite like you. I often am surrounded by friends, but feel very alone. I love Harry and Ron, but they are just not anything like me. I knew you were risking your life spying for the Order, and not being recognized for your sacrifices, least of all by Harry. Then when you killed Dumbledore..." she stopped, then, looking away, continued slowly, "I held out hope that you had a reason. It couldn't be that you would turn like that, so when we saw the debt recorded in the Pensieve, I understood."

She looked down at her hands for a moment before saying, "When I saw you outside..."

Her voice broke both at remembering that night and pouring out her feelings to him.

"Minerva told me," he said, still in disbelief that anyone would become emotional over him.

"Finding you there like that, I realized what I felt was real. I do care for you. It's an attraction that I can't explain. If you leave and something happens..."

Severus was stunned to find anyone looking at him with such concern. He remained frozen, even as she stepped closer and tucked her head under his. He was surprised at himself for allowing someone to come close enough to prevent him from doing anything. Only days before he would have swept outside the castle gates and Apparated to the Dark Lord without a thought, his life worth no more than his value as a spy. But now? Part of him resented being tied down, influenced or controlled by anything.

The other part wanted to bolt for the door.

"Promise me you won't go?" she asked, resting her head on his chest.

When he didn't respond, Hermione looked up at him and repeated sternly, "Promise me."

"Hermione, I..." he began, but trailed off at the sight of her gazing at him with such hope.

He took one of her hands and said, "I'll do what I can."

"Severus, if I may have a word?" Minerva called, waving Severus over to her.

He moved reluctantly, scowling at the prospect of yet another lecture on just how precious and delicate Potter was.

"Severus, please remember what we discussed earlier? I don't want to see a repeat of yesterday," Minerva stated, looking at him over her glasses with an expression indicating that she clearly expected his obedience.

"Minerva, the answer to that lies in Potter's hands. If he can block my spells, he will be fine. If he fails well, he will learn quickly, won't he?" he explained to the worried witch.

And you won't have to see it.

Severus' eyes tracked Harry as he entered with Lupin.

Without looking back at her, he said, "I will do my best."

"Potter, Lupin," he said, nodding at each slightly with a sneer. Harry only narrowed his eyes in response.

"Mr. Potter, tonight the headmistress requests that there be less bloodshed. That, however, will depend entirely on you. You will work on blocking my spells and keeping me out of your mind. Remember, Potter. Leave your emotions aside. You may hate me, but that is only an open invitation."

Severus enjoyed watching Harry grind his teeth before adding, "Oh, and Potter? Not. One. Word."

Hermione approached Minerva and said, "Professor, I'm worried that Severus may try to spy against Voldemort again. I saw the brand. Voldemort is calling him. I tried to convince him that he is needed here, but I don't know," Hermione said sadly. "What can we do?"

Minerva looked defeated and, while watching Severus obviously trying to terrorize Harry, said, "I don't know, Hermione. I cannot stop him, short of locking him up." Raising a locket she wore, she said, "I would know if he left. This will tell me if anyone leaves the castle. We would then have to try to prevent him from getting to the gates."

Hermione watched as Harry and Severus separated to a respectable dueling distance.

"It's time," Minerva said, looking at a worried Hermione. Placing a hand on her shoulder, she said, "He cannot be prevented. We need to convince him that he has a place within the Order without being a spy. I believe you can help him there, yes?"

Hermione nodded sadly.

Minerva moved into the middle of the room and glanced nervously between Harry and Severus. "If you're ready? Begin!"

Harry held his wand out, awaiting Severus' first move. Severus, however, simply stared at him, his wand at his side. Silence stretched out as Harry nervously shifted his weight from side to side. Just as an expression of confusion passed across Harry's face, Severus raised his arms high and made a slashing motion, as if cutting an orchestra silent. He then quirked a grin as a cold wind swept through the hall, extinguishing all of the torches. Only moonlight illuminated one end of the hall.

"Severus!" Minerva cried in the darkness.

Harry could barely see Severus approaching with his wand raised. Then he was gone.

The only sound was Severus' low voice laughing softly. "Not so brave in the dark, are we?"

Harry swung around, trying to locate Severus by the sound of his voice.

Severus seemed to be circling him like some great cat, moving silently, even while half-dragging his injured leg. Harry cast *Lumos* to see and was immediately slammed sideways, landing hard on his shoulder and getting the air knocked out of him.

Severus stood in the dark and could sense Harry climbing back to his feet, breathing hard. The aura of strained magic around Harry made him easy to track, even in total darkness. Severus quietly moved to stand behind him, enjoying the rising panic rolling off of Potter as he searched the emptiness.

"Looking for something?" Severus asked politely, as he circled to stand directly in front of Harry.

Swiftly, he stepped forward, grabbed hold of Harry's robes and, by the light of his wand, stared directly into his eyes. Whispering "*Legilimens*," Severus easily moved into Harry's mind and was first struck by an amazing amount of hatred towards him. He saw the inside of a cupboard filled with spiders, himself giving his famous first-year's Potions speech, catching the Snitch in a game of Quidditch, the Yule Ball, Hermione smiling at him...

"NO!" Harry screamed and roughly pushed Severus out.

"That showed effort, but too late, Potter," Severus sneered from behind.

Harry twisted around quickly, daring to cast *Lumos* again to bring light between them.

Harry only had time enough to register that Severus had moved his wand hand. Bright red light exploded between them for a split-second in time before it shot sideways, rebounded off the wall and out into the other half of the hall, bouncing along the floor.

"Interesting," Severus commented in an amused voice. "Listen to me, Potter. It is time. Do everything you can to take me down. I will not stop until you do, is that clear?"

Without pause, Severus threw a Stunner, which Harry blocked while practically running backwards before falling. The spell spiraled out in a wild arc, lighting the floor as it traveled. It disappeared out of sight, and then the loud, crashing sound of shattered glass falling answered the question as to where it went.

Severus kept advancing, throwing spell after spell as Harry struggled to get to his feet. Bolts of light flew out at all angles, flashing like indoor lightning strikes. Glass shattered along the walls, stone exploded, and the heavy crack of wood splintering could be heard as spells hit tables too close to be safe. Harry was wildly waving his wand arm, trying to keep up. Severus could only see Potter for fractions of time whenever the light of his deflected magic lit up the area around them. He threw all varieties of spells and at least one attempt at Legilimency, all of which Harry blocked successfully. His leg ached badly, but held, allowing him to keep a terrifying pace, eventually driving Potter into the moonlight.

Suddenly in mid-cast, Severus gripped his forearm tightly, hissing in pain and dropping to one knee. Harry took the advantage and quickly advanced on Severus, who looked up with teeth bared in pain and his eyes blazing. Before Severus could recover, Harry silently disarmed him.

After taking a deep breath, Severus slowly rose to his feet. His left hand twisted into a tight fist and shook badly.

"Very good, Potter," he said in a tight voice. He nodded and then turned to walk away.

After a few moments, Hermione turned and felt panic strike her heart when she didn't see Severus anywhere.

Her eyes shot to Minerva, who was already looking at her with shock on her face.

Minerva's hand gripped the locket.

"He's gone."

Return to Me

Chapter 9 of 41

A different kind of library.

Disclaimer: It all still belongs to JKR.

AN: Thanks again to Ariadne for being the beta queen.

"NO!"

Hermione bolted from the Great Hall and out the castle doors with Minerva close behind. Searching the grounds, she turned to Minerva with tears in her eyes and the night wind blowing in her hair. "How could he? I should have stayed with him! Now he's gone!" She looked at Minerva with pure panic in her eyes.

"This only means he left the castle. You may still be able to head him off before he can get to the gates!" Minerva called, scanning the grounds as far as she could see. Hermione's eyes widened, then she ran down the castle steps and into the darkness.

"Oh, Severus," Minerva said, holding back tears as she watched Hermione tear across the castle grounds.

Tears blurred her vision as she ran, screaming his name frantically, terrified at the possibility of never seeing him again. The gates came into view just as she ran out of breath, but she couldn't see him anywhere.

The trees merely rocked in the cool evening breeze, immune to the trauma surrounding them. She gripped the bars tightly and laid her head down, feeling the cold metal. Out of breath and panting, she stood there and sobbed.

"No!" she cried in anger, causing several owls to startle out of the trees.

Severus had developed a lurching gait, the kind that screamed that he had no business being upright, let alone walking. A mixture of jealousy, pain and bitterness surged within him. The cool night wind rippled his robes around him in an even more dramatic fashion than he could achieve sweeping through the halls. His hair flew around his head, whipping into his eyes. A great feeling of responsibility propelled him onward to what he knew was almost certain death.

Something in him needed to try.

"Damn you, Albus," he muttered aloud. "Even from the grave you rule my miserable life."

He stared ahead in the darkness as he moved along, his goal soon coming into focus.

Suddenly, he heard Hermione scream his name in the night. He stopped, torn between returning to his service as a spy and going back to her.

She was getting closer.

The gates stood before him, ornate wrought iron shapes, marking a magical crossing. Once outside, he could Apparate.

Severus touched the gates, but could only stand frozen as he heard her cry his name over and over. Closing his eyes, he opened the gates and moved through.

He quickly moved into the shadows when he saw Hermione approach the gates, watching in fascination as she clutched the bars and cried, moaning his name.

Severus was shocked. No one had ever concerned themselves about his going to the Dark Lord. Always alone, always returning to the castle to provide his report to Dumbledore. He was sometimes barely able to breathe or walk from various injuries. His hands shook for days after being hit by the Cruciatus Curse numerous times. Dumbledore cared, but the information was too valuable. Other members of the Order had no knowledge of the horrors he endured, although, at times, Minerva would show concern. Poppy soon became so upset by the state he would come back in that he ceased going to her, choosing to heal himself the best he could.

A strange feeling akin to pain filled his heart to see her crying. He backed further into the shadows to avoid being seen, stepping into the brittle brush. Severus took a deep breath and, while pulling up his sleeve, whispered, "I'll be back, Hermione."

He moved to touch his wand to the Mark and was promptly knocked to the ground.

The air was completely knocked out of him. The sky above moved in a swinging motion before shifting back into place. Before he could panic from lack of air, a wand was thrust against his throat.

"Don't you dare!"

Gasping for breath, Severus looked up to find an extremely furious Hermione Granger sitting on his chest with her wand pointed at him threateningly.

"Hermione, I need," he gasped. Having her sitting on him, no matter how erotic, didn't help. His leg screamed in pain from falling. Weakly, he put up his hands in mock surrender and smirked into her angry face.

"I swear, I'll hex the daylight out of you, Severus Snape! How dare you leave!" she raged and pounded her free fist into his shoulder.

Barely able to catch his breath, he managed to croak out, "Would you please remove yourself from sitting on top of my lungs?"

She eyed him suspiciously. "You swear to not Apparate if I let you up?"

He didn't think it a good idea to let her know that he still held his wand and could Apparate, even with her sitting on him.

"Yes," he chuckled softly at her. When she angrily pushed her wand into his chest, he repeated quickly, "Yes, I swear!"

"Has anyone ever told you how beautiful you are when angry?" he said with a grin as Hermione reluctantly moved off of him.

When she didn't respond or lower her wand, he raised an eyebrow. "Am I a prisoner?"

"Back inside," she said seriously, pointing at the castle gates. "Now."

Severus limped through the castle gates, brushing off his robes and picking leaves out of his hair.

Once inside, he turned to her, "Hermione, the Order needs information, and I am the only one who..."

"No! You're going to listen, and I'm only going to say this once. You are no longer a spy. Understand? Done! Over with!" she shouted at him.

Severus could only stare at her with an impressed look on his face. He was still rubbing dirt out of his hair, feeling like a scolded child found outside after bedtime.

She started on him, and he even took a step backward before catching himself. "I could never forgive myself if you were killed! Please, Severus, we need you here! Can't you understand that? The only reason Harry won is because your Mark burned. Anyone can see that!"

She breathed in shallow gasps, still ready to hex him should he move towards the gates.

"Besides," she started breathlessly, "I need you."

They stood in silence, their hair and robes blowing in the wind.

"Hermione..." he started, moving towards her.

"Now move!" she shouted. She motioned furiously at the castle, rubbing tears out of her eyes.

Raising an eyebrow, he stopped and crossed his arms over his chest. "And if I refuse?"

Without taking her eyes off his, she slowly moved her wand downwards. In a deadly serious voice, she stated, "Try me."

Severus' eyes widened slightly. He remained still for a moment, then turned quickly and began the journey back to the castle.

Minerva stood at the top of the Entrance Hall steps, listening to Hermione cry out Severus' name as she ran to the gates.

Remus placed a hand on her shoulder as he followed her line of sight. "Minerva?"

"Oh, Remus, what am I to do with him?" she said, looking at Remus with true fear.

"I don't know, but as miserable as he is, he is the most skilled fighter we have. Harry only won because of the Mark. He knows that."

Minerva nodded sadly.

"Minerva? Are Hermione and Severus?" Remus started, unsure of how to ask.

"Yes, I believe so," she said with a weak smile.

"And would you happen to have anything to do with this?" he asked quietly, a slight grin playing on his face.

Minerva shrugged, saying, "I may have given a hint or two to Severus. Sadly, he is a man who will be in love long before he will admit it to be true."

Remus nodded. "He may be a complete git at times, but if this brings him happiness, then so be it."

Emerging out of the darkness, Minerva could make out two forms moving towards the castle. Hardly believing her eyes, she watched as Severus limped with Hermione following behind, her wand firmly trained on him. Severus' face held an expression of embarrassment at being prodded along by a young witch.

With great effort, Minerva kept her grin at a minimum as they climbed up the stairs.

"Welcome back, Severus," Minerva said as they passed. Severus only glared at her.

They had moved in silence through the halls, refusing to argue in front of anyone. Once they arrived back in the rooms, Severus growled, "Happy now?"

"You still don't get it, do you?" she said, moving to stand in front of him.

He ignored her, choosing to stare into the empty fireplace.

When she didn't stop staring at him, he scowled, saying, "Do you intend to stand guard?"

"Are you suicidal?" she asked as calmly as possible.

He rolled his eyes. "Does it matter?"

"It matters to me."

He gestured to the dirt and leaves still littering his robes. "So I see."

Silence fell again. He held his ground, waiting for her to try again.

Hermione knew he enjoyed baiting her, so she chose another route.

Hermione sighed. "When you were lying here unconscious, I watched you for hours. Every breath, every movement, even your nightmares. In the night I had more than enough time to think."

"Fascinating," he muttered. "I had no idea you thought so much."

She ignored his comment, along with the unsettling way he was looking at her. "I thought about what Harry told us about the Horcruxes and how we need your help."

Looking at her intently, he said slowly, "Go on."

"We know from Dumbledore that the Horcruxes are most likely protected by Dark Magic."

Severus sat down and thought for a moment. "Yes, I am aware of that. Dumbledore came to me after destroying the ring, but I was unable to stop the damage to his hand."

He then closed his eyes for a time before looking at her again.

"Can you see now why we need you? No one is more knowledgeable of the Dark Arts, and your fighting style is, well, interesting," she said, searching his eyes. "Can I trust that you will stay?"

Severus seemed to be contemplating. After a long while, he nodded slightly and rose.

"Follow me."

Hermione looked confused, but followed him as instructed.

Severus approached the bookcase in the corner and, after muttering a spell, passed through a door that appeared. Hermione could tell by the stale air that the room had not been open in a long while.

It was a library lined with bookcases at least ten shelves high and covered in deep layers of cobwebs. Chains held the books in their shelves like prisoners. Part of her wondered if they were to protect the books or to protect her from them. A mahogany table sat in the middle of the room with a single candle resting upon it.

Severus turned and leaned on his cane. "These are books on subjects so objectionable and dangerous to the mainstream wizarding community that they cannot be allowed to see the light of day. They contain spells and potions so vile they would rip the innocence from your mind and expose you to the evils of this world. For every sun-filled day, there is a night drowning in darkness where unspeakable things occur."

He motioned around the room with reverence, his black eyes gleaming dangerously in the dim light. "Here is everything that can possibly be known about the Dark Arts."

*AN: *Author laughs softly and slips into the darkness**

Off the Mark

Chapter 10 of 41

No library cards here.

Disclaimer: Still belongs to JKR. I'm only borrowing.

AN: I shall need to find better, more creative ways in which to thank my dear beta, Ariadne. She is tireless. May her addiction never be cured. ;-) Darkness ahead, my friends.

"Severus," Hermione said, in wonder at all the books surrounding her. "All of this is on the Dark Arts alone?"

Severus surveyed the room with an odd type of fascination in his eyes. He had gone to the far end before turning back to her. Trailing a finger through the thick layer of dust obscuring the mahogany table top, he said in a distant voice, "Yes."

"But, no one has been in here for a long time, it seems," Hermione said, tilting her head up to find a frighteningly barbaric-looking lantern hanging on a chain from the ceiling. The glass was broken and it was somehow swinging on its own. "You don't read them?" she asked, a little disturbed at his dreamlike expression. Out of the corner of her eye, she could have sworn she saw one of the books straining against the chains. It was tilted forward, just enough to bow the chain out slightly.

"I have read some," he said, moving his eyes up to the top-most shelves. "Dumbledore's policy was only to allow the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher to know of the collection's existence. He did not share its location until recently. He told me shortly before... everything happened."

"Why would Dumbledore have Dark Arts books here at Hogwarts?"

"Know the darkness and ye shall know the light," he recited, fingering a clasp that appeared to hold the chains for one bookshelf. He answered her before she could ask. "Know thine enemy, Hermione. Anyone who thinks that Dumbledore didn't know Dark Magic is very naive indeed. It isn't the knowledge, it's the application."

"Severus, do you think it's a well, I mean..." she started, trying to express that it might not be beneficial for him to have access to this type of information.

"I am well aware of what you're thinking," he said softly. He gazed at the numerous spines, his head tilted slightly to read them. A long stretch of silence descended between them, making her as nervous as in that first Potions class so long ago. The air, heavy from lack of circulation, seemed to be making her sleepy. When he spoke again, it was with a far away look in his eye as he settled on one of the books, touching it lightly with something dangerously close to reverence.

"That my interest, if you will, in the Dark Arts is dangerous. That all the time Dumbledore denied me the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, he was somehow saving me from myself. From my own descent into evil," Severus trailed off, then shifted his eyes to her.

Before Hermione could speak, he startled her by muttering what sounded like a harsh warning to the occupants of one of the shelves behind him.

Whatever it was, it involved fire.

"Did I capture your thoughts?" he asked, approaching her slowly.

"Severus, I'm..."

He tilted his head slightly and sneered, although it didn't seem to be directed at her. "It's no matter. Now that interest will serve some purpose, yes? It is certain that the Dark Lord has protected the Horcruxes with Dark Magic. I have done some research on the kinds of magical protection that may be placed on such things. I won't know, however, until I see the object just how destructive it will be. Simply being in a Horcrux's presence may be deadly."

Hermione noticed that Severus was absently rubbing his forearm. "May I ask you a question?"

"I have never known you not to," he said, smirking faintly.

"Have you thought about the Mark? I mean, now you are no longer a spy," she said cautiously.

"Hermione," he said slowly as if speaking to a small child, "The Mark is hardly something that you can simply remove at will. If it were, there are more than a few who would immediately be rid of it." A mix of disgust and regret spread across his face as he considered it.

"You don't think it's possible?" she asked, gesturing towards the books. As if in response to her attention to them, she was certain now she could hear the chains moving slightly. Suddenly, one shifted forward, then its neighbors joined it. The chains held, but shook softly.

If Severus noticed the books' menacing display, he was ignoring it. He gazed into the depths of the library, where the light from the sitting room died out. With a touch of what sounded like wonder, he said softly, "It could be."

She tried to ignore the odd expression on his face. "I had a thought. In the end, Harry will need to face Voldemort alone. If we can figure out the Mark, maybe we can divert the Death Eaters so Harry will have a better chance. Divide and conquer," she said with a devious smile.

Severus looked positively impressed. "Are you certain you shouldn't be in Slytherin?"

Hermione laughed, happy that the frighteningly distant look was gone from his face. "Quite sure."

Thinking for a moment, he said, "Hermione, most of these books contain magic that is far too advanced for you to manage. This is not the library, and you will not be settling in here with a parchment to take notes. It's far too dangerous." He glanced back at the books, as if to make sure they weren't at that moment planning something evil.

"What if you select a book that you would allow me to read?" she asked. "Besides," she said with a sly smile, "we can't have you lose another duel because of the Mark, can we?"

He appeared insulted. "I did *not* lose."

"Really? What would you call it?"

He narrowed his eyes and moved towards her, indicating that they should leave the room.

Once outside, the door disappeared. He turned on her, saying, "One would think you would have more to say about my training methods than keeping score. It seems that Minerva is more upset about yesterday's demonstration of instant enlightenment through attempted murder than you."

Hermione was thrown for a moment by how he could shift so suddenly.

"I understand the reason," she said, refusing to take his bait.

Severus circled around her, cutting her off. "I see. And that is?"

Hermione sighed, "I understand that we don't have time to waste. Harry needs to learn quickly, and if that means using *different* methods, then I suppose it's best."

A gleam of victory shined in his eyes as he pressed, "And?"

She rolled her eyes. "It worked."

He offered her a mock bow, as if he was at her service. "Now is the time to allow a true duel to occur. The Dark Lord will not simply try to disarm our dear hero. He will not kill him immediately either. No, the Dark Lord finds pleasure in toying with his prey. It is the imminent strike that inspires the most fear. Potter is about to learn how a Death Eater fights."

Hermione looked at him suspiciously.

"Do you honestly think he could take me in a real fight?" he said softly and stepped towards her.

Hermione stared at him. "Are you saying you're not trying?"

A smug grin appeared on his face. "Not even close."

"Severus! How is Harry supposed to prepare if you're not trying?" Hermione complained.

"Because, Hermione, your dear headmistress keeps begging me to spare him from too much bloodshed or pain. She feels that my training methods are too severe," he sneered, waving his hand dismissively. "She fails to realize that this is not a schoolboy dueling club."

Hermione considered for a moment before asking, "If I talked with her, would you still help Harry?"

He shrugged and turned towards the bedroom. "What else do I have for entertainment?"

Hermione followed him to the bedroom, watching as he dragged his leg after him. He was becoming quite good at his substandard version of walking and she now realized how he made it to the gates so quickly.

"You need to walk properly," she commented, readying herself for an argument.

"What?" he said, reaching the bed. Clearly exhausted, he laid back and closed his eyes.

Standing in front of him, she repeated, "I said, you need to walk properly. Poppy said no lurching about."

Without opening his eyes he said irritably, "I do not *lurch*, Hermione. I'm tired. Leave me be."

Hermione shook her head and regarded him with a stern look. "That was lurching, Severus."

"Hermione," he growled, opening his eyes again and lifting his head. "I am hardly going to discuss the definition of 'lurching' with you at this hour."

"Does your leg still hurt?" she asked with concern.

"No. It's fine," he said a little too harshly.

"Oh, it's fine, is it?"

"Yes. Quite."

She reached out and rested a hand on his leg.

Severus hissed in a mixture of pain and surprise, striking her hand away. He glared at her, shouting, "What are you doing?"

"Oh, but you said it was fine," she said innocently, trying to hide a smile but failing, "and yet you scream like a girl."

Severus only snorted and laid his arm over his eyes.

She grinned as she picked twigs and bits of leaves out of the folds of his robes. After watching her remove various remnants of the forest floor from his clothes, he murmured, "You really are beautiful when angry. Dangerous, but beautiful."

Smiling warmly down at him, she opened his robes and started on his shirt. "Hit you kind of hard, didn't I? I heard you say that, you know. I was just too angry with you for leaving."

He lifted his eyes up to her. "Hermione, I thought I could..."

"You thought what? That committing suicide would be a lovely idea?" she asked, her anger rising.

"I thought it would be worth trying to continue. After all, I promised Albus..." he said with a sigh and trailed off.

"Severus, that time has passed. No more, okay?" she whispered, laying tiny kisses on his chest and pulling the shirt tails out of his pants. He winced at the movement, trying vainly to hide it.

"I'll get a pain potion for you," she said, giving him a quick kiss.

He shook his head "No" and closed his eyes.

When she returned to the bedroom, she knew immediately that he had fallen asleep. Sighing, she set the potion aside and looked down at him. With a smile, she leaned down and kissed him gently. His face held a pained look, but he didn't wake.

Brushing his hair away from his face, she whispered, "Stay with me?"

From somewhere, under many layers of sleep, Severus muttered, "Yes."

The morning sun warmed a corner of the sitting room where Severus sat drinking his tea. Hermione had argued with him thoroughly about getting some sun, so here he was, allowing himself to bask to appease her. Part of him just didn't want to admit that it felt nice.

He had chosen several books that he deemed safe enough for Hermione to research the Mark. While in the library, he had to take care with the chains, as some of the books threatened to push free. One had taken to growling in some language disturbingly close to English.

No telling what their plans would be if let loose. That's all I need, to have a gang of rogue books galloping about the castle.

Since giving a smiling Hermione the books, it had been blissfully quiet while she researched. After a while, he felt himself slipping to sleep behind eyelids colored orange by the sun.

"Severus, look at this," Hermione called, startling him awake.

Hermione read the passage aloud as Severus rubbed his eyes. "A magical brand can be used as both a signal and a connection to a central bonder. Traditionally used by early wizarding armies to call each other to battle, the brand produces a deep burning sensation."

"*Sensation*, indeed," he snorted.

Hermione shrugged, as if apologizing for the book's choice of words before continuing. "The wearer may join the bonder by touching the brand and Apparating to their side. However, if the bonder's mark is disrupted by magic, the Apparition point may be changed or prevented completely. The magical bond can be broken by applying a curse reversal potion and performing a bond dissolution ceremony. The ceremony consists of taking truth serum and denouncing the bonder." She looked at him solemnly. "A blood sacrifice is required and there is a spell described here."

Severus looked down at the Mark on his arm where it had burned enough to leave scars. Hermione watched him as he considered his possible freedom. He had worn the Mark for half his life, and it was a burden that looked to overwhelm him.

Scowling towards the book, he said, "It cannot be that easy."

Hermione tilted her head as she asked, "How many Potions masters do you know that can brew something this nasty looking and perform a spell like this? Or for that matter, even know this information exists?"

Severus observed her for a moment before nodding. "McGonagall will have the Veritaserum locked in her office."

Hermione closed the book and took a piece of parchment with notes. "I'll go fetch it from her."

At the door she stole a glance back at him. The sun reflected off his hair as he stared down. Hermione noticed with pain in her heart that he appeared to be tracing the outline of his Mark, as if bidding it a hopeful farewell.

"May I speak with you?" Hermione asked as she entered the office.

"Of course, Hermione," Minerva said, offering her a seat and smiling over her glasses. Her desk was covered with parchment and Hermione noticed that she now had two school owls stationed in the office. "Would this have to do with a certain dark-haired patient?"

"Yes. It's two things, really. I had a thought that we should try to remove Severus' Mark," Hermione said hopefully.

Minerva leaned back in her chair. "That would be wonderful, but I imagine the magic is much stronger than you may think."

"I thought so too until Severus showed me the Dark Arts books hidden in a secret library."

"Severus has books on the Dark Arts?" Minerva asked quickly. A great look of concern crossed her face. "How long as he had them?"

"Not long. He said that Dumbledore allowed him access to them shortly before everything happened," Hermione said, unnerved by McGonagall's reaction*Is it worse than I thought?*

"He allowed me to read through a few, and I think I've found something."

Minerva leaned forward and listened as Hermione read her the passage, the ceremony details, and her idea about diverting the Death Eaters. When she had finished, Minerva clasped her hands on the desk and thought for a moment.

"Removing Severus' Mark would be a great gift to him, Hermione. I daresay the best gift anyone could ever give him. One word of caution, though," she said, her expression changing to one of worry, "Severus has had an obsession with the Dark Arts for a long time, and it's an attraction that he has trouble denying." She looked at Hermione with great sadness. "We don't want to lose him to that again."

"Don't worry, I won't let that happen," Hermione said with a fierce look to her.

"Perfect. Now," Minerva said, changing the subject. "What was your second topic?"

"Oh," Hermione looked down into her lap. "It was about Harry's training."

"Oh? I think he's doing quite well, don't you?"

"Yes, well..."

"Hermione, what aren't you telling me?" Minerva asked, getting up from her chair.

"It's just that Severus told me he isn't trying very hard," Hermione shrugged. "Because you've been asking him to be less violent."

An expression of frustration, then sadness passed over Minerva's face. She came around the desk in front of Hermione and said thoughtfully, "I've asked Severus to keep things easy to give Harry a chance to build confidence and, at the same time, to keep them from killing each other." Nodding slowly, she looked up at Dumbledore's sleeping portrait.

Hermione nodded, feeling trapped between her friend and the man she had become so close to in recent days.

"Severus and Harry seem destined to always hate each other, I'm afraid. Severus shared with me that he would press hard on Harry to force him to cast silently, but I had no idea he would resort to near strangulation," Minerva said with a slow shake of her head. "I've been hesitant to give him free rein because of what could happen." Sighing, she continued, "I see now that it won't help Harry to have the opportunity to duel with a wizard as powerful as Severus and hold him back."

"Thank you. I'll let Severus know," Hermione said, knowing the duels were about to take on a whole new level of intensity.

"Oh, you'll be needing this for the Mark then," Minerva said, unlocking a small strongbox under her desk and pulling out a vial of Veritaserum. As she handed it to Hermione, she warned, "Remember, do not ask Severus anything you do not wish to know while he is under its influences."

Hermione took the vial and when she saw Minerva wink at her, smiled in return.

Hermione returned to the rooms and paused outside the door. She felt the weight of the vial in her hand and considered the opportunity. While under the influence of the serum, Severus would be compelled to tell the truth. She knew what she wanted to ask him, but feared the worst from his possible answer. Sighing, she opened the door and entered the sitting room, where she found him still in the chair by the window. Holding up the vial, she announced, "I've got it."

They walked in silence through the halls. Considering the seriousness of what they were about to do, Hermione let it go that he was still dragging the leg. Severus moved in a loping motion, leaning forward with each stride, then dragging the injured leg forward. His hair hung in black sheets around his face, swinging in time as he moved. Once outside the Potions classroom, he paused with a hand on the door.

"Hermione, I've read more while you were gone about this ceremony. I will need you to leave the room at one point. The magic I will be performing is far too dangerous." His eyes took on a serious depth, imploring her to heed his warning. "I don't want to hurt you."

Hermione refused to believe that he would ever hurt her, but slowly nodded. "I understand."

He pushed the door open and headed towards his old private lab.

Hermione set a cauldron to simmer and gathered the ingredients which, thankfully, he had in his stores. The last ingredient, however, was too terrible to consider just yet. She watched him in quiet fascination. While he had taught for many years, she had never had the opportunity to watch him work. The line in his brow became deeper as he muttered various incantations, as if willing the colors to merge into each other. A terrible light rose from within the potion, giving it a living presence. Considering the complexity of the potion, she doubted there were many that could successfully brew it. Part of the entry mentioned the risk of a deadly explosion should the temperature be disrupted or the consistency of the ingredients incorrect. She noticed that when Severus read over that part, he showed no concern. *Either confidence or arrogance, or both.*

After what seemed several hours in silence, Severus removed his outer robes. After carefully placing them aside, he moved his hands to his throat, tilted his head back, and began the slow process of removing his coat. Hermione couldn't help but stare as he addressed each button, twisting his hands slightly as he moved downward. His hands seemed to glide along, intimately familiar with the process from many years of practice. When he began to remove his shirt, he allowed his eyes to meet hers. Her breath hitched, and her heart pounded with a force she didn't think possible. The moment would be positively erotic if it weren't for what he was about to do.

Answering the question in her eyes, he explained quietly, "There will be a significant amount of blood."

Hermione's eyes widened. "How much?" she asked, approaching him and looking closer at the notes. She knew it required blood sacrifice, but in her rush she neglected to notice the amount.

"Enough to fill this," he said, placing a long shallow bowl on the table. "You will make the cut, complete the potion, and then pour the finished product onto the wound. It will be caustic, so take care."

"Me? Severus, I..." Hermione started with shock in her eyes. She took a step back as if to escape this responsibility. At that moment she wished she had never come across the passage.

He looked at her gravely as he picked up his wand and conjured a chain and ring of metal. Her distracted mind told her it was a shackle to hold his arm down.

"Hermione, I need you to do this."

She shook her head in slow denial. "What about McGonagall? Can't she?"

"I trust you, and quite frankly I'm not the least bit interested in being seen this way," he said quietly, his eyes pleading.

At that her resistance fell. She distantly heard herself say, "I'll do whatever you need."

Severus limped to the far side of the room and pulled a shallow box off of a dusty shelf. Inside laid a long black dagger. He ran his hand lightly along the handle, carved out of marble for extra weight. The shape, of course, was a serpent. The blade was crafted specifically for blood sacrifice, fashioned to a lethal sharpness. The weight of the handle and blade was meant to allow for an easy cut, as it was used upon the holder for Dark magic potions. It would cut deep and fast, hopefully well enough to leave a precise wound favorable to quick healing. Taking a deep breath, he turned to find Hermione staring at him, the color completely gone from her face.

Hermione tried to busy herself by watching the potion calmly simmer, trying to avoid thinking of what was to come. Her eyes were drawn to watching Severus holding a dagger in his hands, almost contemplating it before he turned to approach her. The anxiety level gripping her heart rose with every disturbingly abnormal step he took towards her.

"It will be ready by the time we need it," he said, checking the potion. He laid the knife next to the shallow bowl, allowing his fingers to brush down the handle's length. Bending low over the table, he laid his arm down and closed the shackle over his wrist. He muttered a spell and the metal glowed white, before dying back down to a dark metallic silver.

"It will not break or respond to spells until this is done," he said, answering her unspoken question. His black eyes glittered with anticipation, holding hers for a moment before she looked away. Hermione felt like she was going to positively be sick. When reading the passage, she'd had no idea the reality of the process, too caught up in the possibility of setting him free.

"Hermione, when I tell you to leave, you do not hesitate, understand?" he said, searching her eyes as if confirming she was aware of the danger.

Hermione nodded. She felt a sick, twisting knot falling slowly down through her stomach as he positioned his forearm over the bowl.

Severus drank a few drops of Veritaserum and motioned for her to read from the parchment. Hesitantly, she took it and, noticing her hand was trembling, resorted to holding it down while she read.

In a shaking voice, she said, "It says you are to answer the following questions. Are you prepared?"

"Yes."

"Who is your bonder?"

Severus paused for a long while, and Hermione began to think he may not answer. Finally he said clearly, "Tom Marvolo Riddle"

Hermione noticed that he flinched when forced to say Voldemort's true name and wondered if that would ever leave him.

"Do you swear on your life that you wish to break this bond and denounce your bonder?"

"Yes, I swear."

They both noticed that the Mark grew brighter as he spoke. Suddenly, Severus jerked back and strained against the chain, hissing in pain. He gripped the edge of the table with his other hand so hard she noticed his knuckles were white. Again and again he hit the end of the chain, the links echoing his pain by shaking along with him.

Hermione felt completely helpless, wanting to both comfort him and afraid to approach him in this state. Her thoughts kept flying back to how he looked when she found him on the grounds. How her image of him was completely torn apart along with his body. The strong persona he'd spent years building, reduced to a barely living wreck draped in her arms. He was strangely calm then, nothing like what he was now, gripped in the clutches of something so utterly terrifying.

"Do it now," he gasped before throwing his head down when the Mark burned again. The shackle cut into his wrist as he twisted. His arm shook badly, every vein and tendon visible.

"Severus, I can't"

His eyes took on a savage light as the Mark burned even brighter. Sweat beaded along his forehead, causing his hair to stick to his face.

When she continued to back away, he roared, "NOW!"

His voice echoing throughout the room thrust her from her thoughts. Quickly, she grabbed the dagger and drew it hard across the Mark. She moaned in disgust as it sank deeper when crossing his muscle. Severus threw his head back, his eyes closed and teeth bared. Immediately, a wide cut appeared as if she was writing with a quill, leaving an ink trail. Dark blood began to flow, landing in sickly drops into the bowl. The bleeding increased, coating his entire forearm and pouring in time with his heartbeat.

Hermione dropped the knife to the floor, where it clattered loudly. She stared at the blood on her hands, just as she did the night she found him dying on the castle grounds. Severus looked like a trapped animal that has given up hope of escape, patiently bleeding enough to fill the bowl. His wrist was mangled from struggling against the shackle, leaving a dark trail of blood that traveled in the wood's deep grain before dripping to the floor. Deathly pale, Severus leaned on the table at an angle, staring at her, barely breathing.

Neither of them spoke. Hermione stood frozen as they both watched the bowl fill at an agonizingly slow pace.

When the level finally reached the brim, Hermione gently eased the bowl out from under his arm and poured it into the cauldron. The potion glowed bright crimson for a moment before darkening to black.

"Now..." Severus said through clenched teeth. He could only breathe in shallow gasps as he leaned all of his weight onto the table. What hair wasn't plastered to his head hung around his face in strings. His chest was streaked with a mixture of blood and sweat and his free arm stretched out across the table, gripping his wand. His shoulders shook. "Pour some of the potion on the cut and leave immediately."

Hermione hesitated, shaking her head slowly.

Severus looked up and said slowly with great effort, "I need you."

Hermione stood for a moment and, remembering the Veritaserum, knew it was true. She held his gaze for a moment before taking some potion with a ladle. Trying to steady her trembling hand, she swiftly poured the potion directly into the wound.

And ran.

Tell Me the Truth

Chapter 11 of 41

Beware the truth.

Disclaimer: As usual, it all belongs to JKR. I'm only borrowing and paying my respects.

AN: The first half of this chapter was written in an inspirational haze. Thanks to Ariadne for all of her wonderful support and our new motto: "Trust that style."

Hermione reached the door just as an intense red light filled the room. At first, it colored the air in a cloak of diffuse color, then took on a life of its own, becoming tangible enough to physically push her. She fumbled for the door handle, pulling it open just enough to launch herself through. In the split-second when she turned to close the door, the room was obscured by the light, deepening to a dark red, unlike any spell she'd ever seen. An inexplicably sinister energy rushed at her. As she slammed the door, she was both fearful for Severus, and thankful she didn't stay.

She stared at the gap below the door. The light grew darker, traveling a spectrum of red to black and back again. Over and over it pulsed, cycled. Each time it returned to red, it died a little more.

Then it was gone.

Hermione placed her hand on the door, then quickly snatched it away. Something was disturbing about the energy living there, coating the door as if it was alive, moving along the grain. She turned her palm and stared at her hand for a moment, convinced there would be some visible evidence of what she had just felt. She took a step back and swept her eyes over the door.

No sign of anything.

She stretched her hand out again and tentatively touched the door once more. It was still there, but weaker, receding. Taking a chance, Hermione drew her wand, took hold of the door and flung it open. She stood in the doorway, unmoving, as the door struck the inside wall.

"Severus?"

Only the sounds of a simmering cauldron and a sickly dripping answered her. She couldn't see him from this distance, but could see a darkened area to the side where the table should be. Incredibly, it had moved several yards to the right and was at a different angle than when she'd left.

Hermione moved slowly into the room. Something in the atmosphere inspired dread, fear and awe all at once. A rose colored haze hung in the air, whether from the magic or the potion, she didn't know, and didn't want to consider.

She almost didn't want to call his name.

Walking crouched, Hermione whispered his name, trying not to panic. What came out was more prayer than call. "Severus, answer me."

She stopped short of screaming when she came around the side of a table that had been knocked over. It was now terribly evident what had happened. The table they had worked on was askew, pulled out of the ruts where its legs had been for centuries. Severus had, in the end, pulled a massive table several yards by the shackle around his wrist. The potion had lost some of its contents, but remained upright, riding along with the table as it must have shuddered over the uneven stone floor.

Hermione jerked in shock when she saw the chain lying flat against the table, still tight, leading off the edge and downward. Her hands shook and somehow made their way to clasp over her mouth as she moved around the table. She should be rushing to his side, but something in her was terrified at what she'd find at the end of that chain.

As she moved closer, she could see over the table's edge, more links, then the shackle, his hand drenched in blood, some drying between his fingers. She stepped quickly over what remained of a stool, splintered into shards and colored red with what she hoped was spilled potion. The destruction was incredible, as if the entire lab had been picked up, swung sideways, and slammed down. Shoving another ruined stool away, she could see him.

Severus lay on the floor in a pool of blood, his arm stretched high to where the shackle still tore into his wrist. His head hung down and she couldn't see his face. He had bled to the point of covering his entire arm and most of his chest. From the angle he rested, every rib was visible and she could see the barely healed tears from Buckbeak's attack.

Why isn't he still bleeding?

She didn't want to answer the academic part of her mind as she crouched down in front of him. He was, in fact, breathing. Hard. The kind of forced breathing of someone barely holding on to consciousness. Hermione reached out her hand and brushed the hair out of his eyes.

Gasping, she recoiled.

His eyes were half-open and staring directly at her with a disturbing light. Slowly, her hand fell to her lap, forgotten, as she watched him raise his wand. His eyes held hers for a moment, then tracked in small steps upwards, following his arm. Before she could say anything, the shackle disappeared, releasing him and allowing his upper body to fall into her arms.

"Severus?" she said in a hushed voice. She felt it, that same disturbingly fascinating energy was surrounding him. Moving onto her. Circling. It felt...

Powerful?

No, more than that. Excruciatingly violent... reveling in it, pulling her downwards. Luring her, whispering words of suggestion. That it is magic all the same, nothing more, but it can offer so much more. Yes, more power than she could ever dream possible....

Part of her wanted him to stop looking at her like that. His expression was something born of an energy that shouldn't be allowed, it couldn't be right. She kept her eyes on his and slowly moved to take his wand from his hand. At first, he refused to let go, gripping it tighter.

"Stop... it's over. Let it go." When she shook her head slowly, she felt him ease and allow the wand to leave his hand.

When he closed his eyes, she moved her hand down his arm. She held his shoulders tighter when her hand reached the cut, grimacing as she smoothed the congealed blood aside. At first she couldn't believe what she saw. The cut had moved into a tight line, as if closing on itself. Fresh blood flowed from it, but not nearly at the deadly rate from before.

Most importantly, the Mark was gone.

"I had no idea it would work," he said, mostly to himself, staring at his arm. All that remained was a thin line, a ghost of the deep gash that was there only hours before. Without magic, there was no hope of his arm being usable after such trauma.

Hermione had refused to look at his wrist as they made their way to the Hospital Wing. At one point, however, as he removed his arm from around her shoulder, it had passed by her. She couldn't fathom how he could be silent and endure such destruction.

While Madam Pomfrey worked on his arm, he shared with Hermione that he did, indeed, move the table, but not the entire distance. At the point of casting the spell, he said, his power had wavered and, as a result, let loose a tremendous amount of unfocused Dark Magic. He had described how it had filled the room, choking out all light, infusing itself into his very bloodstream, settling there, breeding. It was then, he said, that the destruction began, that every object in the room filled with a terrible energy, rising up to move into whatever direction possible. After that, he had no memory.

Hermione said hesitantly, "Your eyes. I was..."

He nodded that she needn't finish.

"Why?"

Watching Madam Pomfrey gathering more supplies from her stores, he said seriously, "You must understand that Dark Magic is not something you want to have contact with. It is both attractive in its wild power and terrible in its ability to destroy. The energy, the presence you felt in the room never forget it. It is in its very nature both hideous and beautiful. It knows no morals. The one who wields such power controls the life force that drives all magic. It is the darkness of the attraction that is the tragedy."

Hermione watched him lower his eyes.

"You must both remember what you felt and turn your back on it. Never seek that out, Hermione. It is the intelligent among us who fall victim to the fascination, descend into the obsession, follow the darkness in the hopes of understanding."

He watched her for a moment, studying her face.

"Promise me."

Hermione didn't know how to react to his words, so she only nodded in response.

Severus held her gaze for a time, as if burning into her mind the gravity of what he was telling her.

She needed to lighten the mood, change the subject, anything. "So much for being easy."

A wan smile lit his face as he held up his arm, "Yes, as we know all too well. The saying 'the book made it sound easy' fits here."

"He'll know."

His face darkened. "Yes. I suspect he already does."

"What do you think will happen now?"

Severus sighed. She expected him to make some grand statement about the inevitable war and how Harry wasn't ready. Instead he smirked, saying, "I think I may be summarily unemployed."

Hermione laughed.

Minerva approached the bed and, taking a seat, was bold enough to reach out and touch Severus' arm. "It is an understatement to say I am happy for you, Severus. This is truly a blessing."

He nodded in response.

Hermione observed how his demeanor changed, his nerves immediately on alert. Her heart jumped and her eyes shot to his face.

For a short time, Severus would still be under the influence of the Veritaserum.

Word had obviously spread throughout the castle, drawing Remus, Tonks and Harry to see if it was true. It was truly a victory to have taken someone from his inner circle, someone Voldemort considered to be his key inside informant, and set him free.

They crowded around a scowling Severus, who was angry at the attention, but remarkably tolerant. Hermione knew it was because if he spoke, he risked entering into a brutally honest conversation. Severus had become adept at moving effortlessly around the fringes of the truth over the years. Not quite lying, but leaving out enough to plant the seeds of doubt, or foster speculation. He enjoyed the ambiguity, the frustration he inspired. It was his lifeblood, his great talent, and his layer of security. Now that security was removed, leaving him utterly exposed.

Hermione caught his eye and saw his great apprehension. He was struggling to keep them from knowing he was still under the potion's influence, and wary because she already did.

Just when it seemed like the crowd would disperse, Minerva looked straight at Severus and asked loudly, "How did it go with the Veritaserum?"

All eyes were suddenly on Severus.

His eyes narrowed at her, cursing her silently. In response, Minerva only smiled innocently.

"Severus? Answer me this..." Minerva said casually.

"Minerva..." Severus growled warningly, although he could not help glancing around the room.

"What do you honestly think of me?" she asked, studying his face.

Severus stiffened, whether from being the center of attention or from the question itself wasn't clear. He had no choice but to tell the truth, but took a great amount of time to do so. He closed his eyes and appeared to be in pain before he opened them again.

Finally, he said softly, with a tone of embarrassment, "I think of you... as a mother figure.

Harry barely contained a snort until Severus' glare fell upon him, causing him to vainly try to disguise it as a cough.

Looking satisfied, Minerva patted him on the shoulder and said to everyone, "All right then... Don't torture him too much." With a smile, she left the room. Severus could swear she was humming happily.

Remus stepped forward and looked at Severus, a question on his lips. He appeared to be considering his words, his brow furrowed with the darkness of painful memories and guilt.

As if sensing Remus' eyes on him, Severus looked up and said with a sneer, "Not because of anything you did; rather for what you didn't."

Remus twitched as if struck, then accepted the answer. He nodded to himself, confirming what he already knew to be true. The power to stop what went completely past rivalry to relentless bullying, accelerating to attempted murder had been in his hands. And he did nothing. It was the brutal truth. Remus let his gaze fall to the floor.

Severus swept his eyes to Harry, who took Minerva's seat. The energy in the room all centered around the two of them.

"Tell me. You were there that night?" Harry asked, daring to stare directly into Severus' eyes.

"I was," Severus said, in no way enjoying where the conversation was leading.

Remus made a sudden movement that made it clear he hadn't known this.

"And you loved her?" Harry pressed, leaning forward in his chair.

Severus closed his eyes for a moment, then said, "Yes."

Harry sighed, and then, composing himself, asked, "Is that why you hate me? Because she died to save me?"

A length of silence stretched out between them. No one dare break it for fear of losing the moment, the answer they all wanted. The answer, though, surprised them all.

Severus ran his fingers through his hair slowly. He shook his head decisively. "No."

Confusion flooded Harry's face. "Why, then?"

"Even without the Vow, I hate you for being his son," he said in a low voice, then met Harry's confused gaze, "just as I protect you for being hers."

Harry sat back, his eyes wide from the revelation that Severus Snape had the capacity to love. He raised his eyebrows, nodded, and rose to leave the room.

Remus turned to offer some sort of apology, only to find Severus shaking his head slowly, telling him to not bother. Tonks watched the exchange with sad eyes and placed a hand on Remus' shoulder before they left.

Hermione had sense enough to let the moment pass. Nothing she could ever say could change the past, and what Severus said was every inch the truth. She knew that when it comes to feelings, right or wrong didn't matter. Feelings simply were, and no matter how you could try to influence someone's thoughts, they remained their own. What people put forward as normal may be an alternate universe, a friendly face against the cruelties of the world. Or in Severus' case, they could choose honesty. The man had many faults, but no one could say that Severus revealed his true self more than humanly possible. Maybe that was the best strategy.

Before Hermione could consider her question, Severus got out of bed. She knew he would usually completely dress before leaving, but he was definitely in a hurry. He quickly draped his outer robes over his shirt, grabbed his frock coat and began moving towards the doors.

"Where do you think you're going? Madam Pomfrey said you should rest," she said to his back, cursing the fact that they'd been able to heal his leg even more. His ridiculously manic speed was returning with a vengeance. She was jogging now.

"Trying to avoid you," he said, and immediately regretted it since it was the truth. He shook his head and plowed ahead of her, choosing a direction seemingly at random.

Hermione stepped directly in front of him. "And why is that?"

He halted with a mix of annoyance and something else Hermione couldn't put her finger on in his eyes.

"Because I fear what you may ask me," he said, unable to stop himself. He knew that the Veritaserum should wear off any minute now. If he could only avoid her for a few minutes.

"Oh, I see. But I need to know a few things," Hermione said. Her grin widened as she noticed he was unconsciously backing, trying to get away.

Surveying the corridor, she moved closer to him, steering him into a alcove.

"I understand but..." he said, then scowled at her when he found him self against the wall.

Literally.

Hermione raised her arms and placed her hands up on the wall. Surrounding him. He would have to physically move her to escape.

He glared at her with defiance. "I can simply push you out of the way."

"But you won't. Will you?"

"... No."

"Shall we begin?"

"I have no choice in the matter, do I?"

She grinned, enjoying the look on his face. That hunted expression. His eyes kept jumping to the side, moving up her arm to where her hand rested on the stone. He was contemplating physically moving past her, but she knew his manners would prevent it.

"Did you really hate me when you taught Potions?"

"No. I was impressed with your intelligence and love for knowledge. It kept me going during some dark times to know that at least someone learned something."

"So that was all an act?"

"Partially. I had to keep a certain image as a spy. I could hardly have Malfoy telling Lucius I favored the Muggle-born."

"Even though you are hardly a pure-blood."

"I never claimed to be. People are free to make their own assumptions."

He was being too careful, elusive. She knew he couldn't lie. The light in his eyes, the helpless struggle...

"Tell me, Severus."

"No, please..." It sounded interestingly close to a moan. Something unexpected from him.

Hermione smirked slightly and lowered her gaze.

"Am I making you uncomfortable?" she asked, touching his chest lightly. The thin fabric of his shirt was near translucent, never meant to see the light of day. He was blazing hot.

He closed his eyes. "Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I cannot show..."

"Yes?" she said, trailing a finger along his hairline. Moving back along his cheek, over his ear, behind, down the back of his neck...

His voice strained, "Not in public."

"Your greatest fear, is it?" She moved her hand over his chest, dragging her fingertips in a languid circling pattern, smaller circles, directly over his heart. Memorizing where his muscle joined his breast bone, feeling the rhythm of his heart. Each time she moved her hand from one side to the other, the pounding sped up, more like surged into another level, settling there, poised for the next leap. She took pleasure in the cause and effect, performing the action over and over as she looked at him, lost in disbelief that it was her holding this power over him.

Lowering his head, he watched her hand.

She could tell that he was clenching his jaw, holding back, most likely cursing his own heart for its betrayal.

Hermione pressed her palm flat against his chest. "I can feel it, you know. This... this is your permanent Veritaserum. It can't lie."

He only looked at her, unmoving.

"Nervous?" she asked, tilting her head and moving her hands to lightly trace along his ribs. "That wasn't your problem before. If you remember, you had me in this situation. The wall, hands, pinning, cold stone... You were quite aggressive. You may have growled once or twice."

"I was trying to intimidate you, after what you did in the Hospital Wing."

"Is that the reason? For all of this? Intimidation?" she asked, gesturing to his robes and the frock coat clutched in his hand. The amount of clothing the man insisted on wearing bordered on obscene.

"Yes."

She idly ran her hand along his collar, dipping down where the first button laid against his throat. She leaned forward against him and simply let her breath wash over his neck, letting him feel the human warmth in contrast to the cold chill of the stone wall. As she'd learned, the feeling as the chill returned was incredible.

A slight moan escaped him before he swallowed and leaned his head back.

"Intimidation is your motive for most everything, isn't it?"

A dreamlike, distant voice. "Yes."

Hermione tilted her head as she forced him to meet her eyes. "Hurt them before they hurt you," she stated.

His eyes flashed enough to answer the question for her.

"Are you capable of stringing more than a few words together?"

Hermione dragged her fingernails over his chest again and noticed he drew his breath in softly. The subtlest of signs.

He rolled his eyes and sighed, "Of course."

"Don't fight it."

Teeth gritted as if that could stop his words. "I have to."

Hermione grinned. "No, you don't. Not with me... You're very nervous."

"You know why."

"Is it because of things like this?" she said and just barely touched her lips to his. He stood frozen, unmoving, until she moved closer, offering completion. He tilted his head slightly, refusing to give himself over, but moving nonetheless. They stayed there, breathing the same air, neither finishing the gesture. A silent battle raged within him, shoving against the walls, pushing more into the depths of emotion. The line of resistance moved an imperceptible amount, in her direction. The air around them became charged, real, impossible to ignore. They had kissed dozens of times. The symbolism of this surrender; however, was too much to bear.

His mouth fell open and he sensed one wall threaten to fail. It was shifting, leaning... The defenses that had kept it strong had deserted him, leaving him no choice.

Hermione's voice surrounded him, barely above a whisper, asking the question he had hoped to avoid.

"Do you have feelings for me?"

His eyes widened. "You know I think of you."

"Don't turn my questions back on me."

A smirk. Just a twitch, but it was there.

"How much?" she asked.

"I..." he hesitated, struggling against the urge, the overwhelming compulsion. He tried to move towards the side, hoping she'd yield.

Hermione took hold of his hips, shoving him against the wall. His eyes flew open, searching the corridor. Every nerve was alive, both from the physical turmoil and the mental battle raging within him. He couldn't speak. Every muscle contracted against the harshness of the cold stone against his back and the shock of her actions. Her hands were still there, gripping his hipbones. He'd have to stress his still terribly mangled ribs to move, and she knew it. Her eyes met his, expecting an acknowledgment that he was trapped. He granted it for now.

Thinking, wanting to choose the correct words. A thought. Seeing her reaction before it was even said. The compulsion is there, shoving him, then easing back.

"I'm waiting," Hermione said softly.

"Hermione, I" he started. He opened his mouth, working on the thought that wouldn't quite form a word and make it to completion. He was always studied in his speech, quick-witted, able to slay the fiercest opponent with a blinding slash of words. The tone of his voice could silence almost anyone. The quieter he spoke, the more dread he inspired. But now, looking at the woman before him, he could do nothing more.

The clock began to toll, startling both of them out of the unbearably tense silence. The exact recording of the length of his delay was maddening. Hermione decided there were entirely too many clocks at Hogwarts.

"I feel you are an adequate companion," he said in a rush. "A friend."

Hermione dropped her hands and backed away, stunned.

Speechless.

He reached out for her hand. There were no words to say to someone you've just devastated.

She was shaking her head, her expression hurtling through shock, pain, and arriving at anger.

"I'm sorry for trying to force you to... oh, never mind!" she cried and left him.

Severus could only stand, backed into a corner both physically and emotionally. Even through all his time as a spy, deceiving one of the most damnable wizards in the world, he had never been more on edge, breathless spent.

Not because she had found out more about him in three minutes than most anyone had in a lifetime.

But because the Veritaserum had worn off.

And he had lied.

Truth and Renovation

Chapter 12 of 41

The truth comes out and Harry finds out how a Death Eater fights.

Disclaimer: All of it belongs to JKR.

AN: Thanks to all who have reviewed. I need to invent better and more sparkly ways to thank Ariadne for her beta work. Keeping my commas and tenses in line is hard work. Offering up destruction in her honor is the least I can do. :-)

"How can I be so stupid? To think that he might actually..."

Once outside, Hermione slowed to a quick walk, her head down in thought. *You're just fooling yourself, thinking that he'd actually love you.* She sat down under a tree and ran her hand over the exposed roots, feeling the twisting pattern, how they climbed over each other, competing. She stayed that way for several minutes, allowing herself to cry in frustration, loss and misled hope.

How she thought there was something, his eyes, his heart - or was it pure nerves? The possibility of her asking about his youth as a Death Eater? No, he was far too practiced at the art of deception to allow his body to betray him. Then again, how often had a woman been the interrogator? He didn't need her any more; there was no reason for her to go back to his rooms. She'd stay away, leave him to his own fate, his solitary existence, now hovering precariously between a death sentence and the Order which, for lack of better words, still didn't entirely trust him.

Could he love?

"Probably not. He isn't capable of love anymore..." she said aloud, pulling at one of the roots, loosening the soil around it, seeking its end.

"I beg to differ," a deep voice said from above.

Hermione startled, looking up to see the dark outline of Severus Snape. Defiance shone in his eyes.

"What did you say?" she asked in disbelief as she rose to her feet.

"I think you heard me quite clearly," he said and then immediately remembered the last time he spoke to her that way.

Her eyes narrowed as she took a slow step towards him. "Watch it, Snape. If you haven't noticed, I'm in no mood to be played with."

Point taken. He noted that her wand hand was moving slightly.

"Come to play with my feelings some more?" Hermione asked bitterly, looking like she wanted nothing more than to have him gone. After practically throwing herself at him, she couldn't bear having him lecture her.

"You are hardly innocent here!" he yelled. "Did you really want the answers, or did you only want to manipulate me? Do not think that what you did was justified!"

She froze, her anger still there, but held in check; her mind running through his words, looking for reason, blame, responsibility.

"I said I was sorry. I wanted to know."

He crossed his arms, taking the upper hand. "Everyone has the right to say those things in their own time."

She looked him in the eye and said angrily. "Well, now I know. You can leave now."

"Hermione, listen..."

"What then? Come to declare your undying love, have you?" she raged. "Well, save it! I'm sick of you messing with my feelings! You..."

"Perhaps if you could stop your ramblings, I could express myself!" he interrupted.

"Oh, so now I ramble do I?" she yelled. She pushed past him and started to stalk away.

Severus quickly caught her wrist and held her.

Her eyes shot to where he gripped her wrist. She drew her wand and lowered her voice in warning. "Let me go, or I'll make your leg the least of your worries."

"No."

"Severus!" she hissed in warning, trying to pull away.

"Hermione, stop being such a typical stubborn Gryffindor, and listen to me!" Severus yelled, losing patience.

"What is with you? You think the world stops because Severus Snape has something to say? I'm supposed to turn my feelings on and off whenever your temper allows?"

"That's not why I'm here. I..."

"Well then, why? You already told me the truth. A FRIEND? How could you?" she raged, waving her wand around.

"Hermione, please!"

"What? That's all I am, aren't I?"

"No..."

"Severus, you had no choice. You said it yourself!"

"It isn't that..." He shook his head, closing his eyes. The grip he had on her wrist was deathly tight.

"What then, Severus? I'm giving you one second to form a thought and get it out! I don't want to be hurt any more by your..."

"I lied!"

He still held onto her wrist, gripping it hard.

Disbelief on her face, the resistance fading.

He loosened his grip, hoping she wouldn't leave.

"I lied," he repeated, breathing hard.

"What? How?" she started, then answered herself. "Of course. It wore off."

He nodded.

She looked up at him. "If you lied, what is the truth?"

"I don't know."

Anger rising again, she jerked her wrist, but he clamped down on it again, pulling her towards him.

"No!" she raged and thrust all of her weight forward, shoving him into the tree. He barely caught himself, slamming into the hard bark, grimacing as he struggled to remain standing, and failed. Incredibly, he still had a firm grip on her wrist and had pulled her down with him.

Ignoring the fact that he was tangled in tree roots, he shouted, "Do you think for a minute I would come out here like a fool if I didn't care? There are far more important matters to hold my attention than this!"

"So now I'm just a distraction? Well, I apologize for invading your precious solitude!" she screamed, her voice wavering. "I didn't know that being completely alone and miserable was a full time job!"

He threw his head back, as if asking the gods to save him. "Hermione, no, I..."

She noticed how he was trying to rise and failing miserably, losing an inch of his dignity with each attempt. She stood up, remaining still. She twisted her hand within his, but didn't offer to help him up.

"Listen to me, you miserable man," she stated, pointing at him. "You have one shot and one shot only. Tell me what this is! What happened back there? What do you want?"

He froze, his mind racing, too many thoughts, paths of phrases, implications, consequences, processes of redemption.

"ANSWER ME!" she roared.

"I love you."

Silence.

He let her wrist go, only she turned it over and held his.

"What did you say?" Hermione said slowly.

"I..." he started, but became enraged at his attempts to get up. His shirt had torn in the back from the rough bark and was pulled askew off his shoulder. It looked as though he had been through a terrifying storm, barely surviving.

Hermione tightened her grip and placed her other hand on his arm, helping him up.

He looked down, preoccupied with glaring at the offending roots.

"I asked you a question."

Severus shook his head, as if to plead with her to not make him repeat it.

"Tell me you didn't hear."

She threw her hands up to the sky in complete frustration. "I might have heard wrong. After all, I HAVE been lied to before!"

"I would never say that as a lie."

"Really? How do I know? Maybe it's something to serve yourself. You have a history of that, you know. How do I know? Tell me that!"

He was astonished. She was literally tearing him apart, and he was just standing there, taking it, wondering if the world was going to arrive on the lawn and perhaps take bets on how often she was going to knock him down both literally and figuratively. Never mind that he deserved every word.

"Stop looking at me like that!"

He blinked. Forgetting her talent at observation could prove deadly.

"Hermione, I..."

"Think before you speak, Severus," she warned.

He glared at her. "Stop interrupting me!"

"I didn't interrupt anything worthwhile. What you were about to say was some sad escapist excuse!"

Damn.

"How do I know, Severus? You've lied to me already! Are you saying this to shut me up?"

"No!"

"Then what?"

"STOP!"

They both stood, panting for air. She watched as he briefly pressed his arm around his middle and used the tree for balance.

Reaching out her hand, she said, "Severus, how do I..."

It happened so fast she almost fell. He swiftly took hold of her arm and pulled her to collide with his chest. Severus held a hand in her hair, clutching her, possessing her. His warmth was overpowering, pressed up against her, wanting to be as close as possible. She held him just as tightly, her hands tearing at him, afraid of letting go, the heat incredible. In the corridor he had been reluctant, fighting against everything she did. He was completely overwhelming her with the intensity of his actions. She could feel his breath, the surge of emotion, anger, bitterness, failed attempts at pride, surrender.

Eyes traveling to his mouth, he bared his teeth as he spoke, as if he was trapped and fighting to escape. "I cannot..."

But forgetting words, he took her lips to his in a fierce collapse of pain and possession. At first, she was in shock, gripping onto his arms to keep from falling. His aggression both terrified and fascinated her. This was a communication that couldn't be achieved using words. They had not known each other for long, but in this single embrace he told her everything she needed to know. The chasm between them closed more, moving to crash together and join them in a bond that most people hope to experience just once in their lives. Every time he softened, as if afraid he was frightening her, she dug her nails into his arms, telling him to go on, don't ever stop.

They both seemed to curse the most basic of human needs air.

Hermione rested her head on his chest as they both gasped. His shirt was almost completely destroyed; in the middle of it all, she had taken hold of it and torn a huge gash across his back.

"I..." she panted. She closed her eyes and let out a soft chuckle. "I love you, too."

She loved the feeling of him there, his deep voice against her ear when he allowed a laugh.

"Don't ever lie to me again," she said in a tone as deadly serious as she could manage, then turned to leave.

A smirk born of admiration appeared on his face. He followed after her, looking down at the remnants of his shirt, trying to recover his dignity.

"Silly witch."

She called over her shoulder, "I heard that."

"Oh, *that* you hear."

Minerva watched from her window as Hermione stalked angrily out onto the grounds. Minutes later, she saw Severus moving slowly to arrive at her side. Her heart nearly broke to see what looked to be a full-scale battle raging between them, and then she gasped as she saw Severus step forward and take her into his arms.

Turning to Albus' slumbering portrait, she smiled sadly and returned to her work.

"Severus? A word please?"

"Oh, splendid, here we go with the speech again," Severus muttered.

Remembering that she had forgotten to mention it to him, Hermione said quickly, "Oh, I did have that chat with her."

Raising an eyebrow at the thought that maybe this speech might be different, Severus made his way over to Minerva, ignoring Harry's stare.

"Severus, Hermione and I spoke and she has some valid points. Harry needs to experience a real battle. He's successfully fought Death Eaters, but none on the level of you, much less Voldemort," Minerva said, making sure to keep her voice low.

At his impressed expression, she continued, "Yes, Severus, it is not lost on us that you have the power needed to help Harry raise his skills. A great master passes his knowledge along; that is his legacy. Will you do that?"

"Minerva, I have."

"No," she said sternly. "You may have taught him, but in a way that is beneficial mostly to you. You're exacting some sort of revenge on Harry for what his father did to you years ago."

Severus' eyes widened at what she was saying, even though he knew it to be true. Minerva took a step closer to him and leaned in to whisper, "Severus, James is dead. Harry did none of those things to you and he certainly didn't knowingly cause Lily's death. You may dislike Harry, that is your right, but please stop fighting James' ghost."

Scowling, Severus nodded and said, "I will try."

"Good. Now, I will no longer require you to keep things light, even if it means stronger spells. Even Unforgivables. It would be no use to Harry to be presented with an opportunity and fail because no one taught him. As brutal as it may be, it is reality. I know it now. I have spoken with the Ministry, and they are aware of what is taking place here," she said with a glance towards Harry.

"If you are prepared. Teaching him these things goes far beyond anything he has ever experienced."

"You are the only one who would know," she said carefully, not daring to finish the thought aloud.

Severus was caught unprepared. Anger rose, then acceptance. "Yes."

"Severus, I'm sorry. I meant..."

He raised a hand to stop her. "No need, Minerva. It is appalling to think that we need to teach an innocent to kill. Let us dwell on it for a moment to appease those who need to mourn, then move on to the reality of the situation. Since he obviously cannot practice killing, I have another option available."

Minerva watched him. Her face echoed the startling truth of what Severus was describing, of what he was going to do. She knew that any battle against Voldemort was hardly going to be a matter of who could cast *Expelliarmus* faster.

"The Unforgivables draw far more magic than he has ever attempted to channel. They all require the same level, though," he said and nodded when understanding spread on her face.

"We need to know, though, don't we?" Minerva asked softly, the question too grave to ask in a normal tone.

Severus nodded solemnly.

"Please take my words to heart, Severus. He needs you. I trust you will do what's right," Minerva said and then turned to go over to Harry.

Severus and Harry approached Minerva, in her customary place in the center of the hall. As the two attempted to stare each other down, she said, "Now, this will be a full duel. Anything is permitted with the exception of the Killing Curse, of course."

"Severus, please try to spare the Great Hall from too much damage, please?"

"As you wish," Severus said, grinning and gave a mock bow.

"Fine. If you're ready then? Begin!"

Immediately, Severus swung his wand, striking Harry with enough force to toss him several yards backwards. Before Harry could regain his footing, Severus was already approaching with an evil grin. His entire demeanor had changed in that split-second. He looked like he was on a mission to kill and having a grand time doing it.

Severus' expression bordered on deranged. "Better get up, Potter! Shall I assist?"

Another movement. Harry was picked up and slammed against the wall near the Great Hall doors, landing in an awkward, gasping heap. This time he quickly forced himself to his feet. Swiftly, he dodged another of Severus' attempts to toss him like a doll. The spell grazed the doorway, blasting part of the hinges apart, and dropping the door at an angle, it listed for a moment then tore off the frame.

Anger spread across Harry's face as he stabbed his wand out. "*Expelliarmus*!"

Severus made a slashing movement at the air, sending the spell back at Harry. The sound of Severus Snape openly laughing filled the air. Harry's wand flew into the air, stopped, then traveled directly to Severus' waiting hand. Harry's face grew red with both rage and embarrassment. He opened his mouth to speak, but was astonished to see Severus throw his wand back at him.

"Have you learned nothing?" he raged.

Something was different about his tone, though; it was coated with more, with a threat of real damage. No more games.

Advancing on Harry, Severus roared, "Hit me with something, Potter!"

Harry moved backwards into the Entrance Hall, dodging several spells in a blinding explosion of light. He reeled backwards, blinded. He cast several Shielding Spells, heard the sounds of destruction around him, felt the shove of the magic filling the air, the sudden rush when a spell barely missed him. His eyes focused in time to watch a jet of light erupt from his wand. It hit Severus in the shoulder, tearing his robes and causing him to twist backwards. Without a second's pause, Severus viciously shot several spells in rapid succession, which Harry successfully blocked, sending them into the staircase. Massive chunks of marble blasted out in a high arc across the Hall,

coating them both in white dust.

"Impressive," Severus commented and swung his wand, sending a Stunner at Harry, who leaped out of the way. They both watched as the spell slammed into the Slytherin hourglass, exploding glass in a fine spray and sending all of the emeralds pouring loudly onto the floor.

Severus opened his mouth in a snarl and, before the others could arrive to see, pointed his wand at the Gryffindor hourglass. It, too, exploded in a sea of glass and rubies. From inside the Great Hall, Severus could hear Minerva shouting his name in frustration at the sounds of destruction.

Before Harry could look back at him, Severus was on top of him, grabbing a fistful of his hair, forcing him to look at him. Suddenly, Harry could hear him in his mind, like smoke traveling through his consciousness, pushing his thoughts aside. Before he knew what was happening, he was dropping towards the floor.

Submit to me. You will not win. The Dark Lord will kill you, that much is certain.

NO!

All you wish to do is to kneel before me and submit... it's simple... just do it...

NO!

Severus watched in satisfaction as Harry fought the Imperius Curse. *Very strong will. Good.* Lifting the curse, Severus immediately threw a Disarming Spell which Harry blocked while shaking the effects of the curse out of his head. The disarming spell spun sideways and struck the front doors, blasting them open to allow the night air to rush into the castle.

Harry lunged forward, casting several spells and hexes, hoping to gain some distance between them to give himself a change to regroup. Two of the bolts bounced off of Severus' Shielding Spell and spiraled at terrifying speed to the ceiling, ramming completely through the ancient structure. Little debris fell, but the sound of something dislodged could be heard, then a louder groan as a immense crack echoed through the Hall, causing both Severus and Harry to stare up in awe. A large hole had not only been opened in the ceiling, but a huge statue from the floor above had fallen and was lodged in the opening.

Some witch, most likely famous for some obscure achievement, had been memorialized in a statue, only to have it end up hanging precariously upside down and threatening to fall.

Severus could hear the others arrive and gasp at the horrid condition of the room. They found the two of them, standing amid the ruins of the destroyed Entrance Hall. Marble pieces were strewn everywhere and a mix of emeralds, rubies and glass littered the floor. Every step required care to avoid injury. Their eyes then shot up to the ceiling, gasping in unison as the statue shifted again, twisting further. Her shoulders were through now, slowly moving, skidding against stone, marble and wood.

"Severus!" Minerva cried at the sight of the hall in shambles and two of the Houses' hourglasses obliterated.

Ignoring her cries, Severus launched into another attack, casting an unimaginable amount of spells, punctuated with every step he took towards Harry. The destruction reached a catastrophic level with the entire right side of the stairway blown apart and the banister threatening to completely separate from the floor above. Minerva and the others had no choice but to retreat to the Great Hall to escape the flying debris.

Harry responded, dodging frantically and throwing random spells, only to have them rebounded right back at him. He backed up the staircase with Severus looking every ounce the Death Eater he could easily become if called upon. There was no scholarly advice. No backhanded praise. Even the taunting would be welcome. Anything but the desperately violent wizard intent on tearing him apart. Part of Harry wondered if Snape would slip and really kill him, Vow or not.

Harry missed a step, slipped and grunted as he fell backwards. Immediately, Severus was upon him, fully expecting to easily disarm him. Harry weakly rose and then started to back up the remaining stairs, blocking it. They both turned to see the spell fly back and crash into one of the suits of armor standing by the front doors, sending it sprawling out onto the front steps.

"ENOUGH!" Minerva cried and silence fell.

Harry and Severus both turned to see an extremely furious headmistress glaring at them from the bottom of what was left of the stairs. Both were severely out of breath and covered in various pieces of debris.

"Severus! Explain this!" she yelled, raising her arms to indicate the total destruction of the Entrance Hall.

"What?" he said easing himself to take a seat on the stairs to rest his leg. "Minerva, you asked for less blood," Severus said in defense and gestured towards his shoulder. "I'm the only one bleeding here."

Harry, incredibly, nodded in agreement.

"You asked to keep the Great Hall from too much damage," Severus reminded her, and grinning, pointed his wand at the Great Hall, "and it's pristine."

Hermione looked at Severus sitting there in torn, dusty robes with bits of glass and marble in his hair, and did her best to suppress a laugh. Turning to Minerva, she could see the older witch was silently seething.

With a shrug, Hermione said, "He's got a point, you know."

As if to punctuate Hermione's statement, a rough, grating sound came from above, and the statue crashed to the floor, shattering in a starburst of white stone. The witch's head rolled to a stop at the hem of Minerva's robes.

"Severus. My office. Now!" Minerva yelled, losing her normally reserved demeanor. She raised her robes and stepped carefully over the rubble out of the ruined Hall.

Breaking the long silence that followed Minerva's departure, Severus cleared his throat and said, "Better, Potter, you do have the ability."

Severus' eyes shifted to where Minerva had taken her leave and grinned.

Hermione caught that look in Severus' eyes. It reminded her distinctly of someone about to disobey.

"Outside."

Harry, who was brushing off his robes, looked up. "But McGonagall..."

Severus drew his wand and pointed to the open doors.

There was no mistaking what he was about to say.

"Outside. This isn't over."

Shadows

Chapter 13 of 41

Light, shadows and darkness.

Disclaimer: Nothing is to be made from this effort. JKR owns it all.

AN: Thank you for your reviews. Destruction surely is a lot of fun. :-) Thanks to Ariadne, who enjoys blowing things up as much as I do.

"Severus..." Hermione said warningly, stepping forward. She had seen that look in his eye before. "You'd better go; she looked pretty angry."

Severus barely acknowledged her words by flicking his eyes towards her as he passed. The only sound was the two of them treading on broken glass and marble the size of gravel. Severus pointed out the front doors, watching Harry carefully pick his way down the ruined stairs and step over the remnants of the hourglasses to make his way outside, kicking emeralds and rubies out of the way as he walked.

Remus approached Severus at the door. With a glance at Harry descending the castle stairs, he said, "Severus, this isn't a good idea..."

Immediately, Remus flinched and stepped back, finding himself at the end of Severus' wand.

Severus growled, "Listen to me *wolf*, and listen closely. Potter needs to learn how to save the wizarding world not how to pass a bloody OWL exam. My job is to teach him how to fight, and I will do so without your interference, understood? You can't *possibly* fathom what he will be up against."

Remus nodded, trying to diffuse the situation. Severus would often toss random insults his way. They were innocuous, meant to extract a little more penance each time. This, however, was different. This was real.

Leaning closer, Severus narrowed his eyes and snarled, "Cross me, Lupin, and I just may forget how to brew your potion." Gazing out into the night sky, he whispered with amusement, "Oh, dear, and the full moon is just about here."

Without awaiting a response, Severus swept outside.

Harry and Severus stood on the castle lawn. The night wind had risen, blowing through their hair and rustling their robes around them. At times, Severus' hair obscured his vision and he developed a subconscious habit of tossing his head.

"Now there will be no interruptions, less to destroy, and no headmistress to call a halt when she fears for you."

Harry nodded quickly, wary that Snape would again go Death-Eater-mental on him and strike without warning.

"Remind you of anything?" Severus asked quietly.

Harry's eyes widened. Dueling with him on the grounds would recreate his flight after Dumbledore's murder.

"Yes," Harry said above the sound of the wind.

Severus' eyes took on a strange intensity. "Close your eyes."

When Harry regarded him with distrust, Severus sneered, "I can curse you just as easily if they're open."

As Harry complied, Severus moved around to stand directly behind him, saying, "Remember the rage you felt that night, Potter. That emotion, the feeling of power rising within you, driving the intensity of your magic to a higher plane. You need to channel that energy, hold it in check, waiting, focused. When it feels like it will completely overwhelm you, hold it a little more. Just as you learned to cast your first spell, you need to intensify that effort a thousand-fold. Revel in it, Potter."

Severus watched Harry's shoulders tense and wand hand flex.

Moving in front of Harry, Severus continued, "Now, imagine that the Dark Lord is in front of you. The Order has diverted the Death Eaters, and you and he are alone. Two mortals in a duel to the death."

Harry's face darkened. Even with his eyes closed, his tremendous hatred was evident, pinching his features, transforming his entire demeanor.

"You are there. It is that moment. All the preparation, all the anticipation, it is over, complete. The Dark Lord is all that lies between you and revenge, glory, the end."

Again, a contraction, tighter, more focused.

"This is war. There is no tomorrow. Focus all of that hatred. Force it into every spell, every block, every fight of the Imperius."

Severus stepped back several feet and took off his outer robes, tossing them to the ground. "Now, open your eyes."

Harry opened his eyes, immediately prepared to fight.

"Oh, and Potter? Think more hateful thoughts than that at me if you do choose to cast something more powerful than a tickling charm. I want to feel something," Severus taunted.

Harry's eyes blazed. Gritting his teeth, he teased, "Aren't you *afraid* Hermione is going to disapprove?"

Severus' eyes widened, his face white with rage.

Harry had no time to move. Severus lunged forward and slashed at the air sideways, opening a gash on Harry's arm. Harry spun and stumbled, scrambling to get to his feet and run at the same time. Another bolt struck the ground where his right foot had just been, tearing the grass apart to leave nothing but a burnt hole. Harry flung his hands

out in front of him to catch his fall, only to snatch them back when the ground in front of him flashed in a stripe of fire. He rolled onto his shoulder through the flames, this time managing to get to his feet and turn to face Severus. That same crazed look was in Severus' eyes, only it was the type of insanity which retained a flicker of intelligence.

Harry thought that was the worst kind of all.

Harry cast to disarm but was blocked; he ducked in time to feel his rebounded spell rush past his head on its way to spin out into the darkness. A movement wove through the trees. Just a shadow.

"Got any more smart comments, Potter?" Severus snarled, crouching low as he advanced on Harry. His lurching gait gave him an even more dangerous look that matched the anger on his face.

Harry was backing down the castle lawn, trying to hold his wand steady as the blood soaked through his robes. Taking a deep breath, he launched himself forward, silently throwing a barrage of spells.

Snarling, Severus blocked all of them in explosions of light, stretching both of their shadows out onto the grass for flashpoints in time. Harry stumbled backwards, unable to focus his eyes from staring into red lightning. He arced his wand arm from side to side, casting in any direction he could, hoping he could block at the right moment. Harry fell onto his back and dug his heels into the soft grass, pistoning his legs, trying to rise while blocking a relentless stream of hexes and curses. Severus seemed to take pleasure in waiting for Harry to try to get up, only to force him to writhe on the ground, struggling to protect himself. Harry frantically shoved himself backwards until he felt Hagrid's fence against his back. He reached to pull himself up, only to have the wood explode out of his hand in a thousand shards, raining back down around him. The fence was alight now, flames racing along the rails like liquid light. Harry rolled under the remaining fence in time to avoid a bolt which blew an entire section upwards in a hail of charred wood. It lit the night sky with flying torches, traveling for a time on the wind before landing in patches on the ground where they continued to burn.

Harry scrambled to his feet and turned to see a red light hurtling towards him. He threw himself onto the ground in time to see the bolt fly out towards Hagrid's hut. It shot through a window, leaving a perfect hole to emerge on the other side of the structure, glanced off the back fence and into the forest.

A blinding light eclipsed Harry's world as he was struck and slammed backwards to the ground.

A slow laugh, drawing closer.

Harry struggled to sit up. His eyes were drawn to the woods. A movement on the ground.

Severus ignored his leg's protest and bent down, took a handful of Harry's hair and twisted it, drawing his face closer. He snarled viciously, "Don't ~~ever~~ try to best me in a verbal battle of wits. You will not win."

Releasing the spell, Severus backed up and yelled, "Get up! NOW!"

Harry took time to rise and saw an opportunity. When Severus moved to attack him again, he swung his wand, slashing at Severus' good leg. Severus fell to his knees, hissing in pain, but thrust himself to his feet on pure adrenaline. Ignoring the blood and loss of coordination, he lunged at Harry, casting the Imperius Curse.

Immediately, he felt a raging flood of magic blocking him, shoving him out. Severus had no time to utter a command before the spell became useless. It felt like a wall was thrust in front of him, blocking any attempt. Severus could touch Harry's thoughts, but could not push to take control.

Lifting the curse, he muttered, "Excellent."

Barely standing, Severus hurled another combination of spells at Harry, watching with satisfaction as he blocked them all. They spun out in all directions, with one blasting straight through Hagrid's various vegetables in his makeshift field. They both flinched when Hagrid's chimney exploded in a torrent of bricks which tumbled down his roof to splash into a barrel of water. The wild array of light threw chaotic shadows across the trees.

Severus turned to Harry, held his wand out as he raised his arms, watching as Harry seemed to tense every muscle at once.

"Do it, Potter."

Harry went to disarm, but was blocked before the spell even left his wand.

"No! More! You're not even trying to do this!" Severus roared. He held his arms outstretched and walked directly at Harry, mouthing a specific spell's incantation to him, his eyes wide.

Harry backed up, shaking his head. Snape was forcing it into his thoughts, chanting.

"You have to, Potter! NOW!"

Hesitating, Harry held his wand out. He was stunned beyond all comprehension when Severus made a show of dropping his wand to softly fall to the grass.

Severus leveled a gaze of hatred on Harry, striding towards him. He still held his arms out, palms up, displaying that he was unarmed, enraged that Harry still had not acted.

Close enough to touch Harry's wand, Severus threw his head back, yelling to the night sky, "Vow or Debt, it doesn't matter! I'd do it again!"

Harry recoiled as if struck, stumbling back, his face contorted with wrath. His entire body contracted, focused, the level of magic shot to an astronomical level, spiraling upwards before he caught hold of it. He was unable to hold it any longer; tremendous outrage flooded his senses, taking control.

"*CRUCIO!*"

The pain in both of Severus' legs faded in comparison to the world of intense agony he felt. Somewhere, he heard someone screaming and realized dimly that it must be him. Severus heard Potter mutter a distracted, "*Finite Incantatem*," and release the curse.

Harry stood, thunderstruck at what he had done.

Severus rolled onto his back breathing hard. Between breaths he said, "Better, Potter, that's exactly what I wanted. You need to be able to channel that rage to be successful against him."

"You lied to provoke me," Harry said distractedly. He was looking at his wand strangely as if it were now foreign, tainted.

Severus nodded. "Would you have done it, otherwise?"

"No, I..."

Severus twisted, summoned his wand and motioned for Harry to get down. He could feel the ground vibrate under him rhythmically, pounding, growing stronger. Severus rose up onto his elbows and looked towards the trees past Hagrid's hut. A sweeping sound accompanied the pounding, matching the vibration under his hands. Vibration and sound merged in a three beat pattern in rapid succession.

Just as Severus recognized where he had heard these sounds before, he saw a shadow taking shape.

"Not again..."

Buckbeak was charging across the castle grounds towards them.

Severus could only watch as the great beast charged across the grounds with its head lowered, its sharp beak snapping open and closed in time with its rolling gallop. His memory flashed back to that night, trying to run and keep from giving the raging Hippogriff the opportunity to tear his throat out. He knew he had no chance of running now. The best he could hope for was to get to the nearest cover which happened to be Hagrid's wretched little vegetable patch. Knowing there was no hope for dignity, Severus scrambled behind the nearest overgrown pumpkin. He could see Buckbeak drawing closer, orange eyes coming into focus in the moonlight. The Hippogriff charged through the patch, smashing vegetables and tearing vines out of the ground. He passed close enough to land a hoof only inches from where Severus laid and brush his wings over his back. Severus watched as Buckbeak slid to a stop, reared up as he angled left, and began a second charge. This time, Buckbeak's eyes were directly trained on Severus'. He was not going to miss this time.

Severus raised his wand, aiming to kill, but to his utter amazement, Harry jumped up and threw himself in Buckbeak's path, stretching his arms out as a shield.

"BUCKBEAK, NO!"

As Buckbeak drew closer, Severus could only watch and hope that the wretched thing recognized Potter. Suddenly in mid-stride, a flash of intelligence crossed its eyes. Buckbeak made to stop, swinging its great wings forward for balance and setting his hindquarters down. In an almost comical slide, he came to a halt directly in front of Harry. Regaining his composure, Buckbeak stared at the young wizard, cocking his head sideways in question. He clicked his beak as if processing information.

"Hey there, old pal," Harry said soothingly, while panting for air. "Haven't seen you in a while. How are you doing?" Harry said cautiously while keeping his distance. Harry then tentatively bowed, keeping his eyes on Buckbeak. A long pause stretched out as the Hippogriff regarded Harry with his head tilted and intelligent eyes gleaming. He was breathing hard from galloping through the forest, weaving in and out of the trees while following the duel across the grounds.

Slowly, Buckbeak lowered his head in a regal bow, as if to say, "I'm just fine, fancy a bit of tea?"

Buckbeak then looked directly at Severus.

Harry calmed the Hippogriff, saying, "It's okay, boy." Then, glancing at Severus, Harry stated, "He's on our side. A friend."

Severus looked at Harry with a mixture of suspicion and disbelief.

"Sir, you can get up now," Harry said quietly, without taking his eyes off of Buckbeak.

With great effort, Severus got to his feet, attempting to remove as much of the pumpkin remains from his hair and clothes as possible. The leg wound was bleeding, but not badly; however, that was the leg he was favoring.

He looked over to where Harry was petting Buckbeak's head. "Going to keep him in the castle, are you?"

Harry chuckled and said, "Think McGonagall would let me?"

"Certainly. After she's done tearing into me for this, she'll probably want to feed me to him," Severus said, waving his hand at Buckbeak.

"Think you can walk, sir?" Harry asked.

"I've been worse. Get rid of the feather duster," he sneered, glancing sideways at the great beast. Buckbeak made a sudden move, then clicked his beak in satisfaction when Severus flinched.

"Sir? That was..." Harry started, unable to find the words.

Severus pulled another rind out of his collar. "Spit it out, Potter. I'm bleeding here."

"It's just that when I cast the Cruciatus Curse, it felt terrible."

Severus looked at him patiently and said, "Casting an Unforgivable correctly requires a tremendous amount of magical energy and, yes, for this curse you do need to hate your target. It is the same energy you will require to cast the Killing Curse. That is why I needed to test you. It certainly would be tragic for you to fail at the pivotal moment."

Severus scowled at the fact that the Hippogriff seemed to be listening to the conversation.

Harry nodded as he caressed Buckbeak's chest. The animal who, only moments earlier, had had every intention of tearing Severus apart, closed his eyes happily.

A thought crossed Harry's mind, and he asked, "Sir, do you think?" He looked at Buckbeak and then to Severus.

"No, Potter. There is no way you're showing up at the final battle on that winged monstrosity," Severus said, starting to stagger his way back up towards the castle and trying hard not to groan with every step.

Severus glanced back to see Harry patting Buckbeak on the head, saying his goodbyes.

Harry caught up to Severus, wanting to say something significant. "I know there's no other way, but I can't help feeling both better and worse at knowing I can."

"It is not the magic, but the intention, Potter. Even the most mundane of hexes, spells, or charms can be used in the name of cruelty. I find it interesting that causing someone great pain for just a short time earns a sentence in Azkaban, while seven years of methodical torment is considered acceptable, even admirable."

Harry knew exactly what Snape meant and had no defense to offer.

"Remember this. You will only utilize this knowledge once, while others have built their entire existence around it," Severus said without looking at Harry.

"Thank you, sir."

"It is I who should thank you for deflecting that thing," he said quickly, shooing him with his hands, knowing full well that yet another Potter had saved his life.

As they drew closer to the castle, Severus heard his name being called by Minerva, her outline in the entryway with warm light behind her. The ruins of the Entrance Hall littered the grass outside the doors, which were hanging on to their frames by twisted bolts.

Hermione stood next to Minerva, her arms crossed. Her anger faded when she saw him approaching with bits of what looked like pumpkin scattered all over his clothes and hair. Hermione tried her best to avoid laughing, but couldn't prevent a snort from escaping.

"Just what in the world do you think you're doing? As I recall, I ordered you to come to my office after this fiasco, and yet you go outside on the castle grounds?" Minerva yelled. "Severus, what do you have to say for yourself?"

He was barely able to keep standing; neither of his legs would cooperate enough to hold him up. He glanced over at Hermione, who was still standing with her eyes narrowed, staring at him. He could tell though that her anger did not reach her eyes.

"Severus, really!"

"Minerva, we've had this discussion before, have we not? Potter's training requires the utmost realism. You wanted him to learn exactly what it's like to fight, and I am providing that service quite nicely I might add. You'll be pleased to know that he did, in fact, best me this time," Severus said, with a slight bow to Harry.

Minerva and Hermione both looked impressed and looked to Harry, who only shrugged.

Brushing a bit of rind off Severus' shoulder, Minerva asked, "And this?"

Harry said sheepishly, "That would be Buckbeak." Harry then shared the story, while Severus stood scowling.

Minerva laughed as she said, "Oh my. The mighty Severus, reduced to crawling through a pumpkin patch to escape his new arch-enemy?"

Severus only glared and did his best to stalk away, dragging his robes behind him and taking time to give the last remnants of the Gryffindor hourglass a good kick.

Hermione set down a breakfast tray as she entered the rooms. Madam Pomfrey had healed the slash on Severus' good leg easily enough, but warned that the other needed rest. She had asked Hermione to keep him in bed the next day, then blushed furiously at the implications of her statement. Hermione had the good grace to let it go, pat the flustered witch on the shoulder, smile, and walk away.

She was on her way to the bedroom when she saw it. A crack in the wall, the bookcase looked as though it was there, but there was a haze and an opening, just enough to cast doubt. It faded and the door reappeared, brightening for a time, then solidifying back into the bookcase, an innocent piece of furniture.

Tilting her head, Hermione tried to determine exactly what she was seeing. Was the concealment spell failing? Or being broken?

Again, a faltering. The sun brightened, casting a beam of light across the bookcase. When Hermione's eyes focused again, the door was plainly visible, and open.

An idea immediately came to her the Horcruxes. The locket that they suspected was either still at number twelve, Grimmauld Place or stolen by Mundungus was protected by some sort of Dark Magic. As always, the need for knowledge would harass her until satisfied. If she could do some research, she knew it could help Harry. *Looking at one book wouldn't hurt anything.*

Drawing her wand, Hermione stood in the doorway, knowing she was wrong. She chewed her lip and looked back at the bedroom door, certain that Severus would be completely furious if he knew. Another voice said it wouldn't hurt to just look, if she propped the door open to be safe. Keep to the brightest portion of the library. She dragged a chair to the doorway and propped it under the knob, shaking it a little to ensure a tight fit.

The heaviness to the air in the room had not changed for the better since the last time. A low, timeless scent hung in the air, dragging the atmosphere to a level at which it seemed cheerful thoughts were not allowed. Not here. The books seemed to be dormant. Hermione stood for a time, one foot outside the doorway, ready to flee if anything strange occurred.

Minutes passed and nothing.

Relaxing a fraction, she lit her wand, illuminating the dust suspended in the air, flowing on its own currents. With her senses heightened, she noticed everything. All of the shelves had chains across the books, holding them in place. At the end of each chain was a fastener where the final link was held with the remaining length hanging free, indicating where to pull. Hermione noticed that some of the chains were swinging slightly. Her logical mind told her it was just the air, resolutely ignoring the fact that some were picking up speed. The darkness further inside was deep, absolute, alive.

A sense of dread came over her as if the books were watching her, sizing her up as a worthy opponent. Seeing nothing too unusual, she leaned further into the room, trying to read some of the titles from the safety of the doorway. She couldn't shake the image of them straining against the chains, pushing to get out, obeying only when Severus threatened them in both English and a horrid sounding language she didn't want to understand.

Without thinking, she had stepped over the threshold. Telling herself she would only look at the titles, the first bookshelf, it's in the sun after all. Hermione tilted her head to read the titles, but there were too many cobwebs in the way, a thick layer of dust coating them, keeping them warm, hidden from prying eyes. She reached out to touch one, just to run her thumb down its spine to uncover the title. Not to read, no, just to check if it was something Severus would allow her to see.

Her hand moved upwards. She knew she shouldn't be in there, but she had no intention of reading them, and besides, the chains held them. It was strong magic, it seemed, binding them, keeping the room's occupants from the world. Then the other voice told her that it had obviously failed: the door was visible. Certainly that was a sign. Of what though?

The book she was reaching for shot forward, hitting her hand and causing her to gasp. It tipped forward, just as some of them had when Severus had been here with her. It rested there, as if it was there all along. Held onto the shelf only by the chain. The only evidence of its actions was the smear of dislodged dust along its cover.

Hermione stared at the book, convinced it was going to move again. Somehow the fact that it was simply sitting there was more disturbing than if it were flailing madly.

It's fine; you've dealt with misbehaving books in the library before.

She looked back at the door and sighed, telling herself she was getting worked up over nothing. The sun had risen more, moving away from the library, lowering the light. The darkness from the depths of the room spread like a mass, moving to devour the table, to climb up the walls, to float along the ceiling.

Approaching where she stood.

Something is wrong the sun and the darkness are out of sync.

The shadow stopped. Hermione stood still, waiting to see if anything else would happen. Wary of turning her back on the blackness, she began to back towards the door. It seemed so far away now.

The coldness of the chains hit her first. She was thrust into them, choking on the dust that was immediately drawn into her lungs, the cobwebs encircling her face. The table had swing violently to the side, slamming into the bookcases with enough force to destroy several shelves, crushing their occupants. Hermione scrambled up onto the table and began to climb over, struggling over the smooth, slippery finish. When she reached the other side and threw her legs down, one of the chains snapped, striking her leg like a whip. The books on that shelf remained still, watching her.

The pain was incredible. Even though the skin was not broken, the clear outline of each individual link was clearly visible on her calf. She sat on the edge of the table, clutching her leg, and waited, thinking. She had her wand, but what could she cast without total destruction? A sliding sound in the back of the room, moving forward. It was on the floor, under the table. She shoved herself to the middle of the surface and tried to judge how far she could jump to avoid whatever was under there. The doorway was not far maybe just a good jump would do it.

Hermione's eyes shot to the bookcase to her left. The books where the chain had snapped were moving forward, slowly, one by one, taunting her. She gathered herself to leap, keeping her eyes on them, orchestrating in her mind just how far they might go and how to best avoid them. In a time when she should be reduced to a quivering

mass, she was performing complex math as to just how far a murderous book might be able to launch itself.

Best do it now, Granger, before more damage is done. He's already going to be furious. Then again, what else is new?

Even after years of neglect, the table still had an incredible polish, feeling slippery under her feet. Hoping she wouldn't simply fall on her face, Hermione looked down at the ground, up at the doorway, and jumped.

She landed successfully and glanced back to see a black mass under the table. She was startled to find that it wasn't threatening, just approaching. Part of the room, nothing terrible. Instead of bolting for the door she backed slowly, transfixed. The dim light around it receded, dying, surrendering to it, a power flowed around it, she could feel it now. The table she had been on just seconds before was in a haze, the same kind of haze...

Before Hermione could form a thought, a great wind rushed at her, and the chair she had so carefully propped against the door was thrust out into the sitting room.

And darkness fell.

Libri Erupto

Chapter 14 of 41

Never doubt.

Disclaimer: It all belongs to JKR. I'm only paying homage.

AN: A huge thanks, as always, to Ariadne.

It is a well known fact that without the use of one sense the others heighten to take its place. Combine complete darkness with the utterly terrifying sound of a predator in the dark, and the mind reverts to its most primal instincts. Hermione knew this; however, no textbook can fully prepare you for reality.

She fought her rising panic, firmly shoving those instincts aside, hoping for bravery to take over. She could feel the crackle of magic in the air, traveling along her wand, as if it were measuring her, taking readings. Her mind was calculating her distance from the last disturbing movement, the source, the level of its violence, analyzing the smell of something that knows no morals and answers to no one. Remembering Severus' words, she knew this was something that would easily inspire fascination one moment and kill the next.

Hermione stood with her back to the door, her hand twisted behind her back, clutching the doorknob. Every time she moved it, she felt an immutable force turn it back, holding the latch in place. It teased her by opening the door, allowing a slight crack of precious light in before closing again. She almost didn't want that light, as it would reveal just how close the haze was coming. Steeling herself, she lit her wand. To her horror, the light had almost no effect, being only bright enough to light the area around her face. She shook her wand and cast again, hoping this was just a mistake; it shouldn't matter where she was, nothing should be blocking her magic, unless...

With each attempt, the circular area shrank further. The small amount of light took on a dull color as if it were fighting a losing battle. It flickered, dimmed to a yellowish fog, then extinguished.

Something was coming towards her from the right, something she could not see, only sense. Hermione moved away from the door, feeling along the opposite wall, running her hands over the shelves, trying not to cringe as the books shoved against her hands violently. She bumped into something at waist level. It was the table, the corner disappearing into the bookcase where it had rammed itself.

Whatever senses were in control told her in an alarmed voice to get up high now.

She complied, climbing back onto the table, standing, readying herself.

Silence. The feeling of a presence. Nothing more.

Suddenly, she heard a methodical snapping of metal. A straining sound, then a groan as the links failed, the force releasing the chains to strike anything in their path. The sounds of books hitting the floor with a thud, fluttering pages, dragging, shuffling, and perhaps worst, low voices.

She tried again, frantically muttering "*Lumos*." Finally, her memory admonished her and told her to look up. The lantern. She cursed herself and lit the ancient lamp, not bothering to open the door as the glass was broken anyway. The room came to life and she flinched, almost dropping her wand. All of the books on one wall had broken free and were throwing themselves off the shelves. She turned in time to duck one that had flung itself at her, snapping its cover furiously. It would have been comical if the book didn't have a violently red aura around it and weren't exuding the faint sound of screaming fury.

How terrible would it be to be killed by books? she thought ironically as she kicked another snarling book off the table. Another part of her mind knew that if she survived, Severus would kill her. The fact that she came in there was one thing, but to essentially destroy the place was another. She had so far refused to call for him, telling herself that he wouldn't hear anyway, that she'd deal with this on her own.

But when the first book struck her, she shoved pride aside and started calling Severus' name. When the lantern tore out of the ceiling, tumbling along the bookcases and spilling fire on its way to crash on the floor, her calls escalated to screams.

Severus felt hot light on his face, invading the darkness of his dreams, lightening first to auburn, then to rose. It began to burn, and he growled irritably, pulling a pillow over his head. But it was no use; he couldn't fall back to sleep, but did not want to move either. Being under the *Cruciatius*, even for a short time, caused every muscle to contract to the point of strain, something he was clearly not healthy enough for yet. Everything ached. Breathing was an exercise in all-encompassing, inescapable low-level pain. Anyone else would be horrified at the true extent of his condition, that remaining upright was a study in determination, that speaking was uncomfortable, and that yelling was painful to the point of nausea. It was not the first time, he told himself, and certainly wouldn't be the last.

His heart was beating far too fast for rest, as if something was wrong.

Everything is wrong. Choose your worry, Snape.

No, this was different. He was missing something. In his mind, there was a need a calling. His name it screamed across his field of thoughts like wildfire, startling him. Growing louder not a dream. This was real.

No one should be able to do that to me, unless...

Suddenly, pain was the last thing on his mind.

She could hear books bouncing off of each other, throwing shredded pages about the room. The smell of old musty parchment choked her, and the burning did nothing to improve the heaviness of the air. From her position, she could see them piling up around her as more chains broke free. Instinct told her that even though the presence was down there somewhere, she would be much safer under the table. She jumped down and crawled underneath, shoving what must have been the weaker books out of her way.

One book in particular was moving under the table towards her, opening and closing its heavy leather cover hungrily. A sickly green glow emanated from its pages and it was trailing something on the floor. Suddenly, it lunged towards her, opening wider and shooting green sparks. Hermione quickly cast a Stunner and watched as the book exploded upwards, splitting the mahogany table in a loud crack. As the table threatened to collapse, she turned and crawled towards the back of the room.

The books were burying her, their weight overwhelming. Her only option was to curl in a ball to keep a space of air as more books rained down and the flames rose.

As soon as Severus entered the sitting room, he knew. He saw a chair lying haphazardly into the middle of the room, on its side. The library door glared at him, as if declaring that, yes, it did have her, and challenging him to do something about it.

She couldn't possibly have...

"Hermione!" he yelled, moving over to the wall. He ran his hand along the door. Cursing under his breath, he pulled on the doorknob, mentally berating himself for thinking that his warning would have been sufficient to keep her from her incessant need for knowledge.

Damn silly witch!

Severus stood back and attempted several different opening spells, all to no avail. He could hear Hermione calling his name, screaming it in both voice and his thoughts. He could feel her terror. The air... there was fire.

He pressed his head up against the door and shouted, "The door won't open! Stand back! I may have to blast it open!"

Severus tried all types of spells, which only resulted in singed furniture, wall and carpet.

The door remained unmoving, taunting him. The handle even moved on its own, slowly, deliberately, showing him it was in complete control.

Thoughts raced through his mind. *What if she was hurt? Merlin knows what those books will do... This is all my fault! I knew she wouldn't be able to stay away...*

When her screams stopped, Severus' heart threatened to beat out of his chest with panic. There was only one thing he hadn't tried.

Fighting fire with fire.

Minerva had just passed through the gates after a trip to Hogsmeade. It felt good to get out of the castle after dealing with the Ministry for the past week, trying to keep the school open for the upcoming term. She was making her way up towards the castle, enjoying the sun on her face, when a window and part of the wall exploded out of where she knew Severus' rooms to be, showering the grounds with glass and stone. The glass glinted in the summer sun as it fell, as if it was a pleasant addition to what was, otherwise, a beautiful day.

Minerva hurried towards the castle, hoping that the two of them hadn't fought to the point of an all-out war.

Why can't there be just one day without chaos?

Hermione was almost thankful for the weight of the books, since they partially shielded her from the smoke. She could hear flames feeding on parchment on the other side of the table. Soon, the air would become so choked with smoke that she would lose consciousness. Her voice had started to give out and, besides, Severus was behind two doors and asleep. There was no way he could hear her. She was thinking about trying to run for the door. See if the magic had subsided, had given up trying to kill her. When she tried to rise, though, she found that the weight was more than she thought, firmly pinning her on her side.

Suddenly, a tearing rage forced its way into her mind, screaming, rising up and slashing downward, disrupting the chaos. The presence in the room not only fled, it dissipated completely, removing the heavy weight from the atmosphere, raising it back up to a bearable level. The books around her ceased moving, frozen in what was either fear or awe.

The only sound was the crackle of burning parchment. Hermione had started to shove the topmost books off of her when it happened.

The door not only opened, it tore out a large section of the wall. Bright sunlight immediately flooded the room, illuminating the smoke in the air. The sudden rush of air swept stray pages upwards, some still in flames as they see-sawed and flipped over on the current.

Hermione saw Severus in the doorway, his wand raised, a haze drifting to the ground around him, dying out in smoke-like spirals. It would have been a positively mythical scene of heroism if it weren't for the fact he was only wearing a hastily thrown on bathrobe.

The expression on his face was unfathomable.

"Hermione!" Severus called, the panic in his voice surprising him. Forgetting magic, pain, and his appearance, he climbed towards her over the mass of still-moving books. He dug, throwing books to the side, until she was able to sit up. Without taking his eyes off of her, he distractedly waved his hand, extinguishing the flames.

Severus leaned over her and took hold of her arms, hauling her up out of the pile. Without anything solid to stand on, they both had trouble balancing. Hermione held onto his fists where he had balled them up in her robes. She could feel him shaking. His bathrobe was splayed open to the waist and she could see his chest heaving. He wasn't breathing well at all, taking abnormally large gasps of air to recover from his shouting. Her mind randomly pointed out that only he could be so intimidating in a bathrobe and with wild hair. *Astonishing.* Hermione told herself to quit letting her eyes wander over his chest, wanting to reach out and apologize, leaving words aside, seeking forgiveness through touch.

"Severus, I'm sorry, I..." she started, but could see that his expression was changing. The words died on Hermione's lips for fear of triggering whatever he was about to say, and at what volume.

Severus straightened, his eyes wide with fury. He had no words to convey his utter disbelief at what she had done. "Just what in Merlin's name were you thinking? You could have been killed! I cannot fathom what was going through your brain to think that you could come in here and handle this!" Severus raged, raising his arms wide to encompass the destruction surrounding them.

She opened her mouth to offer some sort of explanation, but he cut her off leaning towards her, his voice bordering on vicious, "Do you have *any* idea of what is in these books? What they could have done? The spells in here are the darkest magic! Anything could've happened! How could you be so stupid?"

Immediately her defenses went up. "Stupid? STUPID?"

His eyes glinted, knowing he had her full attention. "Yes stupid," he repeated, pronouncing the word slowly as if to leave no doubt. "Leave it to the know-it-all to almost get herself killed out of her own stupidity! Never mind the destruction to school property! Is there no end to your ego?"

Something snapped. She almost lost her balance, slipping when a book twitched under her. Incredibly, he took hold of her until she was steady in order to allow her to continue arguing uninterrupted. Hermione had expected anger. It would have worried her if he hadn't been angry, but this? "School property"? Was that what she was to him? Didn't he care about what she had just been through?

Her eyes flashed, and she snapped defensively, "Yes, I admit it, I was wrong to come in here and I'm sorry! It's not like I meant for this to happen! But you, of all people, to speak of ego? You are the most difficult, stubborn, arrogant man that I have ever known! You think the sun rises and sets in your own personal universe and if somebody doesn't fit the mold of what you believe is correct, you brand them as either stupid or a know-it-all! For your information, the door was open!" She glared at him.

He advanced on her so fast she almost fell while stepping back. He reached out and gripped her arm tightly. They were only inches apart, screaming as if it were a mile. "I don't care if it was open! I don't care if they crawled into your lap and begged you to read them! I told you to not come in here, and no more than one day later you defy me! Look at this!" he yelled, trying to hold his bathrobe closed with his free hand and not fall in the process.

He ran out of breath, his body betraying him. He pressed her against the bookcase, then released her. Severus rested a hand on the table and placed his other around his ribs, regarding her with a mix of anger, pain, and disbelief.

In the shadows of his heart, relief rejoiced.

Hermione moved to stalk out of the room, but Severus countered, blocking her way.

"Move out of my way! If you don't let me by, I'll hex you in a way that would make even Voldemort cringe!" Hermione threatened, her face a deep crimson color.

"You must understand..." Severus said in a barely controlled voice, ignoring her wand pressed up against his bare chest.

"Oh, I understand! I understand perfectly! Do you even care what I've just been through? I had no intention for this to happen and all you care about is destruction to school property and defying you? How can you expect me to believe that you love me if you care more about these books than me!" Hermione snapped.

What little color occupied Severus' face deserted it. For a moment, he was beyond words. He reached out and leaned on the ruined table, gripping the edge. "You doubt me?" he asked viciously, shoving himself upright.

She shook her head, stunned into silence.

His breathing was jerking in fits, as if catching on something.

"How dare you."

Slowly, he raised his arm and pointed with his wand towards the gaping hole where the door once stood.

"Get out."

Hermione was startled at the change, his telling her to leave in a quiet voice was far worse than him blocking her, shouting. Hermione reached out slowly, wanting more than anything to let him know how sorry she was. She placed a hand on his shoulder, letting her hand travel to the lapel of his bathrobe, looking into his hard eyes, pleading with him to soften. It was there; he was wavering between rage and acceptance, stubbornly holding on, righteousness winning the battle.

"Severus, I..."

He pulled away violently and roared, "GET OUT!"

Doubt

Chapter 15 of 41

Destruction and doubt.

Disclaimer: It all belongs to JKR. Yes, I will say it every single time. No JKR, no Severus. Enough said. :)

I must, absolutely, must thank Ariadne. This chapter was tough on me to edit. May she continue to reread the last scene (and its alternate version, Entrance Hall) far too many times to be healthy. ;-)

Hermione fled the library, clamoring over the mass of exhausted books. She almost ran into a frantically worried Minerva, who had barely the time to get out of the way before Hermione left the rooms.

"Hermione! What?" Minerva asked, but Hermione was gone before she reached the second word.

Minerva was awestruck. The sitting room was in shambles, furniture strewn haphazardly, some with enough force to have been turned completely upside down and singed. A door was wedged halfway into the wall, where it looked to have flown at great speed. Stray bits of parchment floated on the breeze, slowly making their way to the floor.

She moved slowly over the wreckage towards a gaping hole that opened into what she could only assume was the Dark Arts library. Smoke traveled along the floor around the opening, evidence that a fire had been just extinguished.

"Severus?" Minerva said, her shocked eyes traveling over the ruins.

Anyone else would assume he was waiting for someone to join him if it hadn't been for his lack of proper clothing. Severus stood, leaning against a bookcase, one arm clutching his side. He twitched when he saw Minerva and quickly stood straight.

"Severus... what in the world happened?" Minerva asked, gesturing to both the destroyed library and his attire.

Severus scowled and carefully made his way towards her. "'Hermione' is what happened, Minerva."

Minerva nodded slowly and, with raised eyebrows, asked, "And I may correctly assume that you did not appreciate her perusal of the library?"

Severus shot her a glare as he stepped over the last of the books.

"No, Minerva, I did not."

Minerva motioned for him to follow her into the sitting room. As she walked, Minerva reassembled the sitting room, neatly placing the furniture back in their proper places, and removed the door from its horizontal position in the wall. Severus watched irritably as the books flew back into place in the library, the chains reattached, and the wall and door sealed themselves.

"Was that so difficult, Severus?" Minerva asked, taking a seat.

"Minerva, it wasn't about the books."

"Wasn't it?"

Severus crossed his arms. "No. Anything could have happened. You know as well as I what a collection of books like that is capable of."

Minerva leaned back in her chair, seemingly immune to his pacing back and forth. At any moment, she expected him to realize his state of undress.

"I see," she nodded. "So you expressed to her that you were concerned for her safety."

"Yes."

"Severus..."

"Minerva, I am not eleven."

"Severus, you forget that you resort to sharp language in the face of confrontation. I highly doubt she meant to do anything more than look," Minerva said quietly.

He paused, then sighed, "I don't know, Minerva. I just when I thought that she could have possibly..."

"You love her," Minerva stated, fully expecting him to deny it in some way. She was pleasantly surprised to see him simply shrug.

"You are mortal, Severus. Admit it."

Severus spread his arms out, cataloging his numerous injuries. "I think that is plainly visible, Minerva."

"Yes, but you haven't bled like this."

He scowled, wrapping the bathrobe around himself tighter.

"No." *Not in a long time.*

"Severus, for this to work, you will need to work on your temper. I can see the two of you having quite spectacular quarrels with neither of you backing down."

"An understatement." He shook his head, refusing to reveal what Hermione had said to him.

"Take a piece of advice from an old witch, Severus. You know the reason behind your anger was concern for her well-being. Did you even tell her you were relieved to find her unharmed?"

Severus raised an eyebrow, thinking. He shrugged. "I might have omitted that part."

Minerva stood. "Apologize, Severus. Profusely. Preferably on your knees," she said, then glancing at his leg, she added with a grimace, "well, at least on one."

Hermione stalked from the rooms, completely shocked by Severus' reaction. He had been so furious; he didn't even care if she was all right.

She walked randomly through the halls, unsure of her destination. Soon, she found herself in the dimly lit and thoroughly destroyed Entrance Hall. Filch had managed to clean up some, but the stairs were still in fragments, and the hourglasses stood with only their bases intact, the jewels and the glass missing. She settled on the stairs and placed her hands on her face, reconstructing the argument, thinking, playing through every possible outcome. Arriving at the conclusion that she was just as much at fault as he was, if not more.

"Hermione?"

Hermione looked up, and her face brightened into a smile. She rubbed her eyes and stood. "Hello, Ginny," she said, hugging her tightly.

Ginny stared around the Hall, then looked at her with concern. "Hermione, why are you in here crying and what in the world has happened to the Entrance Hall?"

Placing her arm over her shoulder, Hermione said, "Oh, I have so much to tell you."

"Come on then; we can talk in the Great Hall. Ron, Mum and Dad are here too. McGonagall has called a meeting."

Hermione shared with her the events of the past few weeks, including her falling for Severus. She braced herself for Ginny's reaction, fearing that she would find her disgusting. Hermione was surprised to find that, although she at first looked a bit pale, Ginny only stroked her arm and listened quietly.

Hermione then described being trapped in the Dark Arts library just prior to seeing Ginny and concluded with Severus' reaction.

"I can't believe the way he acted. He said such nasty things to me."

Ginny rolled her eyes and said with a slight smile, "And this is different from his usual snarky self how?" Hermione allowed herself to smile and playfully smacked Ginny on the arm.

Before they could discuss this further, they were interrupted by Harry and Ron striding into the Great Hall, joking with each other. "Been looking for you all over, Ginny," Ron said sitting across the table from them.

"Hermione has just been telling me about everything that's been going on since... well, you know," Ginny said.

Everyone was quiet. Harry shot Hermione a look, then found the grooves in the table fascinating when she responded with a glare.

Ron said, "Oh, yeah, well... how is everything, then, Hermione?"

Hermione gave a warning look at Ginny and was happy to see that she gave her a slight wink, promising to not reveal what they had discussed.

Hermione relaxed for a moment until Harry said, "She's been hanging with Snape. She has...Oww! Ginny!"

Ron's eyes widened as his eyes scanned their faces. "What? What do you mean *hanging with Snape*? What is that supposed to mean?"

"Ron, it's..." Hermione started. The words caught in her throat as she saw him intently looking at her.

"Will somebody tell me what's going on?" Ron demanded.

Quickly, Ginny stood and said, "Harry. There is um something I want to show you." She then grabbed Harry's hand and jerked him away from the table.

"You didn't have to kick me so hard..." Harry said in a loud whisper as they left the Great Hall.

Hermione sighed and said, "Well, you were bound to find out."

"Find out what, Hermione? Tell me!" Ron said, clearly becoming frustrated, his ears threatening to match his hair.

"Severus and I... well, we were, but not any more. Oh, I don't know." Hermione rambled.

"Hermione, would you just spit it out? Are you and Snape?" The look on Ron's face was a mix of hurt and revulsion.

"Yes, kind of..." she managed.

Ron looked down at the table, and Hermione heard him mutter, "Bloody hell..."

Looking up at her, he asked suspiciously, "Sure you're not under the Imperius?"

"Ron! Yes, I am sure I'm not under the Imperius Curse," Hermione said, rolling her eyes.

"Yeah, but, Hermione... Snape?" Ron said, looking ill.

Hermione continued, telling him about the duels, Severus' Mark, her imprisonment in the Dark Arts library, and their fight. "All the man cared about was his books..."

Ron's eyes widened, and he stood, yelling, "Bloody hell, Hermione! Have you lost your mind?"

Hermione stared at him in shock.

"What would make you go into a room with books like that alone? You know what could've happened to you! You're smart most of the time, but that was a stupid thing to do! Promise me you won't do things like that!" Ron continued to yell at her, his face reddening.

Hermione was shocked. Ron's reaction was almost exactly the same as Severus'. "I know, Ron. You don't need to yell at me!"

Ron blushed and, sitting back down, said, "I'm sorry, Hermione. Well, I just don't want you to get hurt. I you know care..."

A revelation struck Hermione.

Hermione placed her hand on his and said, "Thanks, Ron."

Neither of them saw a robed figure turn quickly and leave the Great Hall doorway.

"Let's settle down to business," Minerva announced.

Members of the Order took their seats, some watching Dumbledore's portrait pensively, willing him awake. Minerva sighed, hoping that Severus would attend. Some part of her knew his sense of responsibility would win out. It usually did.

Ron had started on his fourth biscuit when Molly said in a loud whisper, "Ronald! People will think we positively starve you!"

Hermione knew that several members of the Order still harbored doubts about Severus' loyalty. It was likely they would never trust him again, and his disposition did nothing to encourage inclusion or trust. Her eyes traveled around the room and rested on Remus and Tonks standing by the window, smiling and chatting. Hermione watched them and thought they looked like such a lovely couple.

"Now. Our first order of business..." Minerva started, but was interrupted by the office door opening. "Ah, Severus, thank you for joining us."

"Does the damn twinkle come with the position?" Severus thought, irritated by Minerva's knowing smile. Scowling, Severus' eyes scanned the room, flitting from face to face before taking a seat.

Hermione caught his eye for a second before he looked away with a bored expression.

Look at them there... Of course she prefers to be with them. You're just fooling yourself to think she would ever want to be with you...

"Now, as I was saying. As our first order of business, Severus has graciously agreed to coach Harry in his dueling skills. Severus? A report please?"

It's inconceivable... I simply refuse to apologize. She was wrong to disobey me. Anything could have happened...

"Severus? A report on Harry's progress?" Minerva asked again, grinning.

Severus was startled out of his thoughts, realizing that he had been staring at Hermione and that everyone's eyes were on him. Composing himself quickly, he stood. "Yes, of course."

Clearing his mind, Severus said, "Potter has managed to go from dismal to adequate at blocking most spells and casting the Cruciatus, but still has a major flaw. His mind is still wide open. The Dark Lord..."

"Say his name," Harry said quietly.

"Harry!" Ron whispered warningly, elbowing Harry.

Hermione's face held a startled look.

Severus turned to glare at Harry, his lip curling in a sneer.

Harry looked like he hadn't meant for Severus to hear him, but also like he didn't care. The room remained silent, hanging on every word.

"What did you say?" Severus growled as he moved towards him.

Harry rose slowly and matched Severus' glare. "You heard me. You're no longer a Death Eater. Say his name."

"Harry, please," Hermione pleaded, tugging on Harry's hand, telling him to sit.

"Harry, that is not important..." Minerva started, then trailed off when Severus raised his hand.

At the look on Severus' face, Ron looked like he wanted to flee the room. Hermione still held onto Harry's hand absently, worrying that he had pushed Severus too far.

After a long pause, Severus leaned closer and stared directly into Harry's eyes. In a low, vicious voice he said, "Voldemort."

Severus straightened slowly and then continued as if he hadn't been interrupted. "Potter has failed at Occlumency time and time again. He broadcasts his spells loudly enough that I don't even need to cast *Legilimens*. *Voldemort*," Severus said directly to Harry, "will surely prevail, regardless of any improved dueling skills Potter may manage to retain."

Minerva looked disappointed. "Severus, what would you suggest?"

He thought for a moment, then spoke to the room. "I believe there may be a possibility of developing a potion that could help."

Minerva brightened and, while motioning for Severus to continue, poured some more tea for herself. Severus moved around the room with his remaining limp and said thoughtfully, "If the potion is successful, it will enable the taker to control their emotions and it will enhance Occlumency skills. It would be no substitution for learning the skill, but it would enhance and greatly increase the chances of resistance."

Nodding as Severus returned to his seat, Minerva said, "Thank you, Severus." Her smile widened as she added, "I'm sure Hermione would love to be your assistant. Right, Hermione?"

Hermione looked surprised at first, then responded, "Of course." She glanced at Severus and caught him with what she thought was a hopeful expression before it slipped back to indifference.

"Excellent," Minerva said. She took some notes before continuing, "Remus, Harry? Any information on the Horcruxes?"

"Not too much yet," said Harry. "We think the heavy locket we found at Grimmauld Place is one. Of course, that may have been stolen by Dung already," he said, looking extremely angry.

Minerva turned to Remus. "Remus, would you and Tonks please go and see if you can locate the locket? Do not attempt to open it, of course; just bring it back here. We'll have Severus look it over for Dark Magic before we attempt to destroy it."

At Harry's impending objection, Minerva said, "Harry, we need you to stay here and train with Severus. I'm sure you'll do well. Agreed?"

Harry sat back, shooting a reproachful look at Severus, who glared back at him.

Choosing to ignore the fact that she received no response, after closing her notebook and folding her hands, Minerva said, "Excellent. If there is nothing else, we'll adjourn."

Severus left as soon as the meeting ended, descending the stairs and limping in as dignified a manner as possible towards the dungeons.

"Damn leg," he cursed under his breath. He heard footsteps catching up to him and knew exactly to whom they belonged, resenting how his heart sped up, betraying his strategy of cool indifference. His anger had not dissipated in the slightest.

"Leave me," he growled.

"Won't you allow me to apologize?"

Severus turned his head and slightly arched an eyebrow, but remained silent, turning a corner into the Entrance Hall. Most of the debris had been cleared, but most of the torchlight was still out, and the stairway remained in a state of ruin. Dark shadows cut through the Hall, leaving areas of deep, cold silence.

"Severus, I'm so sorry," she said and caught hold of his robes, hoping he'd stop. "I didn't mean what I said..."

Severus' swiftly turned and caught her wrist, drawing her to him, his expression unreadable. Hermione stared at his grip as he pulled her arm to his chest, just over his heart. Leaning closer, he said, in a tone meant to instill nothing less than cold fear, "If you haven't noticed, it is not in my nature to forgive easily. I am not a nice man. What you said to me is the utmost of insults, considering I warned you of the dangers in the interest of your safety. Remember this, Hermione; it is those who know the power of the Dark Arts that are in the best position to protect others. I have no intention of finding out what is the current price of innocence, least of all yours."

"A simple apology is hardly acceptable. You did more than simply spill something or bump into me. Much more."

"I just for a second I thought you cared more about the books than me. I didn't mean what I said, Severus. After everything you've been through, you finally open up a little to someone, and this is what I do? I swear, I never doubted you. Please I do love you."

"Really?" he asked sarcastically, pressing her forearm against himself.

Hermione felt him tighten his grip; his expression changed, quieted. He was thinking too much for her to feel comfortable.

"I'm supposed to be angry with you. It is a question of honor, you see," he said, lowering his head slightly, watching his own hand as he lifted each finger and repositioned them, aligning, planning. With a final sweeping glance around the Hall, he swiftly lowered her arm, shoved her shoulders to spin her around and pulled her back against him.

Hermione gasped in surprise, but was silenced by his hand over her mouth, pulling her head to rest on his shoulder as he backed them into a cool, deep shadow. He lowered his head, breathing against her neck, holding her arm behind her back. A draft from the doors swept the heat from her, reminding her exactly how fast the man behind her could instill both fear and desire.

Feeling a chill pass down her spine, she said distractedly, "I'm angry with you too."

A deep, rumbling chuckle. Not in the least amused. More like pleasure at watching prey struggle. Enjoying the power. Establishing rules without a single word.

He moved his free hand from her shoulder, splayed his fingers across her chest and pressed her against him. Slowly, he moved his mouth up against her ear. Lingered there. She could feel his lips. Painfully close. Moving his face into her hair, knowing that every movement drove her senses further to the fine edge of control.

"Do you honestly think your anger threatens me?" He was moving his hand upwards, tracing her collarbone, holding her jaw. Increasing the pressure just slightly.

"No."

Severus grinned into her hair.

She shifted, and her arm immediately twisted harder.

Hermione hadn't noticed that she had her nails dug into his thigh, flexing her grip whenever he moved. Each time he ventured further, she squeezed harder, giving a signal to keep going don't stop to ask.

When he moved her hair and kissed her neck in the gentlest of ways, she moaned. In response, he loosened his grip on her arm slightly, lowering it the slightest amount.

"Is that a request?" He was smiling, his cheek against hers as he rested his head on her shoulder.

She shook her head: not here.

"Oh, no, never here. Never," he murmured, enjoying how she stiffened with the knowledge that he had read her thoughts.

Silence. He was waiting. Listening.

He loosened his grip again, her hand now held behind her back by little more than fingertips.

"A request? Or a prayer?" he asked, letting her hand go.

She stood, leaning against him, her head down, heart beating hard enough that he must know; it could surely be felt anywhere he touched her.

"Yes." Nothing more than a whisper. Perhaps not even spoken aloud.

A small rush of breath told her he found this amusing. His hand traveled down her arm to where she was clutching his thigh to the point of causing him tremors.

"Nervous?"

"No." *Yes, terrified.*

"Interesting," he murmured, twisting her hand from his thigh, his other hand moving along her back. Lightly, barely touching, making her long for that touch to return, aching for it. She tried to lean into him again, but he moved away, slightly, just enough to keep her within range to feel the heat from him, to want that touch, to keep her thoughts spiraling hopelessly away from the relentlessly academic paths. *Fascinating.*

He held her hands and leaned forward, pressing his chest against her back, resting his chin on her head. In a philosophical tone, he mused, "There is something to be said for anticipation, Hermione. Don't you agree?"

He felt her drop her chin.

Releasing her hands, he took hold of his robes and raised them up. Slowly, he wrapped his robes around her, his hands clasped on her opposite shoulders.

Moving to speak into her ear again, he relished the time he took to take that first breath. How she shuddered, almost trembling while waiting. "It raises the level of arousal, I believe. This is something that should be entered into with the utmost attention to detail. One should accept nothing less, yes?"

Hermione leaned her cheek against his arm and nodded.

"The knowledge that something may happen, something out of your control, something potentially dangerous. Do you enjoy danger, Hermione?" he asked, dropping his voice lower. He gripped her shoulders before he let his hands drop.

Shaking his hands free of his robes, he reached up and, in one movement, turned her around and pulled her into an embrace. She had no time to react before she was crushed up against him, the heat, him, taking her lips to his, viciously at first, claiming her, proving his power. He took her hand in his and interlaced their fingers.

"Do you doubt me?" he growled, biting into her shoulder.

She couldn't breathe, her attempts too hard or too fast. "No."

"Prove it."

"Severus, I..." she started, looking up into his eyes, which were watching her, waiting. She then took their joined hands and pressed them over her heart, looking into his intense gaze. "Feel. Listen."

He stood, on the edge of both sending her away and holding her close, looking into her eyes, listening with his mind.

Severus heard her thoughts without effort. It was unlike any other time he had practiced Legilimency his target had always railed against him, fighting, had never been willing like this, offering up, granting permission. He felt her remorse, loss, fear, understanding and most importantly, love.

Hermione ran her free hand over his, watching his expression change from confusion and disbelief at first, then moving towards acceptance.

"Can you see?" she whispered, knowing he could already feel.

Distractedly, he breathed, "Yes."

A sigh, a release of tension. She noticed that he was breathing nearly as hard as she was.

"Intimidation?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Works wonders," she said breathlessly as she reached up and tucked his hair behind one ear.

He quirked a smile. "Wonders, indeed."

Hermione rested her forehead on his and sighed.

"It was still a stupid thing to do. Do you understand..."

She interrupted him. "I know, never again."

He moved his head slightly against hers and closed his eyes before straightening. Severus let his eyes wander the Hall, taking in the colossal mess he and Potter had created, taking particular pleasure in the complete eradication of the Gryffindor hourglass.

"Would you like to take points, Professor Snape?" Hermione asked, searching his face, hoping to lighten the mood. "Oh, wait..." she said in mock surprise. "It's not like you can, considering you destroyed the Gryffindor hourglass."

Suddenly, Severus started to laugh.

Hermione was astonished at the sight of him laughing. *He looks so beautiful without some sort of angry expression on his face.*

"Now that," he said, fighting another wave of laughter, "that was an accident."

Curiosity got the better of her. "If it was an accident, why is it so amusing?"

Waving his hand dismissively, Severus admitted, "Perhaps it was not entirely an accident."

At her gasp, he added quickly, "Potter started it."

"You sound like a five-year-old that's been caught being bad," Hermione teased, fighting to keep a smile from her face.

"Going to tell, are you?" he asked, teasing her.

"Never," Hermione said and made a show of placing her hand over her heart.

Severus' gaze traveled to the hole in the ceiling, edges hanging in tatters, swinging on the slight evening breeze from the broken front doors. "McGonagall did make me realize something. That and my near obsessive need to be proper drive me to do this. Are you prepared?"

Hermione laughed, but another part of her was instantly wary. "After what happened just now? I'm ready for anything."

With great effort, Severus lowered himself to one knee and said seriously, while looking into her shocked face, "I apologize. Even though I was reacting out of frustration, knowing something could have happened to you, it was no excuse for speaking to you that way. I find myself unable to bear the thought of losing you."

Smirking at her surprised expression, he said, "Forgiven?"

"Yes, I do forgive you; now please get up," Hermione said, looking embarrassed. "You're going to ruin your leg."

"As you wish," Severus said, rising and kissing her deeply.

Tonks turned to Remus with a shocked expression on her face. Watching as Severus and Hermione walked off towards the dungeons, she gasped, "Did you see what I just saw?"

Distracted, Remus stared at them as they disappeared. "I think we just saw Severus propose to Hermione..."

Great Misunderstandings

Chapter 16 of 41

Rumors and ramparts...

Disclaimer: All characters belong to JKR. I promise to put them back when I'm done.

AN: A generous thanks to Ariadne. This chapter came a long way from the original and is everything I wanted. She truly does bring out the best in me. Cheers. :-)

Remus and Tonks stood, shocked at what they had just seen, or thought they saw. They stared at each other with confused looks. If at that moment a Hippogriff had raged through the Entrance Hall, they wouldn't have noticed.

Tonks threw her hand in the direction the couple had gone, complaining, "Why can't you do romantic things like that? To think, Severus of all people..."

Remus was speechless, taking a moment to find his voice. "I, well..."

"Well, nothing," Tonks said, folding her arms and staring off towards the dungeons. A grin crept onto her face.

Remus shook his head, saying, "I never thought I'd see the day."

Tonks turned around and headed back to the headmistress' office.

"Where are you going?" Remus asked, not appreciating the mischievous grin on her face.

"We have to go tell everyone!" Tonks said excitedly, tugging on his hand.

Remus followed reluctantly, muttering, "This cannot be good."

"He did what? So soon?" Minerva said, rising from her chair. Part of her was ecstatic that he had not only apologized, but proposed. The rest of her mind questioned how it could have happened so quickly.

"What do you mean *so soon*?" Remus asked suspiciously. "Did you have something to do with this?"

"Oh, of course not," Minerva said defensively, even as a smile slipped onto her face. "All right, I may have left a slight hint," she admitted, adding, "Severus is dense when it comes to such things, I'm afraid."

Remus rolled his eyes as if that were a severe understatement.

Thinking hard, Minerva asked, "Are you sure of what you saw?"

Remus opened his mouth to offer his doubts, but Tonks quickly cut him off. "Yes, he went down on one knee, held her hand, and asked her something. Then they kissed and walked off."

"I'm not so sure. We didn't actually hear..." Remus started.

"Oh, Remus, you said it yourself. Severus proposed!" Tonks said loudly, her voice carrying across the office.

"WHAT!?" Ron yelled, his face turning an amazing shade of red.

Ginny and Harry looked at each other with wide eyes before rushing over to McGonagall's desk.

Molly and Arthur stood, clueless, watching their son becoming angrier with each passing second.

Hermione and Severus entered the Great Hall after spending several hours in companionable silence, researching possible Occlumency-enhancing potion ingredients.

Immediately upon their entrance, Minerva rushed up and grabbed hold of Severus, holding him tight.

Severus, both stunned and grimacing in pain, held his arms out and stared in disbelief at Hermione, who could only offer a shrug.

"Oh, I'm so happy for two of you. How nice! We must celebrate!"

"Minerva! Please! I must demand you let me go!" Severus demanded, scowling and attempting to extricate himself from the older witch.

Hermione had absolutely no idea what was happening, but could not help but enjoy Severus' reaction to being hugged. He looked positively mortified, his arms up in the air and his teeth gritted. Minerva had most likely squeezed every single bruised rib together.

"Well, the two of you..." Minerva said as she stepped back, confusion on her face.

"Minerva, if may I ask, celebrate what?" Severus asked irritably, attempting to smooth out the wrinkles Minerva's surprising show of emotion had inflicted on his robes.

Before she could respond, their attention was diverted. Ron was stalking across the Hall, awkwardly drawing his wand.

"You bastard!" Ron yelled, pointing his trembling wand at Severus. Molly let out a loud gasp and hurried over.

"Mr. Weasley!" McGonagall cried.

Severus glared as if insulted and said angrily while drawing his own wand, "What did you call me?"

"You know bloody well what!" Ron yelled, as Harry, Molly and Arthur tried to pull him away. Harry had a grip on Ron's shirt, twisting it up around his neck. It was impossible to tell whether Ron's red face was caused by rage or near strangulation.

Hermione stood in stunned silence, watching as they all struggled with Ron and tried to force his wand down. Molly and Arthur each wrestled with an arm, while Harry still twisted his shirt. Ginny had joined in, taking hold of one of Ron's legs, lifting him in the air.

With a sneer, Severus flicked his wand slightly.

Ron stared in disbelief as his wand flew obediently to Severus' waiting hand.

Severus politely handed Ron's wand to Minerva and repeated, "As I was saying. Celebrate what?"

Ignoring the drama, Tonks walked past where Molly and Arthur were still wrestling their son away. "You can announce it now, Hermione. Everyone knows. We saw you two earlier."

Remus hesitantly placed his hand on Severus' shoulder, saying, "Congratulations, Severus."

Severus jerked away and glared at Remus in a state of half-confusion.

As everyone surrounded them, congratulating and chatting, Severus finally had had enough. He shouted, "QUIET!"

Silence fell.

Severus turned to Hermione and saw the look of amazement on her face. Following her gaze, he saw the Great Hall properly for the first time. The ceiling was festooned with thousands of candles, throwing soft light onto several tables where a feast lay. The High Table was decorated in white lace and set with beautiful place settings. Two chairs were set, one red and gold and the other emerald green.

Slowly, Severus closed his eyes and asked, "What in Merlin's name is this about?"

"Why, your engagement, of course," Minerva said, looking suspicious about his reaction. She then turned towards Tonks and Remus, regarding them with a disapproving glare. Remus shrugged, and Tonks seemed suddenly to find the floor profoundly interesting.

"What? Engaged? Are you completely insane? You've all lost your minds!" Severus said, caught so completely off guard he laughed nervously. When he looked at Hermione's expression, his laughter died.

"Hermione, I didn't mean..." Severus said quickly, hoping to avoid another altercation.

Disappointment spread on Minerva's face. "You mean you didn't...?"

"No, I most certainly did not. What in the world made you think such a thing?" Severus asked angrily.

"But we saw you," Tonks said, embarrassed. Remus looked at her as if to say "I told you so."

"Saw me what?" Severus asked, advancing on her.

Tonks quickly said, "You knelt and I we saw you." She looked to Remus, who shook his head while backing away slowly.

Gritting his teeth, Severus said, "I was apologizing to Hermione for an earlier argument. That is all."

Tonks managed a small, "Oh."

"Oh' is right," Severus growled.

Minerva stepped forward and said, "Severus, we're sorry; we just thought... it's obvious that our information was flawed." She looked around in confusion, and asked, "Wait. Where's Hermione?"

Severus stalked out of the Great Hall, his gait uneven as he crossed to the Entrance Hall doors to see if she had gone outside. He was as shocked as Hermione was by the assumption that he had proposed, but it was his verbal reaction which had driven her away.

Standing just outside the castle doors, he was struck by how high the wind had come up and by the smell of rain in the air. As his hair and robes rippled, he called her name, scanning the grounds. While he listened intently, a movement up high caught his eye. He looked up quickly to see brown curls moving back over the Astronomy tower ramparts. Smirking to himself, he nonchalantly turned and went back inside the castle.

Hermione fled the Great Hall feeling totally humiliated, her mind reeling. Severus' reaction had nearly broken her heart. At first she was going to head outside, but she noticed that a storm was approaching. Something about the power and violence of a storm attracted her. The smell of electricity, damp earth, impending energy, the wind carrying it all in varying directions it made her feel alive. The Astronomy Tower seemed like the best place to think clearly and hide from everyone.

She placed her hands on the cold stone ramparts and gazed out at the grounds. Tears blurred her vision some, but she could still see the stars where the approaching clouds hadn't yet obscured the sky.

Her thoughts carrying her from side to side asking herself why she felt so humiliated. Was her love for him strong enough to affect her this deeply this soon? There was no question, though; something more than love was happening between them, if they could stop yelling at each other long enough to figure it out.

Earlier, when he had held her, it had seemed right, as if nothing else would ever take its place. Her heart already knew what her mind had yet to fully accept: that she did love him. Hermione guessed that no amount of logic would help her now and that, like Dark Magic, love was both attractive and terrifying.

She ran her hands along the stone, wondering if it was true that places retained a certain energy when tragic things had occurred there. Sadly, she thought this was the same wall where Dumbledore had leaned when the man she now loved killed him.

Suddenly, she heard Severus calling her name. She quickly moved away from the edge.

Hermione was thankful for the rain not because it was refreshing, but because it hid the tears.

Severus cursed Lupin, Tonks, and his leg with each step. Gone were the days of sweeping dramatically from rooms and moving quickly. He wondered how long this would take to heal fully, and he knew wandering all over creation on the afflicted limb didn't help.

Being demoted to the ranks of the slow-moving gave him time to think. He certainly had little experience dealing with women, but the little he did know told him that he and Hermione were both making a complete disaster of things by arguing. Severus knew he loved her. Of that there was no question. The problem was his temper. Years of repressing all emotion had turned him into an antisocial being, one lacking the skills to communicate without resorting to intimidation. While that strategy worked as a spy and a teacher, it had no place in a relationship with a witch who could very well hex important pieces from his person. Hermione could hold her own nicely in an argument; that was certain, and was what attracted him to her. He told himself that if he could control himself when dealing with arguably the most insane wizard in the known universe, he could choose his words carefully when dealing in love.

Now, with a chance for happiness, he was nearly paralyzed. Part of him still wanted to drive her away to save her from the emotional wreck he had become. His true heart, however, knew he was already too far in love with her. That knowledge triggered a different kind of fear, the kind one feels in the face of losing control, of surrendering even a small part to someone else.

Arriving at the bottom of the Astronomy Tower stairs, he froze. His heart rate soaring both from wondering how to express his feelings and from the fact that the last time he had been there he had committed murder. If he never saw the place again, he would feel no loss.

"Hermione, why here of all places?" he thought, and, with a hand that betrayed a slight tremble, he took hold of the rail and started to climb the stairs.

Hermione felt the rainfall increase, but didn't care. She raised her face to the sky. Her emotions had moved from embarrassment and confusion to anger, and come to rest in a general sadness. She leaned against the rampart wall, feeling the cold stone under her hands, the texture, unmoving no matter what trauma occurred around it. When she heard Severus approach she sighed, but didn't turn.

"Leave me alone, Severus."

Severus stood next to her and looked out over the grounds. The wind carried the scent of the forest to them before rising again in anticipation of the coming storm.

Hermione shook her head, refusing to look at him, "I've never been so embarrassed. You have no idea how humiliated I feel."

"I have to respectfully disagree with you there," he said, slightly tilting his head.

"What?"

"I believe turning yourself into a cat your second year would be a more embarrassing event. Any time a large amount of fur and a tail are involved, it cannot be enjoyable," Severus said, shaking the hair out of his eyes. The wind had picked up and could not seem to choose a direction from which to blow.

"How will this work? I've never acted this way, or said such things..."

Severus leaned over the rampart. "We all make mistakes, Hermione."

She turned to watch him, his eyes fixed on the grounds, his only tell being the intense grip he had on the stone.

Hermione sighed. "I've made a lot lately. I've treated you terribly out of my own insecurities."

"There is no denying that."

She looked up at him.

"You wish me to lie?"

Shaking her head, she said, "I've never felt like this before. Something changes when I'm around you. Everything becomes more important. I've become so wrapped up in wanting to know how you feel, I've forgotten how to be normal."

"You may blame youth. I, however, have no such excuse."

Hermione smiled sadly, and considered how Severus most definitely did not act his age.

Severus raised his eyes to the night sky, as if searching for a memory.

"Hermione, I do not forgive easily, but I did see that you didn't mean what you said. Something hurled in the heat of the moment is one thing; truly acting against someone out of malice is another. You will find that there is a difference."

"That sounds like..."

"Dumbledore? Yes. I have been subjected to many lectures on forgiveness."

"Does this get easier?" she asked, gathering her hair in her hand. The wind had reached an urgent level, the rain's angle and intensity increasing.

"I'm afraid you are asking the wrong person. To quote McGonagall, I think we will have quite spectacular disagreements."

Hermione groaned and leaned back on the rampart wall.

Severus stepped in front of her. "My reaction in the Great Hall was purely in the moment. I was given no time to think or prepare."

"I might have said the same thing if you didn't beat me to it," Hermione said with a shrug.

He raised an eyebrow. "Interesting. So my strategy should be one of silence?"

"Seems so," she said with a sad smile.

He nodded and ran a hand through his hair, now heavy with rain.

"Severus what do you want with me? With us?" Hermione asked seriously.

Expecting her question, Severus said, "You must understand, my life has been filled with lies, and devoid of emotion. This is a tremendous change. I'm afraid that I have no idea what to do, let alone how to do it correctly. You know as well as I do how infuriating that can be."

Hermione nodded, knowing exactly how it felt to be suddenly shoved into uncharted waters.

"Yes, there is an 'us'," he said turning to face her, "If you still want this broken down, unemployed ex-spy, that is. You have already found a way to lay claim to my heart, something I hadn't known I still possessed," he said, pushing her wet hair behind her ear. The wind and rain had joined in their intensity and were rising together.

Hermione was searching his eyes, looking for sincerity. "Severus, if this is to work you'll need to learn to control your temper. You jump on everyone, including me."

"Yes." His hair was thoroughly soaked, hanging in strings.

"I need to think. You're late for Harry's lesson," she said, fighting a smile at his crestfallen expression and at the role reversal. She watched as the rain soaked his robes and streaked down his face.

Nodding, he expertly schooled his expression.

"Until later," he said, then turned to leave.

Hermione smiled slightly and turned her face upwards to feel the rain once more.

"Tonks, how could you! You're usually so thorough," Minerva complained, both angry that they had caused such a mess and stunned that she had actually hugged Severus.

"I'm sorry I thought we thought Remus!" Tonks said quickly, looking at Remus and pleading for help.

Remus held up his hands, saying, "I tried to offer my doubts, but was cast aside. We never heard what Severus said."

"Well, what's done is done. Hopefully, Severus will be able to repair the damage to their relationship. His reaction was hardly ideal," Minerva said, wringing her hands. "I'm afraid the man needs lessons in diplomacy."

With a wave of her wand, Minerva banished the engagement decorations and moved the tables off to the sides. She knew Severus would keep his word to teach Harry. Having someone level their wand at one should be an unsettling event, but Severus hadn't moved an inch. Minerva was at least thankful that Severus had merely disarmed young Mr. Weasley rather than bouncing him off the ceiling or worse.

As the last table obediently completed its journey to the side of the room, Severus limped into the Great Hall, looking even more miserable than usual. After throwing a

withering glare at Tonks and Remus, he approached Minerva.

"Hermione will not be joining us, at least not now."

"Oh, Severus, I'm sorry for all of this," Minerva apologized.

Raising his hand, Severus said, "Minerva, if you don't mind, I'd rather not discuss it further. Right now I need something to take my frustration out on." Scanning the room, he said loudly, with a slight grin, "Ah Potter, there you are."

"Severus..." Minerva said in a warning tone.

As Harry approached, Minerva said, "Severus, please try to keep the Hall in one piece *and* stay in it?"

Severus responded with a distracted nod, but said nothing.

"If you are ready?" Minerva asked, glancing at the two of them as they glared at each other. "Begin."

Immediately, Severus reached out and grabbed ahold of Harry's robes. He cast *Legilimens*, moving effortlessly into Harry's mind. A mix of memories and thoughts moved around him like tendrils of smoke. Severus saw Dudley towering over Potter as he was roughly shoved into a cupboard, the Hogwarts Express, Dementors descending onto Sirius to deliver the kiss, Lily and James Potter in the Mirror of Erised...

Moving along leisurely, another memory came to the surface. To Severus' horror, he saw Voldemort moving along a line of Death Eaters on the night of his rebirth. He remembered how he almost died that night, after returning to him hours later. It had taken everything in his power to convince Voldemort that he had stayed away to preserve his position as a spy.

Severus pulled out of Harry's mind and pushed him away roughly, growling, "This is how you come to me? I told you to at least attempt to close your mind, and tonight I could have circulated an entire Quidditch team in there!"

Harry had a glazed look to his eyes. He staggered backwards before recovering. "I'm sorry I tried..."

"Tried?" Severus said, advancing on him, "TRIED? Potter, are you even taking this seriously? You offered absolutely no resistance!"

"I'll practice. I promise," Harry offered, looking panicked. The way Severus had entered his mind was more invasive than anything he had ever felt during their Occlumency lessons. This was more of a tearing sensation, a loss of control.

Severus paced, running a hand through his still wet hair.

"Potter, you haven't improved. In fact, you've gotten worse. Anyone with even slight Legilimency skills can walk into your mind. Even if the potion is successful, you will need to rely largely on sheer luck and dueling ability to survive, neither of which you possess in large quantities," Severus said with a sneer. He moved a distance away, turned, and asked in a condescending tone, "You can still cast a spell can't you?"

"Yes," Harry said, his anger increasing with each passing second. He was embarrassed by being berated in front of several people, especially Ginny.

"Potter, you have one minute to disarm me or I will declare you dead. *Voldemort* will not be leisurely about killing you, when the time comes."

Harry gritted his teeth and raised his wand. Lunging forward, he threw several hexes and spells in rapid succession, all silently. Severus arrogantly stood his ground, blocking the volley of light with an almost casual flick of his wand. All of the spells twisted into one shockingly bright spiral of light, shot upward, and hit the ceiling with enough force as to blast it wide open. A hail of stone, brick and wooden beams rained down, forcing Severus and Harry both to leap in opposite directions to avoid the falling debris.

Immediately, rain and wind swept through Great Hall, drenching several torches and tearing two banners from the wall.

"Severus!" Minerva cried, throwing her hands in the air.

"Forty seconds, Potter," Severus growled, circling around the ruins in the middle of the Hall. He tossed his head, trying to move the wet hair out of his eyes.

The realization that the clock had not stopped dawned on Harry's face. He screamed, "*Petrificus Totalus!*" almost tripping over random blocks of stone which were strewn about the floor.

With the swirling rain and wind, Severus could barely see, but he had no trouble locating Potter by his thoughts. He blocked the spell easily, sending it gleefully towards where Weasley sat. To his irritation, the prat dodged out of the way. The spell blasted a nearby window, blowing glass out into the windy night.

"Thirty, Potter," Severus said conversationally, moving towards Harry. "Think of last night."

An expression of understanding flashed over Harry's face and he closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he had a look of immense concentration and anger on his face. Harry raised his wand and began advancing on Severus.

"Twenty..."

Harry slashed his wand, throwing a Stunner which Severus simply side-stepped.

"Fifteen. Potter! I'm not even fighting back! What is your problem? Ten!"

Harry threw another barrage of spells, which Severus blocked, sending them hurtling wildly to blast a leg off of one of the long tables. It groaned before collapsing, leaving the table to resemble a rather large ramp.

Severus yelled impatiently, "Five!"

Harry stopped to stand in the pouring rain that was falling though the ruined ceiling. With a look of sheer determination, he let out a roar and lunged forward, consistently casting one spell after another, anything he could grasp in his mind, swinging his wand violently, stumbling over broken wood and stone.

Severus blocked most of the spells, sending them to drive into the floor at Harry's feet, blasting craters in the stone. Severus dodged a final Stunner, but was not quick enough to miss the disarming spell that followed. He watched as his wand flew into the darkness of the ruined portion of the Hall.

As he summoned his wand, Severus said, "Better, Potter."

Before Harry could look satisfied, Severus added angrily, "Tonight you would have died only one hundred times."

Harry pushed his wet hair out of his eyes before turning to stalk away through the rubble and rainwater.

"Potter! My rooms! NOW!" Severus bellowed and turned to leave the Great Hall.

As Severus passed Minerva, he stopped and said irritably, "Potter and I are going to discuss his award-winning performance. Privately."

"Severus, do try to be easy on him," Minerva said, placing a hand on his arm. "This is a tremendous burden to bear."

Severus jerked his arm away and said viciously, "Really? Interesting. I couldn't~~possibly~~ comprehend what it feels like to be manipulated in a grand plan and forced to kill."

Minerva recoiled as if struck. "Severus, I didn't mean that you didn't..."

Observing her reaction, he interrupted, "Who was around to pity me when I was cursed to near death because I failed to deliver Potter? Who cared when, instead of seeking help for my wounds, I first went to Dumbledore to give my report, fearing I might die before delivering it?"

Minerva stared at him, her mouth open in shock at the raw anger he was hurling at her.

"Do you know how many times I have bled on the very steps that lead to your office?"

Minerva pressed her lips into a thin line.

After a long pause, Severus straightened and sneered in disgust. "Do not speak to me about burdens."

Predator and Prey

Chapter 17 of 41

Reunions and regrets.

Disclaimer: No money, fame or glory made here. Only admiration.

AN: A huge thanks to Ariadne, who, yet again, proves to be the best beta in the world. May the wind always swish your cloak threateningly.

Severus was not entirely surprised to find Hermione absent when he returned to the rooms. It only served to worsen his mood.

When a knock came at the door, Severus cursed and sat in a chair by the window. "Enter!"

Harry entered and, following the impatient wave of Severus' hand, took a seat across from him.

For a moment, Severus only stared at Harry as if measuring him. "What happened tonight, Potter?"

Harry looked down at his hands, running them over each other. "I was distracted, I suppose."

"Distracted? By what?" Severus asked, trying to keep his patience.

"It's... personal," Harry muttered, embarrassed.

Severus sneered, waving a hand dismissively. "Nonsense, Potter. As you can plainly see from tonight's events, everyone knows everything in this bloody castle."

Harry shrugged and continued to look anywhere but at Severus.

Severus set his jaw, preparing to deliver another sarcastic remark, but reconsidered. Slowly, he settled back and ran his hands along the arms of his chair before taking a deep breath. "Harry?"

Harry looked up, startled to hear Snape use his given name.

"It's not difficult to see I have a vested interest in your success as does the rest of the wizarding world. That being said, it's important to me to understand how to strengthen your skills. I cannot do that if you won't share with me what the problem is," Severus said, looking uncomfortable.

"It's just... tonight with Ginny there I just got distracted," Harry said, mostly to the floor.

Severus nodded. "Bit of stage fright, if you will?"

Harry shrugged. "Yeah, I guess so."

After thinking for a moment, Severus said, "Perhaps separating the two is in order. You will take Occlumency lessons as well as dueling. We'll then blend them. If you can achieve the key aspect of Occlumency concentration you will be able to avoid distraction. We will start in the morning."

Harry rose from his chair, assuming he was dismissed.

"One suggestion, Potter. You care for the Weasley girl?" Severus asked, raising an eyebrow.

Harry blushed furiously, a startled look on his face. "Yes."

"Why, then, aren't you with her?" Severus asked, as uncomfortable asking personal questions as Harry was answering them.

Severus watched Harry repeatedly run his hand over the back of the chair. He waited, knowing he had no right to demand an answer.

"I thought it was best if I went on alone," Harry said sadly.

Severus met Harry's eyes for the first time and said seriously, "If you haven't noticed, you are not alone."

Harry shifted his weight and examined the chair, unsure of what to say.

"Dumbledore was correct in telling you that a major difference between yourself and Voldemort is your capacity to love. Voldemort cares only for immortality and power. Nothing more."

Harry nodded slightly, still stunned. If he told anyone that he had discussed love with Snape, they would think he had gone mental.

"You may..." Severus started. He frowned before continuing, searching for the right words. "If you wish, I do believe it would be acceptable for you to resume your relationship with her."

Harry looked suspicious. "You think so, sir?"

"I do. Nothing would drive Voldemort out of your mind quicker than thoughts of love," Severus said with a trace of a smirk.

Harry seemed to consider, then said, "I'll think about it."

Relieved that this awkward conversation could end, Severus said, "Fine. You may go now. Return in the morning and we'll work on your Occlumency."

Harry started to leave, but hesitated. He turned slightly, then shook his head.

"Say it," Severus growled.

"You love her?" Harry said before he could even think. When Severus didn't answer immediately, Harry's face darkened. "If you're playing with her, I swear I'll..." He trailed off when Severus narrowed his eyes and started to stand.

Severus rose from his chair, taking brief pleasure in how Harry took a step back.

The two of them regarded each other for a moment. There was no hatred, only reluctant recognition of a common interest.

The sound of a clock whose job seemed to be to keep track of awkward silences ticked loudly.

Dropping formality for a moment, Severus said, "Yes, Potter. You needn't worry."

Harry visibly relaxed and nodded before turning to leave.

Before Harry could close the door, Severus said, "Oh, and Potter? Another word of advice..."

Harry froze, his hand still on the knob.

"Never threaten me again."

"You love him?" Ginny asked.

Hermione knew she was trying to be a supportive friend, but thought this would be more effective if Ginny didn't look like she had smelled something very bad.

"Yes," Hermione said mostly to herself. Saying it aloud somehow made it real. "I do."

Hermione then recounted what happened between them on the Astronomy Tower and how she had both asked Severus to watch his temper and dismissed him.

"Hermione, that's priceless!" Ginny said, smiling.

"Oh, Ginny, I just couldn't give in too easily. He has to learn to watch his temper or we'll kill each other," Hermione began seriously, but slipped a smile. "But yeah, the look on his face when I dismissed him was amazing."

"I'm sure," Ginny said, grinning. "Are you going back? Put the poor bloke out of his misery?"

Hermione thought for a moment. "Maybe."

Her amusement at hearing that Hermione had put Snape in his place faded quickly from Ginny's face. Her expression was one of barely concealed loss.

Turning serious, Hermione asked, "Have you talked to Harry more? About... you know?"

"No," Ginny said sadly, tracing patterns on the bedspread. "It's hard to be around him any more. Tonight during his duel with Snape, he seemed all distracted, and he failed horribly. I'm sure it was because he didn't want me around," she said with a shrug.

Hermione took Ginny's hand in hers. "Maybe he'll come around."

"Yeah, I don't know. Mum and Dad say that we'll be staying here for a while to help the Order. They say the Burrow isn't safe anymore. I just don't want to get in the way," Ginny said, pained.

"Ginny, you'll never be in the way," Hermione said, giving her hand a squeeze.

Severus remained sitting by the window for several hours. It was the first time he'd been truly alone since returning to Hogwarts, and he was hating every minute. The ease with which he'd spent his days alone before had deserted him. He tried to read, but couldn't absorb anything, his eyes merely skimming the pages. It occurred to him to return to the lab and research the potion, but if his concentration wouldn't hold there was no point. Besides, Potions was hardly an activity to take up when in a state of high frustration.

No reason to deny what was bothering him. He missed her.

Severus picked at the arms of the chair, asking himself how he could have fallen so quickly. Part of him resented never having been given the opportunity to decide whether he wanted to love. It simply happened. Why?

You know very well why. Because she's the first to tell you off to your face and put you in your place. She sees right through your bad temper, sarcastic tongue and intimidation and still loves you. That's why and you love her for it. No matter how much you hate to admit it.

Looking down, Severus saw that he had nervously picked the upholstery off the arm of the chair, exposing the stuffing.

"Oh, hell!" he growled and stood, at a loss for something to calm himself that did not include a bushy-haired Gryffindor.

Hermione walked the halls after leaving Ginny, the sound of the rain outside keeping her company as she contemplated. From time to time, faraway lightning would overpower the torches, illuminating the portraits for a moment before plunging them back into the shadows. She knew where she was going; her heart had already decided.

After a while, she glanced up to see Harry approaching.

"Hermione, hey about earlier we just didn't know..." Harry said, looking genuinely embarrassed.

"Oh, um yeah, it wasn't your fault," she said. After an uncomfortable silence, she asked, "The duel? Ginny tells me it didn't go well?"

Rubbing the back of his head, Harry said, "If you call blasting the Great Hall ceiling open and having Snape take a Sunday stroll around my memories then yeah, you could say it didn't go well. He wanted to talk to me after."

"Oh?" Hermione said, trying not to look as interested as she actually was.

Harry shrugged, "He told me I should get back with Ginny."

"Really?" Hermione said hopefully, "Will you?"

"I don't know maybe," he said, shrugging.

Hermione placed a hand on his shoulder and said, "Harry, no matter what, know that you're not alone."

Smiling sadly, Harry said, "Thanks."

"Ok, I'll see you tomorrow?" she asked.

"Yeah, I have an Occlumency lesson with Snape, so I'll see you then," Harry said.

Her expression quieted when she said, "You're taking this better than well, you know."

Harry looked at her seriously, "I hate the git, but I know. We need him."

Before turning to go, Harry asked, "Hermione, are you... ?"

Hermione looked at him seriously and said simply, "Yes, Harry. I am."

Harry nodded and turned to go.

Severus finally felt relaxed enough to consider the prospect of sleeping. He could feel the muscles in his back and legs loosen and his consciousness slipping away. Closing his eyes, he cast another warming spell on the water and concentrated on his breathing. He thought he heard something in the other room, but dismissed it.

Probably the house-elves.

Thoughts of Hermione had permeated his dreams in recent nights, driving away all but the most stubborn of nightmares. Each night when she would leave, he would lie awake, telling himself he was foolish for wanting her to stay. For wanting her company too much.

His thoughts undulated in a dreamlike state, falling, moving from logic to pure emotion, resistance to surrender, then acceptance and silence. A feeling of a presence in the room, slowly, his mind anticipating the approach.

Severus was not startled when he opened his eyes slightly to see Hermione sitting on the edge of the tub watching him.

With a faint smile on his face, he looked at her through hooded eyes and whispered, "Hermione..."

"Yes?" Hermione smiled as she brushed his hair away from his eyes, thinking his voice when half-asleep was even more attractive, unguarded, honest.

Thinking abstractly that dreams do not speak, he said slowly, "You've come back?"

Shaking her head gently, she said, "I never left."

Severus mumbled something and closed his eyes. She watched him, the harsh lines in his brow smoothing out, the constant concern leaving him. Hermione gently took his hand from the tub's edge, tracing the faint outline where his Mark once laid. She could feel his muscles relax, the weight increasing, almost measuring his descent into unconsciousness. She pressed his hand to her chest, watching as a cloud of confusion passed over his face, then ease.

When he didn't wake, a devious smile slipped onto her face.

Leaning forward, Hermione lightly cupped his cheek, then trailed her fingertips along his jaw. Feeling brave, she laid a series of small kisses along his neck, pausing for a moment between each one, taking care to stay light enough to avoid waking him. When he moved his head towards her and groaned softly, she placed a hand on his chest and took his lips to hers. He slowly began to return her kiss, his heart speeding up under her hand. She felt his hand caressing her hair, guiding her closer, his kiss gentle at first, then moving towards desire, urgency, demanding.

Breaking only when the need for air demanded, Severus glanced down at her hand on his chest and asked, "What brought you back?"

Hermione sat up, swirled the water with a finger for a moment and said teasingly, "You're terribly irresistible. Can't stay away from your incredible wit, intelligence and even temper."

Severus rolled his eyes and shook his head in disbelief. "Indeed."

She reached out and ran her fingers through his hair. Tilting her head, she contemplated with a smile, saying, "Wonderful disposition, kindness devastatingly good looks."

"Now you're just playing about," Severus growled, trying to ignore the almost hypnotic pattern she was tracing on his chest.

"Oh, and that voice. You know the girls would whisper about that voice," she said, loving how flustered he was becoming. She ran her hand across his chest, dragging her nails lightly.

"That cannot be true," he said, secretly loving how she was talking to him.

Leaning over, she added, "And quite a body I may add."

After Severus twitched and quickly cast a spell to make the water opaque, Hermione laughed. "Oh, come now, I didn't look. *Ok, maybe a little.*

Scowling, Severus said, "That's a lie, and I do not enjoy being laughed at."

Hermione smiled and kissed his cheek, noting how his face was burning. "I wasn't laughing at you, Severus. You look like a first year when you pout like that."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "I do not."

"You do too, and it's quite adorable," she insisted. "You may not think so, Severus, but I see the young boy in there, especially when you are being devious. There's a look in your eye that's unmistakable."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, and I am *not* adorable," Severus said, running his hand across the water's surface.

"Oh, I think you do," Hermione countered, studying his face. She smiled when the smirk she had come to love appeared on his face.

After a pause, Severus said, looking down at the water, "This look. You say it appears before I'm about to do something... how did you word it? Devious?"

"Yes?" Hermione said slowly, wondering just what he was plotting.

Severus nodded to himself, then quickly reached up and grabbed hold of Hermione's arm, pulling her into the bath. She let out a scream as she fell sideways, plunging into the water and sending a wave over the edge. He groaned loudly as she landed directly on his leg.

"Severus!" she cried pushing her mass of hair out of her eyes and kneeling on either side of him. At the sight of Severus openly laughing she couldn't help but join him.

"Can't resist me? Even as I attempt to drown you?" Severus said, grinning with a glint in his eye even as his leg raged in protest.

Trying to catch her breath, Hermione smiled and said, "You remain hex-free, so I'd say 'yes'."

"Not angry with me?" he murmured as he leaned forward slightly, breathing on her neck.

Hermione gripped the edges of the tub to steady herself, the heat of him and the chill of her wet clothes battling for her attention.

"No," she breathed, hanging her head as he kissed her lightly, moving higher up her neck.

A low chuckle against her ear. "Pity."

They kissed slowly, savoring each touch, so much more slowly than before. Hermione could feel him shudder under her as she leaned in to kiss him deeply. His breath was becoming shallow as she moved to wrap her arms around his waist. When she dragged her nails lightly down his back, he groaned and kissed her even more aggressively.

As they both tried to catch their breath, Hermione said, "You're driving me insane."

Smirking, Severus moved closer, intentionally dropping his voice lower. "Am I? Oh, that certainly is regrettable. You see, I assure you that is not my intention. Allow me to apologize profusely for any discomfort I may have inflicted upon you."

Hermione let her head rest on his shoulder as chills ran down her spine.

"I have a more agreeable solution. Allow me to show you," he growled, biting her neck with gentle insistence, then, suddenly, harder. He then kissed her with more passion and fire than she had ever felt before, holding her almost painfully tight, winding his hand in her hair.

When he finally allowed her air, Hermione let out a whimper as he moved his kisses lower down her chest. "Severus... I... oh..."

"Yes?" he whispered against her skin. He could feel her trembling.

Hermione sat up and said quickly, "I we oh, it's awfully late."

"Yes, of course," Severus said almost casually, barely concealing a smug grin. *Oh how the predator has become the prey.*

Severus couldn't avoid a laugh at her flustered condition as she left, avoiding his eyes.

After she had gone, he recited a list of potions ingredients in his head for a few minutes before rising.

Severus had taken up residence by the window, allowing the morning sun to warm him. The heat surrounded him, forcing him to relax. After Hermione had forced him to sit there, he now found he enjoyed it. He would never allow anyone else to know, of course.

Hermione said, "What you said to Harry was nice."

"You two don't miss trading information do you?" Severus said with a slight frown. "Let me assure you 'nice' is not a goal of mine. Potter would do better to have her back in his life. It is simple strategy."

Hermione chuckled, "Sure. You don't have to admit you actually did something nice."

"I am *not* nice," he said, opening one eye before his attention was drawn to a knock at the door.

As Severus brought his feet down off of the chair, Harry entered the room.

Harry and Severus exchanged the type of brief nod reserved for those who are not well liked.

"I'm going to go do some research on the potion. I'll see you two later?" Hermione said, glancing between the two of them and wondering if the room would be in one piece when she returned.

"Of course," Severus said without taking his eyes off of Harry.

Before leaving, Hermione leaned in and whispered in Severus' ear, "Temper, Severus. Temper."

Seeing him nod reluctantly, she went to leave.

Severus sat back and said, "Potter, as you already know, Voldemort is the most accomplished Legilimens in the world. You have shown some promise in closing your mind, but only out of uncontrolled rage. The key to Occlumency is focus. Voldemort's powers allow him to hear your thoughts so easily, even silent spell casting would be the same as shouting."

Crossing his arms, Severus studied Harry. "But we already know that, yes?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said, remembering their duels.

"Close your eyes."

Watching Harry comply, Severus continued, "This will be your process to prepare. The more you practice this, the better you will be able to handle yourself if faced with an attempt at Legilimency in battle. I want you to visualize your mind as a desk covered with paper, books and other objects. In your mind's eye, imagine yourself clearing that desk object by object. Quietly and methodically place those objects away where they belong. Your emotional state remains constant during this process."

Severus waited a full minute while an expression of deep concentration appeared on Harry's face, partially surprised that he was actually taking this seriously.

"Now, open your eyes," Severus said in a quiet tone. "Ready?"

"Yes," Harry said, his voice hesitant. While Snape was a maniac to duel with, Harry somehow knew that he was being easy on him when practicing Legilimency. Harry realized now that it would be far worse should Voldemort ever get a hold of him, that Voldemort could quite possibly make him wish to die before killing him.

"Are you certain, Potter?"

Harry nodded, steeling himself. "Yes, I am."

Severus whispered, "*Legilimens*," and was immediately met with strong resistance.

Pushing further, Severus could still feel that fight, the rage against invasion, but could catch emotions as they rose to the surface. He felt an immense feeling of loss, loneliness and a sense of dread at the unknown future. Severus ventured further and was surprised to see himself at what must have been their last Occlumency lesson. His face was white with rage at finding Potter in the Pensieve.

Viewing *that* memory.

Severus was distractedly reliving the memory of that day through Harry: The life Severus led in school was one of quiet desperation. Sirius and James tormented him endlessly, creating a world of constant alertness. He passed time rather than living, hoping to avoid confrontation, knowing he'd be outnumbered.

In defense, Severus learned the Dark Arts, building a reputation as someone to be avoided. Fear, he found easily enough, is the greatest defense against the pain of rejection. If he could keep people away out of intimidation, it would keep them from getting close enough to hurt him.

Except Lily. She saw through his act, and one evening came to sit next to him in the library. Severus remembered how his heart threatened to beat out of his chest when he saw her approach. When she asked if she could sit with him, he couldn't speak and only nodded. They talked about all sorts of subjects, but mostly Potions, which he found she loved. Hours would pass as they sat in the far corner of the library, where no Marauder would be likely to happen by. Over time, they grew closer, and he'd thought he was falling in love with her.

Until yet another time, his temper got the better of him. The look on her face when he called her a Mudblood...

Severus withdrew and found himself looking at Harry again.

"Sir? Are you all right?" Harry asked, sounding concerned. What Harry saw on Snape's face this time was not rage, but deep regret.

Severus muttered, "Yes. Fine."

"Sir, I'm sorry, I was just thinking about the last lesson," Harry started.

Raising an eyebrow, Severus asked, "You pushed that memory forward?"

"Yes, well not entirely on purpose, I guess," Harry said with a shrug, unable to explain what he had done.

"Good, Potter. If you cannot avoid a Legilimens, then your next strategy is to offer what you want them to see," Severus said, trying not to sound impressed.

"Thank you, sir."

"Practice emptying your mind, and we shall try this again tomorrow. You will use your wand to force me out."

Nodding, Harry stood to leave.

Once Harry had closed the door behind him, Severus stared out of the window, feeling that loss all over again.

He would never allow that to happen again.

Room of Requirement

Chapter 18 of 41

A new arrival.

Disclaimer: No fame or glory here. Only admiration mixed with a healthy amount of obsession.

AN: Another thanks to my beta, Ariadne.

"Remus, save the 'I told you so,'" Tonks snapped as she strode quickly towards the gates.

Remus smiled to himself and wisely remained silent as they made their way to Apparate to number twelve Grimmauld Place.

After arriving in an alleyway, they looked around carefully before moving out to walk towards the house. As they walked, Tonks said quietly, with grave concern, "I feel terrible. Do you think it messed up their relationship? Hermione looked pretty upset."

Remus thought for a moment. "Severus is a survivor. He'll find a way out of this one."

"He seems to love her. You can tell when he looks at her. So romantic," Tonks said wistfully.

Passing for a couple out for a walk, Remus pulled Tonks close to him and smiled. "Severus? More romantic than me?"

Tonks laughed. "Preposterous idea, I know."

He then gently kissed her before saying, "Let's go."

"I still don't like this place," Remus muttered as they let themselves in carefully. He noted that the Fidelius Charm concealing the location of the house was broken.

"Oh, it grows on you," Tonks said, almost tripping over the threshold.

"I don't believe the locket is even here. Dung has probably unknowingly sold a piece of Voldemort's soul to some shop for a few Galleons," Remus said, trying not to cough from the stagnant air.

With their wands out, they carefully entered the hall. "The locking spell is still here. I'm not sure if all of the security wards Dumbledore put in place stay after death or if they fail, so stay close," Remus whispered.

Tonks nodded, and replied, while readying herself, "Anything can be in here now."

Dust floated on the air when Remus and Tonks both cast *Lumos* to light the way. While moving in the dark, Tonks quickly swung her wand in the direction of a creaking floorboard and froze. Remus came up beside her and stood listening as well.

Waiting.

After finding nothing, they went along their way, lighting torches to bring the decrepit house to some sort of life.

Once in the drawing room where the locket had last been seen, they settled in to search.

Tonks eventually said quietly, "Remus, do you trust Severus? I mean, the evidence of his life debt to Dumbledore may have cleared him of outright murder, but do you trust him now?"

"That's a sudden type of question to ask a person," Remus said, moving some odd looking picture frames out of a box. He coughed from the dust that rose, cringing to think how old it was.

Shrugging, she said, "Just a question to pass time. You needn't answer me."

Remus looked at her, his thoughts of Snape rudely pushed aside by how she looked in the dim light. He moved to sit next to her and placed an arm around her shoulders. "Do you have any idea how stunningly beautiful you are?"

Laughing, Tonks pushed him. "Remus! We need to look for this blasted thing, not get all lovey."

Remus placed a kiss behind her ear before returning to his search. "Can't help myself."

Several dust reduction spells later, Tonks said, "You didn't answer me."

"Hmm? Ah, yes. Yes, I do trust him," Remus said, shifting to reach towards a shelf. He was contemplating whether he should attempt to open a particularly sinister-looking chest. It was engraved with serpents who looked to be in a fight to the death.

"And why?"

Stopping to look at her, he said thoughtfully, "I have known Severus for most of my life and still have no idea what goes on inside of him. I can't help to think that if he hadn't been tormented in school, he wouldn't have turned to Voldemort to feel anything more than powerless. Dumbledore saw that drive for recognition and pride in Severus and, in a way, used that to fulfill his own needs in the end."

Tonks watched him in silence as he continued. "I do trust him because there have been several times when I have caught sight of the man within. Severus is a man with qualities that can be manipulated either for good or evil. He has taken training Harry seriously, even if it is partially out of pride. That, and now he is truly in love," Remus said with a small laugh. "Something I never thought I'd see from him again."

"Again?" Tonks asked, "You mean with Lily? But that was never public, was it?"

Remus sighed. "No. Sirius and James would have torn him apart if they knew," Remus said sadly. "But I knew."

"And you said nothing?" Tonks asked, her hands resting absently on some odd bottles, their search forgotten for the moment.

"No." Remus looked at her for a moment before continuing. "Lily was quite popular, and I also cared for her deeply. When I saw Severus and Lily in the library night after night, my heart broke. I said nothing, even as Sirius and James searched for her. You see, even though I was not strong enough to stand up to Sirius and James, I could at least ensure him a chance at happiness. So I kept Sirius and James away from them whenever they were together. I made sure Peter didn't find out either."

Tonks smiled warmly and took his hand. "That was very nice of you, Remus."

Remus shrugged slightly and continued his search. After several hours, they decided that the locket must have been stolen. Taking one last look in the place where Kreacher slept, they gave up.

Leaving the house hand in hand, they didn't notice a pair of eyes watching them from down the hall.

A hooded figure cringed before Voldemort, keeping one eye on the snake moving in a circle around them. It tilted its head, locking its eyes on them as it undulated over the exposed roots and curled around the base of a nearby tree.

Voldemort regarded the huddled mass bowing low in the dirt with disgust before waving a hand.

"Speak."

"My Lord, they've returned to the Black house. I heard them talking about the Horcrux and Snape."

"Snape? What of the traitor? SPEAK!" Voldemort demanded.

The figure cringed, tightening like an abused animal, watching Voldemort's wand with wide eyes from beneath their hood.

"They have taken him back at Hogwarts," a trembling voice said, twitching when Voldemort stepped closer. "He is training Potter. They also said he is in love."

"Love? Snape? That wretched traitor!" Voldemort roared and stood over him. Snatching the wizard by the throat, he screamed, "WHO?"

"The Mudblood Granger, my lord," a stuttering voice managed to croak out.

After enjoying the pure terror rolling off the shaking form in his grasp, Voldemort pushed him away roughly, sending him to the ground.

"The traitor must die, that is certain," Voldemort muttered to himself, pacing in front of the gasping wizard who was still clutching his throat from being half-strangled. "He must have access to ancient Dark Arts information. No one knows how to remove the Dark Mark. Perhaps I underestimated old Severus..."

Turning to the mass of tattered robes cowering at his feet, he said in a cold voice devoid of emotion, "You will find out what they are planning. This Horcrux I expected to lose. I will not lose more."

"My Lord, I don't think he will trust me. Snape will see..."

"*CRUCIO!*" Voldemort roared without warning, watching in amusement as the writhing figure before him screamed to the sky, sending birds fleeing their perches.

Voldemort lifted the Curse and clutched the wizard's robes, pulling him to stare directly into his eyes. "You will go. If you fail me again, I assure you, I will not be as kind. You will beg me for death."

When the trembling wizard could do nothing but nod furiously in agreement, Voldemort sneered.

"You have your orders. Now go!" he roared, shoving him away and turning to leave. Nagini hissed and made a mock strike before moving around the far side of a copse of trees.

Severus stood looking out the window, lingering on his memories of Lily and how things could have been different. While the scenery was beautiful, his mind absorbed none of it, choosing to remind him of past failures and replay conversations with people who were long dead. He observed an owl's flight as it approached the castle, slowly registering the fact that it was soaring directly towards his window.

Must be for Hermione. No one in their right mind would owl me, unless it's a Howler or a polite invitation to report to Azkaban.

The owl indeed intended to deliver a message. It swooped to land on the window sill and pecked the glass impatiently. Severus opened the window, allowing the bird to hop inside and ruffle its feathers irritably before sticking its leg out. After retrieving the letter, Severus looked to see the owl was still waiting and eyeing his toast.

"Fine, you bloody bird," Severus muttered, giving the owl a crust and shooing it back outside. When it didn't leave, he realized it was awaiting a reply.

I have information for you. Please meet me outside the gates at midnight.

Raising an eyebrow slightly, he recognized the seal and to whom the owl belonged. Severus wrote out a reply and sent the owl on its way.

"Severus, do you think a modification of the Felix Felicis potion will help?" Hermione asked, watching him look through his notes. Severus' "filing system" irritated Hermione to no end, as it consisted of piles and piles of parchment and notebooks stretching upwards for yards. Spiders had created webs over some of the towers, and other stacks had used cauldrons balanced on them.

"Possibly, although that potion is delicate to put it mildly. I do suggest that if given the chance Potter should take some; however, my issue is any conflict with the one we're developing," he said while flipping through a rather large, intimidating-looking book. All we need is an exceedingly confident Potter making crucial mistakes. Modification of one's emotional state is a tricky business."

Hermione nodded while trying to resist the urge to clean. How he could keep such an immaculate classroom and have this mess tucked away was amazing. The work area, however, was spotless; no doubt because contamination could be deadly.

"Oh, look at the time. Time to go destroy the castle a bit more," Severus said, smirking.

"You're enjoying yourself a little too much, Severus," Hermione said warningly.

"Oh, you just feel left out," Severus teased as he marked his place.

"I do not!" Hermione said in surprise. "Besides, I could hardly duel with you."

Severus nodded. "Because you'd lose."

"No," she said, laughing. "Because I couldn't try to hurt you, that's why."

"Oh, of course," he said with a grin. "This from someone who's threatened me in a manner frightening to men more times than I can count."

Hermione rolled her eyes and shrugged. "Point taken."

As Hermione and Severus entered the Great Hall, Minerva approached and announced, "In light of the unfortunate destruction that is the usual result of your duels, I've thought of a solution. We will work in the Room of Requirement this time."

When they arrived on the seventh floor, Minerva walked past the blank space on the wall three times, and then entered. What met them was a deep room with a few chairs set off to the side. The walls looked to be of hard stone, without any adornments, and there were several wooden uprights throughout the room that could offer cover. Severus looked bored as he looked around the room.

As Arthur, Molly, Ginny, Ron and Hermione took their seats, Harry and Severus approached the center of the room. Madam Pomfrey stood off to the side, looking as nervous as usual.

"Now," Minerva said, looking much relieved that no more of Hogwarts would be damaged. "You both know the usual rules."

"Potter, tonight I will not be using Legilimency; however, I expect a quiet mind from you. Concentration," Severus said, shifting effortlessly into his former teaching role. "Go through the process we went over this morning. Understand that in a true battle the opponent would hardly stand and allow such a luxury. The more you practice, the better you will become. Eventually, you will be able to simply close your eyes for a moment to accomplish this. Begin."

Harry nodded and closed his eyes. He performed the mind-clearing exercise exactly as Severus had described, then, taking a deep breath, opened his eyes. "I'm ready, sir."

Minerva looked to Severus. "Ready?"

"Always," he said with a smirk.

"Right then, begin!" Minerva said, moving off to the side to join the others.

Before Severus could cast, Harry jumped and took cover behind one of the wooden uprights.

"Interesting strategy, Potter. Going to bore Voldemort to death are you?" Severus taunted as he walked towards the barrier. Raising both arms high, he slashed his wand, sending bolts of red light to all five of the wooden barriers. Showers of splinters rained down covering everyone within range.

Harry recovered quickly and, with eyes blazing, threw several spells one after the other at Severus as he moved to the side around the ruins of the nearest barrier. Looking bored, Severus blocked them all, sending them bouncing towards the rear of the room where they ended their lives harmlessly.

"Try harder, Potter. I'm growing tired of this messing about," Severus growled, advancing on Harry. Without warning, he waved his wand slightly and threw Harry across the room to crash into the stone wall.

"GET UP!" Severus roared.

Harry had barely gotten to his feet, rubbing his head when Severus attacked again. Harry successfully blocked several spells, which shot across the room and nearly slammed into where everyone was watching before angling to the right. The walls again absorbed the impact.

Charmed to not break I see, Severus thought with disappointment.

While casually deflecting another spell, Severus complained, "Oh, Minerva, you've made this dull."

"Severus, may I remind you this is a learning exercise, not a method to slowly destroy the castle," Minerva called, watching Harry dodge another spell, which then bounced easily off of the ceiling and faded away.

"Fine," Severus said through gritted teeth, throwing another series of spells. He snarled as Harry circled around, causing him to miss.

As Harry moved, he caught sight of Ginny and looked to lose concentration for a moment. He was then slammed by an Impediment Curse. He fell, rigid.

Severus leaned over Harry and growled, "Lost your concentration, it seems. Quite regrettable." Releasing the spell, Severus stood up, yelling, "MOVE!"

Before Harry could fully recover, Severus threw a Stunner which Harry attempted to dodge but caught in the shoulder, getting thrown backwards. Severus cast another barrage of spells, forcing Harry to throw himself to the floor. The combined spells blasted the door off its hinges.

As the door came to rest out in the hallway, the room's features wavered, and then solidified once more. The room now held mountains of objects piled nearly to the ceiling. Books, cauldrons, cleaning supplies, and all assortments of other things were teetering in great spires. Several winding paths cut through the mess.

"Severus!" Minerva's voice rang out from somewhere in the room.

Experimentally, Severus set fire to one of the books lying on the ground, looking satisfied as it burned. Muttering, "Better," to himself, he looked up at Harry, who was rubbing his injured shoulder.

"Continue, Potter," Severus growled, regaining the predatory look in his eye.

Harry readied himself and silently cast *Sectumsempra*, which Severus dodged. The spell slammed into a nearby tower of books, doubling it over on itself before collapsing into another, sending books and parchment tumbling down.

Batting away falling books, Severus' eyes were locked on Harry as he climbed over the clutter. While Harry was regrouping and looking for how to maneuver, Severus reached out, and, grabbing hold of him, cast *Legilimens*. The rage he felt fighting him was incredible.

Severus said, "Impressive."

Before Harry could react to the compliment, Severus threw a complex mix of jinxes and curses, ending with a Disarming spell. Harry successfully blocked all of them, sending them upwards to the ceiling. They arced gracefully over the top of the nearest tower, and both Harry and Severus were startled to hear the commotion as everyone on the other side dodged the spells.

Harry lunged forward suddenly and wordlessly cast *Petrificus Totalus*, which Severus blocked, but not before it knocked him off balance. Reaching out to steady himself, he tore into another tower of random parchment, pulling it down with him. As the assortment of books and heavy cauldrons fell, Severus snarled, and suddenly Harry was thrown violently backwards onto the growing pile of clutter. Scrambling backwards, Harry managed to block several spells as Severus crawled closer. Finally, Severus rose up and threw a Stunner, which Harry rolled to the side and avoided, but the Disarming spell that followed threw his wand out into the air.

Exhausted, both wizards lay panting. Severus said, "Passable, Potter. Still dead many times over. But an improvement."

Harry snorted and allowed a laugh. "Thank you, sir."

Severus smirked and said, "Better go check on our audience. We've given them quite a scare, I'm afraid."

As they rose, the room wavered once more, clearing the clutter away.

Minerva gave a disapproving look as Severus approached. "Did you change the room, Severus?"

"Now, Minerva, you know the room has a mind of its own. It provided what was needed. Potter needs to learn in a more realistic environment where things can be destroyed, and I need my entertainment," Severus said, suppressing a smirk.

Shaking her head and muttering something at the ceiling, Minerva turned and left without another word.

While Hermione and Severus passed by Harry and Ginny, Severus gave Harry a push and said, "Get on with it, Potter."

Harry looked startled for a moment, then nodded. He turned to a confused Ginny and asked, "Can we go somewhere and talk?"

Severus made his way to the castle gates, cursing the uneven ground and his still uncooperative leg. He pulled open the gates and readied his wand. He stood outside, watching the wind play with the branches, pulling them back and releasing, rocking their shadows. He relished the cool night air, enjoyed the darkness, the absence of distraction, the low, almost primal atmosphere, almost demanding quiet contemplation.

He did not, however, enjoy waiting, and so after only a few minutes started to pace. While fingering his wand, he entertained brief thoughts of Apparating away from it all to go into hiding. This particular thought was not new, but he now had a reason to stay. As he smiled slightly to himself, he sensed someone approaching.

"I was hoping you'd come," a figure in too-large robes said. A hood covered the majority of the face, with the shadows obscuring the rest. A slight stuttering in the voice betrayed nervousness.

"And why wouldn't I?" Severus said, sneering, "Have I not always tried to help you? I had no choice. You know that."

"Yes," a small voice came.

"What do you want with me?" Severus said impatiently, keeping his voice low.

"The Dark Lord is not happy about your desertion."

"Am I supposed to be impressed by this information?" Severus said irritably. "Tell me something I do not know."

The voice quivered slightly, then continued, "He knows of the search for the Horcruxes, that you have removed your Mark and turned on him. You are marked for death, but only at his hands. He wants to do it himself."

"I am overjoyed at the honor. I shall ensure I am wearing my best robes for the occasion," Severus said sarcastically.

"He also knows of your relationship..."

"What? How?" Severus snarled, roughly clutching the thin form and shaking it violently.

Quickly, the figure said, gasping, "I was tasked with monitoring the Black house now that the wards are down, and I heard them talking about you and that filthy Mudblood Granger..."

"Do NOT call her that!" Severus hissed and threw him to the ground. Part of his mind noted how light the body felt. The wind could have taken him down.

As Severus loomed over the fallen wizard, he froze as he heard him plead, "I'm sorry! I can't do it anymore. Please..."

Hearing the words dissolve into sobs, Severus scowled. He crouched down and reached out to push the hood away. What met his eyes was an atrocious mess. He snatched his hand back in revulsion.

Severus gasped in spite of himself. "Draco, what has happened?"

"The Dark Lord is what has happened to him," a voice said sadly from just far enough inside the forest to be hidden. As the voice's owner stepped forward, Severus' face contorted with disgust. His wand hand twitched slightly.

Severus stood up slowly and sneered at the new arrival.

"Narcissa..."

AN: Please review.

Fair Trade

Chapter 19 of 41

Something in return.

Disclaimer: All of it belongs to JKR. No money, fame or glory to be made here. Only admiration.

AN: My apologies to the reviewers whom I haven't answered yet. I do appreciate every single one. Many thanks to Ariadne, who is a never-ending source of encouragement.

"Sure, Harry," Ginny said, confused at Harry's expression and how Snape was acting.

They walked down the corridor in silence and headed into an empty classroom. Cold gray light filled one half of the room, giving it a somber, desolate feeling. Ginny sat on a desk near the windows.

After Harry had succeeded only in looking at his hands for a full minute, Ginny spoke. "Harry, was there something?"

Finding his courage, he reached out to hold her hand. "Ginny, at the funeral when I said I should go on alone. I thought that with everything I will need to deal with that pulling you into that would be a mistake. I, well, now I know that..."

Ginny placed her hand on his and tilted her head, trying to catch his gaze that was fixed on the desk next to her.

Regaining his breath, he began again, "Ginny, I like you. A lot. I realize now that I need you. Will you? I mean do you still?"

A smile spread on her face at his look of hope, a longing for the closeness that only she could provide. Ginny pushed herself off the desk and moved closer to him, holding his gaze. Before he could speak, she leaned in and kissed him gently, trailing her hand down his cheek. "Harry, I do."

Relief spread on Harry's face, and a bold feeling, as though he could conquer the world filled his heart. He took her in his arms and kissed her, moving his hands up into her hair, savoring every touch. Ginny couldn't help but laugh at how he was acting, like she had just returned from a long trip. As they held each other tightly in the moonlight, Harry reluctantly thought to himself he should thank Snape for pushing him to do this.

Harry looked at her, an apology for all the hardship still to come in his eyes. "Being with me won't be easy..."

Hushing him with a kiss, Ginny ran her hand through his hair and said, "I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Narcissa to what do I owe the tremendous pleasure of your company tonight?" Severus said slowly, struggling to resist the urge to strike at the cause of everything he'd endured in the past year.

"Severus, I've come to speak with you," she said, pushing her hood back to reveal her pale face. Her eyes turned briefly to where Draco remained on the ground, his shoulders shaking with barely contained sobs. Narcissa approached Severus carefully, hands held out, her wand nowhere in sight.

Severus thought it shouldn't be possible for someone to age so quickly. It was common knowledge that Narcissa was the only person who surpassed him in the realm of sour facial expressions, but this was a severe change. He had last seen her the past summer, but now she looked years older, as if her world had fallen apart. Some part of him was highly satisfied to see her suffering.

"I have nothing to say to you," Severus growled, ignoring Draco's choked sobs.

"Severus, the Dark Lord has... Oh, I can't bear it! Look at what he's done to my son! You must help us! Remember your Unbreakable Vow!" Narcissa rambled, rushing forward to clasp Severus' robes.

Severus recoiled, took hold of her arms and roughly shoved her away. "Don't you DARE touch me! Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

"Severus..."

"Listen closely, Narcissa," he snarled, raising his wand to her throat. "I carried out Draco's task. If the Vow were still in place, do you honestly think for a minute I'd still be alive after whatever has happened to him?"

Narcissa looked panicked, as if her only ploy had failed. Begging, she sobbed, "Severus, the Dark Lord has ordered Draco to spy on the Order or he'll kill him. You must help us. Please!"

"Narcissa, if you haven't noticed, I am no longer interested in what Voldemort..." Severus started, only to be interrupted as she hissed, throwing her hands up to her face.

"You dare speak his name?"

Losing patience, Severus yelled, "Do not interrupt me!"

While Narcissa and Draco stared at him in silence, he continued, "I am not interested in what Voldemort wants. I am no longer a spy for either side."

"Severus, he'll kill us both! Please! I..." Narcissa pleaded, then brought her voice down considerably, "Draco and I, we no longer wish to..."

"Spit it out, Narcissa. I'm growing impatient," Severus sneered, ignoring her tears. The wind picked up at that moment, blowing leaves across Draco's robes as he sat on the ground. Severus made a conscious effort to avoid looking at his disfigured face.

Taking a deep breath, Narcissa attempted to compose herself. "When the Dark Lord realized you had removed your Mark, he was furious. We thought..."

Severus scowled as she struggled to make her request. *Freedom. Is that what I sell now?*

"Narcissa, since you seem to be deficient in your ability to get to the point, I shall assist. Are you asking me to remove your Marks and hide you?" Severus asked.

Draco made a sudden movement. It was difficult to tell, but Severus thought he saw hope on his face.

Looking relieved that the truth was out, Narcissa nodded.

Staring hard at the two of them, Severus asked, "What do I gain in return?"

"This," Narcissa said, looking around carefully and pushing something heavy into Severus' hand.

Opening his hand, Severus' eyes widened as he passed his fingers over the locket. He traced the engraved S while in deep thought.

"An impressive start," he said, bouncing the locket in his hand and enjoying its weight.

"Start?" Narcissa gasped in disbelief. "Severus, that is..."

"I know damn well what it is!" Severus hissed.

Severus took a moment to savor the panicked look on her face as she struggled to stay silent. He then started to pace around them as he slipped the locket into his robes. Draco remained on the ground, staring up at him in some form of anticipation, his robes shifting with the wind.

After a long while, Severus stopped. Turning towards them, he spoke while gazing at the trees. "Freedom is a precious thing. Yes. Extremely valuable. One only needs to watch a bird in its cage to see that. As I said, this is a start. I require more, as you are asking me to save both of you, yes?"

Draco gathered himself and rose, throwing his hood back over his head.

Thinking for a moment, Severus tossed the hair out of his eyes. "You will locate another Horcrux and bring it to me."

Narcissa gasped, "The Dark Lord does not share that information with me!"

"No, maybe not," he said softly. "However, your dear sister Bella might and then there's your fine upstanding husband."

Narcissa's eyes narrowed at the mention of Lucius.

Severus grinned and tilted his head in a gesture of apology, "Oh, please do excuse my manners... how is Lucius?"

At first, a fire rose in Narcissa's eyes at his taunting, but then faded to defeat. Finally she nodded and glared at the forest floor. "Agreed."

Severus held his wand up as a warning. In a dangerous voice, he said, "One parting thought. Cross me in any way and I shall not hesitate in making you very sorry."

"I assure you, Severus. We are sincere," she said, glancing at Draco.

Severus touched his wand to the base of her throat, admiring how she stood her ground. "I may be on the side of the light, but neither my temper nor my inability to forgive has changed."

Leaving the two of them, Severus made his way back to the castle, turning the locket over in his hand as he limped. Knowing it would be best to destroy it as soon as possible, Severus stopped and began muttering a slow trance-like string of incantations. As he passed his hand slowly over the locket, its gold color deepened to green for a moment before returning to its former state. Nodding to himself, he had an idea of the kind of Dark Magic protecting it.

Severus considered what would happen if anyone else attempted to destroy the Horcrux. From his knowledge of the spell, any tampering with it would result in a violent explosion, enough to obliterate everything for hundreds of yards. Taking a steady breath, he surveyed the area. Calculating the distance, it would only be a loss of himself and maybe a few trees should things go wrong.

The trees would gain more pity than me.

Scowling to himself, Severus opened his hand and the locket rose into the air, rotating slowly. The chain floated effortlessly above it, unaffected by the wind. Holding both hands out, Severus made a slight motion forward and the locket moved easily away from him. Once it was what he felt was a safe distance away, he cast several shielding spells around himself.

With intense concentration, he began to cast, moving his wand in an intricate pattern. Anyone within earshot would swear he was singing low in his throat while conducting an invisible orchestra. He allowed his head to fall back, his hair swaying in the wind, closing his eyes to the stars. The power he knew well rose within him, filling him, flowing through his veins, whispering promises of greatness, connecting his magic to the locket. A green haze moved along a current, sweeping around, weaving over itself at angles, before rushing out to join Severus' wand.

The locket's color changed to a deep green, then sank into the depths of black, bleeding out into the air. The aura obscured the locket's form as it grew in a fierce intensity. As the color rose in a blinding hue, Severus' voice rose with it.

His words accelerated and climaxed as he roared, *"Attero is vomica animus!"*

Immediately, the color's intensity surrounding the locket blazed into a green fire, obscuring it so the shape was no more than a shadow inside. Liquid fire dripped to the ground, setting the grass aflame. As the wind and flames exploded, the very air was alive, twisting, burning. Severus shielded his eyes from the intense heat, holding his ground, fighting the instinct to withdraw, his wand hand resolutely thrust forward into the swirling chaos. A loud scream pierced the air as a white wind shot through the flames and rushed upwards to the sky.

The wind and flames spun violently, lifting higher as it traveled away. The flames died, and the wind lost its ferocity, slowing, its intentions eased. It ended in a loose mist, the night wind quietly carrying it away.

Dropping his arms, Severus felt weak. He listed slightly before catching himself, having no intention of becoming intimate with the Hogwarts grounds again. Stepping forward, he scooped the locket from the ground and closed it again. For a moment, he stood, gazing at it as it rested innocently in his hand, its life as a Horcrux at an end.

Severus then looked to make a decision and placed the locket around his neck. In deep thought, he stroked its engraved mark as it lay against his chest.

Glancing up at the Astronomy tower, he tipped his head slightly.

"For you."

As the sun's rays crept around the drawn curtains, Hermione entered the rooms to find Severus lying on the bed, fully clothed. He looked like he had done little more than lie down and fall into an exhausted sleep. She traced his jawline, intending to wake him with a kiss, when she noticed the chain around his neck. Following the chain's path, she found the locket lying next to him in his hair.

Hermione gasped when she realized what it was. "Severus!"

"What?" He jumped, grasping around for his wand before realizing it was in his robes.

"The locket! Where did you get it? Did Remus and Tonks find it?" Hermione asked, oblivious to his scowl at being awakened in such an undignified manner.

Sighing and rubbing his eyes, he stretched and mumbled, "I shall tell you, since I know better than to deny you information, but do me the justice of allowing me time to properly awaken?"

"Do you often leave in the middle of the night?" she asked accusingly.

"Hermione..." he growled, putting an arm over his eyes to block both the light and her disapproving look.

"You shouldn't go out there. Anyone could be there since you..." she started, as visions of Severus being captured sped through her mind.

"Am not exactly well loved by either side? You can say that much, yes."

"Well yes," she said, placing a hand on his chest.

"You needn't fear, Hermione. I can take care of myself, though I shudder to think of being at the end of your wand on a dark night," he chuckled, moving his arm slightly to catch sight of her.

Her reaction moved from deep concern to the dawning realization that he was teasing her. "Do not start with me, Severus Snape," she said, imitating him.

Doing a poor job at containing his laughter, Severus grinned. "So I see."

Hermione took his hand, aligning their fingers. "You should laugh more often. Every day since you've returned, you look younger."

"Now who is teasing whom?" he said, with a faint scowl.

Leaning down, she had to compose herself to avoid laughing as she kissed him. She could feel him flex his hand under hers so they could intertwine their fingers. Hermione laid small kisses along his neck and smiled when he tried to pull her into bed with him.

As they traded soft kisses, Hermione turned her head and groaned.

"Am I that bad?" he murmured, rising up to kiss her ear.

"No," she said laughing. *Gods, no...* "It's just you have about twenty minutes before Harry arrives for his Occlumency lesson."

He kept a grip on her hand and pulled her closer. "A lot can happen in twenty minutes."

Hermione laughed and rested her forehead on his. "You're lucky I love you."

As she went into the sitting room, Severus put his hands behind his head and said quietly to himself, "Indeed I am."

AN: "Attero is vomica animus" translated is "Destroy this cursed soul" or as close to it as I can manage.

Traitors and Payback

Chapter 20 of 41

A visit, a duel and an elf.

Disclaimer: No money, fame or glory. Nope, still none. Not here. Just admiration.

AN: Many thanks to Ariadne who keeps me moving along nicely and can beta like it's nobody's business. Whatever that's supposed to mean. ;-)

"Aren't you going to do anything more than drag a comb through your hair?" Hermione called from the sitting room.

Severus stood staring into the bathroom mirror with a comb in his hand and said to himself, "How did she...?"

"Such high expectations for a visit from Potter..." he muttered and, tossing the comb, cast a spell to arrange his hair into something respectable. Hearing Hermione greeting Harry, Severus stepped into the sitting room.

Harry stopped dead and stared at the locket around Severus' neck in wonder. "Is that?"

Severus glanced down and fingered the locket. "Yes, it is. You'll be happy to know it's been taken care of, you might say."

"You? How did you find it?" Harry asked, clearly surprised. His eyes were fixed on the locket, as if it couldn't be true.

Taking a seat by the window, Severus asked Hermione, "Since I do not enjoy repeating myself... Hermione, would you please Floo Minerva and ask her to please join us?"

Harry took a seat, his look of disbelief shifting into one of hope.

Minerva stepped through the fireplace and was brushing off her robes as she said irritably, "Severus this had better be..."

Looking up, she trailed off at the sight of the locket around his neck. "Is that?"

Severus nodded and held up the locket so he could look at the engraving again.

"How did you find it?" Minerva said, her eyes shifting to Harry as she took a seat.

"That is the beauty of it. You see, it found me," Severus said with a slight grin.

Silence fell as Severus finished recounting his meeting with Narcissa and Draco. Minerva had a look of quiet contemplation, as if she was performing complex math calculations in her head.

A frown spread on her face. "Severus, do you truly believe they'll bring another?"

"I dare say it's quite a bargain," he said with a nod. "If they value their lives, they will take the offer seriously. Being a Death Eater is far from an easy existence. Throw in Voldemort becoming more delusional by the day, and you have an excellent recipe for disaster. The fact that he tasked a child to kill Dumbledore is direct evidence of his mindset. That was pure revenge for Lucius' failure in that fiasco at the Ministry."

Staring hard at Harry, Severus added, "Trust me when I say that if you fail to deliver on your commitments, you will become intimate with the dirt at his feet, and the sky will know your scream very well."

Hermione allowed herself for a moment to think about all the times Severus went to what he knew was going to be certain torture. To do that while everyone else both rested easily and hated him was beyond her ability to comprehend.

After an uncomfortable silence, Severus said, "Whatever happened to Draco will look like a tea party compared to the punishment for another failure. Voldemort will be expecting information concerning our plans very soon, and Draco is in no position to even make a random attempt at lying. Narcissa knows this and is in a complete state of panic."

"He couldn't possibly expect Draco to be capable of spying," Minerva said, shaking her head slowly. "And in that state? Narcissa is still a mother, Severus. She only cares for her son."

"Despair does wonders for the complexion," he said softly, ignoring Minerva's comment. His eyes held a satisfied look at the memory of the distraught witch.

Hermione didn't care much for that look and then reminded herself that the man before her was hardly an angel.

"Severus, must you enjoy the pain of others?" Minerva said disapprovingly.

Raising an eyebrow, Severus said plainly, "Minerva, life is pain. Anyone who says differently is selling something."

Minerva pressed her lips in a thin line and said nothing.

"Allow me to remind you that Narcissa is just as much a Death Eater as Lucius. Yes, they are quite a matched pair when it comes to taking pleasure in the evils of this world. Let us not forget it was she who forced me to take the Vow that ended in Albus' death. I have absolutely no reason to suddenly have pity on her."

Sneering, he added, "In my opinion, she deserves to shed every tear, suffer every sleepless night, and stare into the face of her ruined son every day for the rest of her wretched life."

Minerva looked saddened at his position, but said nothing, choosing to let the matter lie.

Hermione asked, "Do you think Voldemort has told anyone of the Horcruxes?"

After thinking for a moment, Severus said, "No, not all, but as we know from Lucius' little escapade a few years ago, he was in possession of the diary. Lucius would be a start, and our path to his knowledge is through a certain highly motivated witch and her son."

Hermione and Harry exchanged a glance.

Severus crossed his arms as a perfectly evil grin spread on his face. "Yes, I expect to hear back from them very soon indeed."

"Take my advice, did you?" Severus asked, a slight smile playing on his face.

The question needn't have been asked, the way he was walking. It was as if the weight on his shoulders had been lifted... a light shining only on him, and a perpetually sappy grin on his face.

Harry didn't immediately grasp Severus' meaning. "Oh Yes, sir."

Severus made a lazy "go on" motion with his hand. "And?"

"She said 'yes,' so we're together again... sir," Harry said uncomfortably. He still couldn't get past the absurdity of being tasked with getting back with Ginny as homework.

"Good. Let's try this again, shall we? Clear your mind."

Harry closed his eyes and imagined he was in a large empty room. There was a well-worn desk piled high with parchment and books in the center, and the only light was from a dusty window. Setting to work, he systematically removed the clutter, placing books in the drawers and tidying the parchment. Once the desk was cleared, Harry placed a single picture of Ginny in the middle. Making sure the frame was straight, he took a deep breath and opened his eyes slowly. This time, Harry felt a wash of peaceful emotion come over him.

Harry said quietly, "Ready."

Leaning forward, Severus took possession of Harry's eyes and whispered, "*Legilimens*."

Severus attempted to move into Harry's mind, but was met by strong resistance. Entering an empty room, he could see nothing to grab onto, as memories and emotions were shut behind a barrier. He could hear Harry's thoughts from some far away place chanting at him to leave, and something was pushing him back. Deciding to use more force, Severus increased the pressure. Soon, he was able to advance a fraction deeper before being shoved backwards again. He could only see dim images of Ginny's smiling face. She was looking at Potter with such fire and... love?

The image switched over, and now Severus was looking at Potter sitting in front of the mirror of Erised. Lily and that prat James waved back at him. Lily's eyes were filled with so much love for her son.

"Those eyes..." Severus thought in a haze.

"NO!"

Suddenly Severus felt a tearing sensation and was shoved out of Harry's mind.

Harry leaned back in his chair, shaking his head slightly. He looked at Severus in confusion for a moment before saying, "I kept seeing..."

"Her eyes?" Severus said distractedly.

"Yes..."

Severus said nothing for a moment. This is my personal hell. To have to stare into her eyes in this damn boy.

"This time I shall be more forceful. In a duel you may use your wand; however, try to resist at the first touch."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, readying himself.

Severus nodded and whispered, "*Legilimens*."

Immediately upon entering Harry's mind, Severus felt himself pushed violently backwards. When he raged against the resistance, he was shoved even harder. Gathering himself, Severus threw his mind full force and progressed far enough to grasp onto a few traces of emotion. Happiness... love... hope... yes, it was all there. Trying to grasp onto those fleeting glimpses was like touching smoke. The images flashed too fast to see, blurring, a rage building at the intrusion, then a crushing blow.

Severus awoke to find himself on the floor, his legs and robes tangled in his overturned chair.

A shocked looking Harry Potter came into view over him. "I'm sorry, sir. Are you all right?"

"Yes, of course," he growled, trying to regain his composure. He brushed Harry away and got to his feet, setting the chair back upright and taking his seat again.

"Once more. *Legilimens*."

Once again as he entered, Severus was met with a wall of resistance. Prying with all his energy, he could not advance more than a few inches through the wall. Memories and emotions lived on the other side of a solid wall. Voices could be heard, fading, leaving.

Trying one last time, Severus could only move far enough to grasp onto that fleeting glimpse at what he knew Voldemort could not possibly endure. For him, a fate worse than death... love.

Severus withdrew and studied Harry for a moment. Silence stretched out between them as he thought before saying, "That was quite impressive, Potter. No one has ever

been able to resist me quite like that. Not even full-grown Death Eaters. The test, however, will come in our next duel to see if you can keep that up." Severus looked relieved as he leaned back in his chair. "Yes, quite impressive."

Harry only stared at him in stunned silence.

"Yes, Potter, you heard correctly."

As Harry continued to await the usual sarcastic remark that would negate the praise, Severus said, while rolling his eyes, "Oh, do close your mouth."

Catching himself, Harry managed to respond, "... thank you, sir."

"Just how many times can one study the exact dimensions of a room and memorize the texture of the walls?" he thought bitterly.

Yes, you can watch as whatever natural gray light creeps along the wall, playing on the shadows where the stone was carved. The crushing feeling of impending doom may lift slightly as the day brightens for a short time, taunting, offering fleeting hope, before descending back into the deep fog of despair. Time becomes a mystery, something to be constantly calculated for fear of forgetting, of losing contact with the basics of society, to not know what day it is, or, even worse, the time. Sometimes they feed you, all the while with disdain, muttering about the frivolous waste of food on the condemned. At times, the voice in the center of the mind is relieved at the prospect of eating; other times it considers that poison wouldn't be such a terrible idea.

He replayed the memory of that night over and over in his mind. It was as if it was compulsive to relive your worst memories there, to delve into the maze of decisions and possibilities, alternate outcomes and fantasies of success. What could have been, if just one variable had fallen into place, changed or been removed.

He had ceased raging long ago, but a ferocious hatred had taken root, devouring what little soul he'd once possessed. The loss of his position within the inner circle was particularly painful. His careful balancing act between both worlds was in ruins. When he heard of the raids on the mansion, he felt nothing, but when he was told of his son...

Narcissa had ceased visiting him, saying it was hopeless. That even without the Dementors, the place was the very gaping hole of mental torture and death. Even a person of evil tendencies retained some sort of self-preservation, so she turned her back on him.

Moving slightly, he attempted to at least get more comfortable to pass the rest of the day (or night). Passing time is a frivolous effort when there is a goal at the end. When there is nothing but death as the destination however...

A shadow crossed over him as he heard footsteps echoing on the stone floor.

"Malfoy!"

"That's wonderful, Harry!" Ginny said, smiling, after he shared the results of his Occlumency lesson.

"Yeah, I just hope I can keep the bastard out of my head and from tearing a limb off," Harry muttered, glancing across the room at Severus. As he spoke, Ginny tried to fix his hair.

"Ginny! I don't think my hair needs to look neat for a duel," Harry said, laughing as he took her hands in his.

"I'm sorry, I'm just nervous," she said, blushing slightly. "I'll just go over with Hermione and sit then."

Ginny took a few steps away, but then spun back to return to him quickly. She paused for a second before leaning in to kiss him. Although she meant for it to be a quick kiss for luck, it quickly moved into a soft lingering expression of everlasting support and love. To Harry, it was as if no one else was in the room or, for that matter, in the world.

"If you insist on continuing, I shall need to direct you two to get a room."

Ginny's eyes tracked upwards, and she quickly left to sit with the others. Harry turned to find Severus standing directly behind him. He could swear that there was an amused look in his eyes.

"Sorry, sir."

"So, here we are once again, Potter. Care to make it memorable this time?" Severus said, then, leaning closer, added, "You can do this. Remember, there is a clear difference between confidence and arrogance. Do not cross that line."

"Severus, Harry, if we may begin?" Minerva called.

"Now, let's try and kill each other like civilized people," Severus said with a smirk.

"Good evening to the two of you. Now, we are yet again using the Room of Requirement as Severus cannot contain his desire for destruction." She paused, hoping to shame Severus. When he gave no indication of caring, Minerva frowned slightly and moved on. "We shall allow the room to determine what is needed. If you both are ready?"

Harry and Severus both nodded, holding each other's eyes.

"Fine then, begin!" Minerva said and left the middle of the room.

As Harry readied himself, the room changed around them. The torches were obscured, and shadows closed in to encircle them. Looking around, he could see huge trees appear with long winding limbs stretching to the ceiling. He watched as soil flowed in from the outskirts to wash over the stone. Once the floor was covered, moss appeared at the base of each tree, creeping upwards on what would be the north side, if the Forest were on the seventh floor of Hogwarts Castle.

As if to complete the mood, the ceiling dissolved into stars, and a cool mist appeared around them, moving effortlessly around the trees as a night wind blew gently.

While room's transformation completed, Harry looked up to find Severus gone. Swinging around and not seeing him anywhere, Harry cursed to himself. Left with little more than what passed for dim moonlight, Harry moved slowly to the nearest tree and cast *Lumos*.

His wand had barely time to illuminate when he was struck and thrown across the clearing into the base of a tree.

"Not exactly a stellar idea to notify your opponent of your location, Potter," a voice said from somewhere nearby. Harry moved quickly to his feet, throwing himself behind a boulder as the tree he had just been lying beneath exploded, throwing chunks of wood out onto the ground. Using the light of Severus' wand to locate him, Harry quickly threw a Disarming Spell, which was blocked. The spell flew upwards, severing limbs and sending them crashing to the ground.

"Fascinating," Severus said tauntingly, standing far enough in the darkness to be hidden.

Harry moved low as he tracked Severus by his voice. *Keep talking, you arrogant bastard*, he thought to himself while trying to not tangle his legs in tree roots.

As Harry moved past another clump of roots, a jet of light grazed him as it shot past. The spell tore open his sleeve and streaked fire down his arm. Blasting into the ground, it spread flames out like liquid before dying out. From the angle it seemed like it had come from...

Above?

Another bolt came, and he barely had time to block it, sending it spiraling off to the side and then bouncing along the floor.

"Potter, we could play hide-and-seek all night if need be," Severus teased, clearly enjoying himself. A low chuckle in the dark.

When Severus finished speaking, Harry had come full circle, and Harry was certain he was behind him now. He pushed through some low brush and listened carefully in the dark. Taking a chance, he silently cast *Sectumsemptra* and watched as the spell flew, illuminating the mist below. It found its mark, striking Severus squarely in the back. The light died before Harry could see what it had done, but he didn't need to be told he should move fast.

Severus never saw it coming. As the spell ripped his robes and reopened old wounds, he was thrown forward, barely catching himself before he could fall. He allowed himself no time to contemplate his condition and openly stalked to find Potter. In a rage, he set fire to the nearest sapling, spreading the flames onto adjacent bushes. When he heard slight movement on his right, Severus sent a spell directly into the junction of two large branches, tearing one off and sending it end over end to land in flames in a clearing.

Harry, sensing that stealth was no longer an option, launched himself out into the open and threw several spells. The space between them rose in the light, bright enough for Harry to see the fury in Severus' eyes as he blocked them all. Streaks of light flew in all directions, crashing into trees, rebounding off of rock and slamming into the simulated sky. As Severus advanced, one of the stricken trees gave up its fight, delivering its last protest with a great crack before collapsing to the ground.

Taking the distraction of the falling tree as an advantage, Harry threw two Disarming Spells as he scrambled to take cover. Severus blocked both of them, and was impressed to find that the prat was throwing more.

Now we're getting somewhere.

Severus was able to dodge the series of spells, sending them spinning wildly on their way off into the darkness. The only indication that the forest was, indeed, a room with real boundaries was revealed when the spells rebounded and came back. Something in his instinct told him to turn, but he was too late. Severus caught two Stunners square in the chest and fell.

Dimly, he heard Harry mutter, "*Ennervate*," and he rose to his feet.

Harry immediately backed off and prepared to strike again. Before Harry could raise his wand Severus snarled, "*Legilimens*." Satisfied when he felt an incredible fight even before he could begin to invade, he broke the connection.

Severus threw a barrage of spells as Harry fled to the nearest cover. The ground around him broke apart as he ran, forcing him to almost fall several times. Bark flew in all directions as trees were grazed, and a flurry of leaves, some aflame, sailed though the air. Harry had almost made it to the deeper woods when he caught the last spell in the leg, sending him crashing to the ground.

Severus watched in satisfaction as Harry tried to drag himself and his uncooperative limb behind a tree.

"Willing to give, Potter?" Severus said, with a taunting glint in his eye. While Harry looked to be plotting something, Severus took the opportunity to cast Legilimens, forcing himself into his mind. He felt anticipation and nervousness, but also confidence, love and determination. Images, as before, flashed at a blazing pace, memories, fleeting thoughts, pictures, anything from the mundane to the night on the Tower. Getting lost in the confusing flurry of emotions, Severus failed to realize that Harry was preparing to cast a Stunner.

Severus was thrown out of Harry's mind as he heard Harry's thoughts scream, "*Stupefy!*"

Harry quickly gathered himself, disarmed Severus, and released the spell.

The room cleared, pulling the trees and brush down, sinking into the floor as the light brightened. Harry lay back, not wishing to look at his leg. He could hear Severus breathing hard, the silence worrying him more than anything.

Harry had no idea how to handle the fact that he had won. Silence seemed to be the best strategy.

Between struggling to keep his breath, Severus said while staring at the ceiling, "Good, Potter. Tonight, it is I who would have been dead."

Raising himself up on his elbows, Harry said sincerely, "Thank you, sir."

"Tonight, you may call me 'Severus.'"

"It's your lucky day, Malfoy. You have visitors," a jeering voice called.

Lucius saw Narcissa standing outside of his narrow cell with a mix of fear and anticipation on her face. Off to the side, a robed figure stood, a hood obscuring his face.

Looking at her with disgust, he said, "You must want something. It's not difficult to determine that you are not here on a social call *wife*."

Watching as the guard left the corridor, Narcissa moved closer to the bars and whispered urgently, "Lucius, I need to speak with you..."

"Leave me be, Narcissa. I'm not interested in anything you have to say. I haven't forgotten you've abandoned me here to rot," he said coldly, glaring at the floor.

"Lucius, you must listen to me," she whispered, glancing around to ensure no one was around. In a rambling voice bordering on panic she said, "Severus has removed his Mark and turned against the Dark Lord. We met with him, and he agreed to remove ours and hide us if we deliver another Horcrux. We gave him the locket and..."

"WHAT?" Lucius roared, wide-eyed. He shoved himself from his cot and rushed to the cell bars.

Gripping the cold metal, he snarled viciously, "You dare to even think of turning against the Dark Lord?"

Narcissa recoiled, clasping her hands to her chest as he raged. "Traitor! When I get out of here, I shall return to my place beside the Dark Lord! My first task will be to seek out and kill Snape first, then you!"

"Lucius, how can you still be faithful to him after what he did to your son?" she gasped. Grabbing hold of Draco's robes, Narcissa reached up and jerked his hood back. "Look at him! This is what the Dark Lord has done to our son, and you are still faithful?" Narcissa cried frantically.

The rage in Lucius suddenly switched over to revulsion at the sight of his son, his face disfigured so that he was just a shadow of what he once was. Draco pushed his

mother away roughly and threw the hood back over his head, hiding his face once more.

Lucius first stared at her in shock, then, in degrees, his eyes moved to the floor. Slowly, he sat again and remained silent for a time. Narcissa held her hands up to her face and cried softly.

"Father?"

Lucius flinched at the sound of Draco's voice. He sat on the cot, head down, his hands balled into shaking fists.

"The Dark Lord has tasked me to spy on the Order. I-I can't...There's no way they'll trust me. He expects information soon. He'll know if I'm lying and will kill me if I fail him again..."

Lucius continued to stare at the floor, his jaw muscles working as he ground his teeth.

"He has spoken about you, too. About the fight for the prophecy," Draco said quietly.

Lucius said nothing but tilted his head slightly, indicating some form of interest.

"He has said that you should count yourself lucky to be in Azkaban, escaping true punishment. The others laughed."

Lucius snorted softly and shook his head as he sat on what passed for a bed.*Liar.*

Draco said with sadness, "He said he has no place for a failure and coward like you."

Narcissa stepped forward, keeping her voice low, "Lucius, has the Dark Lord shared this information with you?"

Watching the conflict playing about Lucius' features, she pleaded, "Lucius, please. We have no choice..."

"This is my fault. My failure," said Lucius quietly. Resignation spread on his face. Taking a deep breath, he stood and came to the bars. Fingering the welds where the iron crossed, he motioned them close.

"Narcissa, you know of the room below the drawing room floor?" Lucius asked quietly.

"Yes; only you and Dobby have ever gone down there," she said, leaning close and placing a hand on his.

After a long pause during which Lucius looked to be making a life-altering decision, he said, "You will need Dobby to open the door, as it is charmed to only the elf or myself. In that room there is a cup charmed to appear black. It is in reality the Hufflepuff cup and a Horcrux. The cup is protected by Dark Magic, so you'll need to bring Severus to help. He will know what to do."

Once finished, Lucius ran his hands through his dingy hair and said, while hanging his head, "What have I done?"

"The right thing, Lucius," Narcissa said, and, looking over at Draco, repeated once more to herself, "The right thing."

After they had left, Lucius leaned back against the cold stone wall, a disturbing smile sliding onto his face. A low chuckle escaped him as he whispered to himself, "Traitors."

"Sir? I mean Severus?" Harry said awkwardly. He watched as Severus, lying on his stomach in the hospital bed, opened one eye lazily. The scars across his back were atrocious, to put it mildly, and a large jagged gash now ran the length from his left hip up to his right shoulder. Harry felt ill as he watched it flex with each breath Severus took.

"Yes?"

"During the duel, you said you'd have been dead..." Harry began, thinking hard.

"Your point?" Severus said irritably.

"Well, I couldn't help but notice that if you had cast the Killing Curse the first time you hit me, I would have been..."

Severus sighed. "Potter, I could have killed you thousands of times. Easily. Even without a wand, I have the power to throw you with enough force to snap your neck instantly. If in an experimental mood, I could curse you in such a way that it would make the Cruciatus look like a blessing."

Harry stared at him, stunned.

"Take what I am about to say very seriously. What we have been doing to date has been to disarm or incapacitate. When you are faced with Voldemort, you will be fighting to the death. In the final battle, you will not be allowed such luxuries as a moment of inattention."

Wincing slightly as he raised himself up onto one elbow, Severus said, "There is one key point here that is crucial for you to understand. Voldemort is more powerful than you; of that there is no question. The difference is, he will most undoubtedly be the same arrogant bastard he ever was and will severely underestimate you."

Harry nodded, his mind still absorbing how much Snape had been holding back.

Severus said seriously, "Your strength lies in his arrogance. When two wizards can cast the Killing Curse, the only question is of the timing."

"How should I? I mean, should I have a game plan or something?" Harry asked, hungry for advice.

Shaking his head, Severus said, "No. What you did tonight was pivotal in that you played off of my weakness. I continued to underestimate you, and you used that to your advantage. I also have been trying to settle old scores with the ghost of your father."

Harry's eyes widened at Snape's admission. He wisely remained silent.

"For that, I was wrong. It will not happen again."

After the initial shock of Severus' statement wore off, Harry said, "Thank you."

Severus nodded and looked at Harry intensely, "You need to understand, there is *nothing* more in this world I desire more than to see him dead. I will do anything within my power to make that happen, regardless of my vow."

Light was scarce as the clouds obscured the moon; however, Harry could see Severus' eyes shine with a light of their own as he promised, "I give my word. *will* be there."

Somewhere in the hospital wing, a clock began to chime. A faint sound of glass bottles against each other could be heard as Madam Pomfrey took her potions inventory.

Harry nodded. "Thank you... Severus."

"You're welcome, Potter, and it's after midnight, so it's back to 'sir,'" Severus said with a slight grin. He then lowered himself to lie down once more.

Harry chuckled and said, "Yes, sir."

"You take pleasure in my frustration."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Oh, stop being so melodramatic. This is hardly the first time."

"Get on with it then and finish," he said through his teeth.

Hermione stifled a laugh as she put more healing balm on the gash on Severus' back. After he had stalked the hospital wing for most of the night, Madam Pomfrey had thrust the balm into Hermione's hands as soon as she arrived and ordered Severus out.

"There, it's done now," Hermione said in a condescending voice and patted his head. The wound looked like it would only take another day or two to heal. "You can come out now and stop trying to hide your groaning in the bedding," she said, grinning. "I've heard you before, you know."

"So I remember," he said with amusement.

"I wait, what is that?" Hermione said suddenly and listened. She stood and went into the sitting room in search of the noise and found an owl urgently pecking the window. *Not a school owl, and no one I know...*

As she opened the window, the owl hopped onto the table and took flight, soaring into the bedroom. She came to the doorway to see the owl sitting next to Severus on the bed.

Severus recognized Narcissa's owl as he opened the letter.

Please meet us at noon and bring Dobby the house-elf. You and the elf are needed to obtain the item you are looking for.

Hermione came to sit next to Severus and shooed the owl away. It didn't leave; it simply hopped to the other side and rested there, waiting. Severus was lying on his side, scowling as he reread the letter.

As if reading his mind, Hermione handed Severus a quill from the nightstand. He simply wrote, "Agreed," and sent the owl on its way. With a soft rush of air, the bird took flight and arced left into the sitting room.

After reading the letter, Hermione said, "Severus, this doesn't sound right. It's too dangerous."

"Hermione..."

She interrupted him, saying, "No, you can't go. Now you even have this wound, and there's essentially a death warrant out for you..."

"This isn't up for discussion, Hermione. We cannot pass up this opportunity at another Horcrux," Severus argued, attempting to keep his temper under control.

"What if it's a trap?" she said, with true concern in her eyes. "I can't bear to think..."

"I shall deal with that on my own," he said, avoiding her gaze.

"You are not alone. I'm going with you," she said obstinately, crossing her arms as she leveled her best glare at him.

"No," he growled and moved to get up. "This conversation is over, and I am going to fetch an elf," he said irritably. "~~D~~o not follow me."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him and said quietly, "Fine."

Severus raised an eyebrow at her lack of a good fight. Wincing as he put on his robes, he moved to leave after looking at her once more. She was watching him go with a mix of love, anger and fear, but did not move to follow.

After a few minutes of indecision as to the best way to follow Severus, a thought struck her. "*Severus and house-elves?*"

Hermione quickly headed to the kitchens.

Dobby stared defiantly at Severus with his hands balled into fists. "Dobby is free and does not have to do what you say!"

The other elves in the kitchens were in various states of distress, staring wide-eyed as Dobby dared talk back to a wizard. Severus had a poor reputation amongst the elves as being the least desirable resident to look after. Often they drew lots, and the losers had to attend to Severus' rooms for the week.

Trying to control his temper, Severus stated in a stiff voice, "Elf, you will come with me even if I have to hex you."

"Miserable, nasty wizard cannot tell me what to do! You is not my master!" Dobby cried as he pointed up at Severus.

Several of the house-elves gasped and looked between Dobby and Severus, their hands up to their faces in shock.

Dobby yelled, "You is nothing more than slime on bottom of a soup pot, and not the good part!"

House-elves scattered as Severus strode forward, snarling, "Revoltin' freak of nature... HOW DARE YOU?"

"Severus, I really think I should... come..." Hermione said as she entered the kitchen. Her voice trailed off at the sight before her. Severus was gripping Dobby around the throat and shaking the elf with such ferocity that he was nothing more than a vibrating gray blur with his feet swinging in the air.

"SEVERUS SNAPE, YOU PUT THAT ELF DOWN THIS INSTANT!" Hermione yelled, leveling her wand at him.

Severus stopped throttling Dobby long enough to glare at Hermione. "Hermione, this *thing* needs to be taught respect!"

Approaching him with her wand raised, Hermione said dangerously, "Put the elf down."

A battle of wills played out as they both traded looks that would kill while Severus stood, gripping the struggling elf. Finally, a scowl spread on his face, and Severus held

Dobby out from him. He then not only dropped the elf, but made sure he hit the floor harder than necessary.

"Severus!" Hermione cried. "I said to put him down, not throw him!"

Severus smirked and waved his hand dismissively.

"Semantics..."

After shooting Severus a glare, Hermione crouched down and said, "Dobby, Harry needs your help. Can you go with Severus?"

Dobby jumped to his feet and said excitedly, "To help Harry Potter? Yes! Dobby would love to!"

AN: "Life is pain. Anyone who says differently is selling something." and " Now, let's try and kill each other like civilized people." ~ The Princess Bride

With a House-Elf by My Side

Chapter 21 of 41

A novel-length post HBP HG/SS romance adventure. What if Severus returned, trained Harry for the final battle and worked to destroy the final Horcruxes? Story is complete and will be updated regularly.

Disclaimer: Yet again, no money, fame, glory here.

AN: Another debt of gratitude to my beta, Ariadne. I apparently get better at both grammar and punctuation during my destructive scenes. It is only fitting that I write more of them. ;-)

"Severus, do you think this is wise?" Minerva asked, taking a seat. Her face held a severely concerned look as she clasped her hands tightly on her desk.

Severus scowled, watching as Dobby peered up at the great telescope that stood next to the window in the headmistress' office. Dobby caught his eye and made a rude face before ducking behind Hermione's chair.

Turning his attention back to Minerva, Severus said plainly, "Minerva, I am well aware of the dangers of going alone; however, obtaining another Horcrux is absolutely crucial. Draco and Narcissa have nothing left and are backed into a corner. I am their only savior at the moment. A knight in shining armor, if you will."

"And what if it's a trap, a ploy to bring you before Voldemort?" Hermione asked. "Why can't Narcissa bring the Horcrux here?"

"Do you think I would still be alive today if I didn't think through every possible outcome for my actions? It certainly doesn't require extensive Dark Arts knowledge to become a Death Eater. Narcissa has no way to handle this if the Horcrux is protected. It would kill her, Voldemort would be alerted, and the Horcrux would be moved before we have a chance to destroy it. Does that answer your questions?" he sneered before catching himself.

"*Too late,*" he thought, watching as Hermione's expression changed to exasperation.

Minerva said in a stern tone, "Severus, we're only concerned for you. You're still wounded from the duel last night and..."

Severus interrupted her. "Minerva, with all due respect, I do not care to be spoken to as if I were a student requesting permission to go into Hogsmeade. Also, a wound like this does nothing to diminish my magic. I have survived so far on my own; this will be no different," he said, hating how they were forcing him to plead a case.

He stole a glance at Hermione, who was openly glaring at him now *Oh, hell, here we go.*

Hermione said accusingly, "You are not alone, Severus. We are all in this, understand? You need to realize that you are no longer acting as a lone spy anymore. You act as though help is poisonous to you."

"Is that what you think? That I am a martyr of sorts? That I enjoy this?" he argued, moving towards her. "Did it dawn on you that I am trying to protect you? Do you have *any* idea the kind of power these Dark objects possess? The Dark Arts books are only a faint reflection of the evil these things can possess. They can poison or kill anyone who even happens upon them and in a highly disgusting manner. Care to remember what happened to Katie Bell?"

Hermione said nothing, glancing at Minerva before turning her eyes back to Severus.

"I am waiting."

"No," Hermione said in a small voice.

At her continued silence, Severus looked satisfied and said seriously, "I am the only expert in the Dark Arts in the Order. It is only fitting that I do this alone. If I am lost in this, at least another step towards Voldemort's destruction will have been made."

Hermione looked shocked. "Severus, you can't mean that. You're not expendable."

"I must agree with Hermione," Minerva said calmly. "Severus, it is time for you to stop believing that you are worth nothing outside of sacrifice. Whether you like it or not, you can no longer deny that you are a part of this family. Is that clear?"

When he stared at her incredulously, Minerva said sternly, "Answer me, Severus."

After a stretch of silence, during which Severus looked between them, he finally said, slowly, "Yes."

"Fine, now that that is settled, I do agree with you that no one else is qualified for this task, nor should anyone else be near these objects," Minerva said seriously. "You and Dobby will go alone."

Severus nodded and, indicating to Dobby to follow, swept from the office without another word. Hermione followed.

Once in the hallway, he turned and said, "Hermione, please..."

Hermione approached him, put her hand on his chest and backed him against the wall. She then took his hands, intertwined their fingers, and held his arms to the wall. Severus, too stunned by her forwardness to finish his thought, trailed off and stared at her. Without speaking, Hermione leaned forward and kissed him.

Ignoring the quite convincing retching sounds from Dobby, Severus gave in and softened, bringing his arms down to hold her as they kissed. Hermione moved her hands to rest on his hips and pulled him closer.

His eyes flew open in surprise.

Hermione kissed him gently as she whispered, "Well, you're injured everywhere else..."

Raising an eyebrow, he nodded. "You certainly have a point. No objections; please, do continue."

As he moved her hair away and left light kisses on her neck, Severus murmured, "Get rid of the elf for a few minutes."

Hermione opened her eyes long enough to see Dobby standing beside them, looking ill and tapping his foot impatiently. "Umm... Dobby, could you wait around the corner for a minute?" Hermione asked gently, her voice breaking as Severus breathed in her ear.

Dobby bowed and obeyed. As soon as he was out of sight, Hermione moved her hands quickly into his hair and tilted her head up. Severus moved lower to kiss along her shoulder, pushing her blouse roughly out of the way. A soft gasp escaped her.

They kissed with a depth that is only reserved for times of uncertain separation. A kind of desperate expression, as if you could brand onto the soul of your partner that, yes, you do love them, with a fire that cannot be diminished by time.

He knew that he would kill in a heartbeat to return to her. In the past, he had had nothing more than his duties as a teacher to come back to, but now...

Severus placed his head against hers and, attempting to steady his breath, said softly, "I will return soon."

"Please be careful, Severus. I love you," Hermione said. *I will not cry.*

"I will. I am not the type to say it, but I do love you."

"I know. The dark, brooding type," she said smiling.

"If you insist."

"Goes with the witty humor, startling good looks and pleasant disposition," she teased, laughing, and kissed him once more. Her eyes stilled, pleading. She held his hand. "Come back to me safely, Severus."

"I shall."

"Narcissa," Severus said, nodding. "I see that daylight does absolutely nothing for your complexion."

Satisfied, he watched Narcissa bite back an insult. He turned to Draco, whose hood looked out of place in the daylight. "Draco."

Looking around the gates suspiciously, Narcissa said in a low voice, "We've met with Lucius, and he has told us of the location of another Horcrux. It's in the mansion, and the door is Charmed so that only he or Dobby can enter."

Severus drew his wand slowly and, advancing on the two of them, said in a deadly tone, "My promise still stands. If this is a trap, I swear..."

"I assure you, Severus. We are sincere in this," Narcissa said in a pleading tone. "Please... I know you can tell if someone is lying."

Severus held her gaze for a moment and said, "Yes, that is true." He could detect no dishonesty from either her or Draco, but still did not feel comfortable with leaving of Hogwarts. The price on him was too great. Any Death Eater would give his soul to be the one to drag him half-dead before the Dark Lord.

"Fine, let's go," Severus said impatiently.

All four of them Apparated to stand in front of the Malfoy manor. Dobby cringed at the sight of his old home and moved behind Severus' robes. As they entered into the front hall, Dobby looked around as if expecting Lucius to come out of any doorway.

"Lucius said that the Horcrux is in a room under the drawing room floor," Narcissa said as she led the way. "The Ministry officials have been here twice without finding it."

The expression of suspicion never left Severus' face. Ensuring that both Draco and Narcissa were in front of him at all times, his eyes swept all doorways as they passed.

"The entrance is in the floor here. Only Lucius and Dobby have gone down there. Lucius said the cup is Charmed to look black and that you would know what to do," Narcissa said with hope in her voice.

Draco still kept his hood up, even in his own home. He remained silent.

Severus stared at the floor where there was no noticeable door and considered his options. Silence fell as he thought.

"Dobby, you've been down there?" he asked, attempting to be polite.

"Yes. Master had me move things down there. Scary place. Dobby doesn't like it down there. Lots of bad things," Dobby said, pulling nervously on his ears.

Putting all his patience into being nice to the elf, Severus said, leaning down, "Open the door."

Dobby rubbed his hands together nervously and stared at the floor. Just as Severus thought the house-elf was going to refuse, Dobby went forward and placed his hand on the floor. The outline of a door appeared and, with a small gasp of fear, Dobby pulled it open.

Severus stood with his wand at the ready and leaned over to look down into the room. He could only see a stairway leading down and a piece of the floor below. The smell of stagnant air rose from the opening, along with copious amounts of dust.

Severus could sense Dark magic close by but could see nothing. He thought for a moment and, glancing at Dobby, made a decision. "Dobby, did Lucius ever touch the cup?"

Thinking hard, Dobby replied, "No, master is telling Dobby to move scary things down there, and only Dobby is touching them."

"Dobby, we need you to go down and get the cup and bring it here," Severus said. Then, grimacing slightly, he added, "Please?"

The house-elf paled slightly, then nodded. Dobby went to the edge of the opening, then hopped down, missing the first two steps. Moving cautiously down the stairs, he let out small whimpers of fear as he disappeared into the darkness.

Severus stared intently into the room, listening as slight whining sounds came from Dobby as he moved around. He caught Narcissa's eyes for a moment, then was confused to see her face transform into one of utter shock.

"Loyalty is a blessed thing, Severus. Which is why traitors like you deserve to die," a voice said from the doorway.

Severus sneered as he turned around. "Good afternoon, Bella. Looking as revolting as ever I see..."

At that moment Dobby appeared at the opening and hopped out onto the floor. Cradled in his arms was a black cup almost as large as the house-elf himself. Severus didn't need to see the cup to know it was touched by Dark magic. To him, it reverberated throughout the room.

"The Dark Lord will be very pleased to see me deliver you alive, Severus. Alive enough to scream that is..." Bella taunted as she moved into the room. "And you, Narcissa, I would have never expected this from my own sister..."

"Bella! Draco and I we," Narcissa sputtered, stepping backwards as her sister's wand aimed at her.

As Bella turned her attention to Narcissa, Severus hissed to Dobby, "Take the cup and Apparate back to Hogwarts. Now!"

Dobby looked startled at first, then, with determination appearing on his face, nodded and scurried towards the main hall.

Bella spun as the house-elf sped past, screaming, "NO!" She thrust her wand at Dobby's retreating form and cried, "*IMPEDIMENTA!*"

The spell barely missed Dobby and slammed into the hallway wall, tearing it open and collapsing part of the floor in a jagged hole. Dobby let out a shriek, almost dropping the cup as he ran towards the door.

Bella moved to follow, but was blocked when Severus stepped in front of her.

Snarling, he said in a low voice, "It is I, the traitor, you want, isn't it?"

Severus raised his arms and said in a grand voice, "Here I stand!" He then swung his wand violently, throwing Bella deeper into the house to land in a heap against the drawing room doorway.

Bella quickly rose and, staggering forward, screamed, "*CRUCIO!*"

Severus blocked the spell, sending it to blast the fireplace apart, exploding brick and ashes out into the room. Bella moved swiftly to cast another curse, which Severus dodged.

It struck Narcissa, throwing her backwards in a graceless fall. Her screams rose as ashes fell, choking the air.

As the ashes cleared, Severus saw Draco with his wand drawn on Bella as she backed into the hallway. "Don't you DARE hurt my mother!" he screamed and cried, "*AVAD...*"

Before he could complete the curse, Bella twitched her wand, threw him backwards to land in a shamble of robes, his hood falling back.

"The Dark Lord was right to punish you for your failure! You're nothing but a useless coward!" Bella taunted, laughing as Draco tried to rise. "But I should put things right. Yes... Lucius always said you were a disappointment."

"SHUT UP!" Draco roared.

"Oh, struck a nerve have I?" Bella said softly.

Before she could raise her wand completely, Bella was thrown forward violently as a bolt of light hit her square in the back. As Bella fell, Draco looked up to see his mother standing with a look of complete rage on her face.

"My own sister? Now, Narcissa..." Bella said in disbelief, struggling on the floor to recover.

"You will NEVER hurt my son again!" Narcissa raged, her voice cracking. Her wand hand shook violently but she could not cast the Killing Curse.

"You're nothing but a traitor. All of you! The Dark Lord will kill you all!" Bella raved, gathering herself to rise. Her teeth were bared as she raised her wand once more.

Suddenly Severus placed himself between them and yelled back to Narcissa and Draco, "Go back to Hogwarts and await me there. NOW!"

Bella snarled and swung her wand, slashing at the air. Severus could feel something tear through his chest, cutting him. Screaming more in rage than pain, he advanced on her, throwing a long combination of spells. With a look of astonishment, Bella moved quickly to block him. The hallway was rapidly being destroyed as spells hit every surface. The ceiling was blown upwards, throwing beams through the upper floors. The entire wall on the left side was torn open. A final spell crashed through the floor, leaving a gaping hole and throwing Bella off balance.

Almost falling, she threw her own combination, which Severus successfully blocked, sending them all back at her. She deftly dodged some and blocked others as Severus backed down the hallway towards the drawing room. A thought struck Severus as he remembered how Dobby going down the trap door stairs.

"Oh, dear, Severus, don't back away. We're having such fun," Bella laughed.

Backing into the drawing room, Severus responded with a grand smile, "Bella, I wouldn't miss this for the world!"

Severus held out his right hand, and a large crystal water pitcher and goblet set rose sharply into the air. As Bella entered the room, he swiftly swung his arm and sent them flying, striking her.

Before she hit the floor, Bella screamed, "*CRUCIO!*", blindly throwing the curse. The spell flew past Severus, narrowly missing him and blowing out a large stained glass window.

Bella laughed, "You're not even trying, Severus! Lost your edge, have you?"

Severus snarled as he cast a complex combination of spells, hexes and curses, ignoring the fact that the monumental amount of magic in close quarters was beyond dangerous. Bella's eyes widened as she struggled to block them all and shield herself from the debris as the chair exploded in shards of wood and stuffing, several lamps burst into fine sprays of glass powder, and part of the ceiling collapsed in flames. She stumbled backwards, tripping over a torn rug, and threw another attempt to disarm as she fell.

Severus cast "*Petrificus Totalus*", throwing himself behind a large armchair and stifling a cry as he landed on his shoulder. He was stunned to find himself lying there in silence. He rose carefully to see Bella, lying stiff on her back, her eyes betraying the hatred within her.

Leisurely he stood, brushing off his robes and shaking his head. "Ah, Bella, so here we are. Now I could simply kill you, but that's far too easy."

Severus shook his head as if arguing with himself about her fate.

"No.... You deserve more. Much more."

Severus looked to the ceiling where a hole now allowed a view through two floors.

"You had an intriguing thought before. What was it? Ah, yes loyalty."

He nodded to himself. "Yes, you are quite loyal, Bella... to an obsessively deranged level. You are correct that loyalty is quite valuable, very much so," Severus said, proceeding to awkwardly drag her towards the trap door's opening.

Ignoring the pain spreading in his chest and back, he positioned her at the edge. Grinning evilly, he then pushed her stiffened body down the stairs.

"You were loyal, Bella..." Severus said viciously, watching her eyes glitter in the darkness below, "but to the wrong side."

Staring directly into her eyes, Severus swept the first step with his foot, triggering the trap.

Slamming the door down, Severus ran as red light bled from the cracks.

Anyone passing by would say the house seemed to bow out at first. Sounds of lesser explosions could be heard along with a faint scream. Red light then filled the interior as if a great blaze burned within. Within seconds, the light's intensity spiraled to a terrifying level, obscuring the sight of the great mansion. A horrific explosion tore through the right wing, blasting an obscene amount of opulent possessions in a high arc out onto the grounds. Missing a large portion of its internal structure, the house leaned before sliding to the left and collapsing in a heap.

"Hermione, you must eat something."

"I just can't. I can't even breathe until he returns," Hermione said, staring out the office window. The same window from which she first saw Severus that night.

Seems so long ago...

"Hermione." Minerva sighed. Several members of the Order were present to discuss the events of the past few days and their plans moving forward. Neville had also arrived after his grandmother informed Minerva she no longer thought it safe to keep him at home any more. Minerva agreed that it was best that Neville stay at Hogwarts.

As the others chatted while taking tea, Minerva approached Hermione. Looking out the same window, she said solemnly, "You know, often I would find Albus watching out this very window."

Minerva placed a hand on Hermione's shoulder as she said with sadness, "Yes, with an expression very similar to the one you wear right now. He would await Severus' return for hours, sometimes days. He was always quick to hide it, but I saw hints of guilt there."

"You see, Hermione, Severus would come to Albus to give his report before anything else. Oftentimes in extremely poor condition, his sense of duty much stronger than his self-preservation."

Hermione sighed, allowing her eyes to focus on her reflection as she reached her hand out and pressed her palm against the cool glass.

"He'll be back, Hermione," Minerva said, mostly to herself.

Unnoticed by everyone, Dobby entered the room with the cup hoisted up in his arms. It looked almost comical, as the cup completely obscured the house-elf and seemed to walk on its own across the room to rest at Harry's feet.

As Harry looked down, Dobby made a grand bow so low his ears hit the floor. "Dobby is bringing the cup for Harry Potter!"

Remembering Severus' words, Minerva gasped as she caught sight of Harry reaching out to touch it.

"NO! Harry, do not touch that cup!" Minerva cried, moving quickly to the center of the room. She reached her arms out to fend off any curious onlookers.

Silence fell.

Hermione was on him in an instant. "Dobby! Where's Severus? Where is he?"

"Dobby is going in the scary place and bringing the cup. Nasty Bella comes, and he tells Dobby to run so Dobby runs and comes back to Harry Potter with the cup," Dobby said in one breath, beaming like a lovesick teenager up at Harry.

"Dobby, where did you go?" Hermione asked urgently. "Where?"

"Dobby's old home. Dobby isn't liking to go back there, but he does it for Harry Potter!" he said, proudly pushing his chest out.

"Malfoy's mansion," Hermione gasped, looking up at Minerva. She then turned and ran from the room.

"Wait! Hermione! You can't go, it's too dangerous!" Minerva called, but in vain, as Hermione was already out the door and flying down the stairs.

Couldn't just kill her the conventional way, could you?

Severus stood on the lawn of the ruined mansion. He had barely escaped before the windows exploded glass at lethal force and the entire west wing exploded out into the countryside. He thought he heard Bella scream, and a dim part of his mind noted that his spell binding her must have broken.

Remnants of wood and marble were strewn across the grounds while slips of wallpaper and bits of fabric sailed lazily on the wind. Large pieces of ornate furniture lay at odd angles on the lawn along with a scorched tapestry. A four-poster bed hung precariously off the second floor before crashing into the ruins below. Amused, Severus thought it all looked like a gutted doll house. The mansion let out a loud groan, struggling for a moment before collapsing. Flames took hold somewhere in the ruins, sending the scent of burning wood and upholstery traveling on the afternoon breeze.

Hissing, Severus pulled a large piece of glass from his arm that had gone straight through his robes and watched as the prestigious Malfoy mansion began to burn.

Circling around the rear of where the mansion once stood, Severus thought back over his history with Bella. They had shared much more than a general dislike. It was a

pure hatred, as deep-rooted as two people can possibly have for each other without going mad. She had not only played a part in forcing him to take the Unbreakable Vow but had also goaded Voldemort into punishing him severely over not delivering Potter. Her high-pitched laughter had rung in his ears far too many times to count as he lay screaming to the night sky.

Severus doubted that Hermione would love him at this particular moment, but then she was fortunate not to have experienced the horrors he had over his relatively short lifetime. Surveying the wreckage, Severus tried to work out in his mind just where the drawing room would have been. Part of him couldn't help wanting to collect a certain item if it was possible, a souvenir.

Taking inventory, he was positive that if his robes were not black the amount of blood would startle even the strong-hearted. He shouldn't be standing as he felt blood streaming down his chest in time with his heart. The cut was significant, but not as bad as he had first thought. His back was not faring much better; he was sure it was torn open once more.

One of the remaining chimneys moved drunkenly to the right and arced before crumbling to join the rest of the rubble. Stepping carefully, he took notice of the wallpaper and knew this was the room. The fire spreading through the other side of the mansion could be heard devouring the rich wood. Soon, it would be nothing more than an extremely large bonfire, and by morning no recognizable trace would be found.

As Severus caught sight of where the trap door had once lain, he noticed that it was now open. Frowning, he moved to survey his surroundings as the strong smell of burning mahogany reached him. Listening, he heard nothing but the groaning and crack of wood as it either shifted or burned.

Deciding it would be a better choice to Apparate back to Hogwarts, Severus was startled by a bolt of green light as it shot past, blasting apart a tangle of chairs behind him.

He spun and found himself facing a furious, bloodied, and very much alive Bellatrix Black Lestrage.

A Simple Gesture

Chapter 22 of 41

A novel-length post HBP HG/SS romance adventure. What if Severus returned, trained Harry for the final battle and worked to destroy the final Horcruxes? Story is complete and will be updated regularly.

Disclaimer: It all belongs to JKR. May she always be able to find paper.

AN: We're running out of ways to thank each other it seems, Ariadne. I can only dedicate moments to you. The end is for you.

"What happened?" Hermione gasped, trying to catch her breath as she reached the castle gates.

When Narcissa only sneered at her and the figure Hermione assumed was Draco remained silent, Hermione raged, "ANSWER ME!"

"This doesn't concern you," Narcissa said, looking at her with disgust. Draco shifted his feet, seemingly detached from the situation.

Hermione drew her wand and thrust it through the gates at Narcissa's throat. "Anything that concerns Severus concerns me," she said dangerously.

"Hermione, NO!" a hurrying voice yelled.

Harry grabbed Hermione's arm and forced it down, thinking, oddly, how only days ago their roles were reversed. An expression of pure hatred passed over his face at the sight of what he assumed was Draco standing serenely next to his mother.

Before he could say anything, however, Minerva arrived, severely out of breath.

With a hand on Hermione's shoulder, Minerva stated, "There will be no hostility here. Narcissa and Draco have entered into an agreement with Severus, and we shall honor that until he returns."

Minerva stepped closer to the gates and asked, "Now, Narcissa? Care to tell us what has happened?"

Looking irritated, Narcissa said, "My sister arrived and..."

"You set him up! I knew it was nothing but a trap!" Hermione interrupted. Harry, meanwhile, was angrily fingering his wand, his eyes fixed on Draco.

Minerva hurriedly motioned for Hermione to calm herself and asked, "Please continue. And?"

With an air of someone who had been rudely interrupted, Narcissa explained with a look of regret, "I did not tell Bella that Severus would be there. I swear it."

Glancing at Draco, Narcissa said sadly, "That must have been Lucius' doing. She arrived just as Dobby obtained the cup. A duel broke out, and at one point Severus stood between us, ordering us to leave and return here. They were still fighting when we left."

Her arrogant expression changed considerably. Minerva thought she looked extremely worn and in shock at what her husband had done.

"How long ago was this?" Minerva asked, remaining remarkably polite.

"No more than ten minutes," Narcissa said, visibly struggling to avoid angering her new hosts. Somehow in those few minutes the realization that she and Draco were both fugitives and branded as traitors had hit her. As the mansion was no longer safe, they had joined the ranks of the homeless, as well.

Nodding, Minerva turned to Harry as Remus and Tonks arrived. "Ah, Remus, Nymphadora, if you would please escort Mrs. Malfoy and Draco to the castle? They will not require their wands."

Minerva turned to Hermione. "You may wait for Severus here, but you cannot leave. Is that clear?"

"But..."

"Hermione..." she said warningly, then softened her gaze.

Minerva weighed her options. Part of her wanted to send help directly to the mansion, and the other resolved to wait and heed Severus' request to let him handle it alone. She knew the mansion's grounds were probably protected from outside intruders. Any help would need to figure out how to Apparate nearby or take either Narcissa or Draco back with them. She would give him twenty minutes. No more.

Hermione helped pull the gates open to allow Draco and his mother entrance. As Draco passed by, she gazed at his hooded robes and wondered what exactly Voldemort had done to him for his failure. She roughly pushed the thought of Severus being captured aside as she closed the gates. Resting her head on the bars, she remembered her thoughts on the night when he tried to return to Voldemort, hoping to spy once more.

She only allowed herself to cry once they were gone.

"Are you still trying to win?" Severus sneered as Bella struggled to rise. "You have an overdeveloped sense of vengeance. It's going to get you in trouble someday."

"Do you honestly think for a minute that I don't know enough Dark magic to be able to protect myself? After your laughable Binding Spell failed, I simply waited," Bella hissed, her eyes dark with rage.

"Pity. To think, I was already considering which robes I was going to wear to your funeral," he drawled.

Bella screamed, "*CRUCIO!*" stumbling through the sea of broken wood and carpet, swinging her free arm awkwardly. The spell exploded brick around Severus' head as he ducked. Although it caused him considerable pain, Severus began to laugh, which served to infuriate Bella even more.

"Do not laugh at me!" she screeched, throwing another spell blindly as she staggered through the tangle of wood and plaster. As Severus dodged, it struck and blew apart a dresser that clearly had experienced an unscheduled move to the ground floor.

The flames had moved to a nearby staircase, methodically consuming each stair leading up to nothing. The wind shifted, guiding the smoke through the wreckage, diverting it past thin shards of walls, still stubbornly standing, albeit at angles that defied gravity.

Severus threw several spells at Bella as she stalked him, climbing over the remnants of what once had been a sitting room. Almost falling forward over an upended table, Bella weakly deflected them. Bolts shot wildly into the air to arc in different directions, eventually falling to add to the destruction. While she tried to recover, Severus threw several Disarming Spells as he passed the staircase, grasping the banister as he made his way around.

He glanced back at her, and a spell barely missed his head as Bella laughed in her trademark, high-pitched voice.

His memories of that laughter drove Severus near mad with rage, and he threw himself out before her. Staring into her surprised face, Severus began casting an unavoidable number of spells. He advanced methodically, his head lowered, eyes fixed on her.

Bella's laughter ended in a strangled scream as she stumbled backwards over broken floor boards and the torn upholstery of what must have been an armchair. Without stopping, Severus continued the barrage with complete hatred in his eyes, his frustration increasing as she frantically blocked him.

Streaks of light rebounded in all directions, coloring the thickening smoke like lightning, blasting any remaining walls into sheets of flaming wallpaper and crashing into the upper treads of the staircase, twisting it at an impossible angle.

With a tremendous crack, the staircase surrendered and swung over onto its side, throwing burning pieces of wood into the air. As it fell between them, Severus heard Bella scream as she scrambled to avoid being crushed or burned as it dragged the flames down with it.

Quickly, Severus threw a Stunner, blindly arcing it over the fallen staircase. At the same moment, Bella also cast, staring in horror as the two spells bounced off each other.

The rebounding spell flashed bright red as it passed, singeing some of Severus' hair. Snarling, he swung his wand and threw a Disarming Spell, hoping to keep her away while his eyes readjusted. A distant portion of his mind noted that it was increasingly harder to breathe through the heavy smoke.

Looking up, he was astonished to see her wand flying upwards, end over end. He called it to his waiting hand before she could react.

In a heartbeat he was upon her, shoving his wand at her throat, daring her to make a move.

Silence. The only sounds the fall of disintegrating wood, the rhythmic crackle of hungry fire, and the panting of two souls consumed by as much hatred as the world had ever known love.

Attempting some semblance of pride, Bella sneered, "Severus... we can avoid this... What do you want? I can give you power, money... Return to us... I can speak to the Dark Lord..."

Severus narrowed his eyes and ground his teeth. When she shifted slightly, he drove his wand deeper, anchoring it down where her collarbones met. He bared his teeth in satisfaction when she raised her head and grimaced.

"No. Something I should have demanded the first time *lkilled* you. You will tell me the location of another Horcrux."

"I don't have that type of information. The Dark Lord does not..." Bella started, holding her hands up.

"*CRUCIO!*" Severus roared without hesitation. Enjoying the sound of her screams, Severus took the time to admire how the sun shone through the smoky clouds before releasing the curse.

"Care to elaborate?" he asked politely, watching her shake from the curse's effects with far too much satisfaction.

"You you will need to kill me first you bastard! I remained faithful in Azkaban; I can resist you!" Bella stuttered.

"Fine. If you insist," Severus said in a bored voice, knowing it was her last chance at a show of defiance.

As he raised his wand again, Bella quickly held a hand up in surrender. He stood patiently as she caught her breath, leaning awkwardly against what once was a serving table.

"There is one hidden at the Riddle house," she admitted, hating him.

"Not good enough, Bella," he sneered and, staring into her eyes, whispered, "*Legilimens.*"

The rage at his entrance was crushing. Severus fought to move further and then saw what he was looking for. The image of a bronze eagle hidden in a trunk swam to the surface. It appeared to be in basement from the looks of the nearby earthen walls.

Withdrawing from her mind, he said without emotion, "Perfect."

The wind rose sharply, sliding the curtain of smoke aside, clearing their view of each other. Staring directly into her eyes, Severus raised his wand.

A weak voice. "No..."

"Ah, Bella," Severus said tauntingly, "requesting the same mercy that the Longbottoms received? Then I shall happily oblige."

Bella's eyes widened as she grasped what he had just said.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Within minutes, Hermione had exhausted herself from crying and had resigned herself to a frantic combination of worry and anger. The logical part of her brain took over. *Something terrible has happened... What if Bella tipped off the Death Eaters or worse yet, Voldemort? I should be there to help!*

While resting her head on the bars, she said aloud, "I love him so. Even when he's being a completely arrogant bastard."

"Well, that certainly is refreshing," a silky voice drawled.

"Severus!" Hermione cried, pulling the gates open and rushing at him. Before he could warn her, she grasped him around the middle, forcing him to stifle a groan. Not caring about the pain, he returned her embrace.

Hermione took hold of his robes and pulled him down to kiss him with a fire usually reserved for those returning from a long war rather than from a short afternoon mission.

"I couldn't bear to think..." Hermione said, looking up at him. He somehow looked much older and worn.

"You doubted my promise?" he said softly, pushing her hair behind one ear.

"No, but when they returned without you, I thought..." Hermione said with grief at the thoughts that had run through her mind.

"Hermione, I will always return to you. I no longer have a choice in the matter," he said with a faint smile, trailing a finger around the curve of her neckline.

At her questioning look, he leaned in close and, pausing before kissing her, said, "This is true love. A bond stronger than any vow or life debt. There is no spell or potion that can recreate this, and no one outside of the two of us can break its bond."

Hermione looked dumbstruck at his words, staring into his eyes. After her silence stretched on, he grinned. "Am I not allowed to be poetic?"

She shook her head slowly, saying, "No, it's not that. You don't normally..."

"Express myself?" he said, breathing softly on her neck. He brushed her hair out of the way and leaned to leave kisses behind her ear. A nagging voice told him he should seek Poppy to tend to his wounds, but he pushed that aside for now. Nothing could keep him from this.

"Yes, well... oh," she mumbled distractedly as all of the tension she was bound in dissolved in his arms. She released a breath she didn't realize she had been holding.

Placing a hand on his chest, she felt the tear in his robes and noticed the blood.

"You're..." she managed to gasp before he stopped her with a deep passionate kiss. They moved in sync, kissing with a strong burning need before receding back to soft gentle expressions of affection.

Reluctantly breaking the kiss for air, he said dismissively, "I am fine."

Hermione frowned slightly, fingering the tear in his robes. As she moved her hand further in, he flinched and pulled back.

"'Fine', you say?" she said doubtfully.

Growling, he pulled her close and held her almost painfully tight. His hand moved up into her hair, splaying it out to hold her head, insisting she relinquish control. His breath on her throat, murmuring soft words, strung together for their pure tone, almost a song, their only purpose to drive her nearly mad with the vibration of his voice, long distant thunder, the promise of rain.

In a ragged breath, he rasped, "Fine enough."

Hermione rested her forehead on his shoulder, astonished that she was still standing. "Even now, you're incorrigible."

"Would you have me any other way?" he asked, grinning devilishly against her hair.

Hermione said laughingly, "Of course not; now let's go."

At the sight of Severus entering the headmistress' office, everyone rose to their feet. He strode past them all, directly towards Minerva's desk.

Severus only looked to Minerva and asked, "The cup?"

Minerva said quickly, hoping to allay his fears, "Alastor has stored it safely in the Room of Requirement until it can be destroyed."

"And our guests?"

"Are being looked after quite confidently by Tonks and Remus," Minerva said.

Uncomfortable with all eyes upon him, Severus scanned the room. One eyebrow rose slightly when he spotted Neville looking at him with fearful eyes.

"Ah, Mr. Longbottom..." Severus said, walking over to him.

"YYes, sir?" Neville stuttered, looking panicked as if he had forgotten his assignment.

Harry's face had a protective look, as if he were expecting Severus to pick on Neville.

Hermione sat next to Harry, placing her hand on his and offering a slow shake of her head.

"Mr. Longbottom, I think you deserve to have this," Severus said and handed something to him.

The room fell silent.

Several heads turned to exchange significant glances.

Neville hesitantly took a wand from Severus' hand and held it, a confused expression spreading over his face. Daring to move his eyes up to his former Potions master's face, he said, "Sir?"

"Mr. Longbottom, the reason I am giving you that is because it represents a long overdue act of justice that occurred today. That wand belonged to one Bellatrix Black Lestranger."

Neville's eyes widened as he absorbed Snape's words.

With a touch of pride, Severus stated, "Yes, she is dead, as is only fitting. Trust me when I say she did not die well."

Minerva gasped softly, placing a hand to her face. Molly and Arthur shared a sad look, remembering how Neville's parents had been driven insane by the Cruciatus Curse in an attack led by Bella.

Neville swallowed hard before finding his voice. "Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome, Mr. Longbottom. It is a simple gesture," Severus said in what almost was an apologetic tone. It was all he could offer.

Neville looked up at Severus, still in awe in what he had done.

"It is, you see, an honor, a symbol of retribution," Severus said with sincerity.

Neville stared at the wand in disbelief, holding it across his palms. He glanced up at Severus before passing his gaze around the room. What he found was complete silence and all eyes on him.

Molly sniffed softly and held a hand to her chest as Arthur placed an arm around her shoulder.

Severus stepped back and nodded to Neville, who stood slowly, grasped both ends of the wand, held it up and snapped it in two.

AN: "You have an overdeveloped sense of vengeance. It's going to get you in trouble someday," ~The Princess Bride.

An Outstanding Debt

Chapter 23 of 41

A novel-length post HBP HG/SS romance adventure. What if Severus returned, trained Harry for the final battle and worked to destroy the final Horcruxes? Story is complete and will be updated regularly.

Disclaimer: It all belongs to JKR and yes, I shall proclaim it every chapter.

AN: A debt of thanks to Ariadne. As always, she is Super Beta. The buttons are for you. ;-)

"Take it, Severus," Poppy said sternly. *If Minerva would only turn a blind eye just once I could do this with a simple flick of my wand.*

"I quite clearly said 'no', and I don't care for your tone, *Madam*," he said, matching her tone.

Poppy stood, clearly agitated. "For Merlin's sake, Severus, I need to stitch that up. You are not new to this procedure, and I am hardly going to do it while you are conscious! Now, stop acting like such a child. I have first years who come here with more bravery than you."

"You believe me frightened? Of what?" he asked calmly.

Poppy pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed.

"Severus, why must you be so difficult?"

"Poppy, you know the day I stop being difficult will be the day you will think me either dying or insane."

Setting her hands on her hips, Poppy smirked as she heard Hermione enter the wing. She kept her glare on him as she said loudly, "Hermione, dear, we have a problem with our patient."

"Oh?" Hermione said as she made her way over.

"Don't you dare," he warned, narrowing his eyes.

Poppy only smiled more, enjoying the startled look on his face. "You should have thought of that before, m'dear," she whispered, grinning down at him.

"You take pleasure in making me as uncomfortable as humanly possible don't you?" he said in a low voice, his eyes moving from Poppy's grinning face to Hermione's inevitable arrival at his bedside.

Leaning down, Poppy glared at him and said in a hushed voice, "If you are so self-centered as to believe that my world centers around making you uncomfortable, then by all means believe it to be so. Otherwise, just take the potion so we may both get on with our lives, you miserable, childish, ah, Miss Granger, good evening."

"Good evening, Madam Pomfrey," Hermione said, noticing the argument in the air. With a suspicious look, she set down some books she had brought for Severus to read while in the hospital wing.

"Severus was just about to take this potion to render him unconscious so I can stitch up his body yet again," Poppy said, turning to look at her miserable patient.

Severus glared at her.

"Isn't that so, Severus?" Poppy asked sweetly, holding the flask out towards him.

After Severus remained silent for a moment, Poppy turned to Hermione and asked, "Maybe you can assist?"

"No," Severus said quickly.

As the two witches smiled knowingly at him, he muttered in defeat, "No, I'll take it."

As Poppy handed it to him and turned to leave, he said after her, "You're evil."

"I learn from the best," she said, waving her hand at him. "I shall be back in ten minutes to patch you up."

Hermione sat on the side of his bed, watching him as he drank the potion. Looking at the gash across his chest, she said with a strained look, "Quite impressive. My hugging you must have hurt quite a lot."

"Not enough to make it not worth my while," he said, hating the potion's taste.

"How long until it takes effect?" she asked while inspecting his hair.

"About six minutes."

"Hmm, you smell like firewood," Hermione said slowly, moving her face into his hair.

Severus grinned, remembering the mansion as it burned. "Yes, it's a pity mahogany isn't burned more often since it has such a pleasing aroma. Instead, it is used for frivolous things such as expensive tables and chairs."

Hermione could see a faraway look in his eye as the potion started to take effect.

"Severus?"

He didn't answer, but did look up at her. She thought that he looked as though the weight he usually carried around with him had been lifted for those few minutes.

Hermione shook her head sadly. "Tell me why you resist pain potions," she asked, hoping the drug would prompt him to open up.

After a while, she didn't think he would respond. She brushed a stray hair away from his face, trailing her fingers along the angle of his jaw. Her other hand unbuttoned his shirt, ignoring how it stuck to the wound. His breathing alternated between a deep and calm rhythm and soft intakes when she pulled the fabric away. He was fighting the potion's effects, she could tell, refusing to allow sleep to come.

When she looked back at him, his eyes were watching her; that same intelligence was there, but fading.

He moved his eyes slowly closing them for a time then said clearly, almost startling her, "Pain is a poor but singular remedy for regret."

Nodding sadly, she whispered, "I'll be here when you wake up. Go to sleep."

She ran her fingers through his hair while he seemed to sink deeper. He nodded slightly and closed his eyes.

"You did well, Severus. We appreciate all you do, you must know that," she whispered as she felt him relax against her.

"Looking peaceful as ever. Perfect," Poppy said, smiling as she approached Severus' bedside with her supplies.

"Hermione, could you go in the storeroom and fetch some of my special healing balm? It's in a box up top," Poppy said, tilting her head as she examined the extensive gash across Severus' chest.

"Sure," she said distractedly, feeling woozy at the variety of needles and magical thread Madam Pomfrey had with her. Remembering that Severus was willing to have this done while awake made her think him either insane or exceedingly stubborn, or both. *Then again, removing the Mark was certainly no picnic.*

"Ah, how's our patient?" Minerva said as she entered the wing and made her way over.

"Unconscious," Poppy said happily.

"Splendid. And the wounds?"

"Will be fine in a few days. Just a flesh cut. He doesn't have much in that department though. He's either very lucky or very skilled. His back is not terribly bad either. The arm will be fine, as well. Looks like a rather nasty piece of glass was lodged in there," Poppy said as she worked.

"I worry less about his body than his mind. This is a lot for someone to take on in such a short time. Albus' death was a mere month ago," Minerva said thoughtfully. She felt a twinge of sorrow then, thinking how absurd it felt to be taking care of the man who had murdered someone so close to her.

Poppy began to stitch, jerking the thread tight each time. "Ah, Minerva. I have seen him in much worse shape. Times when I thought he would be permanently broken at such a young age. Even his magic suffered, although he made me swear to never tell at the time. Lately, though, he has recovered quite nicely. One should take longer, not shorter amounts of time to heal with age."

Poppy paused, checking her progress. She nodded, selected a larger needle, waved her wand to thread it and set back to work.

"Little is known about how love affects one's magic and strength. I do believe that it is the difference we are seeing here," Minerva said, trying to look anywhere but at what Poppy was doing.

"The difference is he now has someone to live for," Poppy said, frowning in concentration.

Minerva nodded, offering a sad smile. "That he does; however, he must be terrified. He is no longer in control."

Poppy stood up, admiring her work.

"You know, he's not half bad looking... while asleep," Poppy said jokingly.

Minerva laughed. "Poppy!"

"Oh, you know every woman has a soft spot for the dark hero with the rugged good looks," Poppy said as she waved her wand, enchanting the stitches to bind tighter and then close, leaving a neat line.

"I think we can be sure Miss Granger is more interested in his mind," Minerva said confidently, allowing a smirk.

Poppy looked to where Hermione had emerged from the storeroom, "Of course. She's obviously looked past the mess of scars on the man."

"Indeed," Minerva agreed, looking at the maze of scars crossing his upper body. *So young to have so many.*

"Ah, Hermione, thank you," Poppy said, taking the balm and spreading it over the stitches. "Finished. Now make sure the man rests tonight?" she said and, glancing doubtfully at Severus, added, "At least a little, no one expects a miracle of you."

"Yes, I will," Hermione said with a smile as Minerva and Poppy rose to leave.

Hermione sat back in her chair and watched him sleep as the sun set on one of the most emotional days she'd endured since Dumbledore's death. The colors drained out of the air, settling towards cool grays and blues before moving towards a charcoal the torches could not reach. Letting her mind wander, she held his hand, examining where his Mark once lay. A faint scar outlined where it had burned over time.

"Hey, Hermione," Ginny said, coming in to sit next to her. "How is he?"

"He'll be fine. Just knocked out for now," Hermione said, putting his hand down.

"He looks better when he's not trying to be all angry and bitter," Ginny said laughingly, pushing Hermione a little. "Not very intimidating without a shirt is he?"

Smiling, Hermione said, "Yes, he does, and no, he'd kill you if you saw."

"You love him?" Ginny asked.

Hermione stilled for a moment, then nodded. "Yes, I do."

Ginny shrugged. "To each his own."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Well... is he at least good?" Ginny asked, elbowing her.

"Good at what? Oh, Ginny!" Hermione said in shock

"Just a question," Ginny laughed, holding up her hands. "Should I assume, then, you haven't..."

"Ginny!" Hermione knew she was blushing had to be.

"If you are both quite finished staring at me."

Both Ginny and Hermione were startled to find Severus not only awake, but in the process of angrily pulling a sheet over his chest.

"Severus! Must you do that?" Hermione said, clutching her chest. Ginny looked severely pale.

"Do what? Be conscious?" he said, scowling at the two of them. "Please accept my sincere apology for the disappointment."

"Don't you think you should rest before dealing with Narcissa and Draco?" Hermione said, hating a little that his leg had gotten better.

"I think our *guests* deserve a proper welcome. Besides, I have business to discuss," he said without slowing.

"Could you at least slow down a little?" she asked irritably.

He stopped abruptly in front of a door, forcing her to almost run into him. "Why must I slow down? Why don't you speed up?"

"Severus," she said, trying to hold her frustration, "why must you be so difficult?"

"Forgive me," he said, placing a hand over his heart in apology, "I've seem to have had a trying day. Revenge is a tiring business."

A smirk spread on Hermione's face as she crossed her arms. "Now you're mocking me."

"I must keep up an equal system of torment for everyone," he murmured, his voice lowering, darkening.

"Oh really now? Am I no different?" she whispered, reaching out to hold him somehow without touching some sort of healing injury. Drawing her hand down the front of his frock coat, sliding a finger around each button methodically, tracing its circumference, an intertwining pattern, enough to feel friction, her other hand on his shoulder, moving higher and around his neck.

He leaned back against the door, ignoring how the wood groaned in protest. The scratching sound of his wool coat against the rough texture, catching, tearing loose to slide a distance. Stopping again. The feel of her hands on his hips, holding him there as she looked at him, a wildly intelligent, yet playful look in her eyes.

"It's only fair, I must keep my reputation," he said, bending to lightly breathe on her neck before whispering, "You must understand, I have standards to keep."

"I see, but you torment everyone," she gasped, trying to keep her breath. Her heart beat wildly, surging forward, rising to a trembling level before climbing even higher with his every breath. Severus moved to drag his teeth on the back of her neck, driving her to press both of her hands against door on either side of him, feeling the deep wood grain under her hands hard, unforgiving, timeless offering strength. When his hands trailed down her sides slowly to rest at her hips, pulling her to lean against him, her nails dug into the grooves, dragging downward, tearing splinters out, leaving marks.

"I only torment you with the utmost intentions of pure adoration in mind, an overwhelming need to worship, if you will, compulsive to an obsessive fault," he breathed, touching his mouth to her neck, barely, receding, a terrible grin, a skirmish in the war won.

One of her hands had found its way into his hair. She was kissing around his throat now, nudging his chin upwards.

"Yes, I'm a man of high standards, you see. Anything I do, no matter how small, I approach with the highest regard for quality," he said before moving to kiss her deeply, holding her close as best he could. Every movement caused some injury to complain. It only made sense to him to anger them all in the name of being closer to her.

"Oh?" she breathed. They both looked down to where she had his frock coat twisted in her fist.

"You seem to be fond of this yes?" he said in a dark voice as he reached up and covered her hand with his. His hand tightening over hers.

Her eyes widened and she allowed him to remove her hand. He stared into her eyes as he raised her hand to his lips.

"I think you are fond of it of this the exhilaration, perhaps? It is possible; I see it there in the shadows, unspoken, but known..."

"Yes, considering, wondering... anticipating," he murmured, then took a ragged breath before continuing to whisper directly in her ear, "Of course, as with any performance, it must be well thought out; however, it must seem to be completely impulsive, bordering on primal, if you will. Every possible detail, every movement, no matter how slight; every word, every touch of emotion, no matter how minuscule, all must be accounted for and attended to with the utmost intensity of pure perfection. All of the senses must be taken into consideration. The absolute peak of satisfaction must be reached in a fashion that obliterates all thought of the outside world, each ingredient working together in complete harmony, rushing higher and higher until all that is known crashes over the edge of reason, leaving in its wake nothing except absolute, unadulterated and exquisite bliss."

He kissed her gently, lingering just inches from her lips and said, looking deep into her eyes, "You see... nothing less will do."

Hermione felt as though it was plainly visible just how hard her heart was beating. Finally finding enough breath to form words, she said with a knowing smile, "We're no longer talking about your mocking me, are we?"

Severus' eyes held a strange glint as he grinned. "Bravo, you are quite observant. To answer Miss Weasley's question: I *and damn* good."

Hermione gasped loudly at the realization that he had heard. Before she could say anything, Severus turned and pushed open the door.

They were met by the sight of Tonks and Remus in a passionate embrace on the couch.

"Well now, let us hope that our guests aren't missing in the wake of your most attentive guarding talents," Severus said smugly, watching as a blushing Tonks shot him a look.

"Come now, Severus. They hardly have anywhere to go. They're in the bedroom there, safe as can be," Remus said, smoothing out his robes.

"Indeed," Severus muttered, striding past Remus to the bedroom door and throwing it open.

Narcissa sat by the window, appearing even more drawn and worn than when Severus had seen her earlier that day. If he hadn't known better, he'd have said she'd been cursed to age at some accelerated rate. Across the room, he saw Draco sitting on the bed with his hood still drawn over his head, hiding his face. That was agreeable to Severus, as even he couldn't easily manage looking into such a hideous mass. Some part of him wondered if the affliction was physical or magical in nature.

Narcissa merely slid her eyes in his direction and asked, without emotion, "You have survived, I see."

"Yes. Shall I add you to the list of those disappointed by my quite irritating talent at survival? I've often been compared to cockroaches."

Narcissa's lip curled slightly in response to his sarcasm. "And my sister?"

"Dead," he said flatly. A small noise came from Draco, but he said nothing.

Hermione stood, watching the exchange. The amount of angst in the room made the air heavy with strained conversation usually reserved for speaking of loss or evil.

"And the mansion?" she asked, looking at him angrily.

"Deceased as well," he said, willing himself to neither look pleased nor prideful at the destruction of the Malfoy mansion.

Looking down at her hands, Narcissa said, "Never cared for that house anyway. It's not as if Draco and I could stay there now."

"Now that you've earned the illustrious title of traitor to Voldemort?" he said, ignoring the pain and fear it caused those who still wore the Dark Mark. His subconscious mind felt privileged to no longer be part of that group.

"I should kill you for leading me into such a trap, Narcissa," he said, lowering his voice.

Remus made a slight move as if he would intervene, then seemed to think better of it.

Her eyes met his quickly. Part of Hermione felt strange at the sight of someone looking fearful of Severus.

Draco turned towards them, but still held his silence.

"I had no idea, Severus, I swear it. It must have been Lucius," Narcissa said in a regretful tone. Her arrogance faded when faced with him, unarmed and at his mercy.

"Your own husband, Narcissa? What a fine taste in men you have," he sneered. "In fact, your entire family tree seems to be lacking some portion of the brain that controls both moral aptitude and independent thought."

"Oh, excepting you, of course," Severus said, smiling innocently at Tonks as she stood in the doorway.

Severus enjoyed the way Narcissa's jaw worked as she bit back whatever sharp comment was on her tongue.

"Placing that aside, let's get to our business," Severus said, crossing his arms and staring down at her.

Her eyes grew suspicious, "Severus, we've delivered you two Horcruxes. Surely that is worth..."

"Do you think for one instant that what happened today won't cost you? DO YOU?" he yelled, tearing open his coat and shirt. A long, jagged, rambling line of stitches ran directly across his heart. "I stood in front of you both and earned this! It would have killed you, Narcissa, do you realize that?"

Narcissa flinched, but held her ground, choosing to look away.

The room was silent as Severus glared at her, willing her to speak back to him. When she did not, he stated, as he repaired his coat, "No. You are far from repaying your debt to me. Your usefulness has only begun."

His tone aroused Narcissa's suspicion. She looked at him with an expression that spoke of both sadness and defiance.

"What are you suggesting?" Narcissa asked with an air of reluctance. The hatred had not left her eyes.

"Your dear, departed sister shared with me that another Horcrux is hidden in the Riddle house. The problem is that that is currently the place where Voldemort is holding council, am I correct?" he said, studying her face.

"Yes, at least part of the time. Wormtail, however, has taken up residence in your home," Narcissa said, settling into a mode of information sharing.

"He has?" Severus said with increasing interest. He fell silent as he paced the room, thinking. Arriving back in front of Narcissa, he looked at her appraisingly.

A grin born of evil intentions spread across his face as he asked, "Narcissa, how accomplished are you at the Imperius Curse?"

Narcissa tilted her head up, met his eyes, and said, with pride, "Very."

It Got Away From Me

Chapter 24 of 41

A novel-length post HBP HG/SS romance adventure. What if Severus returned, trained Harry for the final battle and worked to destroy the final Horcruxes? Story is complete and will be updated regularly.

Disclaimer: It all belongs to JKR. No JK, no Snape, and that would be a bad thing. Yes, it would.

AN: Eternal thanks to Ariadne.

"Severus? What do you think happened to Draco?" Hermione asked, nudging him awake. She had gone by the library on her way to his rooms and was using the bed as a cluttered desk.

Squinting against the morning sun, Severus opened his eyes and pushed a book off of his leg. He found her in the process of rubbing healing balm on his stitches and reading a book balanced in her lap.

"Must you use me as a desk? What time is it? How long have you been here?" he asked irritably.

"Late enough, and you haven't answered my question," she said as she turned a page.

Sighing, he said, "A host of things could have happened. There are several fairly destructive spells that can cause physical injuries such as those; however, it could simply be a curse."

Severus closed his eyes as the weight of the previous day's events caught up to him. His nagging mind reminded him that the Hufflepuff cup's destruction was still required. As much as he disliked Moody, he had confidence that he could manage to keep the cup safe for now. First, he needed to escort Narcissa to the gates and send her on her "mission."

"What do you think it is?" Hermione asked, flipping through some sort of large, unwieldy spell book.

"Whether curse or spell, you're not going to find anything of Voldemort's doing in a Hogwart's library book," he muttered, absently tracing a hand across the stitches. They were already starting to drive him mad with itching. His back wasn't much better.

Closing the book, she asked, "You think it's a dark curse then?"

"Why do you care?" he said, letting his hand drop impatiently. "The wretched brat did nothing but antagonize you."

"Because no one deserves this, that's why," she said angrily. "It's the right thing to do."

"The right thing to do?" he said, exasperated. "Hermione, have you completely lost your mind? Have you forgotten what Draco did? He's fortunate to be alive and deserves the hell he's in. Nothing less is appropriate."

Hermione's face darkened, and she moved to look him in the eyes. "So, what you are telling me is that you don't believe in second chances?"

Severus glared at her.

"A little young to be passing judgment aren't we?"

The tone of his voice to Hermione was worse than if he was yelling. It was a tone of controlled anger.

"I wasn't aware that morals had anything to do with age," she said, not backing down. "The mark of a true man is the ability to forgive, Severus."

Severus snorted. "Something from one of your books?"

"No. Dumbledore."

Severus scowled at her, then closed his eyes and nodded slightly as if yielding a point in a match.

Sighing, he rose from the bed and left the room in silence. When Hermione reached the doorway, she watched as he went to the wall where the Dark Arts library was hidden, muttered a spell, and opened the door.

Severus called over his shoulder, "I don't think I need to warn you to stay outside. The books, as you know, find young flesh... appetizing."

Hermione stopped and crossed her arms. "Then you shouldn't have any trouble at all since you're *somature*," she said with a trace of a grin.

He turned as he lit the candle and scowled at her before pointing at the door to slam it shut.

He ran his hand through his hair, yawning as he moved inside, staring up at the books. The same musty, dead air hung in the atmosphere, a reminder of the weight of the information held within the pages surrounding him. Severus lit the lantern, barely reattached to its chain. The spell pushed it into a swinging motion, rocking high shadows across the writhing occupants of the shelves. The chains rattled loudly as the books shifted towards their shelf's edge, threatening, putting on a show.

"You may cease the impressive display of menacing power now; she's safely outside," he muttered, unchaining a shelf and pulling down a book to check the contents. He took a seat at the table and skimmed a few pages, ignoring the protesting residents.

"If you should even consider attacking me, I shall quite happily copy all of your contents and then turn you into owl cage lining," he said without looking up.

Most of the rattling ceased with the exception of some from the larger books, which were closest to where Severus sat, lazily turning another page.

"Then again, there is always fire."

Silence fell with one last rattle of disappointment.

Satisfied, he snapped the book closed and rose to leave.

Opening the door, Severus handed Hermione the book and warned, "This one holds counter-curse information; however, do not remove it from this room. It's possible that the curse could be anything from a prevention of healing to permanent disfigurement. Do not attempt anything without me. This magic is extremely dangerous, and I am by no means being trivial, understood?"

Hermione nodded as she took the book from him, flinching when it squirmed and tried to open.

They both watched the book as it seemed to contemplate biting Hermione's arm.

"It's harmless. Lord over it as you wish," Severus advised.

Hermione smiled and clamped the book under her arm, trying to ignore its struggle.

"If you find something..." he said with a look of resignation, "I will perform whatever is necessary."

Hermione smiled and leaned in to kiss him. "That would be very nice of you."

Scowling, he said, "I am *not* nice."

Ignoring the sounds of Hermione's laughter, Severus stalked back into the bedroom.

"Pleasant to see you two are not conjoined this morning," Severus taunted, walking into the rooms where Draco and Narcissa were being held.

"You could knock you know, Severus," Remus said, rising from the couch where he and Tonks were eating breakfast.

"Oh, I had no idea you and Miss Tonks here were playing house," Severus said with a smirk.

"No more than you are," Remus said in a low voice before noticing Hermione behind him. "Oh, good morning, Hermione."

Hermione nodded at Remus and took a seat next to Tonks on the couch. While Severus and Remus traded insults masked as politeness, Hermione said, "Do they ever grow up?"

Tonks, chewing on some toast, rolled her eyes. "No. At least not these two. The body makes up for the deficiency of the mind though," she said with a grin as she gazed approvingly at Remus.

Hermione snorted as Severus made another smart remark about fleas.

Tonks gestured with her toast at Severus. "Give yours a lobotomy and he wouldn't be half bad."

Hermione couldn't help but laugh, covering her mouth to avoid them from hearing.

"...at least it's nice to see you in love again, Severus," Remus said, trying to break the sparring match.

"What do you mean 'again'?" Severus asked, eying him suspiciously.

"Well of course as you said before with Lily," Remus said hesitantly.

"*That* was never public knowledge," Severus said slowly, looking uncertain as to whether he should be angry or defensive, or both.

Remus sighed. "Severus, I knew. I saw you two in the library all that time and knew you weren't just studying."

Severus' eyes shifted, but he remained silent.

Hermione and Tonks stopped chatting and stared up at the two of them. The tension in the air seemed to demand silence.

"If that is true, why didn't you run straight to your *friends*?" Severus said with a look of disgust.

"Because, I never had anything against you. I had nothing to do with what Sirius tried to do to you. I swear," Remus said with sincerity. He was watching Severus trying to process just how someone would pass up a genuine opportunity to ruin something for him. Once that was imprinted on someone's soul, it could never be taken away.

"In fact..." Tonks said, standing. "Remus is being modest," she said, placing an arm around Remus' shoulder. He turned and took a few steps away.

Severus' eyes tracked him for a time, then snapped back to Tonks in irritated confusion.

Hermione sat watching the exchange in silence.

"Severus, Remus had feelings for Lily too. Not only did he say nothing when he saw you two together; he kept Sirius and James away. To give you a chance," Tonks said, daring to place a hand on Severus' shoulder.

Severus' face held genuine confusion and shock. Never in his young life had anyone ever done anything to help him in any way. He looked at Hermione and saw her moving her eyes towards Lupin, giving him a "Go speak to him" signal.

Taking a deep breath, Severus moved over to where Remus was standing with his back to him and said reluctantly, "I suppose I should at least thank you for doing that. I had no idea."

Remus turned, genuinely stunned that Severus Snape had not only managed to complete a sentence without an insult, but had actually thanked him.

"It *it* needed to be done," Remus said, shrugging and staring at the floor. He had known that given his condition he had no chance with Lily, but it hadn't made the loss any

less painful.

Severus shifted uneasily, still trying to absorb what Lupin had done.

The atmosphere in the room was on edge. Severus and Remus had never passed more than a few words without some form of hostility. Remus looked like he had something significant to say, as if he was going to apologize for everything on behalf of the dead.

Before Remus could respond, Severus startled everyone out of their thoughts by yelling loudly towards the bedroom door, "Narcissa!"

The bedroom door opened, and Narcissa appeared, looking irritated at being called in such a way. "I am~~not~~ an elf, Severus."

"And yet you came like one," he said, sneering at her. "Are you prepared?"

"Yes," she said contemptuously.

"Excellent then. Come with me," he said and swept from the room.

"Draco?" Hermione asked, opening the bedroom door. She saw him sitting in an armchair on the far side of the room. He hastily threw his hood up.

"What do *you* want?" he said moodily.

"I don't want anything. I just wanted to ask you a question," Hermione said, moving towards him.

Remus stood in the doorway, his heart going out to Draco. He knew exactly how it felt to be an outcast.

When Draco didn't respond, she said, "Draco, what did Voldemort say when this happened to you?"

"Why would you care?" he said angrily, trying to hide a flinch at the name.

"Draco, Hermione would like to help," Remus said.

Silence stretched out as Draco sat, unmoving.

Hermione was gathering her thoughts to offer an argument when he said in a voice full of failure, "He said I was a coward. A failure like my father. That although I would be given a chance to redeem myself by spying, I still needed to be punished."

Hermione noticed his shoulders shook slightly before he said, "Then he said '*Informis manentia*' and... this happened."

Sighing deeply, he turned towards her and pushed back his hood. For the first time, Hermione was faced with the sight that had shaken even Severus. Draco's face looked as if acid had been poured on it from above. All of his features were shifted downward and to a right angle with severe blistering. One eye was swollen shut, but the other one was untouched.

Hermione could see the immense pain and regret in that eye.

She fought the urge to look away and, instead, reached out and took his hand. Draco flinched, and an expression of revulsion crossed his face for a moment before it was replaced by defeat and indifference.

"Come with me." Glancing at Remus and Tonks, she added, "We're going back to Severus' rooms to do a little research."

"Narcissa, I don't believe I need to warn you about crossing me. Besides, I have something valuable of yours, yes?" Severus said, his senses heightened by the noises from the rising winds. A storm was approaching, hurrying clouds across the sky at an alarming pace. They stood just outside of the castle gates, each of them keeping their voices low.

"Yes, Severus, I'm well aware of that, thank you," Narcissa said sarcastically, glaring at him as he handed her wand to her.

"I'm pleased that we understand each other," he purred, taunting her. "Now, the password at Spinner's End is 'lemon drops.'"

At the odd look on her face, he sneered, "Would you have guessed it?"

Concealing a grin, she replied, "No, I suppose not."

"Excellent, you know what to do. I am leaving an owl here to wait so you may send notice of your return. Do this and I will remove both your and Draco's Marks. You will be safe with us," Severus said and swiftly turned to leave.

"Why can't you simply grant me access to pass into the grounds on my own?" she asked.

Severus stopped and, without turning, said over his shoulder, "Because trust is a fragile thing, Narcissa. Something you've not much hope of earning with me for a long time."

Scowling, Narcissa Apparated without a word.

Severus Snape's home on Spinner's End provided the perfect location for just about anything of a non-respectable nature. The disheveled state of the neighborhood spoke of a collection of residents who would not give a second glance at any strange goings on, Muggle or magical. When Narcissa stood at the back door of the house, muttering "lemon drops" loudly, no one who might have overheard from the crowded nearby houses stirred. Lately, all sorts of odd people came and went from the house at all hours of the night, some seemingly dropping out of the sky.

Wormtail had long ago stopped going by the name of Peter Pettigrew. The personality flaw that led him to follow anyone in authority stripped his need for a proper name. Now he only sniveled at the Dark Lord's feet, performing whatever undesirable task was set before him. Since the traitor Snape was no longer in need of his home, Wormtail had moved in, having been told to prepare it to be the new base. Soon he would cast a strong Concealing Charm on the house. No one would miss such a wretched place, and the Order would certainly think twice before launching an attack in the middle of a Muggle neighborhood.

He was upstairs watching when she arrived. Part of him was surprised to see her come there of all places. Word of her and Draco's treachery had reached the Dark Lord's ears, and the word "furious" did not come close to describing his reaction. When they found Bella, he had completely lost his composure, lashing out at anyone within range for her death.

Four Horcruxes had been lost, and now the Dark Lord's obsession with preserving his immortality had become fanatical in nature.

No matter; delivering her to the Dark Lord would earn him much praise. Yes, much praise indeed. Without Lucius or Bella, it was entirely possible to rise to a higher position. He had no illusions about Narcissa, though. Her sister obviously didn't go quietly, so he expected the same from her. To capture her alive, though, would take stealth.

When he heard the back door open, Wormtail transformed and expertly leaped from the window sill.

Opening the door to the Room of Requirement, Severus was met with an impressive display of security. Alastor Moody was no one to be trifled with in terms of security, and this was a masterpiece. Not only was the door charmed to only himself and Severus; the room also had transformed itself into quite a stronghold.

As Severus moved into the room, the door disappeared behind him. He found the cup held high in the air, shielded by a bubble of magic. The charm turning the cup black was gone, leaving the golden color to shine brightly through the swirling magic. Severus muttered a spell, releasing the shield, and lowered the cup gently to the floor. Even the floor was protected, a light layer of padding stretching from wall to wall.

Waving his hand towards the Horcrux, Severus watched as its color moved through a wide array of hues before settling on a tarnished silver. When he lowered his hand, it returned to its golden color once more. While pacing a few laps, he thought he recognized the type of magic, but wasn't sure.

This seems to have more of a destructive nature. Voldemort must have been more accomplished at the Dark Arts when creating this one he thought, staring at the cup lying innocently on the floor. He did know one thing: anyone daring to touch it would die almost immediately from the curse.

Taking a deep breath, Severus raised his wand and began to mutter a long, complex incantation, much like when he had destroyed the locket. Based on the cup's reaction he would simply adjust.

At least, that was the plan.

The cup rose from the floor and tipped slowly end-over-end. It lifted above his line of sight, calmly obeying his instructions. He circled his right hand around, and a protective cyclone formed around cup. Again, it calmly turned over and floated harmlessly within its boundaries, controlled, purposeful.

Performing the complex wand movements required him to hold his arms up, sending searing pain across his chest and back. Severus' wand hand shook slightly while the cup continued to rotate calmly, awaiting the next stage. As expected, the color became more intense, but then it suddenly drained into an intense blackness, rapidly becoming a living darkness. A force reverberated, a strange power in the room, rising, reaching out, droning seductively, murmuring soft promises of terrifying strength.

Severus stepped back as the cup started to vibrate violently, its rotation increasing in speed. It began to waver, shifting wildly to the top of the swirling magical field and threatening to escape. Severus, cursing under his breath, concentrated on forcing it down, hoping to hold it so he could quickly cast the final destruction spell.

The light's intensity became blinding, obliterating all detail in the room with pure, blood-red light. Severus could no longer see the cup and blindly cast the destruction spell, staggering backwards as violent energy overtook all of his senses.

As Severus' spell hit its mark, the cup rose to the top of the magical field, spiraled over on itself, and shot downward with such force it blasted through the floor. More explosions echoed upward as the cup shot through seven more floors into the dungeons below, ending in a ground-shaking boom.

As floorboards and bits of padding landed all around him, Severus gathered himself and moved to the edge of the ragged hole. Daring to look down, he could see remnants of the library, hospital wing, broken pipes spouting misdirected water, and several members of the quite startled Weasley family peering up at him.

Severus scowled as he heard Ronald Weasley's distinctive voice exclaim, "Bloody hell!"

Before he could leave to confirm that the cup was destroyed, another face moved into the tunnel of broken wood and stone.

"Severus?" Minerva's strained voice called, "A word? Please? NOW?"

Moving to rise, Severus muttered to himself, "Bloody hell, indeed."

Narcissa quietly entered the dingy kitchen, listening for any sign of Wormtail. The only sounds she could discern were the faraway cry of a tomcat, a water spout dripping rhythmically, and a slight scratching noise. She was sure she had been watched as she approached the house, but she could see nothing. Even in the daytime, the gray sky lent no light to the interior.

Entering silently into the sitting room, Narcissa's memory recalled when she was last there, begging Snape to intervene to save her son. Remembering the wall from which Wormtail had appeared, she shifted to the side, keeping her wand pointed in that direction. She heard a faint alternating thump and scratching sound that were approaching slowly. As the wall jerked slightly and then began to move aside, Narcissa crouched down behind a couch. A stray cat hissed at her from under an armchair. At first, she moved to silently kill it should it give her away, but then thought better of it.

Instead, an evil grin spread on her face as she reached her wand towards the cat, finding it by its shining eyes.

Wormtail dropped down each stair riser towards the concealed door. Once in the sitting room, he would transform, deliver a binding spell and then happily take her to the Dark Lord. With each step, he scrambled slightly, and then dropped with a thump. Even in his Animagus form, he was on the round and clumsy side. Touching the lever to slide open the wall, he couldn't help but squeak in anticipation. Surely tonight he would be enjoying high praise in the inner circle with the Dark Lord.

Wormtail scampered out into the sitting room and peered around, fully expecting to find her close by. Scanning the floor, he did not see any trace of her. Setting up on his haunches, he twisted around, searching with growing disappointment.

Smelling the air, his animal instinct suddenly cried out for his attention. Before he could react, he was snatched up, and he watched helplessly as the dimly lit sitting room swung violently from side to side. He was then thrown forcefully to the floor. Something was pressing on his tail. He rose and tried frantically to run squealing.

Again, he was picked up and thrown, bouncing off of what must be one of the legs of a chair. Twisting to get to his feet, Wormtail hopped a few feet before he was deftly lifted once more. His fur was wet, and he almost fainted with fright to find he was clamped inside of a cat's mouth. The room moved in a soft bounce as he was carried across the room. A set of robes appeared, and as he lifted his head, he saw none other than Narcissa. She was grinning down at him while waving her wand at the cat, who was obviously under the Imperius Curse.

Narcissa laughed softly, enjoying the sheer panic in Wormtail's small eyes as he struggled in the cat's mouth.

"Now, now, Wormtail. Don't struggle. We wouldn't want the kitty to close his jaws on you would we?" she purred, and with a wave of her wand, the cat's mouth began to slowly close.

Satisfied at the sounds of him squealing madly, she lifted the curse and took the struggling rat by the tail. She held him up, threw him in the air and cast a revealing spell, forcing him to transform.

"Narcissa!" Wormtail cried, as if she had just arrived for tea. "It's you! I'm so glad to see you! Draco is doing well I hope..." Wormtail said, rising from the floor. His posture as a human was nothing more than a permanent crouch, forever looking subservient to anyone before him.

"Silence!" Narcissa snarled. "If you think for a moment I am swayed by your insipid babbling, you are sadly mistaken."

Wormtail stared at her in silence, then flicked his eyes to where his wand laid. As Narcissa brought her wand up, he lunged for it and turned. Before he could utter a spell, the wand was cleanly flicked out of his fingers and flew to Narcissa's waiting hand.

Casually, she walked over to him as he put his hands up in surrender.

"Giving up so soon, Wormtail? Pity. You were never good for anything other than being a pet or a sniveling servant."

Wormtail only watched her, fully expecting the Killing Curse. His hands were plastered to his face, worrying his lip.

Feigning sadness, she said in a calming voice tinged with amusement, "Don't fret now. You are about to serve a different master."

A devious grin spread on her face as she raised her wand again. "*IMPERIO!*"

"An explanation?" Minerva said, trying her best to keep her calm as Severus entered her office. She was still brushing bits of debris from her robes. *All I wanted was to have a simple tea with the Weasleys in peace...*

Waving his hand dismissively, Severus took a seat in front of her desk. In his lap he held the mangled Hufflepuff cup. "It got away from me, Minerva. That is all."

"Got away from you? Got away? Severus! What am I to do with you?" she said to the ceiling, as if searching for patience.

Severus grinned and looked up at her. "Do with me? Seriously, Minerva, you're speaking to me as if I were a student again."

She fixed him with a look that said that he was not acting much better than one.

"It was an accident, I assure you," he offered, holding the cup closer.

"An accident? Severus, how..." Minerva started, but then was distracted as an owl pecked at her window. As she opened the window, the owl hopped onto Severus' leg and presented a torn bit of parchment.

As Severus read the note, Minerva said, mostly to herself, "At least another Horcrux has been destroyed. Let us hope that a portion of the castle doesn't need to be sacrificed each time."

Severus shooed the owl away, saying, "If there is nothing else, I need to go meet Narcissa at the gates. She has been successful."

"Successful? Successful at what?" Minerva asked, flustered.

"Come. Take a walk with me," Severus said, glad to have her distracted. He set the battered cup on her desk and rose.

AN: *Informis manentia: Latin translation = Deform permanent*

Friends and Allies

Chapter 25 of 41

A novel-length post HBP HG/SS romance adventure. What if Severus returned, trained Harry for the final battle and worked to destroy the final Horcruxes? Story is complete and will be updated regularly.

Disclaimer: It still belongs to JKR. Enough said.

AN: *Eternal thanks to Ariadne.*

"Minerva, the Riddle house is monstrous. It's not as if we can go galloping in there and search it at our leisure," Severus said as they walked towards the castle gates.

"I see. Well then, why don't you just destroy the entire thing then," Minerva said, waving her arms with a laugh. "Just blow it up. It seems to be a talent of yours."

Her anger over his "accidentally" blasting a hole through Hogwarts had dissipated a little. She couldn't resist teasing him about his apparent destructive streak, intentional or not.

Severus gave her a stern look out of the corner of his eye and chose to ignore her comment. He couldn't help but try to hide a smirk, though. "It was an accident, Minerva."

"If that is your story," she said casually, gazing towards the lake. She clasped her hands behind her back as they walked.

"Minerva..." he said, gritting his teeth, "I am not a child."

"And yet you act like one," she said with a soft laugh. "Love has done strange things to you, Severus. I have known you since you were a small, intense-looking boy. Yes, I noticed you. A frightfully thin and sullen thing. Closed off to the world, trying to fight back by being as formidable as possible. Hurt them before they hurt you was the strategy, hmm? Drive them away and they never get a chance. Only you never stopped doing that, did you?"

Severus turned his head slightly, his expression only a shade more attentive than bored, painful memories shoved far into the shadows.

"Ah, then love comes along," Minerva continued, slowing her pace, forcing Severus to match hers out of good manners. "Hermione didn't fall for the intimidation act, did she? She stood up to you, and you love her for it."

Severus remained silent, choosing to stare at the castle gates, cursing them for being so far away.

Smiling, Minerva said wistfully, "Do not try to fight love, Severus. Its effects on you are a blessing."

"I will not lie and say it hasn't... influenced me in a way," he said, choosing his words carefully.

"Influenced? Oh, Severus, you are the master of the understatement. I daresay you have lived more in the past few weeks than in the past twenty years."

"I do not deny it," he said, mostly to himself.

"You love her, Severus?" she said, more as a statement than a question.

"I do," he said without hesitation, his eyes fixed on the approaching grass as they walked.

Minerva nodded. "Then you know what you must consider. What you must do?"

"I do," he said, tilting his head towards her. Without a word, an understanding passed between them, and the subject was closed.

"Tell me more of your grand plan, Severus. You are quite the strategist," Minerva said, patting him on the shoulder as she negotiated a slight decline. The gates were now coming into view.

Visibly relaxing, Severus said, "Voldemort is choosing to move their headquarters."

Minerva stopped, watching Severus turn after realizing she was no longer beside him.

"How do you know?" she asked.

Severus shrugged. "It's an educated guess. Since Wormtail is obviously not there to enjoy the finer points of Spinner's End, one can only assume. The Riddle house is far too large to cast enough protection wards. That leaves them open to too many blind spots. It makes sense to hide amongst the Muggles. In plain sight, if you will."

Minerva considered his words and nodded in agreement. "You believe they would leave the Horcrux unguarded or move it?"

Severus shook his head, saying, "Moving it is too risky, as Voldemort is aware of both our hunt and that it is I who have destroyed the locket and cup. He has only two left and will not take chances. No, he will leave it there, but it will certainly be guarded."

"Interesting plot of yours, Severus. Why not have Wormtail simply bring the Horcrux to you?"

"Because I do not think Voldemort dim-witted enough not to notice his closest servant acting strangely. Too much suspicion would be raised by Wormtail trying to remove the Horcrux, and there is little chance of him being successful. The plan is to have him share with us the location within the mansion, who will be guarding it, and when the headquarters will move."

"And what will become of Pettigrew once you have what you want?" Minerva asked with a tinge of sadness.

"As much as I would like to see him die in a most creative way, he will be left alive. He will deliver his information here in person, be taken back to my house, and have his memory of ever being under the Imperius Curse Obliviated. Narcissa agreed to not leave a mark on him, so there will be no evidence of any abduction or tampering." Grinning, Severus continued. "We may then trap him at will, extract information and then return him untouched. We will allow Voldemort to think we're completely in the dark for as long as possible, leading him to believe we're at a disadvantage. If Pettigrew is found to be under the Imperius, we have lost nothing."

Minerva smiled broadly. "An unwitting spy... Brilliant!"

"Yes, well... the position has been left open, hasn't it?" he said while waving his hand.

"Severus, you are far too intelligent for your own good. I am glad to have you on our side," Minerva said laughingly.

Severus moved to continue towards the gates, but Minerva stopped him with a hand on his arm. "Severus, I mean what I say. Orders of Merlin aside, you are a hero to the Order. Never forget that."

Suddenly she held out her arms, prompting Severus to look at her as if she was mad.

"Prepare yourself, Severus. I'm going to hug you."

"Oh, hell, Minerva. Has something been dropped in your tea?" he said, looking around the grounds quickly.

"Yes, the Hufflepuff cup almost landed in my tea," she said with a sad smile. "Now, hush and humor an old witch."

Minerva then gingerly held him by the shoulders, attempting a light hug without touching any wounds.

"See? You didn't die, did you?" she said, patting his arm.

"Worse things have yet to kill me."

"It's about time, Snape," Narcissa sneered as Severus and Minerva approached the castle gates.

"Patience, Narcissa, patience," he drawled, opening the gate and motioning in an exaggerated bow for her to pass.

"Everything in order, I presume?" he asked once they were safely inside. A thought struck him as to how strange it felt to be the one on the receiving end of information back from the field.

"Yes. Not a mark on him. Kitty here..." she said, holding up a black cat who looked to be in need of a few dozen good meals, "... should be thanked for being in the right place at the right time. Draco could use a pet, now that... well, since everything is gone."

Narrowing his eyes as the cat attempted to stare him down, Severus asked, "And the Curse? Do you think anyone will notice?"

"Not likely. I've crafted it so that it is very subtle. His orders are to locate the Horcrux, announce that your house is ready to house headquarters sooner than expected and to volunteer to stand guard at the Riddle house. Wormtail, of all lower life-forms, shouldn't raise suspicion by begging to perform such a prestigious task," she said while stroking the cat in her arms.

"Excellent," Severus said, engaging in a staring contest with the cat. It hissed at him and wrapped its paws almost protectively around Narcissa's neck.

"Of course, if the Dark Lord gets a hold of him, he will plainly see what I've done," Narcissa said, passing a slightly apprehensive look between Severus and Minerva.

"Narcissa, there are no shades of treason. You and Draco have already achieved full traitor status. Be proud; I may have badges made up," Severus said with a grin.

Narcissa actually laughed before catching herself.

"I suppose you will be wanting my wand again?" Narcissa said reluctantly as she glanced between them.

"That won't be necessary," Minerva said. "I think Severus will agree that you are no longer a prisoner, Draco included. Right, Severus?"

"Agreed. You are one of us now. Understand this, though..." he said, stepping forward. His face darkened as he looked gravely at her. "The time will undoubtedly come when you will be faced with your former colleagues, people you have associated with for years, possibly even Lucius. I have no doubt that Azkaban will not hold for long."

Narcissa looked at him as though she had already considered this very thought.

"You will have to obey the Order's commands without hesitation, even if it means killing your own husband or others you may have been close to. Are you willing?"

Narcissa nodded solemnly and said, "Lucius has already tried his hand at killing both Draco and myself. It would be my pleasure to return the favor."

Severus nodded his approval.

"Only I will succeed," she added, her eyes filled with vengeance.

A sly grin spread on Severus' face as he said, "That's the spirit."

"Hermione, do you honestly think whatever happened to him will be in a book?" Tonks asked quietly so Draco wouldn't overhear. "Don't you think it's getting his hopes up a little?"

"I know, but this library has everything that can be known about the Dark Arts, including reversal spells. It was good enough to have a history of the Dark Mark's usage; it should have something for this," Hermione said while flipping through the dusty pages. The book was fairly tame, but still struggled to snap closed every chance possible. Whenever left on its own, it crept slowly across the table.

As the book once again tried to close, Hermione pounded her fist on it in frustration, yelling, "Quit it!" The book's response was to wiggle slightly but to remain open.

Hermione kept scanning the pages, looking for anything that indicated the type of curse that affected Draco. She was looking for the incantation *Informis manentia*, but found nothing. While there were several quite fascinatingly terrible ways to disfigure someone, none involved the incantation Draco had described.

As the house-elves brought tea, Hermione had a thought. *Could the spell have been non-verbal, and what Draco heard was to make it permanent?*

Quickly turning back to the front of the book, she reread that the proviso stating the importance of understanding the types of magic one may deal with, as often they might be not purely Dark magic, but, rather, a combination. Renewing her search, she this time looked for spells that matched the curse's effects on Draco.

As time passed, Draco sat staring out the window, his hood still drawn. Remus and Tonks sat on the couch holding hands and, when not watching Hermione work, stared intensely into each other's eyes.

It must be here somewhere... come on... she thought while checking the index, hoping to find a lead.

For some time the room was quiet with the exception of Hermione turning pages and scribbling notes. Her quill would scratch quickly for a time, then stop abruptly. She held the book in place as it weakly tried to creep away as she researched. Frequently, she would read a passage aloud to herself, then either mutter something like "Possibly" or "No, definitely not." In her excitement when on the trail of something she thought promising, she stood as she read, hunched over the book while holding it with one hand and taking furious notes with the other.

Even a distant boom that sounded like thunder did little to distract her; she merely glanced out the window and noted in her mind that it was strange since there were no clouds.

At times, although no one noticed, Draco turned to watch her as she researched. The expression on what was left of his face spoke volumes. He was certainly stunned that Hermione would so passionately pour herself into looking for a solution to help him, of all people. After all he had done and, specifically, how he had treated her, it was astounding that she would still care. Could it be possible that all he had known or thought he knew about blood was wrong?

Another hour stretched out, the silence filled with the rhythmic sounds of Hermione's quill and her muttering to herself. After adding one last passage to her notes, Hermione stood up slowly and pounded her fist on the table startling everyone. Remus and Tonks looked particularly stunned as they peered over the back of the couch at her. Remus' hair was standing up in strange angles.

"I've got it!" she cried.

"Severus, you may go ahead and see to Hermione's *project*. I shall escort Narcissa to the guest rooms where she and Draco will live," Minerva said, looking quickly up at the castle. She and Severus had briefly discussed Hermione's idea of trying to break the curse afflicting Draco, but she had no intention of getting Narcissa's hopes up.

Severus followed her gaze and saw Hermione in their window waving at him. Part of him didn't believe that she could have found the solution so quickly.

Then again, what is the bloody saying? Cleverest witch something-or-other?

As Severus went to open the door to his rooms, it jerked out of his hand, and his arms were suddenly filled with a very excited Hermione. Groaning as his stitches strained, he tried to hold her without falling backwards. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him quickly.

Moving to pull the door closed, she said, "I think I've found it!" She pushed a parchment filled with notes into his hand, seemingly oblivious to his rubbing his chest.

Straining to read her notes, Severus' eyebrows raised. Looking impressed, he said quietly, "This is extremely complex. Are you certain?"

"Yes. Can you do it?" she asked, looking extremely hopeful.

"Of course I can do this, but, Hermione, this will most likely be very painful. It requires me to transform the curse before removing it," he said, placing a hand on her shoulder when she looked at him questioningly. "Dark magic is neither simple nor fair. The very nature of it is to channel evil into tangible results. Requiring me to hurt him again, worse, in the process of removing the curse is only one example."

Hermione said while gazing at the floor, "It's the best chance he's got, isn't it, though?"

"Yes. I doubt there is any other recourse. Understand, though, there is a high probability it will not work after all. A curse cast by Voldemort is by far more powerful than most. I will not lie to you I am good, but I may not be powerful enough to be successful. It is admirable, however... your ferocity in the pursuit of a solution for him," he said softly. "In that respect, you are a far better person than I."

"Thank you, I just... well, I can't help it," she said, shrugging.

"Quite understandable. You must show off your impressive researching skills," he said with a smirk, hoping to cheer her a little.

As she smiled weakly, he drew her close and, putting his forehead against hers, said, "I will do my best, even if it exhausts me. I do this even for someone whose actions almost brought me death. Do you have any inkling as to why?"

Hermione grinned and said quietly, "Hmm, no, I don't."

"Allow me to enlighten you," he whispered before kissing her. "Because you have asked me... and to that, I have no hope of resistance," he murmured and kissed her with deep passion.

"We shall do this in the dungeons," he said quietly and opened the door.

"Now, Narcissa. You may of course alter the rooms to your liking," Minerva said, watching Narcissa walk into the sitting room and then look towards the bedrooms.

"Thank you..." Narcissa said, looking out of place. Kitty had already taken up residence on the window sill, lazily flicking its tail as it surveyed the world outside.

"Minerva. Please call me 'Minerva.'"

"Minerva," Narcissa said with a polite nod. She gazed towards the small sitting area and fireplace.

Clearing her throat, Narcissa said, "There is no way for me to thank you for allowing us to stay here. Draco and I are indebted to you."

Minerva held up her hand and smiled sadly. "You are welcome, Narcissa. I understand these are trying times. I only hope that you will be happy here. If you are in need of anything, please let me know; your fireplace is connected to the Floo network now," she said, nodding towards the fireplace and turning to leave.

A few hours later, Severus and Hermione appeared in the doorway to find Narcissa in the process of levitating a couch nearer the fireplace. She glanced his way and said, "Is Draco with you? I need him to help me with... Gods, Severus, you look like complete hell... More so than usual..."

Severus narrowed his eyes slightly, but remained silent. He moved aside, revealing Draco behind him.

The curse had been removed, restoring his face, with just some residual scarring.

Narcissa's eyes widened in shock and disbelief. The couch she was levitating crashed to the floor as she stood, her wand arm slowly falling to her side.

She gasped, "Draco!" and quickly crossed the room, taking him into her arms. At first, Draco looked embarrassed, but then clutched his mother's shoulders tightly. Narcissa had been reduced to murmuring his name over and over while rocking him.

After a while, Draco moved back and said softly, "Mother, look."

When Draco pulled up his sleeve to show that his Mark was gone, Narcissa completely lost all composure and could do nothing but sob. She ran her hand over his forearm as if to convince herself that it was truly gone.

Narcissa looked up and approached Severus. "I should properly thank you, Severus. I have to admit I doubted you."

"Thank Hermione for both the Mark and curse. It was her research which found the solution," he said with a nod towards Hermione.

Narcissa turned to Hermione, wiping her tears away. She straightened her back and nodded solemnly before saying, "Hermione, there is nothing I can say to express my thanks enough. It is obvious that we have been wrong about blood hatred. My sincere apologies. I know that Draco would agree."

Draco stepped forward and held out his hand to Hermione. "Friends?"

"More than that," Hermione said, taking his hand and glancing around the room. "Allies."

"You know I love you, but..." she began, tracing a pattern around his scar. She was making it itch maddeningly, but he wasn't about to ask her to stop. The sun had set since Hermione had joined him, lying beside him on the bed, but she had made no move to bid him goodnight. He was afraid of breathing incorrectly for fear that she would leave. Part of him had long ceased calling himself a coward for refusing to ask her to stay. The other didn't trust himself if she did.

"That does not sound like a good beginning," he said tiredly. What Hermione didn't know was that he had been exhausted even before removing Narcissa's Mark.

Hermione laughed. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Well, any sentence that starts with something like 'I love you, but ...' is bound to be followed with 'you're a complete git' or 'you secretly make me ill'. Something of that sort. Hardly the beginning of a sentence that is going to make the receiver happy."

"Severus, please," she said, chuckling. "No, it's just I don't know much about you. Your life."

"Oh. Is that required?" he groaned.

"Yes, very much so."

"Isn't secrecy part of the allure?" he said, waving his hand.

"Please do humor me," she said, tracing a circle on his stomach.

"Can't we just imagine that I arrived at Hogwarts a fully grown and accomplished Professor, robes and all?"

"Now you're just stalling," she whispered, kissing his ear.

"Will you be taking notes?" he said with a smirk.

Laughing, she said, "No."

"Fine, not much to tell. Pretty boring life."

"Boring! I'll say, you're anything but boring, Severus."

"Fine, what do you wish to know?" he said, resigned to his fate *No rest for the wicked*.

"Hmm, tell me about your childhood. Your mum and dad."

"Not much to say. I am a half-blood. My mother, as you and your mystery team found, was a witch, and my father was a Muggle. My father was a miserable tyrant who abused both of us mercilessly. At one point I became so enraged that I performed wandless magic and threw him across the room. My mother sent me to her sister's after that. He killed her that spring."

Hermione gasped and sat up quickly. "I'm so sorry. How old were you?"

"Nine."

Staring at the ceiling, he continued, "I then came to Hogwarts to start a new type of hell. As you can most expertly deduce, I was not popular in any way and became the target of Sirius and James. While Remus and Peter did nothing to me, they did nothing to interfere either."

Hermione placed her hand over his.

"I knew quite a bit of Dark Magic when I arrived at Hogwarts and tried to develop a dangerous reputation. The library was my natural home. Sirius and James were as likely to be there as a Hippogriff was to be in Great Hall."

He grew quiet at that point, and with the candles dying out, she couldn't read his expression.

"And Lily?" she ventured.

Silence reigned for a stretch of time. The ticking of the clock could be heard faintly from under the mound of clothing she had buried it in.

Sighing deeply, Severus said, "Lily was extremely popular, but wasn't arrogant or snobbish as one would expect. She would often be in the library as well. One day, she came over to me, and when I found enough breath to form words, we talked. We found that we both loved Potions so met to study most nights. It was quite strange that in all that time, none of James' gang found us. Thanks to Lupin, I now know why. It went on for most of a year."

"That long?" she asked, slightly surprised.

"Yes. It ended, as Potter probably told you, the day she tried to protect me. The rest you already know."

"Were you... were you with anyone else?" Hermione asked, trying to act casual.

Grinning, he said, "Yes, early in my seventh year, I discovered the wonders of hygiene and supposedly cleaned up to look marginally good."

"Yes?" she said, drawing it out to lead him to continue.

"What question are you asking, Hermione?"

Thankful that the dying light hid her blush, she said, "Well, when did you first...?"

"Ah, we've gotten to the point, have we? Is this an interview? See if I measure up?"

Gasping, she said quickly, "No, no! I was just wondering..."

Feigning embarrassment, he said thoughtfully, "I should be dressed much better for an interview, I would suppose."

"Severus! I was just..."

"If you must know, it was in my seventh year. I somehow managed to have a few girls, all Slytherins of course. Over time, I became quite bold and creative."

"Really? You? Breaking rules?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"Shocked? How do you suppose I know exactly every single place an amorous couple may be found in this castle, if I hadn't been there myself?" he asked with a smirk.

"In fact, one time Minerva almost caught me. To this day I don't believe she has any idea it was me."

Giggling a little, Hermione said, "Oh, really? How?"

"Quidditch pitch," he said, looking at her seriously, his eyes shining by the dying light. "Was a full moon in more ways than one."

Hermione burst out laughing, resorting to hide her face in the pillow.

Summer Night

Chapter 26 of 41

A novel-length post HBP HG/SS romance adventure. What if Severus returned, trained Harry for the final battle and worked to destroy the final Horcruxes? Story is complete and will be updated regularly.

Disclaimer: They still belong to JK, and it is still rightly so.

AN: Another sparkly thanks to Ariadne, who is still the best beta and writing partner in crime a gal could ask ever wish for.

"You're laughing too much, Hermione. You must breathe sometime," Severus said with a straight face.

"I'm sorry. I'm not laughing at you. It was just so unexpected," she said while trying valiantly to not start another round of laughter.

Severus shrugged, thinking about how beautiful she looked by candlelight.

"You should warn a person when you're about to do that. You're so serious most of the time," she said, brushing a stray hair out of his eyes.

"I was under the impression that my dry wit was attractive to you," he said, turning his head into her hand.

"You do have a point there. Can I ask you another question, though?" she asked, placing a kiss on his forehead and stroking his hair. She then moved over and started to kiss along his neck, up behind his ear.

Groaning softly, he growled, "How can I possibly hope to deny you? Keep that up, and you may ask me anything."

"Oh, really?" she whispered as a smile crept on her face. "Anything?"

"Absolutely. Of course," he said, raising slowly to one elbow. "I always reserve the right to not answer."

Expecting a typically Slytherin evasive answer, she agreed. "Fine. I'll ask you something simple yet dangerous."

Raising an eyebrow, he responded, "Ah, sounds interesting. Something been on your mind for a while, has it?"

"I ask the questions here, Severus," she said with a smirk.

"Oh, then please accept my most grave apologies. Do continue," he said, lying down again. Somehow, just being with her gave him a second wind. The breeze coming in through the window gave him an idea. "Before you ask, would you like to relocate? Outside?"

"Really? I thought you were tired?" she asked.

He didn't answer other than to raise up and take her into his arms. Gently, he kissed her with a soft tenderness she didn't think possible, stood, and held out his hand to her.

"Here," he said, leading her down towards the greenhouses. The night breeze blew their robes around them softly, driving warmth away, then inviting it back, the temperature perfect. Around back of the last greenhouse was a patch of grass where the castle offered cover from three sides, the structure itself blocking the fourth.

Slipping between the wall and the greenhouse, Hermione grinned. "So, is this one of the famous hideouts?"

"Hideout, yes. However, I would never take you somewhere where I had been with another," he said, looking around.

"So you just hid here?" she asked as she watched him lower himself onto the grass. The look in his eyes told her that he had not been there for a very long time. It was the look of someone confronted by memories, distracted by the visual mind replaying scenes from long ago.

Pulling her hand, he motioned for her to sit. The night was warm, but he still held his robes out to wrap around her. Obliging him, Hermione allowed him to hold her close, completely wrapped inside against him.

"I don't think I could put into words what it's like to be hunted for seven years. I came here and the library for peace, to fight the overpowering instinct to watch my back," he said, staring up at the stars.

Hermione followed his line of sight to the night sky. "That bad, was it? Why did they hate you so much?"

"A case of loathing at first sight, if you will. No other way to explain it," he said, lowering his face into her hair. "Now," he said, smiling at how Hermione was rhythmically running her hand over his chest, "you were going to ask a quite dangerous question of me?"

Hermione was so absorbed in being tucked up against him she took a moment to answer, "Hmm? Oh, yes."

"Unless you'd like to stroke my chest all night. That, and more, can be arranged," he said, grinning at her surprised look as she raised her head.

"No, well not that I wouldn't want to that is..."

"Hermione?" he said, interrupting her.

She sighed in frustration, "Yes?"

"It seems you ramble when you are nervous. I believe this is one of those times."

"Yes. Okay, where do you see us in a year?" she said quickly.

"Interesting question," he said slowly, noting how she had managed to evade an awkward conversational position and admiring how neatly she had put him in one instead.

Hermione leaned further onto him, trying to not disturb his stitches, and awaited his answer. *His voice is amazing. He could be reciting the Quidditch rule book, and I would be in heaven.*

"It's all right if you don't answer," she started.

"No, it's that I've never really planned a future for anything. To be asked to think past tomorrow is a relatively new concept to me," he said sadly.

"I can only imagine. I'm sorry if I've jogged memories."

"My memories are quite rampant on their own. They don't require *jogging*."

"So I've noticed," she said.

"Pardon?"

"I've, um, noticed. You have nightmares," she said, tilting her head up to watch his face.

She saw him pale slightly before he said to the ground, "Yes, there is a reason I usually avoid sleep."

Hermione remembered nights during the week Severus had been unconscious, watching in fear that he would awaken and injure himself further. If he only knew how many late night hours she had sat beside him on the bed, holding his hand and reading by candlelight...

"Back to your question. I believe you referred to us. To give a perfectly politic answer, I cannot imagine a time without you. For as long as you will put up with my poor disposition, even worse temper, and strong tendency to insult in the process of normal conversation, I hope you will have me," he said as evenly as possible. His racing heart at the implications of such a question, however, betrayed his true feelings.

"You make it sound so attractive." She smiled. *Must let him out of that one, or his heart will burst, poor thing.*

"I do try."

Hermione traced his jaw with one finger and asked, "What is your favorite season?"

"Oddly enough, winter."

She leaned against him, asking, "Why do you think it odd?"

"I would imagine most people abhor the cold and gray days of winter, but miss the most magical part," he said, wrapping his robes tighter around her and rocking her gently.

"Which is?"

"This." At a wave of his hand, an invisible dome formed around them. While the temperature remained the same, snow began to fall, silently floating to the grass where it rested for a brief moment before melting.

"Severus, this is amazing. How are you..." she began, but was hushed by his whispering in her ear. "Aren't you going to ask?"

Laughingly, she said, "Okay, what is the most magical part?"

"Ah, I thought you'd never ask," he said, watching snow resting on her hair for a moment before it disappeared.

"Snow is, in its very essence, nature's perfection. Each flake in itself is a magnificent work of art; however, it is the effect a blanket of snow has that is the magical part. Take even the most atrocious looking landscape, cover it in pure white, and it is born anew. There is something about the solemn and untouched vision of this place at dawn after a snowfall that is stunning, an answer to an unspoken prayer, the hope that somehow events could be erased, forgotten, or, against all odds, forgiven."

Hermione looked up at him, too caught up in his words to speak.

"Too poetic?" he said, shaking his head. "Shall I throw in an arrogant comment or two to balance things out?"

"No, I just had never thought of it that way. Sometimes I guess life gets so frantic you forget to notice things like that," she said, taking his hand and intertwining their fingers.

"True, but when you're alone most of the time, the gift of close observation becomes your companion," he said distantly while he waved his hand. The snow that was falling slowly increased in speed, then swirled around them in a spiral pattern, moving higher to follow the dome's ceiling before falling again.

"Severus, how long have you performed wandless magic? You said you'd performed your juggling act since second year?" she asked, holding his hand up and tracing a circle in his palm.

"Yes. I did it as early as I can remember; however, any young witch or wizard will when angry or threatened," he said, thinking there was something undeniably sensual about what she was doing to his hand.

"That's true, but you're very good at it," she said, trailing her finger lightly, concentrating on the circle's pattern, smaller, then gradually widening.

"Am I?" he said distractedly as he directed the snow to form streams, which wove themselves into each other. To the far side of the formerly grassy area, a small snow replica of Hogwarts was forming, complete with towers and small, independently flying flakes representing owls.

Giggling, Hermione said, "Show off."

"Oh, am I now? I see... very well," he said smugly. Waving his hand again, the snow tapered off. He ran a hand through his hair, shaking snow off of it. The snow gave way to the grass, and the dome dissipated, allowing the warm June breeze to come in again. The last remnant to leave was the snow castle with what would have been the North Tower collapsing dramatically to the grass.

"Any other questions?" he asked, staring down as she continued tracing small circles in his hand.

"Hmm, no," she said and leaned gently against him.

"I must admit... there is something about what you are doing there..." he said slowly.

"Oh, really?" she said with a shrug. "I wouldn't know what you are talking about."

"Oh, I think you do. It means something, doesn't it?" he said, moving to put his chin on her shoulder, watching as she trailed her fingers even lighter over his palm and out onto each finger.

"Yes, it does."

With his free hand, he moved her hair and began to kiss the back of her neck. In a low voice he said, "Care to enlighten me?"

"It's an obscure Muggle thing," she said, blushing. She began to trail her fingers along his arm. The fact that she was barely touching him made it tremendously sensuous.

"I sense that it is something that translates well. Tell me, Hermione," he growled and moved from behind her. Circling around in front, he moved on hands and knees towards her. Without a word, she laid back on the cool grass and grinned up at him.

"Whatever do you mean? Are you implying that I am requesting something?" she said, barely able to keep from laughing.

"We are getting closer, I see," he murmured and, leaning down, barely touched his lips to hers. She raised up to meet him, but he pulled away.

He shook his head and said softly, "No, I'm afraid it is not that easy. You must tell me."

"Oh, no, I don't think so," she said and tried to pull him down by tugging on his robes.

"Shy, are we?" he asked, busying himself by moving his gaze further down.

"No more than you are about the possibility of being seen," she said with a smirk, remembering the hospital wing.

"If you aren't shy, then," he whispered in her ear. He dropped his voice lower and grinned slightly when she shivered. "Tell me what you wish."

"I, well..." she said, barely above a whisper.

"Yes?" he mumbled into her hair. He was just barely moving his lips along her neck, pausing to kiss lightly as he traveled around to her throat. When he moved downward, Hermione let out a small whimper.

He felt her hand in his hair pulling him closer. Looking up into her eyes, he said, "Back to non-verbal communication, are we?"

Grinning, she said, "Shut it and kiss me."

Looking impressed, he said, "If you insist. May I choose where?"

At her shocked face, he lunged forward to kiss her urgently, resting his weight on her, grasping handfuls of grass, pulling himself forward.

Hermione still had a fistful of his hair, pulling him closer into a kiss so passionate it stole her breath away. She raked her nails down his sides, ending at his hips, which only drove him harder. They moved together, throwing thought aside, needing to express what had been there for weeks, held back, barely in check. She somehow had taken hold of his coat, her fingers grasping the edges, poised to tear it open. Two buttons had given way, exposing his shirt beneath.

The almost primal need nearly overwhelmed him, a small part of his mind reminding, reining in, being shoved aside, but possessing strength enough to keep hold. A wild glint was in his eye as he hovered over her, his hair hanging around his face, moving in time with his ragged breath. His arms were shaking from trying to painfully hold himself up. A few stitches might be missing, but he didn't care.

Allowing himself to fall over to the side and onto his back, he struggled to catch his breath. "Am I on the correct path?" he asked, turning his head to her.

Hermione took a few moments to gather enough air to answer. "Yes."

Nodding to himself, he stared up at the sky. When her face moved into his line of sight, he smirked and said, "Was that so difficult? I daresay you could have expressed it with a touch more elegance, but it got the job done."

She shoved his shoulder. "You're teasing me now. That isn't easy for me."

"I was under the impression that the spoken word came quite easily to you. It is just another subject."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes."

"Is that a challenge?" she said, sitting up.

"If you choose it to be. The beauty of the spoken word is that you may interpret it as you wish," he said, quirking a smile as she narrowed her eyes at him.

"Fine. I want you, okay?" she said, throwing her hands up. "I think about what it would be like far too much to be healthy, and you're not actually laughing at me, are you?" she said, smacking him playfully as he chuckled.

"Absolutely not," he said, holding his hands up in mock defense. "Only, you speak of desire as though it is some sort of deficiency of morality or deviant thought. Desire is normal."

"It can't be. Not this much," she said, looking frustrated.

Rolling his eyes, he said flatly, "Get used to it."

Hermione shot him a confused look. "Why?"

"Because there is something that needs to be done beforehand," he stated and moved slowly to stand.

Getting to her feet, she looked at him questioningly, trying to ignore the maddeningly fluid movement of his hands as he fixed the stray buttons. "And that is?"

"That," he said, leaning forward and slowly lifting her hand to his lips, "I cannot tell you."

I Cannot Tell

Chapter 27 of 41

A novel-length post HBP HG/SS romance adventure. What if Severus returned, trained Harry for the final battle and worked to destroy the final Horcruxes? Story is complete and will be updated regularly.

Disclaimer: Still belongs to JKR. Yes, no end in sight on that front.

AN: As always, a thanks to Ariadne who survived the last scene quite nicely and, in true carnival fashion, has earned a mug with a quote for her "trouble". ;-)

"Keeping secrets from each other is not a good start to a relationship," Hermione said as they walked back to the castle. She noticed that, while she was trying to reassemble her hair into something that did not look like she had rolled around in the grass, Severus looked perfect, except for a single blade of grass stuck under a fingernail. He frowned at it as he held his hand up to the moonlight, either oblivious to or ignoring her curiosity.

Just as she thought he wasn't going to answer, he stopped outside the Entrance Hall doors. "You cannot possibly insist on knowing everything. It can, and will, drive you mad. Ever hear that patience is a virtue?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I have, but why can't you tell me?"

"You will find out in good time, that I assure you, and do not roll your eyes at me," he said, without looking at her and pulling open one of the doors.

"I did not," she said, mostly to herself.

"Hermione, I was a teacher for most of my adult life. Do you think I don't know when I am being taunted?"

Hermione shot him a look, which did nothing to persuade him.

He raised one eyebrow in amusement.

Severus looked out over the castle grounds while holding the door and made a mental note of a light in Hagrid's hut.

Hermione saw him glance that way and asked, "What are you looking at?"

"Nothing. Just admiring the grounds," he said, offering a conciliatory smile. "After you," he said, bowing slightly.

Hermione looked at him suspiciously then slowly passed by into the castle.

"Isn't a touch of mystery romantic?" he said teasingly, closing the doors behind them.

"No, it's not."

"Interesting. It is late and I'm sure you would like to retire for the evening. I won't keep you any longer," he said, and before she could react, he leaned in, gave her a soft lingering kiss, turned, and began to ascend the stairs two at a time.

Hermione stared at him incredulously and crossed her arms.

"You're also not supposed to go to sleep mad at each other," she called after him.

He turned with a hand on the railing, feeling the edges where the repair work had been done after the duel. He raised an eyebrow as he observed her for a moment.

"Read that in another book, have you?" he asked, knowing she was baiting him, but unable to resist the challenge.

She narrowed her eyes in warning. Even several steps away by dim torchlight, Severus could tell how formidable she could be when a nerve was touched.

"Must you continue to try to translate everything into the academic?" he asked. "How to manage love is not found in books, Hermione. It is not something to be captured, kept and studied."

Hermione smirked slightly in response and closed the distance to the stairs. "And you are an expert on love?"

He shook his head, mostly to clear his mind of rampant thoughts on how beautiful she was when sparring with him. "No more than you," he replied, and waited.

She only stared at him with a fierce intensity that made him slightly uneasy.

"Now that we are even on the subject, there is nothing more to discuss. It is quite late and I need to sleep."

"Oh, please forgive me then; the master needs his sleep," she said tauntingly.

Severus swiftly closed the distance between them, took hold of her arm, and pulled her to him. He held up her arm, pressed it to his chest, and murmured, "Quite all right. I'm not angry with you."

"I'm not going to give up," she said, telling herself that it was not the best strategy to be drawing closer to kiss someone whilst trying to intimidate him.

A soft snort in amusement. "I expect nothing less of you; however, sometimes trust is all we have," he said, maneuvering her against the staircase railing. He raised his eyes to hers for a fleeting moment before whispering against her throat, "Isn't it?"

Hermione could only drop her head back and concentrate on breathing in then out, trying to ignore how he was winning through seduction. She watched the staircases change randomly above them as he was seemingly considering exactly where on her neck was the most sensitive place to kiss. She almost cursed her own hand as she watched it ache to touch his hair.

Severus raised his head, saw her quickly drop her hand, and grinned.

"Good night," he said clearly, as if the matter was closed, turned, and continued up the stairs.

By moonlight, the dismal-looking mansion was barely visible, standing alone on the poorly kept grounds. The weeds had run rampant, snarling around any proper plants and shrubs, moving in with a ferocious appetite in the absence of a grounds keeper. While the house appeared deserted, it exuded a presence of a pure evil devoid of any redeeming value. No family would ever live there, and none would ever know happiness within its walls. Shadows moved past some of the windows, and from time to time a flash appeared, giving the impression that lightning's wrath itself was trapped inside.

A thin blanket of mist slid across the grounds, flowing in an undulating motion, seeming to have a life of its own. The only sound was of crows cawing as they fought over ownership of a particular perch, throwing their wings forward as they lunged at an offending intruder.

A hunched figure popped into existence and peered around carefully, bringing his hands up to his face. He smoothed his thin hair and straightened his tattered jacket before moving in a lumbering gait towards the house.

The wooden staircase cracked loudly as he made his way up, grasping onto a handrail held in the wall only by a few failing screws. The paneling, which once shone with the rich glow only fine mahogany can achieve, was now mottled with neglect, dust covering any horizontal surface. Arriving in the room at the top of the stairs, he immediately threw himself into a low crouch before a large armchair.

"Master..." Wormtail whimpered, bowing low.

A long arm reached out from its resting place in a chair, hovered for a moment, then clasped its thin fingers around a goblet. Barely acknowledging Wormtail's presence, Voldemort muttered irritably, "Speak."

"My lord, the house is ready."

A silence filled with suspicion. "Seems too soon, Wormtail; are you certain?"

"Yes, my lord," he said quickly. "The wards are up and the Disillusionment charm is in place."

Voldemort was silent for a painful stretch of time. He studied Wormtail's face before apparently pushing a thought from his mind. "Very well, we shall make preparations to move."

"My lord, the Horcrux, it requires security. It would give me great pleasure to guard it for you," Wormtail groveled, practically touching the filthy floor with his nose. The heavy smell of old musty carpet and rotting wood filled the air. An uncontrollable urge to guard the Horcrux drove him, but he could not explain why.

"I do not trust your abilities, Wormtail," Voldemort sniffed, replacing the goblet on the side table. "No, I will grant you the pleasure of guarding it, but you will not be alone."

Wormtail looked up at the Dark Lord.

"While you were off playing with the traitor's house, my faithful servants have broken out of Azkaban and are now pleased to rejoin us," Voldemort declared, holding a hand out as if welcoming guests to a civilized tea.

Wormtail cringed at the sight of several half-starved Death Eaters as they entered the room and slowly circled around him. Their wild eyes told a story of their depraved minds. Given the chance, anyone who had thought them violent before would be very sorry to discover the height of their derangement now. The circle closed, Wormtail still on his knees in the center, Voldemort in his chair at the head.

"My servants, as I should barely call you," he said with disgust. "If you think for one moment I do not remember the failure that landed you in Azkaban, you are sadly mistaken."

As he rose from his chair, a barely perceptible flinch passed through every figure in the circle. "Complete failure, all of you."

Voldemort walked slowly around the circle, pausing just slightly before each figure before sneering and moving along. He stopped and gazed appraisingly at one in silence before moving to stand before the chair.

"Some have taken the gift of freedom but not returned to my service," he announced. "No matter. They will certainly die or be recaptured. There is no place for them in this world."

"Wormtail here," he said to them all, gesturing towards the quivering mass on the floor before him, "has successfully prepared the traitor's house for our new headquarters. It is a pity that my most valuable servant is such a wretched thing as this," he said, looking down in disgust. "Who only serves me out of fear of his destruction."

"My lord, I am at your mercy, I will do whatever you wish..."

"Oh, that you will." Voldemort narrowed his eyes at Wormtail once more, then said to the circle, "We move tonight. Three of you will remain here to guard my possession."

Voldemort turned and took his seat once more. "Macnair, Goyle, you will guard the chest in the basement. Leave it for even a moment and have no doubt that you will lose your life in the most horrific way possible. You will beg me for the lightness of the Cruciatus if I lose this. Go. NOW."

Without a sound, they both bowed and left the circle.

"Wormtail, you will make final preparations at the traitor's house and await us there. Once we are settled, you may join the others to assist them while they stand guard."

"Thank you, my lord," Wormtail gasped appreciatively, moving in an exaggerated bow that only irritated Voldemort further. Even though he knew that "assisting" meant keeping them well stocked with food and drink, a part of his mind felt some goal had been achieved.

When the room had cleared with the exception of one, Voldemort dug his nails into the upholstery of the chair, enjoying the sounds as he tore through what had once been a fine piece of furniture.

Running a long finger across his chin, Voldemort spoke. "You have nerve, returning to me in disgrace."

"My lord, I have been most faithful..."

"SILENCE!" he roared, his voice echoing off the empty walls and down countless deserted corridors. The chair groaned as he slowly leaned back again. "You have been a failure to me. Nothing more."

Voldemort waited, daring him to speak.

"In fact" Voldemort said angrily, "Your entire family is a great disappointment to me. Have you no saving grace?"

Gazing in mock contemplation of the ceiling, Voldemort shook his head, saying, "I shall grant you the answer to that. No."

Silence greeted his statement. Voldemort continued, clasping his hands together and giving the impression he was considering his fate. "I should kill you for your failures. As it stands now, I can no longer trust you within my inner circle to plan our assault. You will remain here and help guard this Horcrux. Consider your punishment delayed. The worst thing is to have impending torture hanging over you."

Voldemort smiled, an expression that would strike mortal terror in any soul. It warned of his future amusement at the consequences of what he was about to say.

"Know this, Lucius: I do not forget."

"Yes, my lord."

Voldemort gestured around the decrepit room. "Staying here is a gift of mine to you. Considering that through your own stupidity, you are now homeless."

Before Lucius could push himself to his feet, Voldemort said thoughtfully, "One more thing."

"My lord?"

"Follow Wormtail."

At Lucius' questioning expression, Voldemort stepped forward and repeated, narrowing his eyes, "Follow him."

Details of the Order meeting the following morning washed over Hermione, as she could think of little other than what Severus was keeping from her. She had cornered Hagrid before the meeting, asking him what Severus was up to, and he had refused to tell, moving sideways and quickly slipping away to chat with Molly. She remembered hearing something about Harry's training continuing with Remus and Moody while Severus' chest wound healed. Something else passed by about Harry and Remus researching their theories on the final Horcrux being an artifact of Godric Gryffindor. Even Narcissa standing and recounting her orders to Wormtail while under her Imperius Curse flowed over her in a haze. Hermione's mind was working overtime, recounting everything he could possibly be hiding. She knew that overworking a problem could leave one open to missing the obvious solution, but she just didn't see it.

Several times during the meeting, she found herself openly staring at Severus, which she could tell made him uncomfortable. Only she could pick up the slight flicker of his eyes towards her. She was brought out of her thoughts by McGonagall's next announcement.

"There has been a breakout at Azkaban, and several Death Eaters have escaped. We fear the prison is fallen into Voldemort's hands," Minerva said nervously. "Lucius Malfoy is one of them."

Everyone turned towards where Narcissa and Draco stood in the back of the office. Narcissa looked visibly paler and her eyes immediately went to Severus, who nodded slightly. Draco's face held an expression that was close to murderous.

When the meeting adjourned, Severus swept out the door without as much as a backward glance.

Watching as he left, Hermione turned to Harry and Ginny. "I have no idea what that man is up to."

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked, leaning towards Hermione.

Hermione recounted what he had said and how he was acting, conveniently leaving out the romantic parts.

Ginny looked at Harry. "What do you think he'd be up to?"

"Who'd be up to what?" Ron said, sitting down next to them with a biscuit.

"Severus," Ginny and Hermione said almost simultaneously.

"The git has been hiding something from her," Harry said, rolling his eyes and gesturing at Hermione.

"Oh, that's simple," Ron said through a mouthful of another cake. "He's up to no good, that one."

"Ron!" Hermione gasped.

"Really, Ron, could you stop eating for just three seconds?" Ginny complained.

"What does he say when you ask?" Harry asked, throwing a look at Ron.

Hermione sighed, and said, "Just that he can't tell me, and I'd find out in due time whatever that means."

"Then it's a secret," Ron stated.

"Oh, well done, Ron," Hermione said angrily and stood to leave. "I'm going to follow him."

Watching Hermione leave, Ginny touched Harry's hand and asked quietly, "What do you think?"

"I don't know, but Snape had better watch his back if he thinks he's going to keep her in the dark for long," Harry said with a grin.

Severus left the meeting, intending to head to his lab to work on the item he had procured from Hagrid. He had felt Hermione's stare boring into him throughout the meeting, and he knew she would make some attempt to track him down. With sufficient wards, he could work in peace, under the guise of brewing the Wolfsbane Potion for Lupin.

Severus suddenly stopped and grinned. He could hear Hermione breathing as she tried to follow him. Surely she needed to hurry to catch up to him and was now, quite loudly, out of breath. He had no idea how determined she would be when faced with his denying her the knowledge she sought. He continued walking and turned a corner, a devious grin spreading on his face.

Hermione saw him stop and her heart jumped. She quickly pressed herself against the wall behind a statue of some witch that she should probably remember from a book. Venturing to look again, she could see his robes fly out as he turned the corner. As quietly as possible, she went to the corner and peered around slowly, only to find he was gone.

"I swear, he *is* a bat," she said aloud, disappointed.

She only took a few steps before she was grabbed from behind and, in one motion, spun and shoved against the cold wall, finding herself staring directly into Severus' eyes.

He dropped his gaze as he took each of her hands in his. "I am many things. A bat is not one of them."

"Oh really..." she gasped, trying to catch her breath.

"Yes. One of which is spy. Do you think for an instant I cannot hear you breathing a mile away?" he said proudly.

"Fine. So you caught me, what are you going to do about it?"

"Well, as I can no longer take points, I shall need to think this over," he said thoughtfully. He clasped her hands almost painfully tight and raised them, slowly, out, dragging along the texture of the stone, repositioning them above her head. Slowly, he leaned forward, making sure to push very slightly against her hips.

"I am mad at you, Severus Snape," she said, doing her best to give him a proper glare.

"I find that interesting, since I could use you instead of a fire on a cold winter night at the moment. If this is anger, I am extremely anxious to discover what love is like," he said studying her face with a smirk.

Hermione's eyes widened. "You're horrible. You do know that, don't you?"

"I've been informed of the same, yes. Yet..." he said, tilting his head in thought, "you somehow keep coming back."

Hermione grinned and glanced up to where he held her hands.

He followed her line of sight. "You are driven insane by this aren't you?" he said, shifting his hands in hers, lowering them.

"You have nothing to keep from me."

"I beg to differ," he said sternly, releasing her hands and stepping away from her. "It is very important that you do not know what I am doing until the proper time."

"Fine," she said, then suddenly took hold of his coat, drawing him into a kiss that was so passionate that he couldn't resist.

Lowering his voice, he murmured, "Was that an attempt at seduction?"

"No, well not exactly..." she mumbled, taking an involuntary step backwards as he moved towards her. She found herself literally cornered, with him looming just inches from her face.

"Shall I grant you knowledge of what true seduction is?" he said slowly, moving to breathe along her neck. He had her trapped, but did not touch her, his hands against the stone wall on either side of her.

It was as if her heart stopped. She needed to swallow a few times before her voice returned. "Maybe," she rasped.

"Excellent," he said softly. "The art of seduction is extremely complex. In order to perform it correctly, the dominant party that would be myself must convince the unwilling party that would be you to participate. For purely demonstrative purposes, of course..."

All traces of amusement left his face as he moved even closer, but still made no contact. "It is the hint of the touch that is much more alluring. The slight promise, the anticipation, or the threat that a touch may indeed be granted. See, Hermione, your mind may still be against me, angry because I will not divulge my secret, but there is something else happening here."

Pausing for a moment, he looked down and brought his lips so close she could feel his measured breathing mixing with hers. "Yes, something interesting occurs at this moment. The body cannot hope to resist, as behind the mind's protests, true desire lives. The kind of desire that is always there, flickering just under the surface. It is the fire that humans for centuries have worked diligently to deny and vilify. The mind may rail against the body's desire, but, in fact, resistance only drives it forward."

Severus moved to speak directly in her ear, enjoying how whenever she did breathe, it was forced and shuddered. "Eventually, you will find yourself forgetting to even draw breath as mind and body collapse into one. Your baser needs battle against rational thought, throwing it aside in the hopes that this thing, this emotion, this one moment in time when all that is wanted is that one touch be completed. In a world where sensuous contact is so freely given, there are still those who believe that it is far more desirable to only offer it up as the reward of a dance of wills, of tearing down the thin wall of resistance, of submitting to the elements of what makes us all human. For that is the beauty of seduction, to make the ordinary into something so powerful that you would cry out for it with every ounce of your being. For your partner to grant you that wish only after it has become something of such value, something you would practically give your life to experience just once."

"Some say seduction is about drawing someone reluctantly into the act. I tend to disagree," he murmured, feeling the heat rolling off of her. Moving closer, he barely touched his lips to her ear before saying, "I am of the opinion that it is the true art of persuasion. That in the end, the *victim*, if you will, comes willingly, almost begging to be taken."

He was silent for a moment, taking in the sweet smell of her hair. Turning his head just slightly, he whispered, "Breathe."

He held her eyes as he said, "You may attempt to seduce me all you wish. It won't, however, force me to tell you. Not yet."

Standing back from her, Severus said evenly, "Do not follow me. You will find out what I am doing in due time."

He then turned and strode off, a slow grin spreading on his face, leaving Hermione leaning against the wall, clutching the stone wall behind her to keep steady.

Without it, she would surely fall.

Secret Revealed

Chapter 28 of 41

A novel-length post HBP HG/SS romance adventure. What if Severus returned, trained Harry for the final battle and worked to destroy the final Horcruxes? Story is complete and will be updated regularly.

Disclaimer: All characters belong to JKR. No money, fame or glory here.

AN: A thanks to Ariadne, who somehow manages to do the comma thing in the middle of my destruction and sappy goodness. That certainly deserves recognition.

"What have you been doing?"

Severus grinned as he reached for his goblet. "Might I suggest you never pursue espionage as a career? Your mastery of the art of interrogation leaves much to be desired."

Hermione stabbed her dinner with enough ferocity that her fork scratched the plate.

"I do believe the bird is sufficiently deceased as well," he said with a condescending glance in her direction.

"The next words out of your mouth need to be an explanation of what you are up to, Snape," she snapped.

"Impressive. However, I shall thank you to not point that pheasant at me," he said evenly, looking sideways at her. "I am fairly certain that that particular gesture trespasses on some rule of manners."

Hermione glared at him and continued eating in silence.

Ginny elbowed Hermione during dessert. "Any luck?"

Hermione glanced sideways at Severus, then whispered in Ginny's ear, "No. Was gone all afternoon too."

Ginny looked towards Severus, then turned to whisper back. Before she could, though, a bored voice drawled, "Might I suggest that you try not talking about him when he's right here?"

Both Ginny and Hermione looked to see Severus glaring at them as he stood and left the High Table.

"Now where are you going?" Hermione called after him. Almost everyone at the table stopped eating to watch Severus, hoping to hear his response. Word of his success at keeping something from Hermione had spread like wildfire. Several members of the Order tried vainly to appear otherwise preoccupied while observing the two of them.

Severus ignored her, striding towards the doors without looking back. Everyone turned to watch Hermione's reaction to find her fuming. Harry was making an "Ooo" expression as Ron muttered something that sounded like, "Run."

"Hermione, dear... remember your temper. He's not the kind to be trifled with," Minerva warned, leaning forward to see Hermione become more and more furious.

"He's going wish all I did was *trifle* with him," Hermione muttered. "Didn't you suggest that *lassist* Severus in his research of the potion for Harry?"

A confused look spread over Minerva's face before she realized what Hermione meant. "Yes... but..."

Hermione had already left her seat before Minerva could complete her response. As she passed by, Tonks cheered her on, ignoring the look of irritation on Remus' face.

Severus was halfway to the doors when Hermione caught hold of his arm. When he turned to inform her, yet again, to leave it be, he was stopped by something familiar in her eyes, something he'd seen before.

"I am supposed to assist you. You *are* going to the lab, aren't you?"

"Yes, to brew Lupin's potion. It is far too involved and dangerous for you to be present."

"Severus, you and I both know the only thing dangerous about Wolfsbane is its horrid smell."

He scowled at her. The hall was silent as they stood halfway down the row of tables. Out of the corner of his eye, Severus could see almost everyone at the High Table leaning forward, either straining to hear or whispering to each other.

Hermione crossed her arms and smirked at him in victory. "Try something else. I'm waiting."

"I cannot tell you, Hermione. Trust me when I say it is nothing of consequence. You are worrying yourself over nothing. However, I will allow one thing to slip: I hope you will enjoy what I am working on."

"You hope? How do you not know?"

Severus closed his eyes for a moment, then said, "Because it depends. You will know in time."

Hermione took a step towards him and noticed that he unconsciously stepped back. A smile crept onto her face.

"Don't," he said, his eyes dark with something Hermione could not quite put her finger on. He would turn his head quickly towards the High Table, then back to her, as if fearful of taking his eyes away for more than a second.

"Oh, how power shifts," she stated with a devious grin, moving closer and circling around. Attempting to keep her in his sights, he lost track of where he was backing, running into one of the benches. The wood scraped loudly on the stone floor.

"Hermione, no..." he hissed, pleading with her to stop. She had maneuvered him almost within earshot of the High Table.

Hermione smiled at how unnerved he was by the prospect of even the smallest public display of affection.

"Tell me or I just might kiss you in front of..." She turned, attempted to count those in attendance, then gave up. "... quite a lot of people."

His eyes widened. "You wouldn't dare."

She placed a hand on his chest and his face looked to be near panic. "Nervous?" she asked.

He swore she had a predatory look in her eye, that she was enjoying every second of her prey's discomfort and desire to escape.

"I'd prefer you just hex me instead, quite honestly," he said as he glanced at the High Table once more. The only saving grace was the enraged look on Ronald Weasley's face at the scene unfolding before him.

"Honestly now, Severus. I'm standing no closer to you than if we were dancing at the ball," she said softly.

"You know how I feel, please..." he pleaded through clenched teeth, his brows coming together in a desperate attempt to express to her just how miserable she was making him feel.

All she needed to do was touch one button on his frock coat while at almost arm's length.

"Fine! Fine! Just stop!" he growled, wondering if the fire he felt in his face showed and if his pounding heart could be heard.

"Well...?" Hermione said after he remained silent. Everyone had given up pretending they weren't watching, and they all leaned forward, straining to hear.

"Bastard," Ron muttered, as if he'd completely missed who was intimidating whom. Harry and Ginny both had the same confused look. Neville, however, looked completely stunned and stared with his mouth slightly open.

Severus stepped back to what he felt was a respectable distance. Only then did Hermione notice the complete and utter fear in his eyes, subtle enough that only she could see. He looked as if he was caught unprepared, and she could swear his hands were shaking slightly before he clasped them together. He moved slightly from side to side and seemed to be swallowing far more than normal. His eyes kept flying up to the High Table and scanning the curious faces before returning to Hermione's face.

No one dared to even move in that moment, as something was very wrong with Severus Snape. Several times he swallowed and opened his mouth, tilting his head as he was about to say something then stopped. Seconds passed while he wrung his hands and stared intensely at the floor as if searching for how to begin. He repeated the process, moving his eyes to her, then quickly to the table again.

Ginny slowly leaned over to Harry and whispered, "Think he's going to pass out?"

"I don't know, but he's definitely not in his right mind. Looks like he's trying to say something. Oh hang on, here we go oh maybe not," Harry said, watching Severus struggling to find his voice as Hermione stood before him.

"It kind of looks like..." Ginny started, before gasping, "No he can't be..."

"Can't be what?" Molly asked, catching Ginny's words.

Ginny turned, pushed Harry forward so she could lean over him, and, covering her hand, whispered something in her mother's ear. Molly gasped loudly before clapping her hands to her mouth.

Severus' eyes flew to Molly and the commotion at the High Table.

He muttered, "I'm... sorry," before he turned and swiftly left the Great Hall.

"The git's lost his mind," Ron said with a wide grin as he piled more food onto his plate. "Pass the potatoes, would you, Ginny?" he said.

Ginny's response was to smack him, whispering, "Get it yourself!"

For a moment, Hermione watched him leave, then, gritting her teeth, followed after him.

A few moments passed before it seemed everyone else had the same idea. They rose and quickly followed, trying in vain to be as quiet as twenty or so robed witches and wizards could be while whispering and shushing each other.

Severus sat on the Entrance Hall stairs with his head in his hands. He didn't need to look up as the door to the Great Hall opened and someone came to stand at the bottom of the stairs. Shortly afterward, everyone joined Hermione, standing behind her with expectant expressions.

"Must you have an entourage?" he said with a scowl.

She started to climb the stairs, holding his startled eyes as she drew closer. When she arrived on the landing with him, he looked out at the semicircle of anxious faces at the base of the stairs.

Glancing down, he said, nodding towards everyone, "Does there need to be an audience?"

Hermione looked at Minerva and moved her head in a sort of 'Can we be alone?' motion. Minerva nodded and started to herd everyone out of the Entrance Hall, ignoring their protesting groans.

As Tonks passed out of the Hall, she leaned back, trying to see as much as possible before leaving. Elbowing Remus, she pointed upwards with a smirk on her face and said, "Everyone, follow us."

When the Hall was empty, Hermione stepped towards Severus, her curiosity changing to concern. "What's wrong?"

She took his hands in hers and could feel both his pulse and how he trembled slightly.

"This is very wrong. This man does not tremble," she thought, growing frightened of what he had to say.

"Nothing is wrong; just the opposite," Severus said, shaking his head and returning his gaze to the floor as if deep in thought. His mind was racing, unable to focus on what he wanted to say. What he wanted to tell her could change everything or destroy all that they had in an instant.

"Well..." she said, stepping closer to him and putting her arms around his waist, "Whatever it is you can tell me."

He took a deep breath, saying, "Very well, but you will need to release me."

Slowly, she let him go and stepped back.

Severus fixed her with a look that instantly halted her ability to breathe.

"Hermione, my life has been filled with darkness, misery and loneliness. The kind of emotional despair that cannot be explained without experiencing it first hand, living a life more terrified of allowing someone to truly know me than of anything in this world, including death. I have aspired for perfection in nearly everything, in the hopes of keeping myself company with knowledge, pursuing the comforts of recognition to fill the void in my heart."

While she looked at him sadly, he moved closer, his eyes softening. "Falling in love with you can only be likened to the sun breaking after a cold dismal rain. When I first held you, everything in the world suddenly fell into place. My soul lifts at the very sight of you and can be destroyed by a single word from your lips. I cannot imagine a time without you and dare not speak of it..."

Severus tried to steel himself, reaching out to the marble railing, trying to use its coldness to push himself on. He shook his head and frowned as he looked back up at her questioning face.

"I have only read about love and know nothing of how to be an adequate partner in life. This much I do know I have never felt so at ease with someone. You are my equal and even surpass me in many ways."

Hermione looked at him in shock as he took a white ring out of his robes and turned it in his hand. "Since we cannot risk leaving here in these times, I have been creating this. Hagrid assisted by providing a piece of horn from the unicorn killed by Voldemort. Of course, as you already know, the unicorn has been known for centuries to represent only the purest love. Although this one lost its life to keep Voldemort alive, it is a tribute to such a precious thing that a symbol of true love be created from its legacy. That is what I have been doing; however, the engraving is not finished. I was leaving to complete it."

He reached out, took hold of her hand, lifted it to lay a kiss, and lowered himself to one knee.

Hermione could only stand in stunned silence as he looked up at her.

"Hermione, when it comes to weaving words like fine silk I am very much at ease; however, if you ask me to express my feelings, I will fail dismally. If you grant me this, I will do everything within my power to ensure you are as happy as possible. I would lay my very life down for you. I am undeniably in love with you and have no hope to recover, nor do I wish to..."

"I love you more than anything. Will you grant me the honor of marrying me?"

Her mouth hung open. She forgot to breathe for a moment and swore her heart had stopped. In her delay, Severus waited, holding onto her hand. He slipped the ring on her finger and said softly, "Hermione?"

Coming to her senses, she quickly said, "Yes. Yes, I will," and pulled him to stand.

As they kissed, a great cheer rose from up above, startling Severus into pulling back. Looking up, they saw that everyone had made their way up to the second floor landing and were watching from above.

Minerva was wiping away a tear and laughing at the same time.

"Well, you couldn't expect us to miss that, could you?"

Something in Common

Chapter 29 of 41

A novel-length post HBP HG/SS romance adventure. What if Severus returned, trained Harry for the final battle and worked to destroy the final Horcruxes? Story is complete and will be updated regularly.

Disclaimer: All of it still belongs to JKR.

AN: *My thanks never goes stale for Ariadne: the most emotionally resilient beta out there.*

With a newly affixed scowl, Severus scanned the staircase full of chatting people, mortified that everyone had heard him. They enveloped Hermione, separating her from him. He held her hand for as long as possible, until their fingers separated. Hermione glanced back at him long enough to say she was sorry, but the occasion demanded this.

Severus couldn't believe what he had just said and done. A strange, almost surreal feeling invaded his thoughts. To others, the event was part of the normal passing of the time that is life, but to him, it was much different. Life was not something he often contemplated; rather, it was death that was always on his mind. Avoiding his destruction each time he was summoned obviously detracted from the niceties of the social world. Never mind that he had never acquired even the most basic social skills. He reverted to speaking in highly descriptive generalities rather than truly communicating, never actually exchanging emotional sentiments. Until now.

His *performance* was the most he had ever said about his feelings and, of course, it had to be overheard by the entire bloody Order. His lament over the wreckage that was his life surely would become fodder for many laughs tonight. That, and the revelation that he was indeed a thinking, feeling being. The one thing he did see through the haze of his humiliation was Longbottom's stunned face. Severus knew, and enjoyed immensely while teaching, that Longbottom thought him to be some sort of mythical beast. To bear witness to his practically losing his mind in public must have blown a cold wind through Longbottom's brain.

Their infuriating cheering after he proposed had startled the living daylights out of him. He chastised himself for missing the fact that twenty or more people stood directly above him while he rambled on about his most private thoughts.

"Severus?"

Surely she'll come to her senses momentarily...

"Severus..."

Just wait until the gravity of her acceptance hits home. I wouldn't blame her if she locked herself in a broom closet for the rest of her li...

Rolling her eyes, Minerva came up next to him and said in a loud voice, "Professor Snape!"

"Yes?" he responded, snapping out of his thoughts.

"Come now, Severus, you should be happy," Minerva said warmly.

Severus attempted to scowl, but couldn't when confronted with Minerva's smiling face. "Who exactly do you think you are speaking to? This is me, Minerva. This is as *happy* as I get."

Minerva put an arm around Severus' shoulder and said, leaning close so only he could hear, "Having feelings is not a weakness, Severus. It is, rather, a great strength. Please allow yourself that. No one is here to tease you; rather, they admire your sentiments. I know I do."

While distractedly watching Hermione being hugged by Molly, he conceded, "I suppose you are right; however, I do not enjoy being the center of attention this way."

"Yes, well... that may pose a problem," she said hesitantly.

Narrowing his eyes suspiciously, Severus said, "And what sort of *problem* are you referring to, may I ask?"

"Oh, there will need to be an engagement dinner and then the ceremony itself," Minerva said, counting the list on her fingers. When she looked up, she saw that Severus looked unsettled and had paled slightly. *Clearly not interested in pageantry, and just how can he possibly achieve a paler color?*

"Minerva, I believe that destroying the remaining Horcruxes and winning a certain war should take precedence, don't you agree?"

Before Minerva could respond, Severus felt a hand on his back and Remus came into view. "So, we were just a few days early?" he said, smiling.

With a sneer, Severus said, "Yes, amusing, aren't you? Lupin, I sincerely hope you do not believe this marks some passage of mine into the realm of random outpouring of emotion. Nor does it mean that I am suddenly anything other than my usual disagreeable self."

"Oh, heaven knows, no one expects that," Minerva said, feigning shock. "What would we do without your sharp wit? Your command of the English language certainly has no rival."

Quirking a smile, Severus said sarcastically, "Thank you, Minerva. That is most heartfelt, I'm sure."

Narcissa entered the Hall along with Draco and surveyed the scene. "Clearly, a party of some sort has broken out," she sneered.

Before she could inquire what all the commotion was about, an owl flew in through the Entrance Hall doors and landed on the banister next to her. It fluttered its wings irritably before folding them and sticking out its leg.

Draco reached out, took the note, and stated simply, "Wormtail."

Narcissa looked up again to where Severus was being congratulated on something. "This must be the most sickeningly jovial bunch I've ever seen," she muttered. "I must go tend to Wormtail. Stay here."

Draco shook his head. "No, I'm coming with you. You shouldn't be outside the gates alone."

Narcissa studied his protective expression and thought how she'd doubted she'd see him normal again. "Fine, I should let Severus know first," she said, watching as the crowd circled around both Hermione and Severus. With a scowl Severus might even be proud of, she changed her mind. "Never mind; they're obviously too involved in something tonight."

As they turned to leave, Kitty leaped off the railing, valiantly swiping at the owl that was easily twice his size. The owl threw its wings out and snapped at the cat, causing it to clumsily jump to the floor. Kitty turned and hissed at the tawny bird as it took flight.

Noticing that Narcissa and Draco had gone out the doors, it too followed, its tail up in the air as if trying to regain its composure after such an undignified landing.

"Good evening, *rat*." Narcissa drawled, surveying the wretched man standing in a permanent crouch as they stood outside the gates. Her attention was drawn downward as Kitty arched his back sharply, hissing in an open-mouthed display of his ability to tear vermin to pieces.

Even in his human form, the cat seemed to unnerve Wormtail. Draco watched with satisfaction as Wormtail flinched and stepped back, his eyes fixed on the cat.

"Narcissa... Draco," Wormtail acknowledged after watching Kitty move back to sit at Narcissa's side. His eyes widened slightly to see Draco's face restored, but he said nothing on the subject. A slight sense of confusion played about his features, barely perceptible to most, but glaringly obvious to the well-trained eye. He seemed to be wondering just why he was there, and he had no real explanation for his actions.

"The Horcrux, Wormtail?" Narcissa asked, getting straight to the point.

"Is in the basement of the Riddle house and will be guarded by Macnair, Goyle and myself."

Narcissa's eyes narrowed. "And the headquarters?"

"After I send word that all is ready, we will move tonight to Spinner's End."

"Excellent, you have served your purpose quite nicely," Narcissa said with a smirk. Bending down to pick up Kitty and holding the cat towards Wormtail, she said, "I'll only allow Kitty here to chew off one of your legs instead of two."

Draco laughed as Wormtail shook his head in a jerking motion and backed away.

Narcissa chuckled softly, cradled the cat to her chest for a moment, and then held him out to Draco.

"I will take him back to Spinner's End, lift the curse and Obliviate him," she said, forcibly removing the cat's claws from her sleeve when it refused to leave her arms. "I will be back in a few minutes. Stay here and hold onto that cat. It has a look in its eye that I don't care for at the moment."

Holding her wand on Wormtail, Narcissa hissed, "To Spinner's End."

Standing in the shadows of the small, pitiful yard, Lucius contemplated his situation. It was the way the Dark Lord had ordered him to follow Wormtail that confused him. The terrifying hint of a smile that had graced his lips. Why in the world would he find assigning him a task as useless as this amusing?

Only a little over a year ago, Lucius had been part of the inner circle, one of the Dark Lord's most faithful and closest confidants. Now he was reduced to this. When the rain started to fall, he became even more enraged. What exactly was he supposed to be watching for and where was the wretched excuse for a wizard?

As if in answer to his question, Wormtail Apparated by the back door and appeared to be expecting something. When Narcissa Apparated next to Wormtail, Lucius' eyes opened wide with shock, his mouth opening in a snarl. It took everything within him to resist killing her where she stood.

Practically salivating at the prospect of redemption in the eyes of the Dark Lord, he waited until she Disapparated and followed.

"That was sweet..." Hermione said with a smile as they sat on the castle steps. She had quietly taken hold of his hand and slipped away with him to escape the crowd.

Severus snorted. "Sweet? I pour my the absolute depths of my emotion out to you while humiliating myself in front of dozens of people and you say 'sweet'?"

Laughing, Hermione said, "You know I'm teasing, Severus. That was... well, amazing."

"*Amazing* is an incremental improvement."

"Okay, it was..." she said, brushing his hair back and tucking it behind his ear, "absolutely stunning."

"And?" Severus said slowly, making a "go on" motion with his hand.

"And... I love you with all of my heart," she said and tried to convey her sincerity with her eyes.

With a grin, Severus pushed further. "Better. What else?"

Feeling like she was in class and had forgotten something important, she said, "And I apologize for not allowing you to propose when you were ready."

"We're getting closer..." he said, drawing her to him. "What else?"

Sighing, Hermione said, "I'm sorry for embarrassing you in front of everyone in the Great Hall?"

"Are you now? I'm not entirely convinced," he said, raising an eyebrow, a sly grin playing on his lips.

Hermione smiled and said in a dramatic voice while placing a hand over her heart, "I swear, I am deeply sorry for putting you through that. It was entirely wrong of me and I should have trusted you. Forgive me?"

"I shall take your apology into consideration," he said in a dry voice; the light in his eyes, however, gave him away.

Rolling her eyes, Hermione asked, "What can I do you convince you that I'm sorry?"

Running a finger over his lips, Severus considered her for a moment. "I think I can come up with a few things."

"You're terrible, you know that."

Allowing a smile, he whispered, "I do."

"Good, practice those two words," she said with a grin.

"What did the others..." he began, then, staring at the steps, continued with a shrug, "Never mind, I don't want to know."

"Severus, everyone loved what you said. Well, maybe not Ron... He sort of looked ill and refused to speak to me. Harry went after him, and stop looking so pleased with

yourself," she said, pushing him. "The point is, not everyone is always out to get you."

"It is a far safer position to assume everyone is against you; no surprises that way," he said, scowling at memories.

"Even me?" she asked, leaning down to see his face between his curtains of hair. He had started to busy himself by arranging stray twigs that lay around the stairs into a small fortress, crossing their ends.

"Of course not," he said with a sly grin. "You and I we are quite formidable together."

"Oh, so I'm nothing more than an ally," she said teasingly.

"More than that, you've recently been promoted from ally to close confidant. Consider yourself congratulated," he said, turning his head only enough to reveal one eye.

Hermione didn't need to see his face to know what was behind his words.

"Word is you are soon to be moving up the ladder to lover," he said thoughtfully, adding another layer to the small twig structure.

"Really now? Am I?" she said with a large grin, looking out at the grounds.

"Indeed, you are. If you are still willing."

She acted as if she was contemplating the possibility, loving how an irritated look played on his face when he looked up at her. "I believe I am, yes. I mean, it comes with the territory, doesn't it?"

Looking at her incredulously, he said, "I find it interesting. You took very little time to agree to spend the rest of your days in my company, yet when I ask you to my bed, you think it over more than you would a Transfiguration essay question."

"The answer to that is simple."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Enlighten me."

"You see, a woman can't seem so eager."

"Ah, I see," he said thoughtfully. "So committing to an eternity with me is effortless, but agreeing to an act that will only take a few hours requires an expression of modesty? You weren't this way the other night."

"Hours?" she asked. She hadn't heard anything he said after that word.

He looked at her seriously. "I cannot promise when a proper ceremony can take place; however, you are now promised to me, yes?"

She smiled in agreement.

With a satisfied expression, he leaned back and stated, "That is all I require for now."

She laughed. "Good to know."

They sat close together, leaning on one another. A cool breeze, colder than normal for late June, methodically pushed the warm summer air away. Light rain began to fall, but instead of seeking shelter, Hermione stared up into the sky. Playing a game she learned as a child, she tried to keep her eyes open while the rain fell on her face.

After a while, she said, "Come on, they'll start to miss us."

As he rose, something caught Severus' eye off in the darkness. Dimly, he could see the outline of the forbidden forest's trees. Alternating flashes illuminated the branches against the night sky, then plunged them back into darkness.

"Severus, what is it?"

He didn't answer, staring with intensity towards the forest. Hermione looked up at him and thought of a phrase her mother often used to describe an expression of intense scrutiny. "Look of the eagles," she'd say.

Moving up the steps to see from a higher point, Hermione said, "I thought I saw Narcissa and Draco leave a little while ago. Do you think..." she started, and then her eyes grew wide.

Severus stared at the lights for a moment longer and drew his wand. "Stay here."

He knew she would not obey and so said nothing when he found her running beside him towards the gates.

Narcissa had noticed a presence at Spinner's End, but had not seen him until she turned to Apparate. Now the singular thought in her mind was getting Draco to safety inside the grounds where the wards would keep Lucius out.

"Draco! Inside, NOW! Your..." Narcissa cried, but was interrupted by Kitty streaking off in the direction of the dense brush behind her, crying, his high-pitched howl like a warning.

"Mother, what..." Draco started, but was stunned when the tree directly next to him shattered into shards as a spell slammed into it. Throwing himself to the ground, Draco rolled over quickly and tried to get to his feet, but was thrown as another spell hit the ground in front of him. He scrambled while trying to draw his wand and heard the stricken tree crack, then groan as it fell, taking other lesser trees along with it. Daring to look out into the clearing, Draco was startled to find his father, wand held high and his face filled with rage.

"Leave him, Lucius! It's me that you want!" Narcissa screamed as she put herself between Draco and Lucius.

"On the contrary, *wife*... It is both of you I seek," Lucius sneered, baring his teeth. His usual reserved demeanor had degraded, revealing the deranged image of his fanatical mind. "I will personally drag both of you in front of the Dark Lord!"

As he spoke, Lucius' voice rose in a fever pitch, chilling Narcissa's blood. She quickly turned to Draco and motioned for him to go for the gates. When she turned back, she had barely time to block a spell while keeping herself between them.

Quickly dodging the rebounding spell, Lucius drawled, "Ah, Narcissa, still remember your dueling days? No matter; it won't save you now."

"Leave her alone!" Draco yelled, and then screamed, "*STUPEFY!*" The spell grazed Lucius hard enough to knock him to one knee.

Narcissa spun and tried to shove Draco through the castle gates, but he refused to leave her. Turning back, she was met with the enraged eyes of her former husband as

he roared, "*CRUCIO!*"

Hearing his mother scream drove Draco to a higher level of rage. He leaped over his mother while she writhed in pain and charged at his father.

Lucius, stunned by the non-magical assault, broke the curse and staggered backwards. Draco gripped him by the throat, tearing at him blindly. Lucius felt himself slammed into a tree, striking his head hard against the rough bark. Growling loudly, he managed to throw Draco off and watched as he rose, forgetting magic, and charged at him again. Gasping for breath, Lucius swung his wand violently, and in mid-charge Draco fell, screaming as blood poured from a slash across both legs.

Standing over his son, Lucius began to laugh darkly. "Don't make this hard on yourself, Draco. Come quietly, and I may spare you too much more pain. Perhaps..."

Lucius turned in time to block a spell Narcissa had hurled at him as she shakily rose from the ground. She quickly threw another, hitting him hard enough to throw him off his feet into the underbrush, tangling his robes in the thorns.

Narcissa immediately rushed over and began to drag Draco towards the gates, pulling him by one arm.

"Don't make me do it, Narcissa! Dead or alive it's all the same to me! You're both worth nothing!" Lucius screamed, getting to his feet.

Lucius brought his wand up high as hatred spread across his face. He aimed his wand directly at Draco and roared, "*AVADA KE...*"

He was cut off, not by Narcissa or Draco, but by something that had come from above at great speed, sending branches raining down as it rammed into him, throwing him into the cold iron gates.

He was always drawn to action of any sort. The forest animals grew boring, and one can only soar around the castle grounds so much, staring down as the world spun in a graceful arc. The cool rain dampened his wings, so he kept them close to his body, both aiding in speed and keeping them from touching any of the thorny brush as he passed. He lowered his head as his gait increased, rolling along and stretching out to lengthen his stride. His head was turned towards the two of them as they ran along, he in the depths of the forest, and they out in the clear of the grounds. His mind remembered the man well enough, a friend to Harry, but it was the woman he remembered more clearly, a friend to Sirius.

Hermione struggled to keep up with Severus as they ran across the castle grounds. For someone who had been near death recently and injured several times since then, she was stunned at how fast he was able to run. As she turned to look at him, she saw something running parallel to them in the forest.

Recognizing what it was, she said while running out of breath, "Severus... Buckbeak."

"What?" he said, trying to negotiate the undulating grounds at speed. Turning his head, he saw the Hippogriff as it broke out of the cover of the forest and angled towards them. It cantered alongside of them, thankfully looking more interested than murderous this time around.

"I have an idea. Go ahead!" she called and slowed to a stop.

Severus nodded, trusting her judgment, and concentrated on the gates as they came into view. He could now see flashes of magic as it either rebounded or found its mark. A tree crashed to the ground, throwing others along with it and an unmistakable scream rang out.

Hermione stopped and, as she had hoped, Buckbeak did as well. Gasping for breath, she bowed slowly, waiting for him to acknowledge her.

Buckbeak tilted his head and, in a proud, almost congratulatory manner, lowered his head and granted her his friendship.

Hurrying over to him, she said quickly, "I need you now, Buckbeak. Um may I?"

The Hippogriff nodded solemnly and, buckling his front legs, slowly eased himself down so she could mount. Once she was on his back, he immediately thrust forward and Hermione almost lost her grip on his neck.

Closing her eyes while he galloped for speed enough to take flight, she repeated, "I hate this part, I hate this part..."

Soon, the pounding of hooves under her ended and the rain pelting her face increased as the ground fell away below. She leaned over Buckbeak's shoulder and could see a fight in progress below. She didn't try to figure out who it was, as the long white hair spoke for itself.

Pointing down, she eased forward, and cried, "Him! We need to stop him!"

Buckbeak let out a cry and, folding his wings, fell into a steep dive, rapidly expanding the scene playing out below.

Severus arrived at the castle gates to find Narcissa trying desperately to both drag Draco and throw spells to protect them. Severus could see that both of Draco's legs were cut badly, his face the sickly color of someone close to passing out. Looking past them, Severus saw Lucius looking every bit a deranged maniac, raising his wand to strike. Before Severus could point his wand, a white blur came crashing through the trees and rammed into Lucius, slamming him into gate post.

Seeing Severus, Narcissa cried, "Get Draco inside! I'll take Lucius!"

Before he could respond, Severus found himself crouching low to pull Draco through the gates as Narcissa faced Lucius, screaming at him to take her instead. Once he had Draco safely through the gates, he returned to find Lucius and Narcissa further in the forest in a full duel, no longer throwing spells to incapacitate or injure. The air around them was colored green as they were fighting to the death, casting only Killing Curses.

"Severus?" Hermione cried, running towards him after dismounting Buckbeak. She found him considering how to approach the duel without getting hit by the tremendous number of curses they were throwing and dodging.

He waved her off, hissing, "Go to Draco!"

Severus watched as Lucius and Narcissa circled each other, hiding behind trees for cover and leaning out just long enough to throw another curse. Both had murderous looks on their faces, only Lucius' was more calculated. As Severus moved closer, they circled around again, further from the gates. Even fighting to the death, Narcissa had the presence of mind to draw Lucius away from her son.

"Apparate, Narcissa... Apparate," Severus muttered, wishing she would just escape. He then thought that she would never abandon her son, and she truly had no where else to go.

Trying to get within range, Severus narrowly dodged a wayward spell as it careened through the trees. It screamed past his head, slicing through the tops of several bushes before crashing into the ground. Before he could rise, he heard a sound.

Silence fell.

Listening for a time, Severus watched carefully, but the forest revealed nothing. The only movement was leaves sailing through the air, leaning on the wind, sweeping sharply higher for a time, then falling to the ground. As quickly as it had all began, the forest had gone black, returning to the silence of its usual solitude.

"Severus, where's Narcissa?" Hermione called from the gates, holding onto the bars.

"I don't..." Severus started to say, but trailed off as the black cat softly padded over to where a robed figure lay at a grossly unnatural angle, partially hidden under the brush. Cursing to himself, Severus turned his head sharply and pointed where Draco lay just inside the gates. He then made a sweeping motion to Hermione.

She understood and backed up she was to keep Draco away.

Moving further into the brush, Severus kept his eyes fixed on the figure, willing her to move, moan, breathe hex him for every insult he'd ever hurled at her anything. He stepped over low roots and thicket, pulling his robes along to keep from getting tangled. Each time he brought his eyes away, he thought if he looked again that she would begin to rise, try to brush the soil from her face throw an exceptionally well-crafted sarcastic remark at him...

"Narcissa?" he asked softly. When she didn't respond, his blood ran cold and he halted.

Rain does not fall into the eyes of the living.

The cat mewed at him as if demanding he do something. It kept looking at her face, confused as to why she was lying down but not stroking him.

Severus slowly knelt beside her and, as soon as he took her hand, he knew.

"Oh, Narcissa... we may have disliked each other, but I never intended..."

As often as Severus had seen death, it had never become easy. He would deftly play the part of the heartless Death Eater, laughing maniacally along with the rest as in the single beat of a heart, a life would end. How a soul could be fully functioning and then destroyed in an instant with no hope of returning could only be described as obscene. It is for this that the Killing Curse is most cruel, not for its ability to grant instant death, but that the decline is never seen, an excruciatingly final extinguishing of the light.

He glanced back through the gates where Draco was sitting up against a tree, asking for his mother, with Hermione desperately trying to distract him. A fierce wind swept through the trees, rocking the shadows from side to side across Narcissa's face before settling back. Severus stared at her for a moment and, clenching his jaw, reached out and closed her eyes.

He would carry her back. Somehow, to him, levitating her would not be respectful. Ignoring the pain in his upper body, he leaned in to gather her up. He took her around the shoulders, steadied himself, gritted his teeth and rose to his feet.

When Draco saw his mother's head fall back as Severus began to carry her, he tried to shove Hermione away and screamed.

"Hermione! Keep him!" Severus managed to yell. He tried to breathe while he awkwardly carried Narcissa's body, staggering with his knees bent, trying to ignore the pain.

Draco struggled violently to rise, his face deathly pale with a mixture of rage and grief. Gripping onto the tree trunk behind him, his fingers tearing at the bark hard enough to bloody his hands, Draco kept calling her, becoming more enraged each time she made no response. The wind howled, sending tree branches flailing, seemingly offering a symbol of nature's outrage in response to such a tragedy.

Hermione braced her hands against Draco's shoulders, desperately trying to force him back down, telling him over and over that he couldn't stand that he didn't want to see her not like this...

It pained Hermione more than anything that she could do nothing but try to keep Draco from seeing more than he already had. She couldn't help but cry along with him, forcing his head onto her shoulder, the wind thankfully blowing her hair so that Draco couldn't see Severus move Narcissa's body inside the castle gates and cast his Patronus for help.

As Draco's screams of grief descended into the mindless language of pure rage, Severus thought to himself that they now had something in common. Both had lost their mothers to murder at the hand of their fathers. The difference was, Draco had been there, and would likely never rest until he had revenge.

Remembrance

Chapter 30 of 41

A novel-length post HBP HG/SS romance adventure. What if Severus returned, trained Harry for the final battle and worked to destroy the final Horcruxes? Story is complete and will be updated regularly.

Disclaimer: All characters belong to JKR. It is an honor to play with them for just for a little while. Truly.

AN: Thanks to Ariadne. My apologies for slowing down on the uploads. I've been sick lately. Back in gear now and will push to the end.

Hermione sat next to Severus in the front row, holding his hand in her lap. Even though no one could see, the fact that he allowed her to show any gesture of affection in public told her that he was not all right. He had said very little since returning from the forest with Narcissa's body the night before, and Hermione had had the sense to let him alone.

They had decided to hold the funeral service in the hospital wing to include Draco. He sat upright in bed, staring off into the distance in shock or grief. Madam Pomfrey had told Hermione that Draco had not slept, choosing to stare out the window after she had worked on the terrible cuts above both knees. While drying a tear, she said that he would be fine physically; it was his mental state that was at stake. She said that some time in the night, Severus had come and spent hours with Draco, talking to him until near dawn.

Severus, seeing that Draco was in no condition to speak on behalf of his mother, stood and moved to a teacher's podium they had brought in from a nearby classroom.

Everyone present watched in silence as he ran his hands slowly along the edges of the wood. He seemed deep in thought and gripped the sides as he often did while teaching.

After a pause during which he looked down, he began.

"Narcissa Malfoy, to most of you, was a former follower of Voldemort. She only came into your lives recently as someone changing sides in the process of redemption. Someone living on the outskirts of society and not truly accepted by either side. Her contribution to the Order in her short time with us was astounding. She helped to deliver two Horcruxes and provided information on a third. For that alone, she should be honored."

Severus remained silent for a moment, daring anyone to disagree before continuing, "I will miss her wit and intelligence. In years past, whenever we crossed paths, she would somehow invent increasingly creative ways to insult me. Anyone else I would have hexed into oblivion, but Narcissa I left alone, respecting her as a formidable opponent. We traded verbal abuse and sharp criticism as casually as any of you might discuss the weather over tea. In the end, we may have had our differences, but underneath our words, we had an understanding. We both knew the true depths of madness that is being part of Voldemort's inner circle and were working towards his destruction. I will not lie and say that I didn't enjoy working with her towards such a goal."

He leaned forward and brought his hands up to the top of the podium's ledge, gripping it tightly. The sound of the wood as it creaked under his weight disturbed the silence in the room. Even outside of the classroom, his presence commanded attention, bringing all eyes to his.

In a strong voice tinged with danger, Severus said, "There is no reason for me to temper what I am about to say in present company. We all know what we are to face soon."

"There is little room for morality in war some acts are beyond even the most evil of this world. To kill the mother of your own child is one such example. It is something that cries out for at the very least, outrage and, at most, the most severe revenge. To ignore such a tragedy would drag humanity down yet another notch."

Severus looked directly at Draco and declared, "I will not allow that to happen."

For the first time, Draco looked at Severus with interest dawning on his face.

Hermione noticed that Draco looked extremely worn and somehow much older his days as a student and part of a family at an abrupt end. Kitty sat unmoving in Draco's lap, staring towards where Narcissa's coffin stood.

Severus stepped out from behind the podium, moved to the coffin, and trailed his hand along the edge.

Turning back to an audience that did not dare speak, Severus said, "Remember Narcissa as a devoted mother and someone who, in the end, was working towards Voldemort's imminent destruction. Her actions last night bespoke the kind of selfless sacrifice I have only witnessed only one other time..."

Severus spoke his last words directly to Harry. "And that is a story we know all too well."

Hermione sat down across the table from Severus. She had come from lunch, bringing him a plate since he couldn't leave the potion. On the way, she saw Ron, but as soon as he spotted her, he awkwardly found he needed to go in the opposite direction.

"If he wants to be a child about this, then so be it," she thought, but still she worried she had lost him as a friend.

Severus was in the process of measuring out a foul-looking liquid that smelled nearly as bad as it looked. She admired him for a moment as he worked. His eyes were narrowed in concentration, leaving a slight crease in his brow. Deep thought preventing him from displaying his normal irritated facial expression, leaving an almost peaceful, albeit intense look. Hermione noted that even his breathing seemed slower.

"Severus?" she said, leaning forward. "I'm sorry."

Distractedly, Severus muttered, "What have you done now?"

"You know what I mean," she said, watching as he employed what felt most natural to him. Denial.

Severus shrugged as he adjusted the flame. "I'm fine. Go console Draco if you wish to wallow in such things."

Hermione came around the table and put her hand over his, stopping him.

When he opened his mouth to protest, she shook her head, saying, "Don't even try it. I know for a fact you need to wait at least six minutes before the next stage."

He raised an eyebrow, but made no further argument, offering silence as his best defense.

"Tell me," she said, pointing to the stool next to him.

Remarkably, he sat. He watched her for a moment before he said, "If you must know."

She quirked a smile, indicating that she wasn't going anywhere.

He leaned his elbows on the table and, tensing his shoulders, said, "I knew Narcissa for most of my life. As you know, Lucius and I were supposedly friends, even while Voldemort was thought to be conquered."

"You knew he might come back?"

Severus nodded. "Yes and no. I had no doubt that there might be a way, so I needed to keep my image intact. That meant being part of that ~~social~~ *social circle*, if you care to grant it such a name."

Hermione rubbed her hand on his back, feeling the rough texture of the wool and the vibration of his voice as he spoke.

"Narcissa was always someone who would offer a challenge in the sport of verbal fencing," he said, watching the flame caress the bottom of the cauldron. With a hint of a smile, he said, "I daresay she was my only equal in that realm."

Severus looked at Hermione for a moment before continuing. "While Lucius was hardly a kind father, he was an even worse husband. I do believe that sparring with me was the only diversion Narcissa had from what must have been a lonely, even isolated existence. When I would move to leave after an evening of successfully insulting each other in increasingly vile ways, she would give me the slightest of nods, telling me that we had had quite a match. In Lucius' eyes, Narcissa and I were bitter enemies. The fact that he allowed me to insult his wife spoke volumes about his disregard for her."

He leaned forward and reached out his hand, bringing it close to the heat, staring into the flames, allowing his eyes to lose focus.

"I, of course, blamed her for the Unbreakable Vow, but I know she only did it out of love for Draco. She knew no other way and had no one else."

Hermione leaned her head against his shoulder, watching him move his hand towards the flame, close enough to touch, then back again.

She didn't think he would speak again until he said, "In the last Order meeting when we heard that Lucius had broken out of Azkaban, she looked to me. All I could offer her was the same nod. The same acknowledgment."

He shook his head and took a deep breath, pushing himself to sit back up. "She should have told me that she was going. With Lucius out, she should have never left. I could have..."

"It wasn't your fault," Hermione interrupted, placing her arm around his shoulders. "I'm sure that Draco doesn't blame you."

Severus thought for a moment. "No, he doesn't. He blames himself."

Hermione asked hesitantly, "He's going to fight for revenge, isn't he?"

"Yes," he said, running his hand over the table's surface. "I expect nothing less of him."

"Because you know," Hermione stated, turning to watch his face.

Severus looked at her quickly, and, as if deciding that the conversation was over, rose and returned to the potion.

Hermione let him work in silence for an hour or so, busying herself with a book on the behavior of Dementors before she ventured to speak again. Thinking of nothing better to say, and knowing he couldn't resist a question about potions, she asked, "Can nothing be done for the smell?"

He glanced at her with an expression that vaguely resembled relief at her leaving their earlier topic of conversation alone.

"It is far from a pleasant business," he stated, slipping into a teaching tone. "Just as you witnessed that night, Lupin could kill and have no memory of his actions. To commit a terrible act, to know what you have done, and be able to mourn your mistake, is one thing. To never remember, or to fear what you might have done, is another," he said, holding up a flask to the light before adding its contents to the cauldron. The potion's color brightened for a moment before moving towards a sickly brown.

"No, I wouldn't expect the potion that keeps the mind in place to be palatable. Life doesn't work that way, so why should potions be any different?"

Hermione nodded, then spent the next few minutes examining the texture of the wooden table, her mind returning to how to approach Ron.

"Something is wrong. Tell me," Severus said.

Hermione looked up and realized that he had been watching her. She shook her head slightly as she found a sharp piece in the table's surface to worry with her nails. "It's nothing, really."

"Upon reviewing the day so far..." he said distractedly, timing his stirring. "I don't recall offending you; however, I could be mistaken. As you are well aware, I offend so often it is commonplace to me. Accept my apology and apply it wherever you may see fit."

She gave a small laugh and caught his eyes, seeing a slight grin on his face. "You don't need to worry. You are not in trouble; however, I will accept your apology. I'm sure you'll need it soon."

With a nod, he started to dice a root into microscopic pieces. "Excellent however, that leaves my original question unanswered."

Picking at a raised part of the table, she said, "Am I that obvious?"

"You are, and I'll thank you to not dissect my work surface. This table is one of the few things I have that has not been blown up, spilled on, broken, or written on by idiotic first years who should have their magic forcefully removed for the safety of innocent furniture," he said, pushing a powder from a cutting board into the potion.

Severus put the board down, moved behind her and wrapped his robes around her shoulders. When she smiled, he raised his arm, covering her eyes and murmured into her ear, "I have noticed that you like this. You'll find that my exemplary memory can be utilized for good as well as evil. What can I do to convince you to tell me?"

"It's not something you'll want to talk about," she said. Talking to Severus about Ron was not top of her list especially when wrapped in his robes with that voice.

"Try me," he said into her hair.

Hermione leaned back against his chest and said, "Fine, Ron won't speak to me since we got engaged."

"This is a problem?"

"Severus!" she said, trying hard not to smile. It was extremely difficult to allow a smile at all given the events of the past twenty-four hours.

"It is a simple question. Innocent in its intent," he said lowering his arm, but still holding her close.

"Yes, it is a problem," she said seriously. "Ron is my friend."

Holding her tighter, he asked, "What will you do?"

Shaking her head, she said, "I don't know. Wait him out, I guess. I can hardly force him to talk to me."

Severus smirked while running his hand over her hair. "That is true. You cannot force him."

"Very good, Harry. Now try again," Remus said as he bent to retrieve his wand.

Severus entered the Great Hall and took a seat next to Minerva. He watched as Lupin neatly duelled with Potter, each of them alternating Disarming spells. He scowled at the notion that this type of training was doing anything useful. Not unless Voldemort had suddenly acquired good manners and would wait patiently while Potter retrieved his wand or tied his shoe instead of simply killing him.

Sensing his irritation, but without turning away from the lesson, Minerva said, "Temper, Severus. You may not agree with Remus' style, but he is a competent teacher."

Severus snorted, but said nothing.

"Care to verbalize your eloquent nasal expression?" Minerva asked, turning to him while Remus and Harry prepared for another round.

"Do I dare?" he drawled, crossing his arms and leaning back in his chair.

"Yes, please elaborate. It seems you have an opinion."

"Minerva, you know my opinion. Potter needs to work on true fighting skills, not this Sunday-after-tea-dueling-club nonsense," he said in disgust.

She sighed and said, "Severus, you should agree that we had to continue while you healed. Now, when you are better..."

"I am fine," he interrupted, growling as another boring dueling round completed.

"Severus, you are not. Poppy told me she had to practically replace most of the stitches last night. Besides, you two wounding each other randomly is not our best strategy at the moment, with two more Horcruxes still remaining..."

Scowling, he left the stitches comment alone, and said, "Speaking of the wounded, as soon as Draco is well enough, he and I are going on a little field trip."

Turning in her chair to face him, Minerva brought her voice down. "Now, Severus, you listen to me. You are not taking him out of this castle. He has had enough, do you hear me?"

Ignoring her anger, he said clearly, "Do you have a better suggestion for retrieving the Horcrux currently residing in the Riddle mansion? Send an Owl requesting it be forwarded to us, perhaps? Lucius has undoubtedly already informed Voldemort that Wormtail was under the Imperius. Luckily, I believe it to be too risky for him to move the Horcrux; however, it will undoubtedly be heavily guarded."

He leaned closer. "Draco is the only one who knows that house."

Minerva listened to him and said nothing at first, watching as Harry and Remus exchanged jinxes. After a moment, she said, without looking his way, "It's a thought worth considering."

Severus began to grin after this small victory, but his grin was quickly replaced with an involuntary sneer as he watched Harry and Remus' civilized duel.

Hermione sat next to him and whispered in his ear, "You look even more disgusted than normal. What? Too orderly for you?"

He didn't respond to her question; rather, he indicated Ron, who stood watching the dueling with interest. "Spoken to you yet, has he?"

Hermione looked at Ron sadly and replied, "No. Just sort of looks at me, makes a face and walks away. Wouldn't speak to Harry either. He'll eventually come around, I suppose."

Severus muttered, "Gutless wonder..."

"Leave it be, please..." Hermione whispered.

Keeping his eyes on Ron, Severus asked, "Minerva, in your opinion... where do you envision the final battle taking place?"

Minerva, seemingly surprised by the suddenness of such a question, thought for a moment. "I haven't completely considered that, to be honest."

"Interesting," he said thoughtfully. "And who do you think shall be present?"

Hermione didn't appreciate how Severus was staring at Ron, or the path his thoughts seemed to be taking.

"Well, I would hope we would all be there to help in some way. The Death Eaters, of course, would need to be dealt with. I know you may have found a way to divert them using the Mark; however, I imagine they may already be there. Goodness knows what else he may bring with him, given the chance. Why do you ask this now?" Minerva asked with a puzzled look.

Severus' face darkened further as he continued to stare at Ron. "No reason," he muttered, then stood abruptly and strode across the Hall. He stopped directly in front of Ron, surprising him into taking a step backward. They regarded each other with contempt; however, Severus' stare was proving impossible to endure for long, forcing Ron to look away.

"Weasley!" Severus stated loudly, even though Ron was mere feet from him. He drew his wand slowly and said as Ron's eyes widened, "Disarm me."

Ron's mouth fell open in shock. In a confused, wavering voice, he managed to say, "What?"

"Are you deaf in addition to dim-witted? DISARM ME!" Severus roared, his voice echoing off the walls.

"Severus, is this necessary?" Minerva asked hesitantly.

Gritting his teeth, Severus kept his eyes fixed on Ron as he said, "Yes. It is *very* necessary."

Remus moved slightly, about to say something. Without turning his head, Severus raised his wand at Remus and said simply, "Don't."

Ron, stunned at the prospect of fighting Severus, stood rooted to the spot speechless. His eyes shifted from his parents to where Harry and Remus stood, then to Hermione for a split second.

Severus crossed his arms and growled, "Oh, well done. Please enlighten me, Mr. Weasley. Just which bed will you be hiding under when the battle occurs?"

Looking disgusted, Ron said, "I *won't* be hiding."

Feigning embarrassment, Severus said, "Oh, my mistake. You intend to be there? As a spectator? Where would you like your seat for the best view of the festivities?"

Suddenly, Severus leaned even closer to Ron and asked with a sneer, "Do you think that Narcissa meant to meet death out there last night?"

A small, stuttering voice emerged from Ron. "No."

Everyone waited in silence, watching the exchange. Hermione met Harry's eyes as he stood, the duel forgotten. She gave a slow shake of her head, indicating she had no idea what Severus was doing.

Severus' lips curled at the sight of Ron positively frozen in front of him. Taking on an accusatory tone, he asked, "Tell me, Mr. Weasley, do you think for a second that a polite owl will arrive with a perfectly lettered invitation for Potter to come outside and duel in a civilized manner? It is unfortunate for the rest of the world that the insane do not play by the rules."

Ron only looked confused, wanting nothing more than to be out of the range of Severus' glare. A flicker of anger rose in his eyes, though.

"When the last Horcrux is found and destroyed, Voldemort will be mortal. As mortal and you and I. Do you know what that means?" His eyes bored into Ron's as he loomed over him.

Ron shook his head in a vain attempt to placate Severus into possibly leaving him alone.

"What it *means*, you small-minded twit, is the final battle will have begun. Now that may sound grandiose to you, but believe me there is no other way to put it. Whatever phrase or illustrative terminology you use, it is all the same. There will not be any orderly dueling. In fact you may awaken one night to find the castle overrun by Death Eaters. Just think, Weasley you are alone, and Fenrir Greyback in all his rotting glory is in your very bedroom, just salivating at the prospect of biting another. Or even better, enjoying the slow, sickly, tearing sound as he removes your throat the old fashioned way: with his teeth."

Molly and Arthur both looked disturbed, but remained silent. Severus glanced in their direction for a moment. "No, there is no telling when it will happen. Where you will be at that moment. Who will be left standing, torn, broken, tortured dead."

Severus turned back to Ron. "Still refuse to learn how to fight effectively?"

Ron's angry face matched his hair. Severus raised an eyebrow, noticing how Ron's hand was twitching towards his wand.

"Going to attack me, Weasley?" he asked in an encouraging voice. "Allow me to assist."

Severus leaned in closely, and said in a voice so low only Ron could hear, "It's not my fault you were of the too-little, too-late persuasion."

"Shut up!" Ron shouted, drawing his wand.

Everyone in the room jumped at the shift.

Ignoring Ron as he raised his wand to strike, Severus provoked him further, "Don't blame me you never had the guts to tell her."

Jerking his wand higher, Ron shouted, "Shut up, you greasy bastard!"

"Strong words, Weasley. Care to back them up?" Severus said calmly, a smug grin playing on his face.

Hermione watched them stare each other down, knowing Ron had no hope. He was more lucky than skilled when it came to fighting. Severus was right, by provoking Ron into training to fight better, he just might be saving his life.

Ron held his wand steady. His expression had changed into a quiet, determined look of someone preparing themselves.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Ron yelled.

Severus simply stood aside as the spell bounced harmlessly along the floor. Harry ran his hand through his hair and shook his head.

"Impressive, Weasley. I daresay that would have worked on a family of rabbits. Certainly not on myself or a blood-thirsty Death Eater," Severus taunted. "Here...," he said, casually tossing his wand aside.

Ron watched as Severus' wand hit the floor, rolled and settled to a stop near Hermione.

"We'll pretend that your sad excuse for a spell worked," Severus said, holding his hands up, imitating the fear of an unarmed opponent. "Now, hit me with something that will do more than put me to sleep."

Ron looked shocked for a moment, then charged forward, yelling, "*STUPEFY!*"

Severus dodged the spell easily, watching with interest as it tore down the length of the Hall, grazing the wall and throwing several torches out of their brackets and onto the floor.

Severus turned back to Ron and made a show of flexing his hands. In an instant, Ron found himself thrown across the Hall, sliding into a group of benches.

Ron looked up to see Severus standing over him with a smug look on his face.

"Weasley, I can hear your spells years before they hit your lips. Worse than Potter was before he learned better," Severus said, gesturing to where Harry stood.

As Ron angrily pushed a bench off of one of his legs, Severus said in a low, deadly tone, "You will begin speaking to Hermione again. And don't look at me as if I have gone completely insane. Look at me as if you cannot fathom why nature allows me to draw breath..."

Ron replaced his shocked look with one of revulsion. Everyone in the room stood motionless, wondering what they could possibly be discussing.

Satisfied with Ron's improved facial expression, Severus snarled, "If you ever make her feel like this again, I will hex you with so much force the dozen or so children you will most undoubtedly sire will bear a mark."

Ron's eyes widened as he absently rubbed one of his legs.

"Understood?" Severus growled.

Ron didn't respond other than to get to his feet, looking like he was crafting various ways to see Severus dead.

Quirking an eyebrow, Severus said with a smirk, "Interesting thoughts, Weasley. Care to learn how to put them into action?"

"Stop doing that!" Ron raged.

"I asked you a question, Mr. Weasley and it should be 'Stop doing that, *sir*.'"

Ron appeared murderous, but remained silent. His hands were clenched into fists, gripping his wand so tightly it threatened to break.

"Need more convincing?" Severus asked loudly. "Do you know what being a Death Eater does to one's sense of morals?"

Severus didn't expect an answer, only taking a moment to allow Ron's anger rise yet another notch higher.

"No? Well then, I'll give you a small hint. Lucius wasn't always a delusional fanatic, yet last night he attempted to murder his entire family. How does that descent occur? Well, let's consider for a moment. Enclose yourself in a world where the most wicked, dark, and disturbing things occur without a second thought, and you start to slip. The bar of acceptability moves ever so slightly lower until your idea of normal is the most vile and disgustingly destructive behavior known to man."

Stepping closer to Ron, Severus continued. "You had the pleasure to meet some of these fine upstanding people during the *interaction* lovingly referred to as the Department of Mysteries battle, I believe? And again, here, just a few weeks ago? Just think some of them have had more time to not only slip further into the sea of delirium, but to hone their capacity for mindless violence while in Azkaban."

Ron shook his head, choosing to look at the floor in an attempt to escape Severus' glare.

"They will kill you in a heartbeat and not even care to know your name," Severus said in a disturbingly knowledgeable voice.

When Ron refused to look at him, Severus snarled and took a fistful of Ron's robes, shaking him as he yelled, "Paying attention, Weasley? Or do you still think this is a game?"

Harry stood with his wand at his side. He, along with everyone else, said nothing. There was no need, because even though Snape's delivery of the message was severe, everything he said was true.

Severus shoved Ron away, and said in a thoughtful tone to those in the room, "I have no intention of teaching anyone to kill, as this world has enough murderers. However, if you think for one moment that you should also not be able to defend yourself you are on your own. It is far from heroic to fall in battle due to nothing more than your own ignorance."

Looking at Harry, Severus said, "After all, the burden of required murder is on only one of us. Potter must speak the two words you all know and take a life. No matter how evil the victim, the burden is the same. That being said, this fight is not Potter's alone."

Minerva stood. "Severus?"

Severus turned to meet Minerva's eyes as he declared, "It is time to resurrect this 'Dumbledore's Army,' and, as an answer to the question of where the battle will occur..."

He spread his arms out, indicating the castle.

"Where else?"

Gathering Forces

Chapter 31 of 41

A novel-length post HBP HG/SS romance adventure. What if Severus returned, trained Harry for the final battle and worked to destroy the final Horcruxes? Story is complete and will be updated regularly.

Disclaimer: Still belongs to JKR. Yes, still.

AN: A permanently affixed thanks to Ariadne. PS My apologies in advance...

Severus turned back to the rest of the Order, watching their collectively shocked expression at what he had just declared. Hogwarts would be turned into a war zone. It was a strategy that would be to their advantage, and no one could argue the fact that it made sense. The problems were how would they draw Voldemort in, and would the attack come before they found the last two Horcruxes?

Minerva nodded sadly. "We shall meet after dinner tonight to discuss our plans."

Hermione watched Severus give Ron a glare and join Minerva and Harry. She was surprised to see Ron approach and stand in front of her, shoving his hands in his pockets and hunching his shoulders. His way of standing irritated her no end; it looked to her as if he was either perpetually unsure of something or mortally embarrassed.

After Ron had struggled but not said anything for an awkward space of time, Hermione sighed, rolling her eyes.

"Do you intend to say anything, or will you just stand there and expect me to read your mind?"

"Erm, no," Ron mumbled, glancing in Severus' direction, then back to the floor.

Hermione leaned back in her chair, crossed her arms, and said, "Well then. Get on with it."

Frustration crossed his face, and he muttered, "Oh never mind."

Severus watched the exchange while carrying on a conversation with Minerva and Harry. Over Minerva's shoulder, he saw Weasley walk away and Hermione appear even angrier than before.

Minerva's last sentence trailed off as she noticed Severus' expression darken considerably.

Before she could ask, he said, staring past her, "Excuse me for one small moment."

Minerva and Harry watched as Severus took no more than three strides towards Ron. At the sight of Severus' approach, Ron halted, hesitated, then seemed to sharply change his mind about leaving.

Severus returned to Minerva and Harry, acknowledging their perplexed looks with the slightest hint of a grin.

"What exactly was that, Severus?" Minerva asked suspiciously.

Severus watched as Ron returned to Hermione and muttered, "Nothing of consequence."

"If I didn't know better, it looked like..." Harry began.

"Yes, Potter, we are all well aware of how accurate your interpretation of events has been aren't we?" Severus interrupted in a voice that declared the topic closed.

Hermione looked up to see Ron swiftly return, sit next to her, and glance nervously in Severus' direction. When she caught Severus' eye, he offered a slight grin and then, with an innocent look, returned to his conversation.

Hermione asked irritably, "Have something to say this time?"

"Look, Hermione, I'm sorry I acted like..." Ron began, staring at his hands.

"A prat?" Hermione supplied.

Ron looked insulted for a moment, then shrugged and agreed. "Yeah thanks. Um it's all just, well..." he said, but weakened and couldn't seem to find words.

"Shall I fill in the gaps?" Hermione offered.

Ron only nodded.

"Ron, we are still friends. I don't want to lose that, all right?" she said, concerned for the future. "We can't afford to be divided. Not now."

Ron again nodded in agreement, tilting his head so he could both look at Hermione and keep an eye on Severus.

Hermione took Ron's hand and said, "Besides, Severus doesn't seem to be the possessive type."

"No..." Ron agreed, shaking his head vigorously. "No no, of course not. Not overbearing at all."

"Good, so we're all right now?"

Nodding with relief, Ron said, "Yeah yeah, we're good."

"Great. Look, I'm going to the library for a while," Hermione said and stood to leave.

"Right yeah, see you later," he said, raising a hand to wave.

As Hermione went to leave, Severus barely raised one eyebrow at Ron and moved his head in Hermione's direction.

Ron jumped up and practically ran after Hermione, calling, "Hey, wait up!"

"You're supposed to eat it, not push it about. The miles it travels around the plate doesn't count." Hermione smirked, glancing sideways at Severus at dinner.

A slight crease appeared on his brow. "Hermione, I have survived quite well without your dictating how I should eat."

"That isn't eating, that's rearranging, and I'm only teasing you," she said with a grin. "All right then. How's this? Eat your dinner..." she started, and then, turning her head slightly, added, "sir. Does that help?"

Finally quirking a cautious smile, he said, "Marginally, although I don't require you to call me 'sir.'"

"Not even a little?" she asked, laughing at his confused expression.

"What's wrong, don't like your..." she said, trailing off as she tried to figure out just what was on his plate.

Sitting back, he said, "In a former life I believe it was a chicken or some other type of bird."

"Not hungry then?"

"Quite observant," he said with a smirk. "No, my mind precludes appetite at times. When something is about to come about, when I'm on the edge of unraveling a problem, all time, and, more importantly, food, is ignored. I am coming closer to a modification of the Felix Felicis to help Potter close his mind. He may be able to keep me out while leisurely sitting in my rooms; however, in the heat of battle that will not be easy. And you? I could have used your help."

"Surprisingly enough, Ron is speaking to me again," Hermione said, studying his reaction.

Revealing nothing, Severus casually poured himself another drink. "Is he? Fascinating."

"Yes. Interesting how he just couldn't help but both apologize for his behavior *and* follow me around for the majority of the day even to the library," she said suspiciously.

"Did he? There is certainly a first time for everything," he drawled.

Hermione stared at him incredulously.

Ignoring her scrutiny, Severus said with interest, "Discuss deep, thoughtful subjects, did you?"

"Severus..."

"Things like the complexity of Ancient Runes, the constellations..."

Hermione shoved him, trying to yell and whisper at the same time, "Quit it!"

"Ah you discussed Hogwarts' history, did you? No? Well, I must give up. I truly don't know what else is in his head other than small figures perpetually playing a round of Quidditch."

Keeping her voice low, she asked, "Why did you tell him to talk to me?"

"Very much the type to have a small cheering section chanting his name as well."

"I'm losing patience," she said in a hushed, threatening voice.

Gesturing with his fork as if he had hit on something, Severus declared, "Perhaps a band. Yes, definitely a band."

"Severus!" she cried, pounding her fist on the table.

Hermione turned around to find a few people looking at her curiously over their soup. Luckily, she and Severus were seated at the table's end. Fred and George exchanged gestures that indicated she was crazy, and Minerva regarded her with a disapproving frown before returning to her meal.

Severus, however, had suddenly found interest in his food, effectively making her appear unbalanced to have called his name when he was clearly right next to her.

"Did it make you happy that he spoke to you?" he asked without looking up from his plate.

Reluctantly, she admitted, "Well, yes, but..."

"Then there is your answer. True love cares nothing for social boundaries. It affected your happiness, so it was simple."

She wanted to be mad at him, but just couldn't. "Even though that is borderline interference, I still find it strangely sweet. Could you please not do it by threatening people?"

"I prefer to call it *aggressive persuasion*."

Rolling her eyes, Hermione said, "Fine, I'll play your word game. Please don't *persuade* people so hard. I can take care of myself in that respect. Ron means a lot to me as a friend, and it would make me happy if you'd be nice to him."

Severus made a groaning noise in his throat.

"How about being civil to him?" Hermione offered.

"I shall devise some way to achieve that goal for you," he said with a slight bow of his head.

Still suspicious, she said, "Please do."

He regarded her for a moment before leaning close to her. "You and I need to pick up a conversation we've started before. Later," he said in a low voice. The look in his eyes told her exactly what he meant.

"Oh?" she said, sounding amused. "You've got quite a talent for changing the subject when it suits you."

"A talent useless on those intelligent enough to notice," he said with a grin. "It was worth an attempt, although I knew it would fail."

"Oh, I never said it failed. Just that I noticed," she whispered as a devious smile spread on her face.

Hermione reached under the table and placed her hand on Severus' knee. Immediately, he jumped up, ramming into the table and knocking a candle and pitcher over. Several disgruntled faces leaned forward, staring down the row as Severus tried to compose himself, cursing under his breath in a language Hermione was thankful she didn't understand.

"Are you all right?" she asked innocently, grinning and waving at a few people before they turned back to their dinner. She could hear Ginny giggling and was glad that Ron was seated on the far side of Hagrid, who could obscure almost anything from view.

"You are pure evil, woman," Severus muttered, irritably reassembling the table setting.

Leaning slightly against his shoulder, Hermione carefully put her hand back on his knee, enjoying how he tensed. "Evil? Really. Evil is such a strong word."

Severus gritted his teeth. "Not. Here."

"Oh, no, never here. Never," she whispered in his ear, laughing softly as he recognized his own words.

"It is my only pleasure to know that you are enjoying yourself," he muttered, relieved as her hand left his knee, but horrified to find it relocated to his coat.

Severus took hold of her wrist, hissing, "What are you doing?"

"Nervous?" she asked, smiling as if they were engaged in a perfectly normal conversation.

Severus looked at Hermione and shook his head. Trying to ignore how she was fingering a button on his frock coat.

Angling her body to hide what she was doing, she looked into his eyes, daring him to remain still.

An eyebrow twitched as they stared each other down.

"Stop..." he pleaded, but couldn't manage the harsh tone he intended when faced with her amused expression.

"Fine..." Hermione said, removing her hand. "But, all I did was this..." Hermione then not only put her hand on his knee, but slid her hand upwards a few inches, sending him scrambling to get up.

"Severus, is there something wrong?" Remus asked with a trace of a smile.

Severus glared at Hermione, who was innocently busying herself with her soup. "No."

Taking his seat again, he leaned close to her, breathing in her ear as she ignored him, "You're asking for it, witch."

She grinned, stirring her soup casually. "Am I now? Fascinating."

"Yes you are," he said irritably, brushing his coat off.

Hermione moved so they were barely inches apart, face to face.

Severus' hand stilled in mid-brush, then sank into his lap. At first he moved back, but then he leaned forward, helpless to resist her challenge. He was studying her, holding back. His expression was predatory, making promises without words.

"Just once," she said quietly.

He moved hesitantly closer, sharing warmth, desperately close to touching, until he suddenly remembered himself and retreated. He glared past her as people further along the table argued loudly about something.

She whispered, "You did it once."

"That I did; however, I had no idea all of Scotland was watching," he growled.

Hermione smiled and nudged him, "You will need to do it in front of quite a lot of people. You do know that don't you?"

Looking disgusted, he muttered, "I do."

"You'd rather face Voldemort wandless than be even remotely affectionate in public, wouldn't you?" she asked, suppressing a smile.

He considered for a moment. "It is a close competition."

Trying not to laugh, she leaned towards him and whispered in his ear, ensuring he could feel her breath on his neck, "When the time comes and everyone is watching will you manage to retain consciousness?"

Severus drew his shoulders up and gently pushed her away, saying in a low voice, "Now you are teasing me in more ways than one."

With a grin, she whispered, "Later."

As Minerva sat at her desk, the room quieted. She folded her hands and took the type of deep breath people take before addressing subjects for which they have no affection.

"We will address what Severus suggested this morning. Time is of the essence, as we have no idea what Voldemort's plans are at the moment. We must begin to prepare for what is to come and draw on our strengths. I am in this position as Headmistress of a school, not as an army or war strategist."

Minerva looked around the room in silence for a moment. "It is important that we be prepared and know our enemy. Only one among us is able to offer both and to lead this effort."

Several people looked at one another questioningly.

Minerva turned to Severus. "We will work together towards this, but, in the end, I grant you the authority as leader. Will you accept?"

Severus looked slightly surprised at her words. "I will."

"Agreed, then. Let's discuss our thoughts. Severus, I have the distinct feeling you have strong opinions on the matter?" Minerva said.

Severus rose and paced in thought for a few moments before he said, "I believe that first an inventory of resources and assignment of responsibility should be performed. Hermione, since you are most adept at note-taking, will you do the honors?"

Hermione rose and took a piece of parchment from Minerva. She began to take notes, building what would become their playbook for battle.

"Hagrid?" Severus asked, standing with one hand on Minerva's desk. "Can you speak with Firenze and the Centaurs, gather the Thestrals, and also round up any of the less desirable types of creatures you can find?"

Hagrid nodded. "I can do that."

"Also, the Hippogriff... are there more?"

"There are, yes. Not as tame as old Buckbeak, but good enough."

"Good. Train them to patrol the gates and surrounding area. The one known as Buckbeak will come inside the castle. When at least two more are trained, bring them inside as well. Keep them at three points in the castle from which they can be directed to fly."

Looking impressed, Minerva asked, "Flying weapons, Severus?"

"Won't be a problem," Hagrid said, nodding. He seemed both proud and worried to think that the creatures he cared for might help win the war.

Severus' eyes turned to Alastor Moody. Arriving at a decision, he crossed the room and said in a sincere voice, "Moody?"

Alastor Moody remained seated, looking reproachfully at Severus for being the one chosen to lead anything. "Yes?"

"Finally, your fanatical sense of paranoia will be put to full use," Severus said in a tone as close to a compliment as he was ever going to grant. "If you are willing I'd think you should handle security; the grounds, wards, patrolling everything that falls within that realm."

Moody regarded Severus in silence for a long period of time. To the careful observer, a great deal passed between them. From Moody, distrust of someone who he still believed to be on the wrong side; from Severus, caution in dealing with someone who would happily throw him in Azkaban if it still stood.

Moody glanced around the room. His mechanical eye, however, remained firmly on Severus. He finally said, "Yes, I will."

Severus nodded, then said, "Tonks and Lupin... Since separating the two of you would surely cause you to wither and die in a most dramatic fashion, and I don't care to hear the screams of the heartbroken, you are both with Moody."

Remus looked irritated at first, but then softened as he most likely figured this was as close as Severus would get to being kind.

Severus turned and looked out over the sea of red hair filling the room. "Since I cannot simply address anyone as Mr. Weasley without you all responding, I will reluctantly use given names.

"Fred and George, I've observed your penchant for traps and tricks," he said with a disdainful sneer. Having been tormented as a child hardly warmed Severus to such talents. "You will now have the project of a lifetime then. You two will arm the castle and grounds with traps."

The twins brightened considerably, grinning at each other as if their fondest daydream had come true. Molly and Arthur exchanged worried glances at the prospect of setting them loose.

"Charlie, tell me..." Severus said, crossing his arms as he stood in front of him. "What would it take to get every dragon you can get your hands on here to Hogwarts?"

Charlie contemplated for a moment before responding. "Quite a lot."

"Tell the powers in charge that we are looking to save the Wizarding world," Severus said seriously. "Enough?"

"Severus, I think we've found that dragons cannot be tamed," Minerva stated from her desk.

Turning towards her, Severus said, "I have no intention of taming them, Minerva. In fact, I would like them to be as wild as possible and hungry."

Minerva looked both slightly ill and impressed. Not wishing to extract further details, she made a "go on" motion with her hand.

Charlie nodded. "I'll leave in the morning."

"Arthur, Bill, you are in the business of recruitment. Arthur, you are to carry on from within the Ministry and find out where people's loyalties lie. Attempt to rein in Percy. Bill, if you are up to it, continue to ascertain how the goblins at Gringotts feel. Molly, you will help with healing, along with Poppy and Hermione."

A devious grin appeared on his face as Severus walked over to stand in front of Ron. "Mr. Ronald Weasley."

Ron made an attempt to keep the mix of apprehension and disgust from his face, but failed miserably. Hermione watched the exchange of disdain between the two of them with interest, her quill poised to take notes.

"I'm told you are skilled at wizard's chess?" Severus asked, raising an eyebrow.

Ron, looking confused, responded cautiously, "Yes?"

"That shows ability at analysis and strategy?" Severus suggested and waited.

Ron, sensing that he might actually be serious, said slowly, "I suppose so."

"Excellent. You will work with Potter on strategy and present your thoughts to myself, Minerva and Hermione before sharing with the rest of the Order for discussion. When you're not learning to fight at a level where you won't get yourself killed in the first two minutes of battle, of course."

Before Ron could respond, Severus moved on. "Mr. Longbottom, you are to work towards growing as many healing herbs as possible. You will also learn to brew healing potions adequately, even if it kills you. You will also learn to fight. It would be in your best interest to do well in both areas wouldn't it?"

"Yes, sir," Neville said hesitantly.

"Minerva, if you can owl Professor Sprout to return?" Severus said without taking his eyes off of Neville.

"I will," Minerva replied.

Nodding towards Ginny, Severus said, "Miss Weasley, aside from lending *moral support* to Potter, will also assist with healing. That brings the total of five people involved in preparing healing supplies or learning to heal. Poppy, you will be needed to hold classes to teach the others."

Poppy smiled sadly and nodded.

Turning to Harry, Severus said, "The map you undoubtedly are still in possession of will go to Moody, Lupin and Tonks to be used in the process of security. As far as communication, owls may be used; however, they can be intercepted."

Ron turned around in his chair towards Fred and George and said, "You two had those charmed pieces of parchment. The ones you two always used in class to send notes. You can write on one, and it'll show on the other."

Severus looked interested. "The range?"

"We've only tried in the same room. Twenty feet?" George shrugged, looking at Fred for confirmation. Both were trying to ignore their mother's disapproving look.

"Make it a mile," Severus said and turned away from them as if the matter were closed.

Severus looked at Minerva, saying, "I believe that will cover things here. The Ministry should be handled with care, so I shall leave that to your discretion."

Minerva sighed. "Yes, I am considering how to engage with Scrimgeour."

Severus asked, "Poppy, how is Draco?"

Poppy answered, prepared for a fight. "He is coming along nicely, but requires rest."

Ignoring Poppy's glare, Severus pressed, "How soon until he can leave?"

"Severus! He needs to heal properly," Minerva said sternly, standing up from her desk.

Severus crossed his arms, stating, "He is *needed* to help obtain and destroy a Horcrux. There is no time to wait."

Poppy offered, "He can walk, but should rest at least another day."

"No, Severus. You will allow him enough time to recover," Minerva argued with a glance towards Poppy for reinforcement.

Everyone's eyes moved from Minerva to Severus as they drew closer in the middle of the office.

"Minerva, need I remind you that madmen hardly allow time for recovery? In fact, that is precisely the time that Voldemort will strike. He knows that we will come for the Horcrux; it is only a matter of when. I need Draco. Pure and simple," Severus said, scowling.

Minerva shook her head the entire time he spoke. "Severus..." she started, but was interrupted as the office door opened.

Draco, his jaw set, entered the office on tentative legs, his wand gripped tightly in his hand. He walked determinedly towards Severus.

"I'm ready."

Severus regarded Draco for a moment, then nodded.

"We go now."

"Are you certain, Draco?" Severus asked as they walked towards the gates. He observed as Draco seemed either to be concentrating on walking convincingly well or to be deep in thought.

"Yes," he said without emotion, staring at the long grass.

They had left immediately from the meeting. Severus hoped that Hermione would understand that a dramatic goodbye would not help him, so he was relieved to see her only smile nervously as he placed a hand on her shoulder. When he leaned over to whisper goodbye, she grasped his hand and surprised him by kissing him on the cheek in a way that no one could see.

Once outside the gates, Severus realized the significance of the place and wished they had discussed more on the way. Severus noticed the nearly full moon, sliced by the branches as they swayed. When Severus looked back at Draco, he was staring towards the tree, scarred from his tearing at the bark in his grief.

"Once we arrive on the grounds, we will undoubtedly trip the wards," Severus said, hoping to shake Draco from memories he didn't need to dwell on. "Speed will be key. Do you have the location firmly in your mind?"

Draco nodded. "Yes, there is a side entrance that was used for the last few meetings. The basement stairs are located on that side of the house."

"Draco, if things should go wrong, you are to return here. Leave me. Understand?" Severus said.

When Draco looked indecisive, Severus stepped closer and said in a dangerous voice, "There will not be any heroes here. You are to return here without a second glance if I tell you to go."

After a moment, Draco nodded reluctantly.

Once they Apparated, Severus took in the sight before him. The mansion was enormous and nearly impossible to fully ward without the full attention of a powerful wizard. An evil presence surrounded the house, spreading to the trees, which seemed sinister, their branches twisted into wooden monuments to torment and subversive intent. Long-standing abandonment removed all warmth from the dwelling, reducing it simply to a structure that occupied the hill, threatening to randomly drop pieces of roof tiles or boards onto the ground. They skirted the edge of the trees around the grounds in silence, gradually drawing closer to the side of the house.

At least the wind is on our side, Severus thought as the wind rose sharply, pushing the tangled tree branches together.

While Severus concentrated on stepping through the brush, he thought through just how best to take down both Macnair and Goyle without total war. He was not concerned as much with Wormtail, as he was a coward once spells started to fly, choosing to cower as Death Eaters had their fun at meetings. Macnair and Goyle would be a handful without the element of surprise, and Draco was hardly fully capable in his state. Of course, there could be more guarding the house, but he preferred to push that thought aside for now. Draco was still in obvious pain as they walked, and Severus unobtrusively slowed his gait to allow him to keep up.

They approached a decrepit-looking set of stairs leading to a door sitting crooked in its frame, connected only by one rusty hinge. The top few stairs were missing, and the railing on one side was completely missing.

Severus climbed the stairs and looked over his shoulder to where Draco stood at the bottom and whispered, "Remember my words. It does the Order no good to lose us both."

Draco responded, his eyes fixed on the door, "That will not happen."

With a nod, Severus turned, reached up, opened the door, and was met with a flash of green light.

Just the End

Chapter 32 of 41

A novel-length post HBP HG/SS romance adventure. What if Severus returned, trained Harry for the final battle and worked to destroy the final Horcruxes? Story is complete and will be updated regularly.

Disclaimer: No fame, glory or money made here. It all belongs to JKR.

AN: Thanks for all of your reviews. All are appreciated. Extra sparkly thanks to Ariadne. May her quill always be sharp.

Severus had to reach out to grasp the doorknob as the last three stairs were missing. He had barely opened it halfway when the world exploded with green light, the top of the door blasted outwards, and he was thrown backwards off the stairs to the ground.

Some part of Severus' dazed mind registered that Draco had run up the stairs and into the house.

Severus could only see a haze of deep green as his eyes struggled to refocus. He angrily threw a large piece of the door aside and held his hands to his eyes. He heard Draco's voice shouting spells from inside the house, explosions, and the crashing sound of falling debris. He had barely succeeded in sitting up when the window directly above him blew out, sending a white spray of pulverized glass to rain down onto him.

Ignoring the fact that his sight was nothing more than a liquid blur, Severus Summoned his wand and struggled to rise. Using the shouting as a guide, he approached the stairs and looked up. He could make out two shapes in the hallway by the light of flying spells, flooding the area outside the door with shades of green and red. Before he could make his way up, he heard Draco scream "*Avada Kedavra!*" and was struck by something heavy, knocking him back down the stairs to the ground.

Shoving a body off of himself, Severus stared up to see the distorted vision of Draco's face come into view.

"Sorry about that," Draco said in a pained voice and panting for breath. He tilted his head as he asked, "Can you see anything?"

Severus scowled as he stood, saying, "Nothing much just my entire life."

Using his foot to turn over the tangle of robes lying on the ground, Severus shook his head and said flatly, "Goyle". He noted that it was clearly insulting to have been almost killed by one of the slowest-moving humans ever to blight the wizarding world. Severus knew if it hadn't been for the missing stairs and Draco, he'd certainly be dead.

Severus didn't bother disguising his impressed expression as he observed Draco standing before him.

Draco glanced towards the empty doorway and said, rubbing his legs, "When I joined, Mother arranged dueling lessons for me over the summer. We covered the Unforgivables of course."

"Indeed," Severus said, nodding slowly. "I meant what I said, Draco. She was quite an intelligent witch."

Draco nodded, not exactly happy to have killed one of his classmates' fathers. "I failed her when facing my father. I just couldn't...."

It took Severus a moment to find words. "It's not the same faced with someone you know, never mind your own blood."

Draco looked uncertain as he stared down at Goyle's body. Leaning over, Draco gripped his right thigh, as if testing it. His face cleared, and then, pointing with his wand towards the house, he stated, "It's not far inside if you're ready?"

Shaking glass out of his robes and hair, Severus nodded.

They climbed the stairs once more and entered the darkness.

"Lucius?" a crouched figure said hesitantly from the doorway. His short fingers drummed nervously on the splintered wood trim, ready to withdraw if threatened. He had learned to approach Lucius with care, as his mood swung more violently since he had broken out of Azkaban. Daring to disturb him had become a dangerous undertaking, one best avoided. While the Dark Lord's orders were that Lucius guard the Horcrux, he had instead spent all of his time sitting in one of the drawing rooms and ordering Wormtail around.

"What do you want, rat?" Lucius said with disgust, swirling his glass before taking another drink. Even though it was the middle of summer, he sat by a roaring fire that had taken Wormtail most of the day to build. An empty bottle of Firewhisky lay on the floor, and evidence of another, which had met an unfortunate end, littered the hearth.

Lucius turned just enough to reveal an expression of a disturbed mind. One that could turn violent with the slightest provocation and even less reason.

"The wards have been breached," Wormtail said, cringing in anticipation.

Gritting his teeth, Lucius stared into the fire and simply asked, "Where?"

Wormtail began to move slowly into the room, holding his shaking hands up around his face. "I am not sure. I heard noise coming from the west side of the house just now..."

Lucius sat up suddenly and twisted around in his chair. "Who is with the Horcrux?"

Wormtail remained silent, his eyes round with fear.

Lucius threw his glass to shatter in the fireplace, and the flames flared upwards to touch the mantle. He shoved himself out of the chair, rushed across the room, grabbed Wormtail's collar, and shook him, shouting, "WHO?"

"Macnair," Wormtail managed to croak out.

"THAT'S ALL? Have you no sense, you wretched excuse for a human? You never leave your post! UNDERSTAND?" Lucius yelled, twisting Wormtail's robes tightly, sending a flood of color rushing up through his face and into his scalp.

Trying to regain his composure, Lucius growled, "Where is Goyle?"

When Wormtail didn't answer immediately, Lucius screamed, "ANSWER ME!"

Wormtail shook his head in a frantic, jerking motion, gasping, "I I don't know..."

Lucius yelled in frustration, threw Wormtail down, and stalked out of the room.

Severus and Draco moved quietly through the dimly lit hallway, trailing their hands along the raised paneling on the walls as a guide. Severus had developed a headache, either from being half-blinded or thrown more than ten feet twice. As they walked, he noticed that the floor flexed under their feet and hoped that it wouldn't completely give way. A part of his mind did think it would be highly amusing to simply come crashing through the floor into the basement and pretend it was all a clever plan.

"Here," Draco whispered, placing his hand on a door recessed into the paneling.

Severus looked suspicious. *Wonderful, another door.* He took a moment to observe and noticed the door opened outward. He glanced at Draco in the dim light and whispered, "Trust me?"

When Draco nodded, Severus motioned for him to stand next to him along the wall. He then swung his arm and violently pounded on the door. The sound of someone running up the stairs could be heard growing louder. As the door opened partway, Severus moved quickly and kicked the door back shut.

He smiled evilly as they heard the satisfying sound of someone cursing as they fell back down the stairs.

At the stunned look on Draco's face, Severus shrugged and said with a smirk, "Far more entertaining this way."

Severus threw the door open and cast *Lumos* as he descended. Lying in a heap at the bottom was a furious Walden Macnair in the process of righting himself. Before he could recover, Severus Petrified him, effectively preserving the perfectly murderous look on his face.

Draco descended slowly, gripping the handrail.

Watching Draco rub one leg, Severus said, "Adrenaline does wondrous things until it wears off."

Draco shrugged and motioned towards the top of the stairs. "Only Wormtail is left."

"I have learned never to assume," Severus said, listening closely for any more arrivals. "There are more; of that I am certain."

Severus scanned the room. He could see that it held nothing more than a few tables and the same wooden chest he had seen in Bella's mind. He knew that in order to destroy the Horcrux, he would need to be fully engaged and unable to help should anyone else arrive. He looked back at Draco, who was sitting on the steps and trying his best to avoid showing any pain. Severus knew Draco would have trouble holding anyone off, let alone the one he was certain was in the house Lucius.

Severus looked at Macnair and then asked Draco the question he had asked his mother just days ago...

And a perfectly evil grin spread on his face at the answer.

Lucius' anger was beyond words. Even rage was an inadequate description, as he was past the upper limits of any sane person's range of emotion. He muttered under his breath as he walked in long strides towards the basement, clenching his hands into fists. His robes flew out behind him as he stalked, whipping against the wall whenever he turned a corner.

Reduced to lording over complete imbeciles. Sad excuses for wizards who can't even guard a simple Horcrux. If the Dark Lord loses this one, he will certainly kill me. The only one left lies directly under their noses where they'll never look....

Cowering in the darkness behind him, Wormtail followed, cringing whenever Lucius' voice rose as he muttered. Wormtail massaged his neck while he ambled along and drew his wand, intending to destroy whoever dared come after his master's property. He hoped it was either Draco or Severus or, even better, both. The excitement at possibly delivering them to the Dark Lord rose in him again. His dark eyes glittered while he kept his distance from Lucius, who had just pounded his fist against the wall, shaking large amounts of dust loose.

Turning the corner, Lucius seemed to forcefully compose himself as he neared the basement door. He snapped his head towards where Wormtail stood several feet away, and, pointing his wand at him, hissed, "Do not fail me, you miserable wretch."

Severus levitated Macnair's Petrified body to the top of the stairs and explained to Draco what he should do if anyone should approach. "I will need to concentrate to destroy the Horcrux. It is extremely Dark magic, and if I am interrupted things could get let's just say *interesting*. You must hold off anyone else who may be alerted to come here. Can you do that?"

"Absolutely," Draco said without hesitation.

"My orders still stand. If I give the word, you leave. Understood?"

Draco nodded, but Severus could see in his eyes that he would not abandon him. Severus noted that, while Draco looked just like his father, he had the heart of his mother, and that was what mattered.

Severus approached the chest, waved his wand, and watched as it slowly opened, revealing the statue of a bronze eagle. It shone with the power of its own reversal of light, vibrating, emitting a low, undulating droning. Taking a deep breath, Severus looked around the room, noting which objects in the room could become lethal debris should the Horcrux escape his control. Each Horcrux, he found, was different, in that the magic protecting them had become more complex, possibly because they were created at different points in Voldemort's life. Considering his record to date with the process, he thought it was better that Draco was not aware of how it usually ended.

Severus closed his eyes, raised his arms, and began to murmur the incantation. The eagle rose, brightened in color and slowly rotated in the air, frozen in a pose with its chest thrust out and wings thrown back. Each wing curved outward as if straining in flight, each feather separated by invisible wind. As the eagle's color intensified, the droning sound rose, becoming wilder in tone, wavering, deepening.

Points of light erupted from each feather's tip, cutting through the darkness. Trying to avoid staring into the bright light, Severus instead watched the shadows on the wall. Slips of parchment circled on the floor next to the wall, driven by a soft wind that had risen, slowly building in intensity. The circling soon slowed, and the papers lay down. The wind, however, had not slowed; rather, it rose higher, swirling Severus' robes around his legs.

Severus had begun to believe that the destruction of this Horcrux might actually go well when he noticed something odd about the shadow.

When he dared to look up at the Horcrux, his eyes widened at what he saw.

Draco was mesmerized, watching as Severus worked to destroy the Horcrux. When he heard footsteps approaching, he was shaken out of his trance and stood to press his ear to the door. Quickly, he released Macnair from Severus' spell and then whispered, "*Imperio*."

When Lucius reached for the door, it opened on its own and Macnair appeared. Macnair closed the door behind him again, the poorly lit hallway hiding the strange glaze in his eyes.

Lucius relaxed considerably, but remained suspicious, "Where is Goyle?"

"I think he went to the west side to check where the wards were breached," Macnair said in a slightly odd voice.

Lucius motioned to Wormtail. "Go check on him." He watched Wormtail shuffle away down the hall, his feet leaving long, uneven stripes through the dust on the floor, then turned his lit wand back to Macnair. Lucius tilted his head, examining Macnair's eyes. "Everything in order is it?"

"Yes," Macnair said, positioning himself in front of the door.

"I would like to see," Lucius said sternly with narrowed eyes. He moved his wand along the floor around them, illuminating where there were several sets of footprints in the dust.

The expression on Macnair's face transformed from cordial to deadly in an instant. "I don't think that will be necessary... Malfoy."

"What..." Lucius started, but was interrupted when Macnair raised his wand.

Draco listened at the door and gritted his teeth as he listened to his father speak. When he heard Macnair attack him, a grin spread on his face. The destruction must have been tremendous; he heard shouting and explosions travel down the hall and into another part of the house. When silence fell, Draco gripped the door knob and took a deep breath.

In his heart, for all the wrong reasons, Draco hoped it was his father who survived.

When Severus shielded his eyes and looked at the eagle, he was stunned to find that its wings were moving. At first, he thought his eyes must have betrayed him, but not only was each wing flexing forward, the statue itself was steadily growing larger. The eagle's head moved as if it was struggling against an invisible force while the circle of magic carried it around in a lazy circle. Suddenly, it shoved its head down and began to beat its wings, throwing blinding beams of light around the room. Severus covered his ears just in time as the eagle let out a horrific scream that echoed around the room, magnifying in volume as it raised its head.

It spun faster, battling for control, thrusting its wings downward, twisting its head from side to side, pushing towards the outer edge of reason. Severus cast a Silencing spell just as it opened its beak to scream once more. Even without a voice, its tearing cry tore through the air, infusing terror, slicing like a bolt of lightning on a clear night. It twisted, breaking free of its pose, angrily arching its back and flexing its talons.

Growing at an alarming pace, the reverberating darkness intensified, drawing the light inward, devouring it.

Severus continued to murmur the incantation, absorbed in the sight before him. The vision was of a creature in excruciating pain being ripped apart in silence, hauntingly beautiful and wildly hideous at once.

Draco opened the basement door slowly, allowing high, arching shadows to sway across the opposite wall. With a final glance behind him, he moved out into the hall and closed the door behind him. Light bled out from under the door, illuminating the dusty floor. Draco lit his wand and swept it in either direction.

He stood, watching and listening.

The wooden floor groaned and cracked under Draco's feet as he inched along the darkened hall. Holding his wand out in front of him, he tried to ignore the fact that his racing heart was making his hand tremble, moving the light in a bouncing pattern along the paneling.

Turning a corner, Draco could see that the dust on the floor had been swept in every direction, the wall scorched, and what once was a doorway torn out, leaving a gaping hole. Shifting his wand to the side, Draco found the door, still closed and in its door frame, lying sideways across the hall. Smoke from the recent flurry of spells and still smoldering wood hung heavily in the air.

Suddenly, Draco's world lit up in green liquid fire. He instinctively threw himself to the floor, covering his head as part of the wall and ceiling were instantly obliterated. Draco shoved himself through the wreckage and crouched low against the wall.

The combination of darkness and silence was maddening, magnifying the slightest sound or hint of a movement.

"I don't have to miss," Lucius drawled, stepping out into the hallway from a side room.

Draco froze. Something heavy was dragging on the floor.

"Using one of my own against me?" Lucius said casually, sweeping the light from his wand over Macnair's face, revealing the final, shocked expression common to victims of the Killing Curse.

"A poorly performed Imperius Curse, Draco," Lucius chastised, searching the dark for any hint of where Draco was hiding. "Didn't the lessons your dear, departed mother arranged teach you anything? Look at what you forced me to do.... This is all your fault."

Lucius dropped Macnair's body to the floor.

"You turned your mother into a traitor," Lucius said accusingly, sweeping his wand along the floorboards enjoying the hunt. "You might as well have killed her yourself." He laughed softly, waiting for the rage to build, knowing exactly how to push Draco into lashing out.

Draco clenched his jaw in the dark, but said nothing as his father's footfalls echoed on the hardwood. His legs were screaming at him for staying in such a position, twitching in anticipation of the need to run pain or not.

"What can one expect from such a waste of pure blood? I always knew you were worthless. Weak. I should bring you alive before the Dark Lord but maybe I think I'll just say my wand simply... slipped."

Silence. Lucius stopped, moved out into the center of the hallway, and listened.

Draco shifted, feeling some of the blood return to his legs. He positioned his hands on the raised paneling, intent on using it to drag himself up. His father was mere feet away he was sure of it.

Lucius grinned in the dark, lunged forward, and screamed, "*Avada Kedavra!*"

The spell blasted a hole in the floor directly in front of Draco, and for one, terrifying moment, he almost fell through when his legs failed to respond.

Severus looked at the top of the stairs, only to see that Draco was gone. He continued working, even as he carefully climbed the stairs backwards. He drew his wand back, took a deep breath, and cast the final spell. Immediately, violent light broke free, flooding the room in a deeply rich red haze, blooming against the light, rising to the ceiling, shuddering as it spread. Darkness swept in like cold fury, tearing through, sweeping like a cloak, blackening, spiraling rage eclipsing all light.

Running up the final few stairs, Severus slammed the door shut behind him. He quickly took in the scene before him by the light of his wand and observed the dust on the floor, disturbed by dozens of footprints, large areas where a body must have fallen, and major pieces of the walls blown away. Looking back towards the basement door, he saw the final stage of red light bleeding from under the door and knew that it was not a good sign.

Draco ignored his legs' refusal to flex and forcefully shoved himself upright. He lurched across the hall and into a doorway, cursing to himself as he found the door locked. The light of his father's wand swung from side to side, far enough away so he couldn't be seen. Draco struggled to keep his breathing quiet, even as the light passed his way again.

Then the light extinguished.

"I would expect you to hide, Draco. After all, you are nothing but a coward. Even your wretched traitor of a mother stood and fought me in the end," Lucius growled from an angle which told Draco he was moving along the opposite wall.

Draco thought that his best chance would be to reach the side door to get outside where he could at least see a little. As Lucius continued to approach, Draco waited. When he could tell that his father was on one side of the wall, Draco bolted past him and ran in a lurching gait towards the side door.

Lucius screamed, "NO!" as he sensed Draco running past him in the dark. He turned and ran after him, screaming incoherently and throwing curse after curse, blasting the house into pieces.

By the time Draco reached the door and awkwardly leaped over the missing steps, his legs were starting to give out from the pain. He could hear his father behind him casting curses, and he knew this was not going to be a simple duel. What was more disturbing was his father's mindless ranting. His father had never been a kind man, but Draco still felt the loss of the little semblance of a family he had once had.

Draco turned and raised his wand, watching the doorway as the sound of his father's screaming competed with his own pounding heart.

"Not again," Severus muttered, watching the light simmer under the door. He looked up as he ran and was startled to see a stray spell fly across the hall from the direction of the side door. It set the wall alight, throwing tall shadows, then all was dark again.

As he reached the end of the hallway, Severus looked back just as the basement door exploded with enough force to drive it though the opposite wall. At the same moment, the flooring started to push up in a rolling wave towards where he stood. Floorboards bowed upwards to the breaking point, banging into the walls, revealing a firestorm of blood-red light below. A piercing scream eclipsed all sound, heard not only by the ears, but tearing directly through the mind into the soul.

As quickly as the light illuminated the destruction in the hallway, it receded, plunging the house back into darkness. The screaming died along with the light, fading into the cold, dead stillness of the dark.

Severus stood, exhausted, with one hand on the wall, trying to regain his breath. He then heard the distant, unmistakable voice of Lucius Malfoy.

Shaking his head, Severus groaned before running towards the source of the sounds.

Lucius completely lost all composure at the possibility of Draco escaping, casting any spells he could after him. When he could see the doorway ahead, he slowed and cautiously approached with his wand out before him.

"Going to fight like a man, Draco?" he called with a sneer. As he moved to the edge of the doorway, the side of the house next to him exploded into a hail of shards.

When Lucius dared to look out again, he saw Draco standing on the grounds near the trees, waiting.

Draco held his wand up high and said viciously, "I am more of a man than you'll ever hope to be."

"You'd better aim to kill, Draco," Lucius snarled, descending the stairs and raising his own wand.

Lucius turned quickly as an explosion rocked the house and was nearly struck as Draco threw a Stunner at him. He growled loudly and charged at Draco, alternating between trying to disarm and kill, debating which end would provide him more opportunity to regain his position within the inner circle. He knew the explosion was Severus

destroying the Horcrux, and that meant serious consequences. His only chance at redemption was to bring Draco or Severus back dead or alive.

Draco cursed as his spell missed its mark. He threw another, only to find it blocked easily and sent back to blast a bush into flames next to him. Lurching further into the forest, Draco turned to see his father level his wand again. He threw himself down as the air flared in blinding flashes of green and red. Spells flew by close enough to blow his hair as they passed. Draco tried to stand again, but failed even to complete an incantation as the tree he was using for cover suddenly erupted into flames and split in two. It leaned to one side before twisting and falling into the thick brush.

Every spell Draco cast was easily blocked by his father as he stalked after him methodically. Draco ducked under a large area of brush and crawled with thorns tearing at his robes. He emerged on the other side and, as his father passed, Draco found himself presented with a clear shot.

He stood with his wand poised and struggled to allow the words to pass his lips but just couldn't. He thought bitterly of when his mother stood facing her sister, but could not cast the curse.

Instead, he screamed, "*Stupefy!*" but Lucius turned and dodged fast enough so the spell only hit him in the shoulder. It spun him into a tree, which only served to enrage him further.

Draco thought to lead his father back towards the house, hoping that Snape would be able to help. The weakness in his legs began to spread, effectively disconnecting the movement from the knees down. Spotting a chimney through the branches, Draco ran in that direction. His father was drawing closer and would soon overtake him.

Suddenly, the ground fell out from underneath him, and he slid several feet down. Trying to avoid crying out loud, he gripped onto the edge of the steep hill. Earth crumbled in his hands while he gripped onto roots with his left hand and his wand with his right. His vision blurred from the pain as he found a foothold and blindly tried to haul himself back up.

Lucius openly bared his teeth with rage as he watched Draco disappear out of sight. In the dim light, he failed to see the drop and fell, slamming onto his back, losing his wand in the process. He growled in frustration as he turned over and clutched at anything he could to stop his fall.

Each time Lucius tried to climb, the earth gave way further, allowing him only a few inches' progress before mocking him again. Stopping to catch his breath, he raised his head and tossed the hair out of his eyes.

Draco stood at the top of the hill, staring down at him.

A strange silence stretched out. Draco held his wand steady, his face filled with calm resolution.

Lucius ceased his attempt to climb and stared back up at his son with utter hatred. The wind blew his hair off his shoulders, leaving a few stray strands to flutter across his face.

Draco shook his head slowly as the wind rose again, rippling his robes to one side.

"You fail, even at this?" Lucius sneered, driving his fingers into the hillside deeper as one of his footholds gave way.

The expression on Draco's face hardened. Clouds obscured the moon, leaving nothing but cold shadows between them.

Suddenly, Lucius raged, "Do it then! You are nothing but a traitorous coward, and you are no son of mine!"

"You're right I am nothing like you..." Draco said contemptuously.

The shadows receded long enough for them to meet each other's murderous gazes as Draco drew his wand back to strike.

Severus reached the side door and could see light flashing through the trees. He leaped down the stairs and was startled to hear the sound of Lucius screaming under what was obviously the Cruciatus Curse. But instead of the abrupt silence that usually marked the release of the curse, the screams faded as if Lucius' voice had simply failed.

Before he could enter the forest, he was relieved to see that Draco was not only still alive, but that Lucius was as well, although he was Petrified and being dragged through the dirt. Not that he cared for the rotten excuse for a wizard, but he undoubtedly held extremely valuable information.

Draco was barely able to walk. Limping would be a kind description, as he was only just able to remain upright enough to move. Dropping his father unceremoniously to the ground, he painfully lowered himself to sit.

Draco handed Severus his father's wand and said, "I just couldn't."

"There is no shame, Draco. No one expects you to kill," Severus said sincerely. "He is far more valuable alive than dead."

The slightest movement caught Severus' eye in the brush behind Draco. When Draco saw Severus' face grow serious, he turned and saw Wormtail emerging from the forest with his wand trained on both of them.

"Release him or I'll kill you both," Wormtail said in a hesitant attempt at sounding vicious, his small eyes shining in the moonlight.

If Wormtail had expected an elaborate exchange of words, he was disappointed, as Severus strode directly towards him, ignoring his quaking wand. Wormtail's eyes widened, and he opened his mouth to protest; however, his voice failed him.

"How dare you!" Severus roared and swung his wand. The spell not only struck Wormtail, it slammed him into the side of the house, knocking loose pieces of siding to the ground.

As Wormtail scrambled to his feet, Severus stalked after him, snarling, "Back not broken yet? Shall I assist?"

At the sight of Severus striding towards him, raising his wand again, Wormtail quickly transformed and started to scamper away.

Severus scowled and raised his right hand. Wormtail was drawn up into the air, his legs still moving in a frantic running motion. Severus stepped forward, grasped the screeching creature in his hand, and cast a spell preventing him from transforming again.

Holding the screaming rat by his tail up to the moonlight, Severus grinned evilly while swinging him slightly.

"Ah, Wormtail I do believe I have a better idea. I know of someone who would very much like to see you again."

To anyone entering the Headmistress' office, it would appear that Harry and Ron were playing a simple round of wizard's chess. They sat across from each other, leaning forward in deep concentration over the small pieces on the board before them. Instead of knights and pawns, however, perfectly scaled-down replicas of dragons, Thestrals, and Hippogriffs stood in their respective places. The dragons puffed smoke from their nostrils and whipped their tails from side to side while the Thestrals and Hippogriffs stamped their hooves impatiently. Names were neatly printed in places, representing either traps or Order members. In place of a checkered pattern, there was a detailed map of Hogwarts and the surrounding grounds on the board.

Harry took his eyes off the board to observe Hermione sitting alone, staring down into a cup of tea. Other Order members remained after the meeting, but no one seemed to notice how upset Hermione was since she hid it so well. Harry gave Ron a look, and they both rose and went to sit on either side of her.

"It'll be all right, he'll be back soon," Harry said, trying to console her.

"Yeah, don't worry. He's got Draco with him," Ron said, looking doubtful and shrugging when Harry gave him a strange look.

Hermione smiled slightly at their sad attempts to make her feel better. "Thanks, but I'll be fine. I just want to be alone."

Harry and Ron left her, returning to their board. Ron frowned down at a dragon when it snapped at him as he tried to touch it. It moved on its own, traveling towards the castle gates and circling there. When Harry reached for it, the dragon landed on his hand and bit him. It then resumed its circling around the area just inside the gates. One by one, the other dragons left their places. They flew, nose to tail, swirling and refusing to be interrupted. Ron shrugged and looked towards Fred and George, who were watching from nearby. Fred turned to George and grinned.

Suddenly, the office door banged open and Severus strode into the office. He tossed the squealing Wormtail to Lupin and said as he passed, "We'll need a prison for Draco's *guest* outside, and keep this one away from the cat for now. Poppy, Draco needs your attention."

His eyes found Hermione by the window as he crossed the room. When he reached her, he took her hand, pulled her to stand, and kissed her as if they hadn't seen each other in years.

Conversation in the room died as all eyes turned to rest on them. Minerva placed a hand over her heart, while Tonks held her tea cup at an odd angle. It moved to the edges of her fingertips before it slipped and shattered on the floor.

Hermione was stunned and didn't dare move, lest he remember himself again in front of so many people.

Slowly breaking the kiss, he said in a quiet voice, "I seem to have done it twice now."

Hermione took a moment to find her voice. Her breath caught in her throat as she said, "Yes, but what brought this on?"

"Tonight I had yet another opportunity to review my life," he said softly, taking her hand and trying hard to ignore everyone's eyes on him.

Hermione looked concerned, then asked with a smile, "Anything good?"

Severus tilted his head and said with a slight grin, "Just the end."

Close Your Eyes

Chapter 33 of 41

A stormy night...

Disclaimer: All characters belong to the great JKR. I am only borrowing to pay homage.

*AN: Thanks to all who have reviewed. You're a hardy bunch. An extra spiffy thanks to Ariadne, who, bless her heart, has survived this chapter more times than should be considered healthy. All in the name of team Of Debts. *raises glass**

Enjoy

Hermione smiled and, leaning closer, whispered, "Everyone's looking at us."

"Nervous?" With a smug look, he imitated her, whispering, "You'll need to do this, you know."

Hermione pushed him a little. "Very funny. Proud of yourself, are you?"

"Now, if you must know, it is clearly a large achievement. Surely there is some admiration for that?"

Hermione laughed. "Oh, really? Right. Would you like points? We'll need to check to see if Filch has patched the hourglass together yet."

Severus quirked a smile, then leaned in as if to tell her a secret. "I must advise you of an impending subject change."

"Ah, I see. I'm listening," Hermione said, tilting her head.

The glint in his eye returned. Hermione decided she loved that look, even though it meant trouble.

Severus stood straight and passed a glare around the room, sending people hastily to find either an excuse for a conversation or to find somewhere else to look. Ron's stare lingered a moment longer than the others' before he tried to touch one of the swirling dragons. Immediately, all of them went for his hand at once, biting and flapping their wings fiercely.

"I believe I owe you something," Severus said quietly. He raised an eyebrow as if to prompt her for the correct answer.

"Really?" she said, ignoring the fact that his expression was rapidly traveling towards irritation. "I'll use a phrase of yours: please enlighten me."

Appearing nonchalant, he drawled, "It is something we have discussed in detail before."

"Is it now?"

With a smirk, he replied, "Yes. Actually, it was something you requested quite adamantly."

"Oh," she said, smiling and pretending to search her memory. She examined the ceiling for a clue.

Severus crossed his arms, staring at her in a way that made her feel both uncomfortable and warm at the same time. After a moment, he shrugged and stated, "Fine, I shall be in the lab."

He flashed a smug grin as if daring her to ask, then began walking casually towards the office door. He completely ignored the looks of the remaining Order members, who were doing a poor job of acting busy as he passed.

Hermione sat down and couldn't help but laugh while watching him go.

After Severus closed the door behind him, Tonks sat next to Hermione. "The man kisses you like that in front of everyone, and you let him leave?"

Hermione shrugged and looked towards the door with a grin on her face that couldn't be prevented. He was playing with her, and she knew it. Hermione was certain that her knowing that he knew, and that she knew he was playing, only made sense to the two of them. It practically hurt to figure it out.

"Are you mental?" Tonks asked and pushed Hermione until she had no choice but to get up. "Go to him!"

Hermione laughed. "He's just playing with me."

"And what are we talking about?" Ginny said, throwing an arm around Hermione. "By the way, Hermione, that was a right spectacular kiss. Ron almost passed out! It was quite fun."

"Exactly!" Tonks said, gesturing with frustration towards Hermione. "The man does something stunningly romantic, and she just watches him walk out."

"Are you mental?" Ginny asked incredulously.

"See? Two opinions. Now go!" Tonks said, shooing her away.

"Fine, fine, I'm going," Hermione said, laughing, holding her hands up in surrender. *A battle of wills he wants...*

Severus was passing through the Entrance Hall when he heard her approach. He had gone so far as to unfasten the top two buttons of his frock coat after removing his outer robes, shaking out bits of glass and dirt from the evening's events. The sound of her footfalls clearly meant she was jogging, but then he heard her slow to a more respectable speed.

"Ah, here we go again," he thought, struggling to remove the smirk from his face.

Hermione moved up alongside him, asking casually, "Heading to the dungeons, are we?"

"Would seem so, yes," he said, admiring the repair work to the Entrance Hall ceiling. "Are you all right? You seem out of breath."

"I was running to catch up to you," she said, and gesturing to his chest, she noted, "You've allowed a button or two to slip there."

"It is summer," he said in a dry voice, glancing sideways at her.

Rolling her eyes, she said, "Oh, I see."

Severus stopped and faced her. "And just what are you insinuating?"

"Oh, nothing." She stepped closer to him, fingering the third button threateningly, taking hold and tilting it, just slightly, so that it was poised to slip. "You're warm."

Severus grinned and backed away. "It's hot, and I've had an interesting day."

"Oh, I understand. Then you'll be relieved to remove the coat," Hermione said and followed him, sliding her hand lightly over the wool, dragging her fingertips over the fabric.

He stopped trying to escape her and stood, absorbed by her hand's motions. Both hands, lightly trailing over the surface, along his chest, up around the collar, down to his waistline, to the coat's edge and back. Hermione watched as his eyes slid closed, and she leaned closer, placing a single, soft kiss along his jaw-line, lingering, watching him grit his teeth, no doubt trying to resist showing any reaction. A battle of wills. Tracing the edges to where the coat parted, gripping it in one hand and tugging on the buttons with the other.

One more button through the hole.

Her hand pressed against his side, slipping around to his back to hold him close. He brought his head forward against hers and opened his eyes. Slowly, he shook his head, a small movement. His hand joined hers and grasped it, stopping its movements.

Severus motioned towards the Entrance Hall stairs, attempting to sound casual as he struggled with her over the buttons. "I think we've been here before. While I am sure everyone would love to happen upon a repeat performance, I do not care to be found..."

Suddenly her lips were on his, her hands shoving under his coat and behind him, nails against his shirt, driving in and dragging down. He staggered backwards, into the shadows, only stopping when he hit the stone wall, pausing long enough to register that they were between two hourglasses. Positive that his heart had stopped, leaving him desperate for breath. The physical body and spirit at odds, battling for precedence, betraying each other for their own gain. All resistance in the name of remaining proper left him in that moment; she had such control over him he was helpless to not hold her tightly and fall further into the act, shoving reason aside. Lifting from the kiss only long enough to gasp as she raked her nails down his back again, looking into his eyes in a way that made his heart both seize and burn with a passionate fire at once. He pushed forward, taking his robes and covering both of them, plunging her into darkness. It did nothing to slow her; in fact, it only drove her on to kiss along his throat, laughing softly as he gasped. This time it was she who shoved his hair aside and, with a simple breath, elicited a moan that he failed to catch in time.

Allowing his head to fall back, he forgot himself and dropped his robes, allowing fresh air to wash over them. Hermione kissed along his throat and jaw lightly, edging them both back to reason. She watched his face as she reached up, released the clasp holding his robes, and smiled devilishly as they fell to the floor.

"Tell me," he said, measuring his breath and trying to ignore how he needed to swallow to continue, "are the robes the only thing keeping you from tearing me apart like this?" He surveyed the fact that his outer robes were now strewn across the base of the Hufflepuff hourglass and his coat resembled something that had been torn open by an animal.

Not bothering to appear embarrassed, she responded decidedly, "You should lose the robes and only wear the coat if anything."

After taking a look down at himself, Severus raised his eyebrow. "I fear the consequences. Would it be possible for me to travel anywhere without molestation?"

"Doubtful," she said laughingly and stepped towards him again.

"I see," he said thoughtfully, trying to reassemble his coat and becoming frustrated when the buttons were misaligned.

Hermione sighed. "Allow me."

"Pray tell," he asked, watching as she worked her way up his chest, taking more time than necessary to finish. "What prompted this? Was it the dramatic entry or the rather romantic public display of affection?"

With a slightly surprised expression, Hermione asked, "Do you plan these things?"

"I plan many things, but no, spontaneous expressions of emotion are not among them. That was genuine, I'm afraid. I would never lie when it comes to love," he said, his expression sincere. He continued on his way towards the dungeons.

"I believe you."

Severus nodded as they turned a corner. "Excellent choice. You'd do well to believe in true love."

"And why is that?"

"Because..." he said, letting his gaze fall to the floor as he spoke, "True love never lies. One's soul is laid so bare that there is no hope of deception. Even the most stoic falls victim to unorthodox, and yes, even stunning expressions of love and truthful confessions of emotion. There is no other way to live. It turns thoughts of tomorrow and next week into passionate vows of undying loyalty and devotion not only for a lifetime, but an eternity."

When he caught her looking at him knowingly, he added, "So I've read."

Hermione stopped and observed him for a moment before asking, "You're describing yourself, aren't you?"

Turning to face her, he studied her face before nodding slightly.

Hermione reached out and gently brushed the hair away from his face. She traced his jaw lightly and said, "I've noticed you do that, Severus. You speak of things as if you're an outsider, but in reality it's you. You've never told anyone of any feelings before, have you?"

He didn't answer. Hermione thought she saw traces of suspicion hidden in the shadows in his eyes.

"You can speak to me directly. I would never tell."

His eyes narrowed slightly. "You enjoy vast outpourings of thoughts and feelings?"

Hermione chuckled. "Well, not all the time but, yes. Of course, I would never want your incredibly sharp wit to fade."

"Poppy would have me sedated and tied down if I turned emotional," he said with a smirk.

Waving her hand, she said, "Besides, what would I do without this never-ending war of words with you?"

He shrugged. "I shudder to think of the lack of color in the sky should we speak in plain generalities to each other."

"That surely would be a tragedy."

He held her hand and carefully intertwined their fingers. "While I have free license to express myself without dozens of witnesses..."

When she saw his eyes, she stilled, watching how he turned her hand over in his.

"I meant every word I said to you the other night. I remember you coming at night, holding my hand. My nights are far from restful. Only your being there changed that if only for a short while."

"I was only checking on you."

Examining how their fingers joined, he continued, "I pride myself on noticing every minute detail in life. I notice these things, Hermione. Every single one of them. I feel confident enough to say that nothing can express love more than the accumulation of small acts of caring such as these."

Hermione smiled slightly. "Like when you torture me endlessly with words? Your way of showing you care..."

With a shrug, he said, "I do try to please."

"Exactly. Back to our first topic," Hermione declared.

Clasping his hands behind his back, he asked, "Which was?"

"Tell me you don't know what prompted me to practically strip you in the Entrance Hall," she said and began to lead him in the direction of the rooms.

"I do not," he said innocently.

Instead of arguing further, Hermione shook her head and simply pulled him in the correct direction.

Severus appeared impressed at her forwardness, but allowed her to lead. "That was quite an eloquent way of telling me to stop talking."

"Hush," she said, turning to catch the amused look on his face.

They had neared the last turn before his rooms when he spoke again.

"Miss Granger?"

Hermione couldn't help but stop dead.

"If I may speak or is it too much of an impertinence? Shall I remain silent for all eternity, or is there a time limit to the restriction of my voice?"

She pushed her finger into his chest. "You're testing me."

Severus appeared threatened, a smirk playing on his lips. Placing a hand over his heart, he countered, "It was a simple question."

"You're being difficult, you know. I think you know exactly what you're doing."

He gestured to himself, as if humbly pleading a case. "If that is your opinion, then who am I to offer an argument? There is no doubt that you possess ample research to support your claim."

Hermione couldn't help but laugh. "I think you enjoy frustrating me with words. Your weapon of choice."

Severus observed how she still held onto his hand, clutching it possessively. He lifted her hand and stepped behind her. Standing close enough to barely touch. Daring her. His lips just a fraction from her ear... "Frustrating? You believe me to be frustrating?"

She held her ground, ignoring how his voice permeated her very world. She closed her eyes against the torch-lit hallway. "At times..."

Severus nodded as if accepting her point, then, gripping her shoulders, turned her around and swiftly shoved her against the wall. Hermione hit the corner of a portrait, sliding it up off its hook. It fell to the floor. Grasping her wrist, he roughly pinned it against another portrait, eliciting a string of insults and the hasty evacuation of its occupant.

Leaning forward, he pressed his lips against hers, slowly, methodically. Kissing softly, lighter each time, ending with a simple touch. Hermione dropped her head, staring down at his chest, too stunned for words, unsure if her heart was still beating. Both of them stood, breathing hard, hovering painfully close to each other's lips. Severus pressed himself harder against her and drew his fingers slowly down her side, watching his hand travel to her hip, gripping her.

"Frustrating is such a strong word and Merlin knows I do love words," Severus whispered into her ear. "Wouldn't you say it is more like challenging?"

Barely able to breathe, Hermione whispered in agreement, "I do love a challenge."

A soft chuckle against her neck. Her knees gave a little, but he caught her by pushing against her harder.

"Severus, that..." Her breath hitched as he shifted, watching her through his tousled hair. "That *isn't* helping."

Whispering surrounded them, interjected with gasping and other mutterings of indignation. The fallen portraits' inhabitants, now lying face down on the floor, could only voice their protests to the stone.

He watched her gaze drift up to her trapped wrist, then back into his amused eyes. A standoff. She twisted her free hand in his hair, forcing him to bow slightly. He grinned, looking up at her through the dark, parted curtains before letting his gaze fall.

"Severus..." she said, glancing towards where the door to his rooms stood, "we're nearly there."

"Are we?" he said casually, dipping his head low to barely touch his lips to her throat. He gripped her wrist tighter, then brought it behind her back. Hot breath against her neck, high up behind her ear, moving through her hair. The closeness without touch driving her mad.

A kiss spreading into a grin against her skin, a devious one of that she had no doubt.

The rumbling of his voice. "Oh we have yet to begin."

He tugged her collar aside to gain better access, growling as he moved to the back of her neck, his hair brushing her chin as he moved lower with shuddering breaths...

Hermione groaned and let go of his hair, throwing her hand out against the wall. She grasped onto something only to have it give way. Another round of shouts and a crash told her that it was yet another portrait.

A large painting depicting a picnic scene across the hall was becoming quite crowded, and there weren't enough fans to go around. When Hermione's knees gave a little more, Severus took the opportunity to shift against her again.

A round of gasps and whispers. More arrivals.

Hermione twisted her hand in his frock coat, forcing open the top button she had fastened only minutes earlier. She tilted her head up, drawing him in for another heart-stopping kiss. A smirk even before she broke the kiss, clutched his coat and pushed him away.

Groans and whispers of disbelief erupted from the picnic-goers and their uninvited guests.

Silently watching her, he followed as she moved towards the door to the rooms, reached behind her back and opened the door.

The paintings' whispering and shuffling through frames to get a better view disturbed the silence. Comments on the audacity of such a public display were drowned out by insistent hushing as he took her hand and kissed it once then again, as if it were his most precious possession. Hermione smiled as he looked up at her, his lips lingering on her hand.

When he straightened up, she reached out and placed her hand against his chest, tracing the rough wool. A faint smile, fingering the second button, hooking her finger over it, contemplating.

He stood patiently, watching her hands. The balance of power wavering between them.

Slowly, he moved closer, his eyes traveling up to where she had her hand against the door frame.

"You dance well..." he said barely above a whisper, breathing each word as he wrapped an arm around her waist, placed his hand over hers and pried her fingers from the door frame.

She grinned at him, her eyes briefly moving to the portrait across the hall. Several occupants were waiting with baited breath, their hands clasped against their chests. A few were fervently making motions for her to kiss him.

"Yes...", he murmured, bringing her arm behind her back and moving to kiss her throat. He backed her slowly, deeper into the room. "Resist if you wish, for it would most definitely make it a reward worth fighting for..."

He reached one hand behind his back, and the door shut against a round of disappointed groans in the hallway.

She moaned as his breath washed over her, his hair trailing across her chest as he shifted to kiss along her collarbone. Letting her head fall back, from her distracted mind came the thought that one never looks at the ceiling unless frustrated with a problem or in the throes of passion.

"I shall win," he said, allowing the vibration of his voice to sink into her chest, "in the end."

She hoped he didn't sense how his voice affected her. "Yes, I do know." She stared him in the eyes. "Don't do that."

He splayed his hand across her chest and pressed. "Hermione, I needn't use Legilimency to know."

Shaking her head, she placed her hand over his. "Traitorous heart."

"I have heard that, yes," he murmured into her ear, and then, moving his hand aside, he started to trail light kisses in a slow, methodical, circular pattern.

"What are you doing to me?" she said to the ceiling, attempting to keep her breathing under control as he chuckled and moved lower.

"You wish me to stop?" Severus said and started to back away, a devious grin on his face.

Hermione took a fistful of his hair, pulled him to her, and all but growled, "Don't you dare."

She dug her nails into his coat, catching on the buttons, pushing her hands between their bodies to grab hold. Severus made no attempt to help her, continuing his relentless pace down her neck, lingering at her throat, biting gently before moving further down.

"Problem?" he whispered. A low chuckle against her breastbone, spreading directly into her heart.

Hermione took hold of his coat, turned and shoved him against the wall with enough force to shake a portrait free to crash loudly to the floor.

"Impressive," he said, laughing softly, although there was a trace of surprise in his eyes. "We are gaining quite the reputation, it seems."

"Quiet," Hermione ordered, becoming frustrated with the unyielding nature of thick wool. In a fit of frustration, she inserted both hands in between the maddening row of buttons, looked directly into his eyes, raised eyebrows and all, and tore open his coat, sending buttons flying.

Severus chuckled, watching several buttons rolling in circles before they finally fell down. "Impatient woman, you've ruined it..."

Hermione interrupted him with a kiss, slid her hands inside the coat, and pushed it off his shoulders. It fell to the floor. "Afterwards, I will teach you a new spell called *Reparo*."

He grinned against her lips, raising his hand to stroke her hair.

"You enjoy this," Hermione said, grasping his shirt. "Admit it."

He clasped his hands around her waist. "And what if I do?"

"Then I must admit that I am deeply in love with this side of you," Hermione said decisively.

Severus quirked a smile and said thoughtfully, "I see. More alluring than random insults, is it?"

Nodding, she said casually, "Much more."

With a grin, his tone descended as he moved to murmur in her ear, "Oh, but have I told you that the exchange of words can be more erotic than touch?"

As soon as his first breath brushed her ear, the chills almost obscured everything he said. After a moment of intense concentration, she replied, with her head on his shoulder, "Really? You may have mentioned it."

"That if I were to do this in the way I prefer, I would start by mentioning something to you early in the day. In passing, mind you. In plain words, so that, if overheard, they would mean nothing to the casual listener, but they would, between us, ignite an undeniable fire. Later on, I would corner you and ask innocent questions, which again, only to you, would mean much more. Sometime in the afternoon, I just may brush your hand slightly and speak to you with only a significant gaze. Nothing overt, just enough to get your attention and let you know that you are mine, and yes, I do intend to act on my rights of possession. I may even be so bold as to do any of these things while you are with others. If you can so much as complete a sentence while I either look at you or pass by, I have not succeeded. The measure of success is that, by the end of the day, your only desire is for night to come."

"That would be an incredible tease."

As if he were insulted, he said with a hand over his heart, "A 'tease' implies that I would have no intention of delivering. I would say it is more of a promise."

"You do have a point there," she conceded.

Severus smirked. "Excellent. Let's continue."

He leaned closer, just shy of completely pressing against her. Barely touching his forehead to hers, he murmured, "Do you recall my description of seduction?"

"Vividly."

"What I believe I mentioned is that the anticipation of the event is far stronger than any aphrodisiac. It raises the sensitivity to a level where only the slightest hint of a touch drives desire higher," he whispered, then, almost imperceptibly, touched her face with his fingers. He trailed his hand down her arm and along her back with a maddening lightness. Every nerve felt alive as he moved his fingers in a long, looping pattern across her shoulders and the back of her neck. They stood painfully close, breathing the same small space of air.

He lifted her hand. On her face, a questioning look. He lowered his head as he turned her hand over, exposing her palm. She stood still, her eyes tracking his descent. With a slow trace of a movement, he laid a singular kiss in the center of her palm.

No movement could ever replace how he was perfectly circling around her hand, loving every inch of her skin. His eyes slipped closed as he carefully laid light kisses in a precise pattern, waiting before moving on to another place then touching again. Breath washing over her hand before he began another turn, crossing over itself, rising up to her fingers and traveling outwards swaying gently and returning to the sensitive center, now aching for his kiss. Her breath caught as he hovered over that place, trembling for that one touch, exquisitely alive, crying for completion. He opened his eyes and lifted her hand, turning it so she could see his face.

Staring directly into her eyes, he moved painfully slowly, his gaze locked on hers until her eyes closed. A soft moan escaped her as he barely kissed the center of her palm. She gasped as his lips brushed against her skin, astonished that something so innocent, so ordinary, could be transformed into something so perfectly erotic.

Hermione could only straighten her knees to keep from collapsing; she resisted the urge to grab hold of him immediately. Instead, she waited, breathing in shallow degrees, moving from one to the next with intense concentration on control.

Lost in herself, she was almost startled when he purred, "Forgetting to breathe already? I must say ~~were~~ ahead of schedule."

"Um..." she started, then, shaking her head clear, said, "Yes."

Severus moved his hand into her hair. "Beautiful," he murmured before kissing her lips gently. He carefully ensured that he softly kissed every inch along her collarbone before returning once more to stare into her eyes.

"No more words?" he asked with a grin. "That is quite a shift."

"How do you do that?" she asked dreamily.

He quirked a smile, betraying that he knew exactly what she meant. "Do what?"

"Know exactly what to do."

"I don't. It's an illusion," he said while moving her hair aside to busy himself in the sensitive place just behind her ear.

Gasping slightly, she held onto his shoulders as her knees gave a little. "It is not," she managed in disbelief.

"Hermione, when someone is admitting they aren't an expert in something, especially someone as egotistical as I, you do not accuse them of exaggerating their inadequacies," he said, gradually backing her into the bedroom.

"But you said..."

"I merely meant that I observe very carefully what is required, then act accordingly. Apparently that talent is well received, as opposed to the predominantly primitive strategy men employ, which is to simply conquer, declare victory, and flee the scene."

Hermione nodded her head slowly in agreement.

He took her hand again and this time traced tantalizingly light circles in her palm. "Does this still mean what I think it does?"

With a dawning smile, she said while watching him, "It does." Her hand was so painfully alive, his simple touch threatened to send her to the floor.

"Tell me."

Hermione sighed, then, tilting her head, said, "It means 'I want you.'"

"Really? I had no idea of your motives," he said, glancing up just long enough to maneuver her into the bedroom.

Severus observed her discovery of where they were and said with a slight bow, "I do believe I shall turn things over to you."

Her eyes widened. "Oh, I can't..."

He moved closer, tilting his head in question, dragging his fingers along the sheets, rippling them into peaks. Bringing his eyes up to hers, he asked, "Did I just bring an impostor in here, or are you still the same Hermione Granger who half attacked me not more than two minutes ago?"

Blushing, she muttered, "Well, yes, but..."

Severus placed his hands on her shoulders and watched as his fingers trailed down her arms to her hands and out to her fingers. She stilled, watching how the candlelight threw a soft shadow along his face, half-concealing him in the dark.

He leaned closer in small degrees, lowering his gaze to where he held her hands in his. Touching her cheek as he moved his lips towards her ear, took a shuddered breath and murmured, "You have more power than you may believe."

The argument left Hermione, and she became lost in his dark eyes. A calm came over her, so calm she lost track of herself as he stood before her. After a moment of thought, she waved her wand, lowering the candlelight before pushing him gently to sit on the bed. He complied and looked at her with a deep, soulful gaze that, to her, seemed able to stop anything in the world to hold her forever.

Hermione moved onto the bed, barely touching her lips to his neck, moving higher and leaving the slightest touch of a kiss as she circled behind him. He hung his head forward, allowing his hair to slide into curtains, obscuring his face from her. Several times she simply lingered, allowing her breath to wash over him before moving on slowly. She took the sudden intake of his breath as a good sign and continued, holding him from behind with an arm around his chest. She worked his shirt open with her arms over his shoulders, and he allowed her to help him remove it, moving his arms back slowly for fear of ruining Poppy's work yet again. Hermione had no need to place a hand on his heart to feel it; its pounding was evident anywhere she touched.

When she moved in front of him, Severus growled loudly and pulled her down, kissing her deeply with a rising need. Hermione responded by straddling him and raking her nails lightly down his sides, just as she had that night out by the greenhouses. As they kissed, the urgency rose, and her hands traveled to his hips. A low noise escaped his throat as his breath became more and more ragged. She held a hand over his heart as she moved in lazy circles, leaving light kisses along each rib while making sure to let her hair splay across him. Whenever he made any attempt to rise, she dug her nails into him gently, demanding he stay still.

She spent several long minutes simply moving in a random pattern around his scar, then upwards to his throat. The sensation of her breath there seemed to drive him nearly mad, so she moved in that vicinity carefully, coming closer, then receding several times. Hermione moved slowly, feeling her own heart running wild with his gasp or groan, her hands shaking as she held onto his arms. Lost in the moment, the feel of his hands in her hair, grasping hold, pulling her down. Lowering herself, she rested on him, kissing along his collarbone, then along his neck to his ear. He hissed and held her even tighter, and her breath caught along with his, rising, connected. His chest rose and fell as he took deep shuddering breaths, gasping slightly after every swallow.

"It's warm in here," she said softly, trailing a finger lightly down his chest. She raised her head to look into his eyes, which held an intense fire that bespoke a power held barely in check.

Severus stared at her for a moment before understanding appeared in his eyes.

"Close your eyes."

She lay down next to him and complied. Severus waved his right hand, and a strong wind picked up around them. The scent of cool, damp earth filled the air, the wild, electric charge of an approaching storm infused the atmosphere, and, off in the distance, thunder rumbled, slightly rattling the portraits on the wall.

Hermione smiled without opening her eyes. "I don't need to open them to know."

Severus closed his hand, and a soft breeze swept past the candles, extinguishing them. "No. However, you will miss this."

He pointed again, and the ceiling, mimicking the Great Hall, dissolved to reveal a disturbed sky. The contrast of the light gray clouds as they gathered ominously seemed surreal against the blackness of the night.

When the first branching streak of lightning flooded the room with instant light, Hermione said with wonder, "You remembered."

"It is my purpose in life to remember everything that makes you happy. Until the day I die, I promise you," he murmured.

Severus leaned on one arm next to her, carefully intertwined her fingers with his, and whispered, "It is your magic too. You may direct it however you please."

Hermione looked deep into his eyes and then gazed up at the sky. She thought she'd like the wind a bit stronger and for a light rain to fall. She was astonished to feel the wind pick up and a cool mist come to rest on her face.

Severus answered her question before she could ask. "It is yours. As am I." He showed her that he was no longer directing the sky by removing his hand from hers.

Hermione gasped softly while watching the clouds sweep across the sky. She pulled him towards her and kissed him with a passion only held close to one's heart, only to be revealed in a moment such as this. He slowly moved to brace himself over her, fighting a losing battle to hold back.

Hermione raised her hand, watching it shake slightly as she ran her fingers through his hair.

"Tell me," he said in a raspy voice.

Gathering courage, she tilted her head and whispered in his ear, "Take me."

"Will you have me forever?"

"Oh, yes, always."

He stared intensely at her, his eyes shining in the dark, the wind sweeping his hair across his face. Tossing his hair to one side, he growled passionately, "Do not ever doubt my love."

In a fierce voice, she dug her nails into his arms and declared, "Never."

Several times throughout the night, the sounds of a violent thunderstorm could be heard. The crashing sounds of thunder rolled through the halls, sending the portrait inhabitants to complain of the noise. What was most puzzling was that if someone looked out any window, they would only be met with a clear, peaceful, star-filled night sky.

AN: Review?

Lucius' Choice

Chapter 34 of 41

A novel-length post HBP HG/SS romance adventure. What if Severus returned, trained Harry for the final battle and worked to destroy the final Horcruxes? Story is complete and will be updated regularly.

Disclaimer: All characters belong to JKR. I am only paying homage.

AN: After this many chapters there aren't many words left to express my thanks to Ariadne, so I shall just bow low before uber-beta. Thanks for coming along on the journey. We are rounding the bend towards home...

Remus turned to Tonks after knocking on the door for the second time. "Think they've just overslept?"

Tonks rolled her eyes. "Severus Snape sleep? Impossible," she said with a laugh and knocked again insistently. "Besides, I have my theory on why they haven't surfaced."

They both leaned back and took a second look at the hallway. Several portraits were strewn across the floor, and others were hanging crookedly, their occupants looking irritable and sleep deprived. The picnic scene was darkened and, if one looked closely, one would see several sleeping ladies lying about, their fans still held loosely in their hands. The trail of disturbance continued the length of the hallway, ending at Severus' door.

"Tonks, really..." Remus said, suppressing a grin.

Remus raised his hand to knock again; however, before he could, the door flew open to reveal Severus dressed in what was obviously a hastily thrown on robe cinched tightly around his middle. He angrily clutched the top of the robe closed and roughly shoved his hair out of his face.

Remus couldn't help but be surprised at Severus' appearance. He had never seen him outside of a school uniform or his obnoxiously formal teaching robes. For a man who seemed like he would lose his mind at the very thought of losing one of his thousands of buttons, he was truly a shocking sight. It was obvious that Severus had just woken up and, from the looks of him, had endured a night which required his hair to perform some sort of exercise, resulting in a newfound ability to stand up in odd directions on its own.

After an awkward silence, it was Tonks who braved speaking first.

"Good morning, Severus," she said with a slight smile. She let her eyes take in his appearance, knowing how it would unnerve him. She was rewarded for her efforts when she was met with his glare.

Squinting as if he had been asleep no more than a minute before, Severus growled, "And to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Severus, it's almost noon. We would have called through the Floo, but it seems to not be on the network at the present moment," Remus said politely. When Severus only stared at him as if this was not a new piece of information, he continued, "We were wondering when you two might be joining the rest of the world?"

Remus gestured at the robe, and his smile widened when Severus pulled it closed even further.

"Did the storm keep you up all night?" Tonks asked innocently. "It was quite loud."

Severus' eyes widened slightly.

"There was no storm," he said slowly. With a suspicious look, he opened the door further and said, "Perhaps you'd like to join Hermione for a moment?"

"Of course," Tonks said with a sweet smile. "By the way, as per your suggestion, we've begun patrolling the castle and grounds. This part of the castle was mine last night."

With a slight tilt of her head, she thoroughly enjoyed the shocked look that passed over his face before she strolled past him into the rooms.

Severus closed the door and faced Remus. "Have something to say do you? You do seem to be enjoying yourself."

"Come now, Severus. I mean you no harm," Remus said with a laugh. He couldn't help but look at the state of Severus' hair. "We're adults now."

Giving up on his hair, Severus sneered at Remus, "I've never forgotten, Lupin. Remember this: refusing to prevent an injustice is just as destructive as acting on it yourself."

"I am well aware of that, Severus. I've freely admitted that I should have done more to stop James and Sirius. I did try though. For you... and Lily," Remus said hopefully. "Besides, you are hardly someone to preach about acting against injustice in your youth."

Severus remained silent, refusing to acknowledge the truth in Remus' words.

"It was twenty years ago, Severus. I'll bet that you can't remember what you ate yesterday, yet you remember every day of school?" Remus argued after more silence had passed. He thought that Severus had certainly softened a bit since he was still standing after making such a comment however true it was.

Severus' eyes grew cold. "Seven years of what amounted to near torture in addition to attempted murder doesn't simply go away with time, Lupin. Ever. The reason I remember is because it seemed like an eternity."

Remus nodded slightly and crossed the room. He gazed out the window, but could sense Severus' stare on him. After a sigh, he said in a sad tone, "We may find ourselves fighting side by side in this war, Severus. Certainly you can put old wounds aside for this?"

Severus raised an eyebrow, looking skeptical. He said clearly, "I may trust you as an ally, but not as a friend."

Remus lowered his head and traced his hand across the windowsill. He opened the latch and pushed the glass to allow the cool morning air in. After some thought, he said, "Fair enough, although the offer is there. I, myself, wouldn't mind having you as a friend."

Severus said nothing, regarding Remus with dark distrust. A scowl played about his lips that didn't quite reach his eyes. After a time, he appeared to want to say something, then thought better of it.

Remus nodded sadly and looked toward the bedroom door expectantly, wishing for Tonks to return and end this severely awkward conversation. Then he heard Severus say suddenly, "I was never forced to brew the Wolfsbane potion for you."

Remus turned and raised his brow in question.

"I suggested to Dumbledore even after..." Severus said, then paused for a moment. "after I let slip about your *issue*... that I continue to brew it even before he could bring up the subject. I knew you had no means to pay any Potions master's price."

"I didn't know that," Remus said slowly, finding it difficult to disguise the astonishment in his voice. "Thank you."

"It was the right thing to do," Severus said, unable to tactfully accept anyone's thanks. "I may be slightly disagreeable..." he said, shooting Remus a look before he could find that amusing. "However, I do believe that reckless endangerment of innocent people, be they Muggle or magical, is unconscionable if easily prevented."

"Quite an elaborate way of stating that you aren't as evil as you make yourself out to be," Remus ventured with a wry smile.

Severus quirked a sarcastic grin. "There is something else you are not aware of as well. Over the years, I have been working on an enhancement to the Wolfsbane potion that could possibly prevent total transformation." At Remus' startled reaction, he quickly added, "It by no means is a cure, but it could possibly reduce the amount of time you spend looking like the Knight Bus hit you."

Remus smiled sadly. "What a poetic way to put it."

"For obvious reasons, that project has been put aside in favor of others," Severus said, returning to a serious tone. "By no means do I intend to abandon it, though. You are not the only innocent to be afflicted. Greyback has been, let's just say, busy over the years."

"You certainly are one of the very few capable," Remus said, still surprised. He reached out his hand and waited patiently as a mix of expressions passed over Severus' face.

After a moment, Remus said, "Truce?"

Remus had begun to think that Severus would, once again, refuse to let the past lie when Severus slowly raised his hand, took Remus', and shook it, albeit briefly.

Crossing the room in an attempt to keep an awkward situation from worsening, Remus boldly took a seat without invitation and said casually, "So. Long night, was it?"

"Let it go, Lupin," Severus growled, still standing by the window.

"My name is Remus, Severus."

"Fine. Let it go, *Remus*," Severus repeated.

Gesturing towards the bedroom door, Remus chuckled, "Do you think for an instant they're not in there talking about it?"

Severus couldn't help but appear thunderstruck by this piece of information. His eyes shot towards the bedroom door as if he were going to make some attempt to stop them from their discussion. Running a hand through his hair, he took a seat across from Remus in defeat.

Severus had taken to tracing the upholstery pattern on the arm of the chair. After a long silence in which he had moved past tracing and onto picking at the fabric, he put his head back and said with dread, "They talk about that, do they?"

"I believe so yes," Remus said with a glance towards the door. "You have my sympathy."

Severus muttered, "Splendid."

"Have something in there I haven't?" Remus said with a grin. He pointed to where Severus was still clutching the robe across his chest.

Severus scowled and slowly let go of the robe, allowing it to open enough to show a small portion of his chest. The stitches were torn open in places and threatened to bleed. The scar, if it ever properly healed, looked like it would be significant.

"Quite impressive," Remus said, and at Severus' sudden look of disgust, he added with a laugh, "The cut, Severus. The cut."

"Yes..." he said, remembering. "Bella's parting gift to me." Coming out of his thoughts, Severus asked, "Not to change the course of this most sentimental walk through history but was there a purpose to this visit?"

"Yes. Moody is asking what we intend to do with Peter, well... Wormtail, and Lucius. Lucius seems to have a great talent for hurling elaborate insults, and I fear Moody may start to get creative soon."

Severus sighed. "I will deal with Lucius myself. I believe he has information on the last Horcrux. I could invade his mind; however, it may turn violent were I to go that route. I'd rather play upon either his paranoia or his lust for power. Besides, when we have what we want from him, he may be a candidate to be a messenger of misinformation back to Voldemort. Convince him that Potter is woefully unprepared, we are not united, resources are lacking... whatever we may like."

An impressed expression spread across Remus' face. "To draw them in before they are prepared?"

Severus nodded. "Exactly."

"Why not use Wormtail for that? Certainly Lucius is far more dangerous to leave alive."

"Lucius would be far more influential with Voldemort. He has nothing to lose anymore and everything to gain in terms of redemption. The psychology of rank amongst the followers is not difficult to understand."

Remus considered. "Makes sense. And Wormtail?" A small voice told Remus that this must be the longest conversation he had ever had with Severus without threats, rude facial expressions or references to cycles of the moon.

Severus grinned.

"I'd like to invite him to lunch."

Hermione had just pulled on a robe when Tonks knocked lightly on the door. As Tonks entered, she noticed with a smile that all of the portraits in the room were empty, crooked or lying on the floor. There was an earthy smell to the air as if a swift storm had just moved through, and the bed looked as if a Hippogriff had galloped around in it. Hermione was pulling her hair down in an attempt to at least keep it from being airborne.

"Well? What was all of that last night?" Tonks asked casually, sitting on the edge of the bed.

Hermione sat down slowly with a shocked look. "You heard? I knew I forgot the silencing wards..."

Tonks nodded with a grin. "Sounded like a right monster of a thunderstorm."

Rubbing her neck, Hermione glanced at the ceiling briefly and said, "Yes, well, that seems to be a talent of his."

"I'll bet it is," Tonks said with a chuckle.

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and waved her hands. "No! I meant you're assuming that I mean..."

After observing Hermione struggle to deny what was glaringly obvious for a full minute, Tonks grinned deviously. "Well?"

"Oh, no. No way," Hermione said, shaking her head. "I don't discuss things like that. It wouldn't be fair to him."

"Come now, don't let that stop you," Tonks said with a wave of her hand. "They know we do."

Hermione looked surprised and leaned forward as if someone might possibly overhear. "They do not," she said in wondrous disbelief.

"Sure they do," Tonks said confidently. "Tell me it was romantic?"

Turning her rapt attention to arranging the sheets into small shapes with her fingers, Hermione muttered, "Well... yes."

"Good then," Tonks said, sitting straighter and patting Hermione on the hand. "Keeps them on their toes if they think there's a review afterward from time to time. Go out there with a knowing smile, and he'll never let the standard drop."

Hermione laughed and began to get dressed.

Hermione was in the final stages of taming her hair after Tonks and Remus left when Severus clasped his hands around her. "I wish you would leave your hair. I find it desirable running wild."

She smiled and her voice wavered when he held her tighter. "The look may work in here, but it needs to behave for the safety of others."

"Have a good conversation with Miss Tonks, did you?" he asked, lowering his head to kiss her neck. She was losing the battle and was starting to have a difficult time figuring out where his hair ended and hers began. She turned and went to place her hand on his chest when she looked down and frowned.

Distractedly she said, "Yes, it was nice but the stitches."

"Yes, I've noticed," he said, touching his hand to them while staring down.

"You should see Madam Pomfrey to fix the last of them. They're almost done healing, but those were um lost."

Severus grinned. "I would have no indication as to the cause. Would you care to explain it to her?"

Hermione laughed. "I'm going to say 'No.'"

When Severus took off the robe, Hermione caught sight of his back and gasped. "On second thought never mind."

Severus turned and narrowed his eyes. "Why the sudden change of heart?"

"No reason. In this light it looks right enough. I'll put some healing balm on it after you bathe," Hermione said quickly and shrugged.

He looked suspicious for a moment, then appeared either too tired or not interested enough to bother and left to the bath.

Hermione wasn't sure if Poppy would suspect how his back came to be in that condition and, frankly, didn't want to find out.

"Draco! Get that cat under control!"

Draco scowled at Severus and rose from the High Table. He approached the clear area on the Great Hall floor where Kitty was happily batting a frantic Wormtail between his paws.

"Allow the others a turn," Severus said, gesturing at Mrs. Norris and Crookshanks who were waiting patiently.

"Severus, is this necessary?" Minerva asked impatiently as she took a seat next to him. As she drew her chair up, she gestured to where the other two cats were circling. "Isn't it cruel?"

"Minerva, you are absolutely right. Where are my manners?" Severus said, feigning embarrassment. "Feel free to have a turn," he said, waving his hand towards where Wormtail was completing another screaming lap with three cats sending him sliding around as if on ice.

"Severus!" she gasped, looking insulted.

"Do you prefer we just execute him? It could be arranged; he certainly deserves it ten times over," he asked diplomatically.

Minerva only sighed and tried to ignore him while she ate her lunch. After a few minutes in peace, she noticed it had quieted. Wormtail had fainted, and the cats were patiently waiting for him to wake up.

"Severus, have you ever learned to dance?" Minerva asked suddenly while trying to ignore the fact that Kitty was currently pinning the tail of a newly awake Wormtail to the floor.

The answer was clear from the way Severus looked at her as if she had grown wings.

He regarded her casual attitude as she ate and paused before daring to answer, "A question like that is not asked without good reason. What are you planning?"

"Nothing much. I just thought you ought to know that an engagement dinner and dance is traditional," Minerva said, observing his reaction out of the corner of her eye.

Severus snorted. "Certainly tradition isn't appropriate in these times?"

Minerva quietly placed her fork down and turned to him. In a low, stern voice she said, "Severus, you listen to me. Hermione deserves this to be done correctly, regardless of the times we are in. They should not stand in the way of life. If you continue to come up with reasons for not living, you will die before you have the chance."

Severus only stared at her as she continued to lecture him. Clearly his question had struck a nerve.

"Certainly you can spare two hours in an evening to celebrate your coming marriage." When he opened his mouth, she stated, "There is no discussion. You once told me that you see me as a mother figure?"

Severus' mouth truly hung open in stunned silence. As Minerva clearly expected an answer, he chose to nod in an attempt to make her soften the glare she had fixed upon him.

"Then acting in that role, I am not asking, but telling you," she said, now pointing a thin finger at him. "You *will* attend this dinner, you *will* dance with that woman, and you will appear happy. Is that clear?"

When Severus stared at her incredulously, she asked sternly, "Answer me, Severus. Is that clear?"

"Yes," he said, realizing that he had actually leaned away from her as she pointed at him.

Minerva brightened immediately and patted him on the shoulder. "Excellent. It will be tomorrow night. We will have our usual dinner, only we will dress formally. I suggest you learn to dance."

"Tomorrow? Minerva, you must know that is too soon..." he started, but then trailed off when she merely turned to look at him over her glasses. Growling slightly, he said, mostly to the table, "Fine."

Severus picked at his lunch and glanced up to see Hermione sitting at a table, chatting away, surrounded by a pack of Weasleys and Potter. Periodically, they would turn their attention to the cats, who were now lying on their sides taking turns as they shoved Wormtail from one set of paws to another. To his credit, Wormtail still attempted to escape at every opportunity, only to be dragged back into the circle of fur.

Suddenly, in the middle of their conversation, Hermione looked up and smiled at Severus in a way that made his heart stop.

"Longbottom?" Severus said without taking his eyes off of Hermione.

Severus could hear Neville dropping some sort of utensil before leaning forward at the table and responding, "Sir?"

"Join me in the Potions lab in an hour. We shall start..." he said, but was distracted at the look Hermione was giving him as those insipid friends of hers carried on around her. It was as if she were the only one sitting there at the table, in the room, the world for that matter.

"Sir?"

Severus shook his head before completing his thought. "We shall start work on healing potions..."

Neville paled at the thought of working with Snape alone, but said clearly, "Yes, sir."

Hermione was still gazing at him, but now wore a slightly amused expression. A sly smile crept onto her face.

Severus could hear the distinctive rambling voice of Lucius, followed by Alastor Moody's raspy threatening voice. "Quit your ranting, Malfoy, or I'll string you upside down and let the Whomping Willow have at you!"

Shaking his head, Severus went to place his hand on the newly-appeared door. The sound of hooves on stone interrupted his thoughts. Severus turned to see Buckbeak wandering the end of the hallway. Just before he could become enraged that Hagrid would simply turn the beast loose in the castle, he noticed the heavy chain around its neck and Hagrid following behind. Hagrid raised a hand in greeting before Buckbeak spied something interesting and tugged him along out of sight.

Severus entered the room, throwing the door open with enough flair to almost startle Moody into hexing him or worse. At the sight of Severus, Moody looked both relieved and angry at the same time. He lowered his wand with some reluctance.

"Quite an excellent job," Severus said, admiring the elaborate prison in the Room of Requirement. There were numerous cells, closely resembling Azkaban's, lining each wall complete with a cold, damp atmosphere. There was even a low mist moving along the floor and the sound of dripping water echoing off the stone walls.

Severus commented with raised eyebrows, "Shall we invite the Dementors in? Complete the effect?"

He took a moment to notice Lucius narrow his eyes in pure hatred and blanch slightly at the same time.

Moody snorted, muttered something about spots and wizards, and left the room.

A hoarse voice echoed off the empty stone walls, "Come to kill me, Severus? Get it over with then."

"Lucius, would I kill an old friend?" Severus taunted, appearing saddened by Lucius' words.

He paced thoughtfully in front of Lucius' cell, allowing a space of time to stretch, enjoying the sound of the dripping water.

"I must admit, I admire your loyalty to the Dark Lord. In that respect you are a far better wizard than I."

Lucius stared at him in disbelief, then narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "You lie. You're nothing but a traitor."

"Am I?"

Lucius became livid, his pale features the first to betray his anger. Even inside of a cell, Lucius' arms were bound behind him and fastened to an uncomfortable wooden chair. It gave him a thoughtful pose even as he glared defiantly up at his former ally. The wood let out a crack or groan whenever Lucius shifted.

"Severus, do not insult my intelligence. I have not survived thus far by being stupid." His hair hung in discolored strings around his face. It seemed that Moody had taken the liberty of liberating Lucius of some of his cleanliness and perhaps tossed him down a few stairs in the process. "You have been working for the Order and destroying the Dark Lord's Horcruxes. What other explanation is there?" he sneered.

"Have you considered that I am destroying them so that the Order will be lulled into a false sense of security?" Severus proposed as he paced. "So that I may be placed in full control of this war?"

Lucius sniffed. "I don't believe a word you say."

Severus chuckled darkly and clasped his hands behind his back. "I don't expect you to believe; however, history shows that in all aspects of war, belief does nothing to prevent victory. It will happen with or without you. Certainly, your doubting the wishes of the Dark Lord and standing in the way will help your position once we are victorious."

"You have lost your mind to think that I should believe these lies!" Lucius yelled viciously. "You are here to interrogate me, so proceed with the torture."

"Lucius, let's keep our roles in this clear. You are playing the part of the madman here. I do believe that the acoustics in here are exceptional for your mindless ravings," Severus said thoughtfully, gazing around the room. "I dare say I shall request that Moody shut the lights out when we're not in here. Give you time in the dark."

Severus watched Lucius' eyes change in that moment shifting towards the torches, then back to Severus.

"The darkness lends itself to thought doesn't it? There's no telling, however, the type of twisted, deranged paths the mind may wander though. In the dark there is nothing to prevent it. You would know."

It seemed that Lucius had wisely decided to keep quiet.

Severus continued, "Do you think that after all these years I would simply throw everything I have earned away? It is simple. The Order will never allow Potter out from behind their protection without believing the Horcruxes are destroyed and the Dark Lord is mortal. It is the only way."

Lucius watched Severus pace outside of his cell. He wrenched his shoulders forward in a vain attempt to find a more comfortable position.

"Now that you are listening," Severus said thoughtfully while observing Lucius' guarded interest, "the trusting old witch thinks me a great war strategist and has been so kind as to place me in charge of the war preparations. As we speak, they are scurrying around acting on my orders." Severus approached the cell bars and said in a low voice, "Potter is woefully unprepared, and the rest of this ragtag band have little to no dueling skills to speak of. The strategy, if you will, is a facade of power. There are no alliances, the Ministry is not involved, and there is let's say much infighting. I have played my part by organizing them somewhat and issuing orders for them to fulfill. Impossible feats. Busy work."

Lucius watched Severus carefully. His eyes shifted as he listened.

"The time to strike is soon. Of course, I do require the last Horcrux. The bloody werewolf and Potter have it in their mind that it is close at hand, possibly in the castle itself. I must convince them that I will destroy it and instead protect it for the Dark Lord. Only then will it be time to draw them into battle completely unprepared."

"There is one flaw in your story, Severus," Lucius said with disgust, his eyes moving to Severus' forearm. "You've removed your Mark. There is no explanation for that."

"Come now, do you think for an instant I would gain this much trust if I was answering the Dark Lord's call? For this to work, I had to cut off all contact. If I denied the opportunity to gain more Horcruxes through Draco and Narcissa, I would have lost my cover. Understand that the Dark Lord only requires one Horcrux."

Lucius considered, then said with hatred in his voice, "And the Mudblood? Certainly you haven't developed a taste for filth?"

Severus' hand moved slightly, but he said nothing, choosing instead to walk slowly towards the bars.

"No, of course not. She is, however, quite enjoyable nevertheless," Severus said slowly, with a lustful grin. "It is the final piece of the puzzle. You see, many members of the Order are not as slow-witted as the others. Not so easily plied by stories of lost love and regret. No the others needed more. Taking up with the Mudblood has completed my act. They all trust me now."

Severus shifted his gaze towards the door.

"Yes, even the old Auror trusts me a little, I believe. Although he would be still be skeptical even if the Dark Lord appeared, offered his apologies for being so remiss as to offend the Wizarding world, and voluntarily placed himself in a cell."

Lucius sneered, "I still don't believe this elaborate plan of yours. You aren't capable of acting like you're in love."

"No? They are planning an engagement dinner as we speak," Severus said and was slightly distracted to see mice and rats milling about down the row of cells. He rolled his eyes, thinking of how Moody had built himself his own personal Azkaban.

"You have never struck me as a man capable of loving a woman. No one would believe such lies," Lucius said with a laugh.

Severus crossed his arms and sneered. "This is from a man who wears a bow in his hair?"

Lucius' laughter died, and he glared at him, going as far as to bare his teeth slightly.

"As I said before, Lucius, it does not matter if you believe me. You have reached the end," Severus said, shaking his head sadly. "Homeless. A murderer. The Dark Lord has found failure in you far too many times for your position to be repaired without some spectacular display of loyalty, and the Order will hold you until the war is over then kill you."

Severus trailed his hand along the bars of the cell, letting his fingers slide into the corners of each join, then to the next. "If I let you go..." Severus said and paused. He took note of how Lucius looked up at his words. "Where would you go? Back to the Dark Lord? I think not. That would be certain suicide. Unless you possessed information crucial to his victory against Potter. There is a weakness that would be critical to the Dark Lord's success."

Lucius's expression alternated between suspicion and hope.

"I could share that information with you old friend."

The chair creaked as Lucius tilted his head down in thought. Silence stretched out as Severus waited without a trace of expression on his face. He could have been waiting for a train at that moment or plotting to run both sides of a war at once.

"What other option have you?" Severus said quietly. "The last Horcrux, Lucius."

Lucius regarded him with disgust. He was every bit a desperate man held barely in check from total rage. "I do not trust you, Snape."

Severus' eyes darkened. "You must know I am not at leisure to allow you to live after what you have done. You have killed the mother of your own child. If I was to allow that travesty to go unpunished, my work here would be destroyed."

Raising his head, Lucius offered no regret.

"I cannot allow that for my own reasons as well."

Severus quirked a wry smile at Lucius' expression of hatred. Lucius was trapped and knew it.

Severus continued, "I do not enjoy killing; however, you leave me no choice in the matter. I will get what I want either way. I will be at the Dark Lord's side when he kills Potter, and I would prefer to have an old friend with me as well. I could simply break into your mind and retrieve the information I require then kill you. I promise you. I will not be kind. Make no mistake, I will destroy any semblance of sanity you have left, retrieve the information required, and then discard the empty shell that will be your body in the forest for the animals to enjoy."

The chair's protest as Lucius shifted broke the silence.

Severus tilted his head as if in thought. "We all have a place deep inside where we go when experiencing excruciating pain. You have been under the Cruciatus enough to know exactly what I am referring to yes?"

Lucius narrowed his eyes, but did not deny it.

In a deadly cold voice, Severus made a final offer, "You have a choice. You may exchange information with me in a civilized manner, or I suggest you flee to that deep place and hope with every fiber of your being that you are unconscious by the time I get there."

Severus drew his wand, placed his hand on the cell door handle, looked Lucius in the eyes and asked, "Which would you prefer?"

Darkness

Chapter 35 of 41

A novel-length post HBP HG/SS romance adventure. What if Severus returned, trained Harry for the final battle and worked to destroy the final Horcruxes? Story is complete and will be updated regularly.

Disclaimer: All characters belong to JKR.

A/N: As always, a deep bow to Ariadne, who continues to ride this roller coaster of a story.

Darkness ahead...

Lucius appeared both calm and calculated as he stared with utter hatred at Severus. The only sounds in the room were rats scuffling down the row of cells and dripping water as it hit the stone floor. Lucius' lips pressed into a faint line, then pushed into a scowl as he processed the offer that Severus had just made him.

In short, share what he knew or be driven insane by one of the most accomplished Legilimens in the wizarding world, apart from Voldemort himself.

Observing Lucius contemplate his situation, Severus crossed his arms over his chest. He began to pace, grinding the sole of his shoe into the grit on the floor with each turn.

"Come now, Lucius," he said impatiently. "I am a busy man these days. A war simply won't run itself, and I have an appointment to keep in about forty minutes. Although completely ravaging your mind shouldn't take more than two minutes three, if you turn out to be a fast runner."

Lucius lowered his head and looked almost feral as he growled, "You are bluffing."

An expression of amusement spread on Severus' face. "You believe so?"

"Yes, I have said it before..." Lucius spat, but faltered as Severus angrily unlocked and swung open the cell door with enough force that it slammed violently into the bars. The sound of metal hitting metal echoed as Severus approached and drove his wand roughly under Lucius' jaw.

Lucius' face grew white at Severus' approach. He struggled against total panic, his eyes darting from Severus to the open door and then back. Shoving his legs straight, he weakly pushed the chair backwards, the legs scraping on the stone floor.

A low chuckle, the wand lodged next to his throat vibrating with it.

"There is no escape, Lucius," Severus said softly, with what sounded like regret. "I shall miss you."

Frozen, taking shallow gasps for air, with his eyes tightly shut, Lucius snarled, "You love that Mudblood! I saw it in your eyes! You..."

Lucius didn't get a chance to complete his sentence as Severus immediately snatched him by the throat. He positioned his fingers carefully either side of Lucius' neck, just under the jaw-line. Severus paused, alternating between a twisted smile and the unearthly urge to simply squeeze and never let go. He traced his wand down Lucius' face, mimicking the trail of a single tear.

"Have no fear, dear friend, as I have no intention of strangling you yet," Severus said in a chillingly calm voice. The tone bespoke someone who knew exactly what he was doing and wished to share the details.

Lucius still held his eyes tightly shut, and his head thrown back as Severus pressed harder.

Baring his teeth a fraction more with each breath, Severus watched the play of emotions pass over Lucius' face. He waited counting the heartbeats. Enjoying the silent spaces between lengthening...

"The mind is a fragile thing, Lucius. You see it requires adequate blood flow to function correctly. Something that you are not able to provide at the present moment."

A faint sound, Severus could feel it, Lucius was grinding his teeth.

"Feeling weak?" Severus asked with mock concern as he twisted his hand.

Lucius' breath came in rough gasps as he struggled against the magical bindings holding his arms back to the chair. A low groan escaped him as he tried to pull away from Severus' grip.

A soft laugh as Severus kept his murderous grip on Lucius' throat following any movement he made. Soon, Lucius fell silent, leaning forward, the bindings holding him to the chair the only thing keeping him upright.

Severus tilted his head with interest. He shifted his hand slightly allowing some blood to pass. He didn't want him to black out just yet.

Severus sneered. "Still think you are above the rest of humanity? That somehow nature's most basic rules do not apply to you? You must know that you are nothing but a sick creature, bereft of any redeeming value. You may dress yourself impeccably and surround yourself with wealth, but strip you of all that and you are less than a man. Nothing but a wicked wretch who is, at this very moment, slipping into the sweet darkness of unconsciousness."

Lucius' bared his teeth as he tried to once more pull away, stark terror spreading over his face.

Repositioning his hand, Severus kept Lucius on the edge.

When Lucius quieted again, his forced breath coming in wheezing fits, Severus said in a removed, academic voice, "I can feel your heart beating wildly although it is not working as well anymore. Pity. Just consider for a moment we are all just minutes from death. Even you."

Moving to speak directly into Lucius' ear, Severus said in a leisurely manner, "I suppose I should divulge my plans for you, dear friend. You are at this moment unable to see even if you did open your eyes. It is, you see, the beginning of brain death. Lack of blood flow. In the moment before consciousness is lost, you will no longer be able to close your eyes, as your body relaxes into the state the brain induces in a vain attempt to preserve itself. I shall then unceremoniously tear down the door to your deranged mind and pillage at will."

With glittering eyes, Severus grinned as he tapped his wand on Lucius' forehead, taunting him waiting.

Lucius suddenly growled loudly, thrust his head down and began to thrash.

Severus lunged forward, twisting a large section of Lucius' hair around his fist, tangling his wand. He jerked Lucius' head backwards, repeating the word "No" in a mockingly soothing voice.

Lucius attempted to swallow, but failed, left instead to allow his mouth to drop open to breathe. His jaw worked as he bared his teeth.

"Have something to say?" Severus asked politely. He could feel Lucius' pulse slowing under his grip. "Look me in the eyes."

Lucius' face held a mix of revulsion and creeping terror. His head was wrenched so far backwards it was growing difficult to breathe, let alone close his mouth enough to speak clearly.

"No..."

"Very well then," Severus said calmly. Almost an apology. "Goodbye, old friend. I shall tell the Dark Lord you died crying for mercy."

Severus clamped down on Lucius' throat, effectively cutting all blood flow and most of his airway. Lucius surged into a raging struggle, throwing his weight from side to side.

Growling in frustration, Severus rocked the chair backwards to slam onto the stone floor. In his rage and pain, Lucius forgot himself and made the fatal mistake of looking up at Severus.

With a triumphant grin, Severus pointed his wand at Lucius and said, "*Legilimens!*"

Severus tore into Lucius' mind and found himself surrounded by a bleak desperation. Off in the distance, he heard a muttering sound which didn't seem to be forming words, only rambling on as if reading from a script. The droning continued without variation before being overrun by a blinding green light. Severus was horrified to be faced with Lucius' memory of Narcissa's murder. Before he could push it aside, he was faced with the vision of her struck with the Killing Curse and falling gracelessly to the ground. He viciously tore at the memory, destroying it, leaving fragmented pieces of sounds, but no vision.

Moving on with determination, Severus filtered past other memories of hiding Dark objects from the Ministry, miserable days and nights in Azkaban, and even his days at Hogwarts. Severus twitched a grin at the sight of the ruined Malfoy manor, the charred remnants standing against the blue sky. The satisfying result of his and Bella's final duel.

In the background, the droning grew louder, rising in urgency and becoming fanatical in nature. It sounded unlike any normal reading or speaking voice more like someone holding a conversation with themselves, playing both parts.

Severus moved forward, paying closer attention to the Death Eater meetings over the years. He watched himself writhing in pain on more than one occasion while under the Cruciatus, most likely for not delivering Potter to the Dark Lord.

He could see the look of satisfaction on Lucius' face as Bella whispered to him, "I have been encouraging the Dark Lord. Severus is failing and needs to be taught a lesson."

Thinking back, it was at that point that almost every single meeting he was subjected to more and more abuse, whereas prior to it he had been able to placate the Dark Lord with bits of information. He watched another meeting where Lucius responded to Bella's snide comment by saying, "Screaming becomes him, doesn't it?"

The voice was becoming more feverish in its ranting and was much closer. An image of a hallway entered Severus' view. Torches lined each side, their warm flames flickering, giving an impression of a well lived-in home. Ahead he caught sight of someone walking, head down and wringing hands as if in thought or prayer. The figure looked up, saw him, turned and bolted in the other direction. Severus followed suit, turning blindly around corner after corner. The stately, well-kept hallways degraded into dilapidated, stark, abandoned passages. Turning a corner, he was met with the wild eyes of an extremely terrified Lucius Malfoy, backed into a dead-end hallway. A huge

tapestry adorned the wall, and Severus could see Lucius clutching it with his hands behind him.

"Tell me willingly and I might leave you a slight chance to live. After all I will find it anyway," Severus growled as he took another step forward. "I do not appreciate being kept waiting."

Lucius' chest heaved as he continued to fist the tapestry in his hands. The ranting voice was now joined by others. Their words intertwining with instructions, reminders and a long diatribe on blood and traitorous activities. He heard one reciting various reasons as to why both Narcissa and Draco should have died together and how Lucius was a failure for not making it so.

Severus paused for a moment. Listening to the pure chaos surrounding him he realized something. There was no need to drive Lucius insane. He was already there.

Ignoring the raging voices, Severus grabbed hold of Lucius and shook him. The stone on floor in the cell became the stone wall behind him. A murky memory came to the surface of what appeared to be a statue of a lion. It then wavered, fading in color, changing into something else. Lucius was clearly attempting a combined effort at Occlumency and lying.

Severus shoved Lucius against the wall and snarled, "Where?"

Lucius only rocked his head back against the tapestry, staring up to the ceiling.

When Lucius didn't respond, Severus lowered his voice and threatened, "If you do not cooperate..."

Suddenly, the hallway where they stood began to shake. Raging voices and the tearing sounds of a multitude of memories being rendered useless could be heard. The increasingly panicked voices permeated the air as they were ripped from their rants.

"I've never done this," Severus said calmly, his eyes drifting up to watch the tapestry behind Lucius tear from its bindings and hang limply by one corner. "I'm not quite certain if the heart stops from fright before the brain simply descends into the type of darkness from which there is no return."

Severus spoke directly into Lucius' wide gray eyes as he offered an almost cordial invitation. "Shall we find out together?"

Suddenly, he saw a hallway where a statue of a griffin stood. It looked slightly out of place, possessing a trace of darkness, refusing to reflect any light. Studying the surrounding area, Severus could tell it was the corridor near the bathroom where the mountain troll had been found. To the normal, everyday eye, the statue had been there for hundreds of years, never suspected of being anything more. The thought occurred to Severus that Quirrell could have brought the statue in somehow while under Voldemort's influence the perfect example of hiding something in plain sight.

Severus returned to himself as he crouched next to Lucius in the cell, his hand still around his throat.

He tilted his head and stared into Lucius' bleary eyes as the light in them threatened to leave.

"I'll have you know I have not defected, Lucius. I am just as vicious and deadly as ever and I do not appreciate being laughed at in the least. For that alone I should kill you. Still choose to doubt me?"

Lucius weakly moved his head a fraction indicating, no, he did not.

Severus abruptly removed his hand, roughly took hold of Lucius' robes, and hauled him and the chair back upright.

"I've never killed a man with my bare hands before," Severus said thoughtfully, examining his hand, curling it slowly into a tightly bound fist. "Seems so primal, rough uncivilized. See, I would think I would prefer the distance the Killing Curse provides, but, at times, I wonder if given the opportunity..."

He shifted his eyes to Lucius and lowered his hand. "Would I do it?"

Lucius' stared in disbelief as Severus contemplated murder. In a raspy voice, he gasped, "You wouldn't..."

Severus narrowed his eyes and said with a nod towards the door, "There is no one who cares for you. That you see is of your own doing. There would be no tears, no consequences for my actions."

Severus raised his arms and posed in mock battle. He dramatically clutched his chest and said in a voice filled with the memory of a valiant fight, "He fought me as I extracted the information needed for the Order. My wand was lost, and I just had to do it. He deserved to die, you see as retribution. In the end, while both sides may have their own reasons for killing, I have my own. I just had to exact the justice we all cry out for in the face of an atrocity, but haven't the tainted soul to perform. 'Send him back to Azkaban when it is raised again,' they'd say, when it is brutally clear that you deserve more than that. Much more. Only death is appropriate and not any ordinary passing either. No one else would do it..."

Dropping his arms to his sides, Severus said coldly, "But I might for the absolute thrill of it. Do you doubt me?"

"I...I don't doubt you," Lucius stuttered, his dull, stringy hair swaying as he shook his head.

Severus snarled. "Liar!"

"No! I believe you," Lucius said quickly. He was visibly trembling and shook some of his ruined hair out of his eyes. A streak of blood worked its way down his forehead, tingeing a strand of hair orange as it traveled.

Severus stood straight and observed Lucius for a long stretch of time, keeping the appearance of being on the edge. He could feel the utter terror rolling off of Lucius and only wished that his value as a messenger back to Voldemort wasn't so high. A small part of him wondered if he was capable of cold-blooded murder, and he decided that he would do well to turn away from that path now. After all, Bella's death, in the end, was hardly self-defense, and that is a decline best approached with caution. He preferred not to think about Dumbledore's death at all.

He grinned almost casually, patted Lucius' shoulder and declared brightly, "Excellent."

Lucius eyed him nervously at the shift, the arrogance he had displayed so proudly only minutes ago now replaced with true desperation and fear.

After a moment of silence, Severus said, "The wards."

Lucius only stared at him blankly.

Severus rolled his eyes. "The wards, you imbecile. The weakness I spoke about earlier, if you recall? That would have been before I started to murder you in the slowest way possible?"

Understanding appeared in Lucius' eyes, and he winced as he nodded slowly.

"The castle's defenses have been unstable since the old fool died a most unfortunate death. I have devised a plan to destroy the wards at the main gates. The old witch recasts them at regular intervals. I shall interfere with that action five days from now at noon and take them down. The Dark Lord must strike then. I won't be able to hold it long," Severus said.

Lucius' face came alive and hope gleamed in his eyes. "I must go."

Severus nodded. "Ah, that you must; however, my plans, for glaringly obvious reasons, must not be revealed to the others. I will return tonight and perform guard duty. I will then take you out of the castle to the gates and set you free to inform the Dark Lord of the plans. I will simply explain that my wand slipped and I dumped your body in the forest. My carefully built reputation as a violent murderer won't be challenged, and I believe we've already reviewed the fact that you won't be missed or mourned."

They regarded each other for a moment. Severus noticed the distinct evidence of where his fingers had been on Lucius' neck. Surely severe bruising would be there by nightfall. He turned and closed the cell door behind him, allowing the metal to bang loudly.

As he strode towards the door, he heard Lucius hesitantly call, "I apologize for doubting you, Severus."

Without turning, Severus responded with a dismissive wave of his hand, "I accept," and left the room.

Severus exited the Room of Requirement to find Moody, as expected, posted outside.

"Prisoner still alive?" Moody asked and looked slightly disappointed when Severus nodded.

"Yes; however, I believe he would do well to spend some time in quiet contemplation..." Severus said thoughtfully, "... in the dark."

Moody flinched a wary grin, nodded slightly, and entered the room.

Neville's Gift

Chapter 36 of 41

A novel-length post HBP HG/SS romance adventure. What if Severus returned, trained Harry for the final battle and worked to destroy the final Horcruxes? Story is complete and will be updated regularly.

Disclaimer: All characters belong to JKR.

A/N: My eternal thanks to Ariadne. The countdown to the final battle has begun.

Severus took long, sweeping strides through the halls, his legs taking him to the Potions classroom by pure memory. Clenching his hands into fists, he fixed his eyes on the floor, watching as the texture changed from smooth to the more rough-hewn stone of the dungeons.

What he had done to Lucius was much more than any ordinary interrogation. After all, Veritaserum would have achieved the same result. But he couldn't resist the urge, and what he had done had cost him dearly. Cold. Broken. How close he had come to simply not backing away from the crumbling edge. Control had always been within his grasp. He had mastered it, even in the most dire circumstances but this this was dangerously close.

Replaying it through his mind, it was, in his opinion, the performance of a lifetime. Through it all, a small, removed portion of himself had watched to see what the outcome would be, and, if the plan was successful, he wondered if he would survive to see it carried to completion.

Lucius believed everything in the end, but then Severus knew him to be nearly insane.

Some strange part of him believed what he'd been saying as well. Amazing what lies could do distorting truth beyond recognition. A secret code in his mind kept it all in place, leaving the calculated exterior in place. For a disturbing moment in time, his mind had slipped into that darkness, believing, forgetting the code, reminding him that he held the power.

The power to rule over both sides however he wished, even if that meant sending them all out there rushing blindly into a war that neither side could win, exacting revenge for what both sides had taken from him.

Hermione had brought so much to his life, but as Severus stalked the halls, he knew he was not the redeemed soul she might believe him to be.

Severus barely slowed his pace as he raised his arms, forcefully slammed his fists on the classroom doors, and sent them crashing into the inside walls. When he lifted his head, the sound echoing through the classroom brought him out of his thoughts.

He stopped, met with the vision of Neville Longbottom, who was twisted around in his seat, startled almost out of his skin and clutching a potted plant to his chest.

Severus descended the stairs, swiftly shifting his mindset from near murder to dealing with someone who surely thought him to be pure evil incarnate.

As Severus observed Longbottom's reaction to his presence, one thing struck him. While other students had a healthy fear of him, none had ever approached Longbottom's dizzying level of terror. Over the years, Severus had almost gleefully unnerved Longbottom to the point of utter failure, yet Longbottom still attended his class. Severus surely had to respect him for tenacity, a trait he himself had found useful over time. One arguing point that he would not, for fear of his life, broach with Hermione was the fact that she helped Longbottom excessively. The world, in Severus' opinion, was not a place full of compassionate people who were willing to cover up inadequacies and save those unable to perform under pressure.

Severus decided to see what could be done to remedy the situation with Longbottom considering he wanted something from him. In the situation with Lucius, that meant a near-death experience, whereas in Longbottom's, it meant he was in for quite a shock.

Mr. Longbottom was about to learn he had more to offer than his Herbology talent.

Severus leaned against his desk and crossed his arms.

"Do you fear me, Mr. Longbottom?"

Stunned, Neville looked as if a private conversation with Snape was certainly his worst nightmare come to light. "Well I..."

"The question only demands a simple yes or no answer," Severus said impatiently, attempting to keep his voice as even as possible. It was like speaking to a startled animal.

"Yes, then... I guess so, sir," Neville stammered, still clutching the potted plant and running his fingers nervously over the texture of the clay.

Severus nodded. "There is a distinct difference between fear and respect. I only expect the latter from you from this point forward. Is that clear?"

Neville looked at him in disbelief, but said with more confidence, "Yes, sir."

Severus clasped his hands behind him and thought for a moment before asking, "Mr. Longbottom, do you know why I have singled you out in class over the years? It is my experience that some students need a harder push than others to reach their full potential. That being said, that method has seemed to have had the opposite effect on you."

Neville only looked at Severus as if he was going to be ill.

Severus scowled slightly. "I heard of your performance in the Department of Mysteries battle. That, in the end, it was yourself and Potter left standing?"

Neville nodded slowly, nervously rubbing his fingers over a leaf.

"Impressive," Severus said thoughtfully and approached where Neville sat, ignoring how his eyes grew wider with every step. "That brings me to the reason why we are here."

Neville pulled the pot closer to himself.

Severus stopped and scowled slightly before continuing, "We are not going to brew healing potions yet."

At this Neville looked truly nervous. It seemed like he would be more comfortable if Snape would simply shout at him rather than speaking in such a civilized manner.

Severus appeared uncomfortable and arranged his words carefully. "I am aware of your talents. I have spoken enough in this room and now it will be used to allow me to gain some knowledge."

Severus then did something shocking.

Taking a seat at one of the student's desks, Severus motioned towards the plants that Neville had brought. "Tell me about them. I know you have been researching quite extensively and am interested in your findings."

Neville was stunned and clutched the pot so tightly to his chest it threatened to break. He stared in disbelief at Snape's sitting at a table like a student, calmly looking at him, expecting a lesson.

Slowly, after Severus made no move to berate him, Neville gathered his pots and samples, moved towards the front of the room and began to share.

"What are you wearing to the dinner tomorrow night, Hermione?" Ginny asked while keeping an eye on Fred and George who were crouched low over the wizard's chessboard, laughing as the dragons swirled angrily, snapping at their hands as they passed by.

"Dinner?" Hermione asked with a blank look.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Of course, everyone knows but you, since you spent half the day locked up with 'Sevikins'."

Hermione snorted. "I dare you to call him that."

"No thanks, that's your job," Ginny retorted with a smirk. "McGonagall is planning an engagement dinner for you two tomorrow night. Dancing, too."

"Now? Seems like a strange time since we're in the middle of a war, don't you think?" Hermione said doubtfully, glancing around the Hall. Her hopes of a serious planning session were in danger as she watched Fred tying something to the furious chess pieces and nodding to George before taking notes. Both had mischievous grins on their faces and snorted with laughter as they worked.

She sat up straighter before elbowing Ron. "What are they doing?"

Ron shrugged. "Don't know... having their bloody fun as usual. Been outside all day setting traps all over the grounds, most likely." He looked doubtfully towards the window where the sky indicated a beautiful summer day, warning, "I wouldn't walk out there if I were you."

"Well, what are you going to wear?" Tonks asked. She rustled Hermione's bushy hair, turned to Ginny, and declared, "Definitely put it up."

Hermione shrugged. "I don't know."

"Well at least you know how to dance. You can dance with Neville. He's gotten quite good," Ginny offered with a hopeful expression.

Hermione looked concerned. "Why wouldn't I dance with Severus?"

Tonks and Ginny both laughed out loud at once. Even Harry snorted, which he hurriedly tried to convert to an innocent cough. When they saw that Hermione was serious, they forcefully stifled their gales to small giggles.

"Snape? Dance? It'd be a miracle of physics," Harry said with a smirk which he quickly lost when Hermione fixed him with a glare.

"He could learn," Hermione argued, daring him to laugh once more.

Putting a hand on her shoulder, Ginny said, "I'm sure he could, but it's tomorrow night. I hardly think he could learn that fast."

"Yeah, I suppose that's true," Hermione said distractedly as the miniature screams of the dragons and the twins' laughter echoed through the Hall.

To everyone's interested observation, Severus and Neville entered the Great Hall together.

"Think it'll rain again tonight, Severus?" Hermione asked casually as Severus passed by. When he missed a step and stopped, she innocently gazed out the nearest window.

Severus looked with her at the same startling blue sky.

"Yes, I believe so." He then shifted his gaze to her and stated seriously, "Quite hard."

Hermione's eyes widened, and Severus raised an eyebrow, as if claiming a point in a match.

"Are you two mad?" Ron said, pointing towards the window. The brightness of the afternoon sun required everyone to squint.

"Ron, if Severus says it will rain tonight, then it will," Hermione said in a light tone.

Severus twitched a smirk in response, nodded slightly to her, and continued on his way.

When he assumed Severus was out of earshot, Ron snorted. "I'd like to see that."

Ginny, who until then had restrained herself to only a strained smile, giggled and tightly held her hand over her mouth. Tonks, however, was doubled over and nearly out of breath. They leaned on each other, gasped at nearly the same time, and wiped tears from their eyes.

At Hermione's glare, Ron argued, "What? It's not like he can force it to rain*quite hard*."

As the girls burst into gales of uncontrolled laughter, Harry looked clueless and made a motion as if they were mental. Ginny was nearly falling off the bench while clutching onto Tonks' arm. They both clumsily rose and staggered in hysterics towards the door, their laughter echoing behind them.

Hermione regarded the both of them with an irritated expression. Her eyes then shifted past Ron.

Ron looked completely befuddled by the thought that Snape controlled the weather. "Yeah, sure... thinks he runs the bloody world," he muttered a little too loudly to the table.

When Ron sat up again, he caught sight of Harry's face and of the fact that his eyes were fixed on something behind him.

"He's right behind me, isn't he?" Ron said with one eye squeezed closed and his mouth screwed up as if he tasted something foul.

"Very observant, Mr. Weasley," a cold voice said from behind him. "While I may not run the *bloody world*, I do run this small event commonly referred to as a war. Care to survive?"

Ron turned around in his seat and forced his eyes to travel up to meet Severus' glare.

"Weasley, Longbottom and Potter," Severus announced, "all of you will meet me here tomorrow morning after breakfast for dueling practice. Hermione, please retrieve Miss Weasley and go with Molly to study healing with Poppy. Please remind Miss Tonks that she is expected to patrol the castle and then relieve Moody when she has completed her bout of hysterics about the predictability of the weather."

Turning to Neville, Severus said, "Mr. Longbottom, we shall take up our work later on tonight. I shall see you then."

"Why not Malfoy?" Ron muttered, looking over where Draco sat alone at the Slytherin table, untying what appeared to be the *Daily Prophet* from an owl's leg.

Harry glared at Ron, then shook his head as if he suddenly didn't know him.

Severus turned, slammed his fist on the table and drew to within inches of Ron's face.

"Because, Weasley," Severus spat, "Malfoy is a better duelist than even some of the best full-grown witches and wizards of our time. *That's why*. And you should be more worried about your own skin."

Ron stared at the table, ignoring how everyone had grown silent around him.

"And for that little outburst, you shall have a private lesson with me."

Severus stood up and looked at Hermione, pausing for a moment before indicating she should talk to Draco. He then shot another glare at Ron, daring him to look back up at him, before turning to join the others.

A thought occurred to Hermione as she watched Neville take a seat next to Harry. It was the first time she had ever seen Neville not react with some form of terror at the mere sight of Severus, let alone appear anything but deathly pale at the prospect of spending even more time with him alone.

Something had clearly changed between them something significant.

"Interesting," Minerva said after listening to Severus quietly explain how he had persuaded Lucius not only that he was still faithful, but that he would open Hogwarts for them to attack at a prescribed time. They stood in the back of the crowd of Order members, assembled around one of the tables in the back of the Great Hall.

Severus clasped his hands behind his back and watched as the twins made grand gestures and pointed enthusiastically at a map of the grounds.

"That's all? 'Interesting'?"

"I trust you," she said carefully, reinforcing her words with a significant nod. "I imagine that Mr. Malfoy voluntarily chose to believe you?"

His brows came together at the complete chaos on the twins' map, his imagination painting scenarios that no one would want in the middle of a battle.

"Not exactly."

Minerva pursed her lips, preferring not to ponder what his preferred method of persuasion was, knowing only that he was not in possession of Veritaserum. "If you are sure?"

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Have we a better option?"

With a deep sigh, Minerva said, "You'll need to tell Draco."

He glanced over to where Draco was sitting, and nodded. "Yes after."

Minerva turned her gaze towards Severus, meaning to offer an argument for telling Draco before, but then thought better of it.

"Agreed."

"Draco," Hermione said softly, sitting down across from him. She glanced back towards the others while twisting to bring her legs under the table.

He stared at his copy of *The Daily Prophet*, refusing to look at her.

"What do you want, Granger?"

"I don't *want* anything, Malfoy," she said, hoping to draw him into a sparring match anything.

His face twisted in an expression of pure revulsion as he spat, *Don't* call me that."

Hermione sat up, startled at his reaction to his name.

She slowly leaned forward again and said in a low voice, "I'm sorry, Draco."

Shrugging, he turned a page. Before he could resume reading, Kitty serenely walked onto the paper and lay down. When Draco lifted his hand to shoo the cat away, Kitty looked directly into Draco's eyes and hissed.

Scowling at the cat, Draco irritably threw his hand towards the Gryffindor table. "Go back to them. You don't belong over here; can't you see that?"

"House membership doesn't matter anymore. Not here not now. We need to work together," Hermione said, raising her voice as Draco angrily got up from the table and started to leave.

Draco stopped, leaned over the table, and unceremoniously shoved Kitty off of the paper. Folding it roughly, he held it up and snarled, "This this is my mother's so-called death notice."

Hermione could only sit in stunned silence, watching the rage in his eyes as he gripped the paper in his fist.

Tilting his head, Draco pointed over at Harry, saying bitterly, "I'm not here to protect your dear Potter, or even to fight Voldemort..."

Draco shook the paper as if he had a score to settle with it, then threw it down on the table. Kitty sat, looking affronted, but with a strangely sympathetic expression.

Hermione opened her mouth to say something, but quickly recoiled when Draco pointed up to what she assumed to be the Room of Requirement, leaned in and said viciously, "I *will* kill him. I just have to. THAT is why I am here."

Hermione watched Draco stalk out of the Great Hall, then took the paper and stared at the article.

An outdated picture of Narcissa was there, announcing her death. Not murder. Death. As if Narcissa would simply die for no apparent reason.

In a true tragedy of irony, it stated that she left behind a son.

And a husband.

"Wake up, Lucius!" Severus ordered loudly and without warning, called, "*Lumos!*"

Lucius groaned and shut his eyes painfully as bright light flooded the room.

"Pity. Please accept my sincere apologies for the darkness, old friend. It seems the old Auror was negligent in recasting the light spell for you," Severus said apologetically, enjoying the fact that Lucius still could not open his eyes to the light.

Severus approached the cell and gripped the bars, moving his hands in degrees along the metal.

In a strangely cold voice, he asked, "Enjoy the darkness, Lucius? You can widen your eyes as much as physically possible and still see nothing. After a number of hours, as you can imagine, it no longer matters if they're open or not. After days well after days, you begin wondering if the only things you'll ever see are your dreams."

Lucius had managed to open one eye and regarded Severus with both fear and exhaustion.

"Or nightmares."

Nodding to himself, Severus opened the cell door and asked with mock concern, "Certainly there are no hard feelings about earlier? You must know it is crucial that my work here be successful and that nothing can get in the way of that. Even you."

"Of course," Lucius agreed, trying to hide the look of disgust on his face.

"Look at me," Severus said softly. It was a tone that could be taken either as compassionate or as the last thing someone hears before being murdered.

Reluctantly, Lucius raised his head and met Severus' eyes. He flinched back in the chair as Severus raised his wand.

"Do not doubt me, Lucius. If you do, I shall ensure that your execution is performed in the most vile way possible. Regardless of my loyalties, I have my own agenda, and your mockery of me is unforgivable. Are we clear?"

When Lucius nodded in agreement, Severus brought his wand down swiftly and the magical bonds were released. Lucius almost fell forward out of the chair before painfully bringing his arms forward. He sat hunched over, gritting his teeth and rubbing his aching limbs before regarding Severus through his stringy, blood-stained hair.

"I'd allow you to clean up; however, I can't be observed coddling the prisoner, can I?" Severus said with a smirk before turning and walking towards the door. He removed Lucius' cloak and wand from a cleverly concealed compartment in the wall. Clearly, Moody enjoyed efficient prison construction.

"If anyone sees us," Severus said warningly, touching his wand to Lucius' chest, "you will run and I will be forced to either recapture, or, depending on the witness, kill you to avoid suspicion."

Lucius paused as he put on his cloak, studying Severus' face.

Scowling, Severus roughly took hold of Lucius' hood, threw it over his head and taunted, "It is, therefore, in your best interest to avoid being seen yes?"

Holding up Lucius' wand, Severus added, "You shall regain this if we are successful."

Once outside in the hallway, Severus led Lucius towards a passage that would take them down to the ground floor. As they approached the corner, Severus suddenly halted and jerked Lucius back against the wall. He could hear the sound of hooves on the stone floor, scraping and settling down. Quickly, he shoved Lucius behind a statue and ventured out to peer around the corner. Buckbeak was chained to a nearby wall, with a neat pile of ferrets and vermin at his feet. He raised his head swiftly and regarded Severus with piercing orange eyes.

Severus returned to Lucius and motioned for him to move towards the main staircase, hoping that they wouldn't be seen. If they could just reach the passageway one floor below, they could make their way down easily.

While on the stairs, Severus glanced down to see the other staircases thankfully empty. Once inside the passageway, they emerged from a doorway in the dungeons.

"This way," Severus hissed and roughly shoved Lucius ahead of him. He intended to take him through the entryway he used whenever called by Voldemort which emerged

near the greenhouses. With a strange reminder of his mortality, he remembered that reaching this entryway had almost been his last thought as he laid dying on the Hogwarts grounds not so long ago.

As they turned the final corner, Severus was startled to see Remus towards the end of the hallway, obviously out on patrol.

Severus quickly thrust Lucius' wand into his hand, pointed back towards the Entrance Hall and hissed, "Go!"

Waiting a moment, Severus watched Lucius awkwardly willing his legs to cooperate after having been restrained for so long, then loudly yelled, "Lupin! He's running for it!"

Hearing Lupin running up behind him, Severus gave chase, throwing an impressive array of spells after Lucius, blasting various portraits off the walls and instantly converting a small statue into dust. Remus ran up next to Severus, casting his own spells as Lucius disappeared around the corner towards the Entrance Hall.

Arriving at the doors, Lucius slid to a stop, throwing a panicked look behind him. Severus angled his path in front of Remus and nodded to Lucius as he disappeared out the front doors.

Severus and Remus ran out into the cool night, watching a cloaked figure stiffly running towards the castle gates. After the sound of Lucius' Apparation was heard, Severus and Remus stopped and stood in silence while catching their breath.

Once they had sufficiently recovered, Remus laughed and, with a hand on Severus' shoulder, said with a smile, "Quite a team."

Severus nodded and responded with a restrained grin, "Yes. Quite."

Hermione had been up for an hour, watching a small rectangle of sunlight form, then brighten. It made its way across the room, patiently traveling over furniture on its journey towards the bed. When it crested over the edge of the mattress, just above where Severus' hair splayed across the pillow, Hermione paid close attention to how the light tinged his hair blue. She idly arranged the strands in sections, spacing them apart against the white of the linen, feeling the warmth where the sun reached.

"Severus, you do know there is a dinner for us tonight?"

"I am aware of that fact, yes," he mumbled and, without opening his eyes, swept his arm behind him, closing the drapes before the sun had a chance to fully invade the room. Only a small strip of sunlight remained, stubbornly insisting that it was, indeed, morning.

Severus decided that Dumbledore's insistence that he move to the rooms was certainly a back-handed punishment of sorts, considering how incessantly bright they were.

Hermione leaned against him from behind and placed her hand over his heart. She remained that way for a while with her chin on his shoulder. "There will be dancing, too."

"Yes, I am aware of that as well," he muttered, and settled in to fall asleep again.

"Unless I'm missing something, you do not dance. It simply doesn't fit the 'bat of the dungeons' persona."

Severus turned and lay on his back, knowing he had no hope of any more sleep.

"How do you know I don't have a whole other life? Maybe I'm secretly wealthy and well-bred. It's possible I was privileged and learned fancy things like dancing."

"Oh, really?" she said with a grin, knowing he was teasing her.

A genuine smile graced his face, and even with the horrid mess of hair obscuring his eyes, she could tell he was truly happy in that moment.

"It's quite possible," he argued.

Nodding as if in thought, she countered, "So, then there is a Snape Manor? Complete with a huge staff and gobs of Galleons? Will I be the Lady of the house?"

She caught him rolling his eyes, so she clasped her hands together and said wistfully, "Oh, I think I shall make the drapes red!"

Severus openly laughed. "Now you're getting ahead of yourself."

"See? I knew it," she said with a triumphant smile.

"Of course, the drapes must remain blue as they go well with the stunning sea view in the master bedroom."

Hermione laughed. "Now you're teasing."

"Fine, I shall allow you to change the ones in the drawing room," he said with a wave of his hand. "I never cared for those anyway."

"You're terrible, you know that."

He shrugged. "That is the prevailing opinion."

"You've managed to thoroughly avoid my question," she said, reaching up to pull her hair back.

He glanced at the ceiling for a moment before asking, "Which was? I've forgotten."

Frustrated, but loving every minute of it, Hermione sighed and asked, "Can you or can't you?"

"Ah," he said, then yawned. "I believe I am capable of performing, yes."

Hermione gasped. "I'm talking about dancing not that."

Feigning shock, he held his hand to his heart. "I was speaking of dancing as well. Really, Hermione, I'm honestly surprised at how easily your mind travels down that path."

Before she could speak again, Severus leaned over and kissed her gently, touching softly and then moving a fraction before joining again. He caressed her face and gently brushed her hair away. Each kiss became a slow study in just how sensuous the slightest touch could be. Every time he withdrew, she experienced that same feeling of loss before the touch returned in the form of a kiss or fingers tracing the angle of her ear.

Hermione lost track of how long they kissed like that, realizing only later that the sun had moved across the floor enough to be noticeable. She kept her eyes closed to ignore the voice telling her that they were going to miss breakfast.

After a while, he broke the kiss and murmured, "You may dream of the stunning manor with ocean views and Galleons, or you may have only me, keeping in mind I am terribly unpleasant, have developed an annoying habit of sleeping late, and am currently unemployed. Oh, and that my only home is currently occupied by a wizard whose only focus is killing one of your best friends."

Hermione ran her fingers through his hair and smiled.

Before she could respond, he added apologetically, "There's no sea view and the drapes are not red."

Hermione chuckled. "I don't care what you don't have. I only need you."

"Ah, I see. Excellent choice. Let's show ourselves at breakfast before they send another search party," he said, taking her hand.

Hermione knew full well that he had avoided her question, but decided to let it go.

Sparring with him was by far more entertaining than simple conversation, and it was something that, in her mind, would never grow old.

Of Debts and Promises

Chapter 37 of 41

A novel-length post HBP HG/SS romance adventure. What if Severus returned, trained Harry for the final battle and worked to destroy the final Horcruxes? Story is complete and will be updated regularly.

Disclaimer: All characters belong to JKR.

AN: I must thank Ariadne, as always, for her patience and encouragement.

We are nearing the end. Now is the time to let me know how you're feeling about the story. Don't try to tell me you tripped in here by accident. ;-) Enjoy, and remember to feed the author on the way out.

Severus stood at the end of the corridor, rehearsing in his mind just how to tell Draco that he had willingly released his father. His only hope would be that Draco would understand the critical part Lucius had yet to play, but Severus knew that this scenario did not have a high probability for success, considering what Hermione had shared with him. Revenge can be both a noble and crippling pursuit, and unfortunately, Draco was well on his way to being consumed by the overwhelming drive to avenge his mother's murder.

"Bit of trouble, Severus?"

Severus looked up and scowled at the portrait of a long-dead Slytherin patron to the school.

He crossed his arms and glanced in the direction of Draco's door. "You could say that."

Leaning forward, the patron said decidedly, "Never stopped you before."

"Usual strategies do not apply here," Severus said, trying to gather his thoughts.

The patron seemed to join Severus in deep thought, then stated quite clearly, "A Slytherin does not change his strategy, regardless of the circumstances."

Severus furrowed his brow, then shook his head. Striding towards Draco's door, he said over his shoulder, "Not this time."

Finding the door ajar, Severus leaned in and called Draco's name. Receiving no response, he pushed the door open further and looked inside. His eyes were drawn to a few small pictures on the mantel that Draco must have retrieved from his dormitory. Approaching the mantel, Severus stared at the collection, the last remnants of a home and family that Draco no longer possessed.

Several smaller portraits showed random relatives standing with a young Draco on his first day at Hogwarts, but it was the larger, central one that caught Severus' eye. It showed Lucius, Narcissa and Severus gathered around the end of a formal dining table. No one was smiling, of course; none of them did in those days, but Narcissa looked strangely different. She sat in a high-backed chair with Severus on her left and Lucius on her right. While a complete stranger would have appeared more at ease next to her than Lucius, it was Severus that Narcissa was leaning towards with a slight trace of a grin on her face.

Severus stood, staring at the portrait in silence, then reached up and took it into his hand. Remembering that night, he could recall that Narcissa had just informed him that he had better not attempt any semblance of amusement as it would surely ruin the portrait. He ran his hand over the frame, wondering why Draco would keep a portrait with his father in it, then realized that there were none with just his mother.

"She gave that one to me, said it was her favorite."

Severus turned quickly, the portrait held tightly in his hand.

Draco approached Severus, his eyes dropping to the frame. He took it from Severus' hand and gripped the sides as he stared down at it.

With a haunted smile, Draco said, "I thought I was something special, having a portrait of my parents with you. The others told me that you looked even more evil back then."

Severus nodded slightly, unsure of where to start.

"It was a different time."

Draco kept his eyes on the portrait for a long time, then closed his eyes.

"I saw him leave."

Severus remained silent, watching as Draco ran one finger over his mother's image.

"At first I was furious," Draco said as he replaced the picture to the mantel. "Then I decided you must have your reasons."

Severus, wary of Draco's calm reaction, said carefully, "He is, at this moment, delivering misinformation to Voldemort that will allow us to hold this battle on our own land and our own time. The advantage is extremely valuable."

Unsure whether Draco was absorbing what he said, Severus placed a hand on his shoulder, intent on explaining further.

"Killing in the heat of battle isn't murder," Draco said fiercely. "Promise me you'll give me that chance."

Severus searched Draco's eyes and found that he was serious, far more serious than at the Riddle mansion.

"Draco..."

Draco raised his arm sharply, shoving Severus' hand away. He crossed the room and leaned his hands on the windowsill, pressing his forehead against the glass.

Severus stood, at a loss for words.

"It's not the same," Draco muttered, staring out over the Hogwarts grounds.

Watching Draco, Severus thought that sometimes strategies change in a heartbeat and that unspoken promises could still be kept.

Kitty batted the cage forcefully, sending it skittering across the table before it caught in a groove between two planks. Wormtail cried out, pressing himself against the back of the cage only to find the cat circling again. Lowering his head to peer inside, Kitty methodically wedged a paw between two of the bars, pushing further, hooking a claw...

Suddenly, the cat was replaced by a piece of toast.

"That'll be enough," Remus said, dropping Kitty to the floor.

Kitty turned, glared at Remus, and ensured that every occupant of the Great Hall heard the sound of his displeasure before strutting away with dignity.

Minerva sat next to Severus, asking casually, "Have you prepared for tonight?"

"Yes, coming along quite well," Severus said shortly. He swept his eyes across the Hall to where Weasley was laughing at something undoubtedly insipid and daring to place a hand on Hermione's shoulder for a brief but life-threatening moment.

Severus saw Minerva's hand waving out of the corner of his eye. "And how is that? Do share."

"Knowledge is obtained in the most unusual ways at times," he said without a glance. He could feel her trying to examine him through his annoying curtain of hair.

Minerva leaned back in her chair. "Cryptic as always. What would I ever do without the challenge of battling with you over the most mundane questions?"

"I haven't the faintest," Severus muttered. His stare had traveled to Wormtail, his thoughts rambling down the road of what use the wretch could serve.

Minerva watched Wormtail sitting up in his cage, eating a piece of toast far larger than he was, and asked, "What are we to do with him?"

"I have an idea," Severus drawled, his eyes narrowing in thought.

Minerva knew that look well and immediately shook her head, preparing to argue. "Severus, no more of that. Peter has done terrible things, but..."

"Minerva, without the Dementors to carry out our dirty work, what else is there?" he said severely, casting a sideways glance. He sighed at her expression as it became more and more irritated. "There is something else that has been overlooked until now."

Her irritation dissolved to curiosity. "Please share."

Severus pointed his fork towards where Harry sat with Ginny. They were quietly eating breakfast, leaning on each other. Ginny whispered something to him, and he placed his arm around her shoulders and laughed.

"Our dear friend *Peter* owes Potter his life."

Minerva's eyebrows rose. "Yes, I'm aware of the night in the Shrieking Shack."

Severus stood, his eyes riveted on the cage where Wormtail sat with his long, hairless tail wrapped neatly around him as he turned the toast in his paws.

"Peter Pettigrew, better known as Wormtail, will fight on our side. Like it or not," Severus announced as he walked around the edge of the High Table.

Severus drew his wand, pointed it towards the cage, and suddenly Wormtail the rat became Wormtail the rat-like human, still holding the piece of toast to his mouth.

Wormtail looked stunned after having spent over a day trapped in his Animagus form to find himself sitting on a Hogwarts table in the Great Hall. He stood slowly, and pieces of the broken cage fell to the floor.

All eyes were on Severus as Wormtail stood before him at the High Table. Wormtail felt around his clothes for a moment before squinting to see Severus holding his wand up.

"Looking for this? Really. Do you think me that dim-witted?" Severus spat, taking methodical steps towards Wormtail. "Mr. Potter, I do believe this involves you."

Harry rose hesitantly and approached Severus.

"I do believe that Wormtail here, previously known as Pettigrew, owes you something," Severus stated and crossed his arms, looking at Harry expectantly.

Confusion crossed Harry's face before clearing. "Oh, yeah. Yes, he does."

Wormtail's eyes widened in understanding.

Harry stepped forward, his hands tightening into fists at the mere sight of him. "Peter Pettigrew, I saved your life in the Shrieking Shack that night, and now call upon your Wizard's life debt to me."

Wormtail's hands were crowded around his mouth as if he was trying to chew all of his fingernails at once with nervous energy. His eyes shifted around the room, flitting from face to face before returning to Harry. Finding no solace, he dropped his gaze to the floor.

Severus cleared his throat. "Even your feeble mind can grasp without much effort that you are bound by old magic to this debt?"

The Order members drew closer, listening to the exchange. Minerva slowly stood, her fingertips spread on the table, touching the smooth surface tentatively in anticipation of Peter's words.

For the first time, Wormtail spoke. The nervousness he displayed in his actions was evident in his shaking voice. "Yes, I understand."

Interested in this turn of behavior, Harry looked from Severus to Wormtail. Various whispers spread through the crowd as they took in this development.

"You will turn against Voldemort and fight alongside us in the inevitable battle that is to come," Severus said, ignoring how Wormtail flinched at the sound of the name. "You will protect Potter with your life even if it means throwing yourself in the way."

"I will," Wormtail said with resignation.

Severus said in disgust, "Remember, Pettigrew, you are still the most vile piece of flesh somewhat resembling a human ever to walk the earth next to Voldemort himself. This is the only way you will redeem your horrid soul even in the slightest. I, myself, would rather kill you where you stand. I am not the only one who wishes you dead, either."

Wormtail cringed as if struck and said nothing. His eyes found Remus for a moment before quickly looking away.

Severus approached Wormtail and observed how he cringed as if awaiting an impending blow, clearly the best position to take whenever in Voldemort's presence and a difficult habit to shake. "Care to share with us?"

When Wormtail looked around the room again, his eyes came to a halt on Remus. Molly placed a hand on Remus' shoulder and whispered something into his ear as Tonks held his hand and firmly took his wand.

"Dementors," Wormtail announced, hunching his shoulders protectively as he saw the raw hatred on Remus' face. "The Dark Lord commands them. There is a spell to compel them to do your bidding. Similar to the Imperius."

Severus narrowed his eyes and said with interest, "And?"

Wormtail flinched as if the sound of Severus' voice alone was a threat. He took a deep breath through his hands, which seemed to be permanently occupying space around his face, before looking resigned to his fate.

He turned to Harry and said, "I know the spell."

Harry looked stunned at what Wormtail had just said. Dementors under Voldemort's command. While he processed this information, he was aware that everyone was watching his reaction. Thankfully, he heard Snape speak.

"Voldemort will undoubtedly send the Dementors ahead of any attack. You will be on the grounds, accompanied by someone and awaiting their arrival," Severus ordered, ignoring how Wormtail became increasingly apprehensive by the minute. "You will then tell them to go into the forest and await your next command."

Severus swiftly reached out and gripped Wormtail, twisting his shirt and vest. "Of course if you are lying..." to which Wormtail firmly shook his head "No."

Shoving Wormtail away, Severus sneered, "Thank Potter for saving your wretched life. Until needed, you will reside in the quite comfortable accommodations that Moody has set up in the Room of Requirement."

As Moody took Wormtail away, Harry said, "I remember Dumbledore telling me I would someday be glad to have him in my debt. There is no way he can avoid it?"

Severus shook his head. "There is no denial of such a bond, and honor plays no part when it is called upon. It is the same type of old magic that your mother invoked by sacrificing herself."

"You know of that old magic," Harry said quietly, knowing that Severus had been affected by two life debts, the first to his father and the other to Dumbledore. It was more a statement than a question.

Harry later swore to Ginny that he saw a flicker of pain pass through Severus' eyes before he answered.

"Yes. I do."

Wide grins appeared as Fred and George once again erected a map of the Hogwarts grounds and explained which traps they had set. Molly covered her mouth in shock at times and at others appeared almost proud of their creativity, no matter how wild.

Hagrid joined them, and small icons representing the various creatures he managed appeared on the map. They leaped about impatiently in their places and performed small actions whenever he pointed to one. When Hagrid pointed to a Hippogriff, it sprang to life and flung its wings back proudly.

The portrait system of communication, it was determined, could be used to a certain extent, but the charmed parchments the twins were working on would be key. Fred and George happily announced that the range was now as far as from the Astronomy Tower to the Quidditch pitch.

Moody, Remus and Tonks joined in and outlined their security and prisoner-management strategy. An agreement was reached that during the battle they would collect prisoners and keep them in the Room of Requirement prison that Moody had conjured.

Minerva's conversations with the Ministry had confirmed their suspicion that Azkaban was no longer a viable prison and that the Ministry had no immediate solution. Essentially, they were on their own. Arthur sadly reported that Percy had no interest in rejoining the family, that he had suspicions that there were several Voldemort supporters within the Ministry, and that he was investigating. Molly shared that Charlie had sent an owl stating he was on his way, but no other details, most likely since the message could be intercepted. Bill shared the news that, after his having spoken with the Goblins extensively, they had no intentions of choosing sides; however, they had agreed to seize control of Lucius Malfoy's account, considering he was an escaped criminal and a confirmed murderer.

Poppy reported that her meetings with Molly, Ginny, Hermione and Neville had gone well and that, with the return of Professor Sprout, more healing plants could be produced. Neville announced that his lessons with Professor Snape were productive and that the results would be revealed soon. He then flashed a sheepish grin at Severus who, shockingly, acknowledged the expression with a quick nod.

Severus recounted to everyone that he had, indeed, allowed Lucius to leave. Ignoring all gasps of protest, he calmly explained that Lucius would hopefully convince Voldemort that the gates would be opened at noon on the upcoming Saturday. Severus explained how, once the Death Eaters, along with Voldemort, had made their way onto the grounds, the wards would be replaced to prevent their departure.

The final Horcrux would be destroyed only when Voldemort was trapped, effectively making him mortal.

Severus stood and looked around the room.

"Less than four days remain before the gates will be thrown open. Dream of it. Dread it. Wish that the time go terrifyingly fast or excruciatingly slow. Either way spend the

time wisely."

After breakfast, Severus turned his attention to where Harry, Ron and Neville stood, and called to Remus and Moody, "Take everyone but Mr. Weasley. He and I shall have a private lesson."

Ron paled and remained still while Harry and Neville stepped away as if he was suddenly afflicted by some contagious disease.

After a moment, Harry reached out and gave Ron a push, muttering, "Oh, just get a move on."

As Ron approached, Severus removed his outer robes, tossed them onto a nearby table and stated, "Outside."

Once out in the sun, Severus turned and studied Ron as he stood before him. "Regrettably, injuring each other this close to a battle would be foolish, to put it plainly. However, you must learn to defend yourself if you intend to live. Please tell me you are taking this seriously?"

Ron regarded him with suspicion, but managed to say, "Yes."

Severus watched him for a moment. "Mr. Weasley, do you know why I am doing this?"

Ron appeared to want to seize the opportunity to notify Severus of exactly how much of a vindictive, power-abusing git he really was, but he responded aloud, "No."

Choosing to ignore the lack of proper address, Severus stated, "I am doing this because, as it stands now, you will undoubtedly die quickly and not at all pleasantly. As you know, that is not something I can allow, considering that Hermione unfortunately prefers you alive. Are we clear?"

Ron nodded reluctantly.

"Fine. We've already established that we hate each other, so let's dispense with the formalities. You will learn how to successfully block spells. I will only cast to disarm."

Ron appeared visibly relieved to hear this piece of news.

"Disappointing, I know."

"Stop doing that," Ron spat, his anger flaring immediately.

Severus strolled around Ron, enjoying how he tracked his movements.

"Close the gaping hole that is your mind, and you won't have that trouble," Severus countered.

Ron, seething with rage, drew his wand.

Severus casually ignored Ron's newfound anger and drawled, "I don't believe that Hermione would enjoy your doubting her sanity either."

Without warning, Ron screamed, "*Stupefy!*" which Severus neatly sidestepped.

Before Ron could react, he saw Severus make a dismissive motion with his hand, and he found himself thrown through the air to land hard onto his back. He stared at the sky for a moment before Severus' face came into view.

"I said disarm only. You do understand English, don't you?"

Ron growled as he pushed himself up to sit, and he could feel the lump on the back of his head starting to grow.

"Focusing that wild anger into something constructive would be far more useful, Weasley. Remember, your dislike of me means nothing, as we are on the same side."

Ron rose to his feet and closed his eyes, but the redness in his face and his clenched fists plainly displayed that he was losing the battle with his temper. When he opened his eyes again, Severus had moved off several yards and had his wand trained on him.

"Block me," Severus said.

A second later, Ron watched as his wand flew uselessly into the grass.

And again, many more times.

After Severus had disarmed Ron another dozen times, he stopped and pinched the bridge of his nose. "How did you ever survive at the Department of Mysteries?"

Ron shrugged. "We just fought as a team. It just all happened so fast."

"And tell me why I am able to disarm you without any effort?" Severus asked, sighing when Ron only looked doubtful. His brow creased as if he was attempting to decipher a puzzle as he thought for a moment.

Ron stood with his wand loosely in his hand and shrugged, awaiting some elaborate Snape-like method of informing him of just how stupid he was. What he received, however, was a calmly asked question.

"Tell me, Mr. Weasley, in a game of chess, what is the most basic strategy to achieve victory?"

Ron thought for a moment, then answered, "To avoid being taken."

Severus pointed at him suddenly, causing Ron to jump. "Exactly. And what do you think is your greatest asset when in a duel with an opponent far more powerful than yourself?"

"Erm... avoid?" Ron ventured.

Severus nodded. "The Death Eaters are an experienced, but far older lot. More powerful, but also not as nimble. The key to your survival is to simply not be there when the spell comes. Attempting to cast requires you to remain still for a moment of concentration. You cannot afford that. The battle is too close to change the fact that you are an utter failure at non-verbal spells. Dodge their spells and hit them before they have a chance to react to your movements."

Understanding dawned in Ron's eyes as he nodded.

Severus attempted to disarm Ron several more times and was only successful twice. When Ron had managed to avoid him completely, Severus lowered his wand and looked satisfied.

Ron appeared to be amazed at his performance.

"Yes, Weasley, I am capable of successfully teaching something," Severus stated flatly, a trace of amusement in his eyes. "Look to your strengths. If you focus too much on your shortcomings, you will fail to see the positive. You are quite good at this. I imagine you should survive a few hours at least."

Ron snorted and rolled his eyes. However, his reluctant smile was genuine. A compliment from Snape, no matter how backhanded, was a rare thing.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. To avoid raising suspicion, you may resume hating me now."

"Leave, Remus," Tonks ordered, grinning and pointing towards the door. When he didn't move, she playfully began to shove him towards it.

Ginny shook her head as she worked on Hermione's hair, resorting to aiming her wand at it threateningly.

Remus chuckled and turned to catch Tonks in his arms. "And just where am I supposed to go?"

"You're dressed. Go help Severus. I'm sure he's hopeless," she suggested.

Remus soon found himself standing outside of Severus' rooms, listening to him cursing loudly inside. As Remus took a deep breath and shook his head, he raised his hand to knock.

Severus jerked the door open and scowled. "Lupin, what are you doing here?"

"Say it with me, Severus, my name is Remus," he said with an exasperated sigh.

Severus sneered; however, it lacked the threatening manner it had once had. "Answer the question, *Remus*."

"I'm here to help you dress," Remus said with a shrug. "Or so I have been informed."

"What?" Severus said with a frustrated glance down. "I assure you I can dress myself just fine."

Remus folded his arms and leaned against the door frame. He pointed in the general direction of his rooms, "That, and I seem to have been evicted."

Severus said nothing, but opened the door further and walked back into the sitting room.

Remus looked around the room and said, "Without sounding like Tonks, what are you wearing?"

Severus gave up on trying to rid himself of Remus and instead took a deep breath. "No idea. My dress robes are too heavy. It'll be my frock coat, I imagine; however, it needs to be dressed up," he said while touching the coat where it lay over the armchair. "Hermione..." he said, then stopped after catching himself. "She likes it, but it doesn't fit me well anymore."

"You're very thin, Severus," Remus observed.

Severus looked up sharply in surprise that anyone would have noticed. Fingering the coat, he muttered defensively, "I've had an interesting year."

Remus smiled sadly. "I'd say you've had an interesting twenty years."

"Yes, well, thank you for that most enlightening observation. Unless I can gain weight in the next hour, there is no solution," Severus said in frustration, pushing his hair back.

Remus moved and slowly placed both hands on the back of one of the armchairs. When Severus observed him obviously crafting how to say something, he said, "Out with it."

"Severus, you are the only one amongst us to know the true nature of Voldemort and what we are up against."

After a deep breath and several moments of silence, Severus answered, "All too well."

Remus concentrated on the chair's fabric before asking, "We are alone, so tell me honestly. Do you feel Harry is ready?"

The expression on Severus' face before he lowered his head worried Remus, as it was not full of promise. He watched as Severus stepped around the other armchair, trailing his hand along its back and looking towards the floor in thought. When he fixed his hands on the chair and hunched his shoulders, it did nothing to raise Remus' hopes.

"I would be lying if I said there was such a thing as 'ready' for a duel with Voldemort. That would give the impression that the only goal would be to reach a certain level and then call it a success. Voldemort is, by far, more powerful than any wizard alive." Severus looked at Remus gravely as he said, "I have no doubt that I would have a difficult time surviving even a casual duel with him alone."

At Remus' expression of growing dread, Severus continued, "That being said, Potter will not be alone. In the end, there is nothing in the prophecy that says that he cannot have help to at least incapacitate Voldemort."

Remus nodded in agreement.

Severus spread his hand over his frock coat, tracing each button. "I do not live in a fantasy world where the forces of good inexplicably win over evil. That by the virtue of simply being good anyone deserves to be victorious. The world simply doesn't work that way. Fate will strike down the most pure of hearts and allow the most dark and despicable to live long, destructive lives. There is no explanation, but to go into a battle such as this believing that fictional things such as luck and righteousness will push the odds in his favor would be foolish, to put it plainly."

As Severus observed Remus cross his arms and pace, he said, "A long explanation, but as you indicated yourself, you wanted the opinion of someone who knows. I am looked upon as being too cynical. I would rather have Potter know his true abilities and limitations than go out there with some inflated fantasy that he will stand before Voldemort, deliver a valiant speech on good and evil, revenge and justice, and then strike him dead. It simply won't happen."

"That much is true. No one can argue with you on what it is like to face him. I surely won't start now," Remus said thoughtfully.

"All of that aside, I can say this: we will be able to do this if we work together. Once I destroy the final Horcrux, it is everyone's mission to end this nightmare, with Potter striking the final blow," Severus said as Remus paced another complete lap, his head tilted down as he walked.

Severus gripped the back of the chair and said, "Not the answer you were hoping for."

Shaken out of his thoughts, Remus replied, "No. I agree. It is something that needed to be put into words. Sometimes, reality is both startling and liberating at once."

"Over the coming few days, I believe it best to keep Potter's confidence level high. I am still working on a modification of the Felix Felicis potion to help close his mind."

There is also something to be said for sheer bravery as well," Severus said thoughtfully as he held the coat up. "For tonight, though, let him enjoy things before this undeniable burden draws near enough to become a crushing weight."

Remus agreed and said with a faint smile, "Tonight is for you and Hermione. There is no sin in putting war aside for a few hours. You two truly are a stunning couple. I never thought I'd see the day."

Severus snorted and quickly changed the subject. "Which leads me back to my lack of a tailor and adequate nutrition."

Remus smiled gently and said, "Never doubt the ingenuity of house-elves."

"What do you think?" Minerva asked as Ginny and Harry entered the Great Hall. The house-elves had decorated the Hall much as they had the first time they had been under the impression that Hermione and Severus were engaged. Green, silver, red and gold were somehow mixed to look lovely in various ways, including on the chairs and tablecloths. The High Table was set with beautiful plates with both the Slytherin and Gryffindor crests.

Ginny raised her eyebrows and said, "It looks absolutely beautiful." Harry nodded in agreement with a strained smile.

Tonks and Hermione arrived, and while Hermione took in the sight of the decorations, Tonks waved a hand towards her as if to say, "Approve?"

Minerva smiled and nodded, holding a hand over her heart as she took in how beautiful she looked.

Hermione wore a simple, strapless, deep-red dress with her hair nicely tamed and up in a style similar to that she'd worn when she attended the Yule ball. It had taken Ginny almost an hour and countless charms to force her hair to submit to her will. The result was well worth the effort. Small wisps were left to frame her face, and without her large mane, the delicate curve of her neck was visible.

Hermione turned to see Ron gazing at her before he hesitantly approached.

"You look... well, ah, I mean..." he started and was nodding either as if Hermione had made some witty comment or he had forgotten the English language. He again had his shoulders hunched up around his ears.

"Nice, you look nice," Ron said with something that resembled relief at having successfully managed to assemble a sentence.

Hermione smiled and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Thanks, Ron. I get the general idea," to which he nodded gratefully and took his seat.

An elbow was being prodded into her side. Hermione looked over at Ginny and was stunned beyond words.

Severus had entered the Hall with Remus, wearing his frock coat with the tails as she liked, but with a silver vest and a white-collared shirt. Every piece of clothing was tailored within an inch of its life, fitting him perfectly. His hair was pulled back and definitely showed evidence that he had voluntarily washed it without her usual threats.

"Have you heard anything I've said?" Ginny asked with a giggle. She passed her hand in front of Hermione's face before giving up and sharing a look with Tonks who had just given a congratulatory wave to Remus.

"You look stunning," Hermione breathed as he approached.

"I believe protocol states I am supposed to say that to you," he said as his eyes traveled over her and arrived at her hair. "And you are beyond stunning. There are an assortment of exquisite descriptions that shall come to me later. Of that I am most certain. But not now."

"Something tells me I should be extremely flattered to have rendered you speechless or at least hindered you in some way," Hermione said with a grin.

He tilted his head and agreed, "Quite."

"Your hair," she said, leaning over to see how it was tied back.

"Too much of the hopeless romantic style?" he asked apologetically. "Lupin's idea."

Hermione laughed. It seemed he would never have any tact in accepting any sort of compliment. "No, but what happened to the coat? It fits you well."

He glanced down and said in a quiet voice, "I'm afraid I couldn't follow your earlier advice to quote*wear the coat, if anything*', so this is the next most acceptable thing."

Hermione looked shocked for a moment, then smiled at the thought that he remembered things like that.

After dinner, Minerva rose and said, "Everyone, if you will... Even in the preparations for what we all know is to come, life must move on. We are here to celebrate the love between two of our own. I have watched them grow closer, and can say that, in my time, I have never seen a truer love than this. Tonight is for Hermione and Severus, and I invite them to take the first dance."

Severus took Hermione's hand and bowed. When she smiled and said under her breath, "So formal..." he replied just as quietly, "They are watching us. After all, we must play the parts for which we are destined."

She rose and took his arm. As they arrived at the center of the room, she asked, "Should I help you? You know, with the steps?"

Severus only grinned, placed a hand on her waist and clasped his other in hers. He leaned forward slowly to breathe into her ear, "Yes, you may hold on."

As the music started, he pulled her close and began to move her around with an ease that seemed familiar. Simultaneously exact and subtle, every change in tempo, every rise and fall, each space of near silence was filled with a movement so expressive it took her breath away. With both authority and kindness, he guided her and kept her within his circle of control. At times, he would allow her to move outwards, only to snatch her back to collapse onto him, and stare intensely into her eyes. It was the kind of dance that exuded a strong presence, a deep passion, possession and intimacy shared only by soul mates. When the music turned to a slower pace, he held her close and rocked her easily, every so often lowering her into a dip in which she had no choice but to allow her head to fall back. Whenever in that position, he would lean over her and ensure that she could feel his breath travel around her neck.

After a while, they barely noticed when Minerva led everyone in polite applause, let alone that others had begun to take to the floor. To them, it seemed no one else was in the room.

"How did you learn?" Hermione asked and moved to rest her forehead against his, astonished that he allowed such a gesture in public. The devilish grin she had come to both love and fear appeared on his face.

Without words, he eased her into a dramatic dip and indicated upwards with his eyes. When she looked up, she was met with the smiling, and upside down, face of Neville Longbottom, who was dancing with Minerva. Reaching out, Minerva smiled and patted Severus on the shoulder.

"You asked Neville to teach you to dance?" Hermione gasped as he gracefully pulled her back up to him. "But he said..."

"That our lessons were going well?" he finished for her and grinned proudly. "I see no deception there, only the selective exclusion of details."

Hermione laughed softly and whispered into his ear, "You, my love, are the master at wordplay, secrecy and utterly romantic gestures."

The vibration of his laugh against her hand. "As I said before, I only do what the occasion demands. Apparently there isn't anything I wouldn't do for love anymore," he said and raised his arm to cue her to spin. "Even this. And you are, after all, the perfect partner."

Hermione blushed. "I'm not that good. You seem to have natural grace."

Tilting his head in a slight bow, he murmured, catching her eyes, "Thank you; however, I was not only speaking of dancing this time."

She smiled and raised her head in a mock snobbish fashion. "You, sir, are taking advantage of the fact that the light is dim and we are no longer the center of attention. Do you intend to dance or to whisper alluring things to me?"

"Both."

Severus held a hand on her back as he turned her a few times before bringing her close again.

Hermione was stunned at how affectionate he was while dancing, as if the music granted him some magical permission to express himself. "Something had changed inside you."

He raised an eyebrow slightly before agreeing, "That it has I cannot deny that."

Leaning forward, she pressed her head against his chest, thankful that the lights had been lowered and the music was at a quiet lull.

After a while, she said, "Promise me something?"

"I will do my best," he said, tilting his head down.

"This..." she said, lifting her head to look into his eyes. "Keep this. I can't put it into words, but the way we are now. Don't ever let it go."

He studied her for a moment, knowing that in a few short days everything could change or come to an end. There was a plea in her eyes, something that demanded remembrance. In times filled with quiet desperation, it was only possible to make promises the heart alone could keep.

Severus' eyes moved slightly as if to see if anyone was watching before leaning in to kiss her softly.

A promise the only one he could keep.

"I would never dream of ruining perfection."

Ginny watched Harry pick at a plate of food as they sat out a dance. After he had stared down intensely at the plate long enough, she reached over and took the fork from him. "Harry, are you all right?"

He sat back in his chair and gazed out onto the dance floor where Severus and Hermione were moving flawlessly to the music. "I'm fine."

Ginny put his fork down. "Hit home, didn't it?"

"What?..." he started, but then seem to know exactly what she was referring to. All of the battle preparations taking shape made what was to come all too real. "Yeah, I suppose so."

"Harry, when I look into your eyes I see it there," Ginny said and tried to lean forward enough to make him look at her. "You have to be able to tell me. Everybody needs someone; it's a fact."

Harry ran a hand through his hair, then dropped it on the table, hard. "And tell you what, Ginny? That I don't know what's going to happen? That I have no control over my life and just want this over..."

"I know, Harry."

"No, you don't," he said a little too harshly.

Ginny looked out onto the dance floor again and waited for him to calm down. Growing up surrounded by boys had taught her a thing or two about the male mind. She watched as Ron was dragged onto the dance floor by McGonagall, and she glanced over to see Harry half-heartedly enjoying Ron's suffering.

"Ginny, I'm sorry, I..." he said, then shrugged as if he had no explanation.

She nodded and took his hand. "It's all right. We'll find our way, Harry. Please remember how much I care about you. We all do."

Harry stared down at their hands and allowed his words to be drowned by the music. "If only that was enough."

"Lovely job, if I may say so myself," Tonks said with a nod towards Severus and Hermione.

Remus turned so he could see them and said with an air of pride, "If you are complimenting my successfully dressing Severus, then, although it is a strange honor, I'll take it."

Tonks giggled. "He does clean up well. How did you get him to tie his hair back?"

"A strategically placed comment on the fact that women love that look," he said with a chuckle.

"And he bought that? Oh, he is most definitely in love," she laughed. "And the coat and vest?"

Remus smiled. "Elves."

"You're a good friend, even to a reluctant victim like him," Tonks said and dramatically posed as he lowered her into a dip.

Remus laughed. "Thank you. It's hard work, but I think someday he'll call me by my first name without being threatened."

The Great Hall doors opened to reveal Charlie Weasley in his traditional dragon-keeping attire, complete with boots and a singed jacket.

"Am I late?" Charlie called. He smiled as he caught sight of Molly and Arthur as they waved, excited to see he had arrived safely. Molly had brought the clock with her from

the Burrow, even though it only moved between "Mortal Peril" and "Traveling," and had been watching it faithfully.

Severus stepped apart from Hermione as Charlie approached. Charlie quickly hid his surprise at Severus' appearance as they came within speaking distance.

"Well?" Severus asked.

Charlie brushed what looked like cinders off his sleeves. "I've got good news and bad news."

Severus scowled and impatiently made a "go on" motion with his hand. "Skip to the end, Weasley."

"All right then. The bad news is we had four but misplaced one."

"Misplaced? Misl..." Severus began, then pinched the bridge of his nose before continuing in a slow, deliberate voice, "I am interested, Mr. Weasley. How exactly do you *misplace* a dragon?"

"Well, he sort of got away broke free really. Flew over London for a while, then kind of circled Big Ben. But don't worry," Charlie said quickly when he saw the expression on Severus' face darken.

Arthur paled at the horrible thought of thousands of Muggles staring up at the great clock only to see a dragon firmly perched on its face, breathing fire and flapping its great wings wildly.

Charlie held his hands out in a calming motion. "We cast Muggle concealment charms on them. He's around somewhere. They usually follow their own kind."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Fine. Keep them as you did for the tournament."

"Will do," Charlie said and turned to head out the Great Hall's doors. Before he got far, a huge, shuddering boom shook the Hall, sending large chunks of plaster to the floor.

Everyone froze. Again, another boom, and then a loud scraping sound, all from above.

All eyes shot to the ceiling, staring in awe and disbelief as large sections gave way, exposing the night sky. Suddenly, the view through the gaping hole was obscured by a shadow, which then disappeared with a rush of air.

Charlie jogged over to the nearest window, craning his neck to look up into the sky. He then looked back at everyone with a great smile.

"Found him!" he called with a relieved expression on his face. Charlie scanned the room and called, "Hagrid? Could use your help!"

Hagrid nodded, rose, and was beginning to leave the Hall when the unmistakable vision of a dragon soared past the windows. He stopped and squinted as if to catch details as the tail waved by before whipping around to rise up into the sky.

Hagrid's face lit up as he cried, "Norbert!"

On the Eve of War

Chapter 38 of 41

A novel-length post HBP HG/SS romance adventure. What if Severus returned, trained Harry for the final battle and worked to destroy the final Horcruxes? Story is complete and will be updated regularly.

Disclaimer: All characters belong to the great JKR.

AN: As the title indicates, we are on the eve of war and no one is safe.

Thanks to Ariadne, who, as her plaque indicates, is my editor-in-chief.

Hermione watched as Severus spoke to Fred and George after breakfast in the Great Hall. In the few days since the engagement dinner, he had been checking in with everyone from time to time, but largely leaving them to their individual roles. He spent most of his time in the lab, working on the Felix Felicis potion enhancement for Harry. It had been moderately successful in trials, enabling Harry to block Severus from his mind for the most part. Severus, however, was not content for something that worked most of the time and so went back to brew a new batch.

At night, Severus studied the spell that they hoped would interfere with the Dark Mark. If they could isolate Voldemort, they could keep him from calling the others. Obviously, with no way to test the spell, it was unknown if it would work. Hermione knew enough to leave him to his own devices when working on things so complicated and so only checked in on him to force him to eat.

Even now, he was spending yet more time discussing what looked like a bit of parchment with the twins while his food sat untouched.

Remus and Moody had taken up helping out with dueling practice while Severus worked. During meals, a Thestral or Hippogriff might fly past the windows as a reminder that preparations were, in fact, taking shape. Hagrid mentioned happily that Norbert remembered him and, miraculously, would come when called. A frightening sight even for the strong of heart. Charlie, however, snorted and stated that while it was touching that Norbert loved Hagrid, it would be preferable if the other three wouldn't all try to take to the sky, cages and all, in an attempt to follow him.

Hermione spent most of her time with Neville, Molly and Ginny in the hospital wing, learning healing spells and practices from Poppy. She listened to Neville describe proudly how he thought using a newly discovered herb in a healing potion would increase its effectiveness, and how Severus had set him up a work station to try it. She smiled at how Severus had come to the realization that not everyone responded well to a good hard push in order to reach their potential. With every passing day, however, it became harder for Hermione to enter the wing without wondering who would be brought there during the battle, and in what condition.

"All right, Hermione?" Ron asked, bravely sitting in Severus' chair.

"As well as possible," she said with a shrug, realizing that she had been staring into space for a time. She felt strangely calm and couldn't accept the fact that there was nothing more that could be done.

"You know, Hermione, I..." he started, turning a fork over in his hand. "I want you to know before tomorrow that I care, you know even though..." he said with a glance over to where Severus was talking with his brothers.

Hermione smiled faintly. "Thanks, Ron, I know." She gave him a hug and then felt him twitch. Hermione did not need to look to know it was because Severus had seen.

Once she'd released Ron, he said, staring past her, "I've got to... I'll see you later, yeah?" and quickly rose to leave.

"Must you frighten him so?" Hermione asked when she felt Severus sit down behind her. The Hall was empty with the exception of the twins seated at the far end. They were completely engrossed in some sort of liquid they were pouring on the floor and laughing almost maniacally about the effects.

Severus wrapped his arms around her and murmured into her hair, "I assure you, I did nothing to frighten Mr. Weasley. If he insists on living in fear of me, the position of someone considering me his Boggart is, indeed, vacant."

Hermione laughed. "So you and Neville are friends now? I see."

"I wouldn't say friends; however, once a man allows another to lead while dancing, the relationship certainly takes a strange turn. I doubt that Longbottom fears me now," he said, holding her close. Hermione leaned back against him and closed her eyes, noticing how he was obviously shifting behind her to ensure no one could see them sharing this moment. She could hear the mundane sound of the house-elves clearing the breakfast plates away. In her mind, she couldn't help but note that within twenty-four hours the most routine of tasks could not possibly take place.

"It is both strange and advantageous to hold a war on your own grounds and exactly at the time you wish. It is also the most wearing on the nerves. The condemned suffer far worse than those struck down in an instant," Severus said with a tinge of dread. "Anticipation can be torturous as well."

"Reading my mind again?" she said, holding one of his hands up.

He looked over her shoulder, watching as she traced his fingers against hers. "It doesn't require Legilimency to know what would be going through your mind today."

With a deep sigh she said, "No, I suppose not."

Severus passed by the rose bushes, trailing his hand along the thorns.

This day. Each passing hour brought reality closer what he was about to do. He had assumed the anticipation would be high had accepted it with firm resignation, but his mind kept calculating.

The time how much was left?

Would he fail them all?

Tilting his head, he walked, eyes traveling over the uneven edges of the rose bushes. His mind drifting only the occasional snag on his fingers allowed reality through the thin veil of daydreams. Walking with no destination in mind, Severus passed through the gardens and into a clearing.

Where he found him.

Severus approached quietly and stopped when he saw Draco hang his head and place his palm to his face. In his casual clothing, Draco appeared frightfully thin, the sharp angles of his shoulders betraying just how little he had eaten in recent days. Severus inwardly cursed himself for not noticing the decline and for pushing Draco to do even more for the Order. The same way he had done to his mother.

"Draco?"

He didn't move; rather, he continued to run his hand over the stone, tracing her name. It was heart-wrenching that the weather did not correspond to emotion or tragedy. It was a beautiful day with a soft, warm breeze. The air pushed though the hanging willow branches, giving them their own motion; a lulling, soothing sway, as if nature was apologizing and offering a different sort of comfort.

Draco turned his head slightly. "Why did you keep his name?"

Severus was startled beyond words.

He had told Draco the night of Narcissa's murder. Minerva and Hermione knew as well, but it still struck him hard to have anyone speak to him about his own mother. A physical pain, the kind that cannot be helped.

Lowering himself to the ground, Severus stared up through tree branches to the sky.

"I had no real choice in the matter at the time," Severus said quietly, hating how his voice was not as strong as he had expected.

Draco nodded slightly, his hand passing over his mother's name. He had not spoken much that day, but Severus had honored his only request that his father's name be omitted.

A silence passed between them, the only sound the soft rustle of the trees branches against each other. Severus watched the shadows sway across the grave, and his thoughts once more drifted, replaying the events of that night, how he failed to protect her, he could have saved her, saved both of them.

"I'm going to kill him tomorrow," Draco said without emotion. His hand, pressed flat over his mother's name, drew slowly into a fist.

Severus remained silent, but shook his head.

Draco turned on him, preparing for a fight. "I can't let him get away with it."

Severus studied Draco's face. The rage, pain and vengeance there were almost too much to bear.

It is the same.

Draco took hold of Severus' robes and leaned over, raging, "He can't get away with it! They'll just lock him up! You have to let me!"

Severus sat unmoving even as Draco pounded a fist into his shoulder. After his rage had drifted into tears, Severus raised his arm around Draco's shoulder.

Staring at the name *Narcissa Black* etched forever into stone, Severus said, "He will not escape justice. I promise you."

Hermione and Severus approached the Quidditch pitch as dusk approached. The setting sun spread a warm glow over the pitch, with deep red stripes of sunlight alternating with shade from the spires. Hermione thought to herself that it was almost a shame that this was not a sight that could often be experienced, as school was out at that time of year. As they drew closer, Hermione saw Harry and Ginny waiting.

Once on the pitch, Severus removed his outer robes and dropped them on the ground.

Hermione sat next to Ginny and put an arm around her. "Talk to me, Ginny."

"I can't without crying, Hermione, and I can't do that around him. Not now," Ginny said, looking down into her lap.

Hermione thought for a moment. "I think it'd make you feel better if you try."

Ginny shook her head. "I know I'm supposed to be encouraging. Keep his confidence up. I don't think I'm doing a good job, though."

They watched as Severus and Harry approached each other. The sun made it impossible to see any details, only their silhouettes. Harry nodded as Severus handed him what was most likely a small flask of the Felix Felicis potion.

"I'm sure you're doing the best you can. We're as prepared as we can be for something like this," Hermione said, noticing several black dots which appeared to be Thestrals flying off in the distance. "The waiting is worse than if they all just broke through the wards, I think."

"He has barely spoken these past few days. I see him watching out the window, but not really seeing," Ginny said, her voice breaking as she stared at Harry. She shook her head slowly. "He's gone, Hermione. He's in some world where I can't reach him. I don't need to be older to know."

Hermione saw that Severus and Harry were sitting across from each other, obviously trying to determine if the potion had worked. Severus flinched slightly, and Hermione assumed that, as sometimes occurs with Occlumency, Harry had cast a hex to force him out.

"Ginny, Harry needs to be like this right now, I think. What he is facing is terrible, and no words can help him deal with that. That kind of comfort only comes from it being over with," Hermione said sadly.

Hermione assumed from the lack of frustrated gestures on Severus' part that the potion seemed to be working.

They both watched for a few minutes in silence before Ginny said, with an uneasy attempt at humor, "So... who are you going to cheer for?"

Hermione looked at Ginny seriously. "Harry."

Severus held his hand over his eyes as the sun fell lower in the sky, stretching their shadows across the pitch. The warm light tinged everything red even as a chill crept into the air. Some faraway voice interjected into his thoughts, reminding him that this might be his last sunset.

"Once more?"

Harry nodded. "I think so, yes."

They looked into each other's eyes as Severus muttered, "*Legilimens*."

Severus was met not only with an immediate and impenetrable wall, but with an overwhelming feeling of something much larger than himself. He couldn't even pick up a hint of the emotion which he had always been successful in discerning, at least, even when the victim fought valiantly against him. Traces of thoughts or images were almost always there in the forefront, ready to be taken, even from the better Occlumens he had come across in his time. Harry offered no such traces. There was nothing there except an unforgiving wall. Nothing he tried allowed him to gain any ground, and, instead, he found himself unceremoniously shoved out.

Harry watched as Severus broke the spell, closed his eyes, and turned his face to the sky, muttering, "Finally."

For the first time in days, Harry could do nothing but smile. He stood and, looking down at the man that he, at one time, had wanted to kill almost more than Voldemort, offered his hand to help him up. Severus opened his eyes and, looking impressed, took his hand and rose.

"I suppose we should. One last time?" Harry said with a shrug.

"I believe that would be beneficial; however, we cannot carry on as we've done in the past. However enjoyable that was, you cannot be injured at this point. Neither of us can risk it, actually. You will instead both shut me out and try to disarm."

Harry agreed and drew his wand. Severus moved off a distance before turning and drawing his own, holding it low as he stepped around in an arc. He watched as Harry concentrated for a moment, a look of great intensity in his eyes.

Without warning, Severus lunged forward and cried, "*Legilimens!*" When he was met with the same resistance and a strong push out, he released the spell. Before Harry could fully relax, however, Severus reached out and snatched him tightly by the shirt, twisting it and pulling him close. With a sneer, he cast the Imperius Curse and shoved Harry away.

Severus' eyes held a strange glint as he watched Harry try to fight the curse. He circled Harry while instructing him to kneel. Instead, he found himself up against an amazing amount of resistance. Harry gritted his teeth while fighting the curse, refusing to bend the slightest bit. After a long stretch of time, Severus released the curse and stepped back. When Harry took time to catch his breath, Severus quickly disarmed him.

Harry watched in surprise as his wand flew onto the grass.

Severus snarled, "Think you will have a moment to rest up? Maybe take some tea between rounds? Do not treat me any differently, Potter!"

Gritting his teeth, Harry stalked towards where his wand lay.

"Or aren't you taking this seriously?" Severus said in a cold voice.

"I am!" Harry yelled as he picked up his wand. "More than you know!"

Severus crossed his arms. "Prove it to me. I am standing here in the open, and you have yet to do anything."

Harry seethed in anger. Severus, however, made no move and only narrowed his eyes as Harry raised his wand. Hermione and Ginny sat in silence, watching the two wizards as they attempted to stare each other down, the angle of the setting sun spreading their stark shadows across the grass.

As Harry prepared to cast again, Severus interrupted him, "Tell me, Potter. How much intensity do you plan to employ tomorrow?"

Harry was dumbstruck.

"The question is..." Severus said in a slow voice, as if he were speaking to a child. "If Voldemort were standing here, how would you react?"

"I'd kill him," Harry said, then winced at how simple that sounded when spoken aloud. It was the phrase and mission he carried around in his mind; however, the "how" was not clear.

"Interesting," Severus pondered. "I don't feel as if I'm about to die, here."

Harry gripped his wand and looked furious.

Severus smirked. "That's it. Use that and disarm me. With the potion you are unstoppable. Remember that."

Harry didn't hesitate and advanced on Severus fiercely, casting one spell after another. Severus reeled and stepped backwards as he blocked most and avoided others. Watching Severus on the defensive seemed to drive Harry onward, encouraging him to become even more aggressive. Soon, he disarmed Severus for the first time.

With each successive round, it required less time as Harry became more confident. They continued as the sun set, draining the color out of the sky. By the time the last gray light threatened to leave them in darkness, Severus raised his hand to stop.

As Severus retrieved his wand from the deep shadows, he asked, "Feel ready?"

When Harry didn't respond for a moment, Severus approached him.

"Harry?"

Shaken out of his thoughts by the sound of Severus using his given name, Harry shifted, saying, "I do. I mean I don't know what's going to happen, but I think I've prepared as much as possible. With your help."

"It's all that you can do. Remember that you are not alone tomorrow."

Harry nodded solemnly.

"There is one thing you should know," Severus said as they began to walk over to Ginny and Hermione. "I only gave you a tenth of what you will take tomorrow."

Harry's mouth fell open.

"You may close your mouth," Severus said with faint scowl. "Yes, you possess the ability to best me with only a trace of the potion, which means you are better than you think. I needed to reduce the potency of the confidence to achieve the Occlumency enhancement. The resistance to the Imperius, however, you achieved on your own."

Harry's entire demeanor changed for the better. "Thank you, sir."

Severus quirked a grin. "You are about to destroy the reason most of my life has been a complete disaster. There is no longer a need to call me 'sir'."

Harry appeared shocked at Severus' words. He smiled faintly and asked, "Will it expire at midnight?"

"No," Severus said. He couldn't help but laugh. As they approached where Ginny and Hermione sat, he noticed that Tonks had joined them.

"Where is Lupin?" Severus asked, picking up his robes and brushing them off. He caught sight of several Hippogriffs soaring in the direction of Hagrid's house, presumably for their evening meal.

Tonks said casually, "Guarding Wormtail."

Severus looked at Harry. How Remus felt about Peter's betrayal was no secret; he'd gone as far as attempting murder the night in the Shrieking Shack. While Severus trusted Remus to look after Wormtail in his Animagus form, he was not comfortable with the type of conversation that would be occurring now.

Without a word, Severus turned and moved swiftly towards the castle.

The Room of Requirement door opened, allowing a precious amount of torchlight to creep in along the floor. Further down the dimly lit row of cells, a specially reinforced version stood with small mesh wire lining. Even a rat couldn't escape, never mind the fact that the room was heavily warded, a perfect use of Moody's vigilance. As the light reached the cell, Wormtail raised his head and squinted. The shadow of a man approached, the light shining from behind exaggerating his height. The distinct outline of the wand in his hand was written on the stone floor as he approached with measured steps. Wormtail's eyes widened, and he went to scramble back further into the cell, as though that could somehow shield him. No one ever approached him without hatred or revulsion.

"Remus..." Wormtail said in a gasping voice.

"I want to know. Do you intend to fight tomorrow?" Remus said evenly, his hand flexing around his wand as if to gain a better grip.

Wormtail moaned. "... You know I have no choice. I must protect Harry..."

Disgust spread across Remus' face. "Only because he saved you! Kept me and Sirius from ridding the world of you! You could never possess anything even remotely close to bravery without some sort of threat or without hiding behind whomever is stronger."

Wormtail only cringed and held his head in his hands.

"Thought this conversation was over, did you? It's never over, Peter..." Remus said, gazing at the ceiling as if trying to keep his temper. "No, betrayal is never over. At least not in my mind. I think about it every day." He shook his head at the memories. "They deserved so much more, including Harry. You took that all away, and in the process you destroyed Sirius too."

"You don't know what the Dark Lord is capable of, he..."

"It doesn't matter what Voldemort is capable of!" Remus yelled, his voice bordering on vicious. "A schoolboy could have threatened you and you would have betrayed them! And why? Why did you join him? Even worse, you helped him regain his body! All of this is because of you!"

Wormtail held his hands up and stuttered in a whining voice, "I don't know, it all happened so quickly! I wanted to be a part of something, then I couldn't get out!" He moaned and held his head as if it was splitting apart. "I'm sorry..."

"My last thought before going out there will be that you will fulfill your duty, then die. If you think you are walking away from this, you are sadly mistaken. I won't allow it. James and Lilly deserve justice," Remus threatened with promises of vengeance in his voice.

Remus' breath came in hard gasps of air, barely in control. He raised his wand and said through gritted teeth, "If you even think about betraying us now, I swear..."

"Remus?"

Severus stood in the doorway, his eyes shifting from the cringing mass in the cell to Remus. He could tell that Remus was, at least, contemplating injuring the wretch.

Severus could not allow that to happen on the eve of a battle in which they needed him, no matter how well-deserved the retribution.

When Severus reached Remus, he placed a hand on his wand arm, saying, "I need to speak to you."

Remus stared at Severus and slowly allowed him to lower his wand. Wormtail watched the two of them with wide eyes from the back of his cell. When Severus raised his eyebrows slightly, Remus reluctantly moved towards the door.

Before leaving, Remus turned and said with complete hatred, "Die in battle against him, Peter. It's the least you can do."

Hermione stood at the bedroom door, unable to speak. She almost didn't see him, a still shape amongst objects made ambiguous by the dim light.

In the dark, he stood with his arms outstretched, his hands gripping the drapes, holding them open. Head tilted down, he rested his forehead against the glass.

The sight of him like that nearly condemned stopped her heart along with her breath.

"Hermione," he said grimly, startling her.

He turned his head and allowed one hand to slide down the length of the drape, spreading the fabric out wide before letting it go. It swayed, cutting the gray light in half.

She concentrated on the strip of light as it moved, eventually becoming still. The need to speak to him was there, but the words nothing prepares anyone for such conversations. Another shape on the floor, the shadow of his hand on the window. It turned to the side and moved out of the light. The sound of fabric running through his fingers and the light almost shut out.

In the flicker of the light from the sitting room, she could see him raise both arms, grip the drapes and tear the rail down. Bright moonlight flooded the room as the drapes fell to the floor.

"We shall need the light," he stated and turned to look at her.

She entered the room, approaching him slowly. "Severus, I..."

"Danger is not contagious, Hermione," he said softly, then removed his robes.

With measured movements, she shook her head and sat on the edge of the bed, nervously running her hand over the sheet. Somehow, concentrating on the texture of the fabric removed her mind from the downward spiral of possibilities, scenes of despair, desperately trying to remember the last of everything before the unknown eclipsed it all.

She heard him cross the room and lay his robes across the chair in the corner. He was watching her; she could feel it. When he stood before her, she gripped his coat in her fists and simply pressed her head against him.

After a deep breath, Severus laid his hand on her head then brushed her hair aside. "Hermione, if anything should happen to either of us tomorrow..."

"Don't talk like that ... please," she interrupted painfully, almost moaning, as if speaking of death forced it across the line from possibility to truth.

Hermione kept the grip on his coat, but felt him move to her side and sit on the bed.

"Look at me."

His hand brushed her cheek, downward and curled under her jaw, insisting.

He met her eyes and said, "Too often, things are left unsaid. If I have learned one thing, it is that words can either ruin life or make it worth living."

Hermione closed her eyes, rejecting the fact that his touch somehow brought the reality of it all too close.

"You must understand, I have a part to play in this that will be extremely dangerous. Once they realize they are trapped, every Death Eater will wish me dead immediately, as I am the prize. Not because I am the enemy now, but because I am the one who turned." Severus ran a hand over his forearm and said, gazing at it, "There are many amongst his followers who have little heart in it anymore, but are trapped. They will come after me simply because I was successful, while they are bound forever. For that reason, I will be the most desired target."

"Because they have orders to not harm Harry," Hermione said thoughtfully, falling into logic.

Severus smiled sadly. "You are, as always, one step ahead."

"What will you do?"

He took her hand in his and said, "There is not much I can do, other than play my part. You must understand, the way you may see me out there..."

Hermione ran her hand along his chest to rest over his heart. "I know you. All I need to do is look into your eyes to know. No one else can see that."

He nodded and stared downward. Silence fell between them, but Hermione dare not break it.

"You must know that my greatest fear is expressing my feelings. It is as if speech fails me at times like these. I look at you, even in the most ordinary moments, and experience what can only be an indescribable love, something that binds me to you like nothing else in this world. It is an undeniable force that demands that I tell you, draw you close and ensure that this is kept alive, never wanting for reassurance. I know very little about love, and am playing by pure instinct, following what no books can possibly teach me. That is by far most unsettling for me. I fear at times that I am failing."

"You are not," she whispered and kissed him gently. Her hands moved to his throat and started to unbutton his coat, her fingers sliding between each one.

Severus closed his eyes. When he opened them again, she could see the change.

Her hand stilled, halfway down, across his heart.

"I do know that you have brought so much into my life that, if it must end tomorrow, I could be content in the final moments. A large difference from the way I felt when you found me. My thoughts then were filled only with regrets, of being found as something less than strong, and of failing to fulfill great ambitions, all of which seem frivolous now. My pride meant the world to me then, whereas now I would make a fool of myself if only for the knowledge that, whatever the cost, it made you happy in some small way."

Hermione smiled gently, remembering that the man before her asked a student to teach him to dance. Nothing could have expressed his love more. Her hands had continued their path on their own, freeing each button on his coat, requiring no thought as she looked into his eyes, in utter awe of his words.

He looked at her with both love and a sense of finality. "I do know this. In death, my final thoughts would be of you. Somehow, I think I could face it easier. I have already

accepted it in a way. I owe you so much you will never know. Even now, I cannot form the words to adequately express it..."

"Severus, words are not important. I know from the moment you wake and look at me in the morning, the way you touch my hair when you think I am asleep; the look in your eyes and the simple touch of your hand speak volumes. Sitting in silence with me while reading says more than an evening of words can ever achieve. All of these things tell me how much you love me. This is something that can't be ignored. It simply is."

"Yes," he said, nodding as if she had captured it exactly.

With a tilt of her head, Hermione took his hand and clasped it in hers. "The fact that words are not important can only mean that we are strong. That we can sit in perfect contentment and not say a word is incredible in itself. You have the ability to say you love me without a sound, and that is more amazing than a million poems or beautiful speeches."

She reached out and brushed his hair back behind one ear. When she brought her hand back, she followed the edge of his jaw and lifted his head so he would look at her.

"Show me."

Realization dawned in his eyes. To go out there without first showing her how much he loved her would be a crime of sorts, a rebellion against the unwritten rules of love that must not be transgressed.

Severus moved her onto her back and took her lips to his. With slow, almost sorrowful movements, he kissed her with a restrained passion that spoke of completion, ensuring that everything would be performed perfectly, for fear of never having another opportunity. They exchanged deep, passionate expressions of love through touch, extending the act into a remembrance of their bond so that it would, if need be, extend past death. Soon, their somber expression blended into a needful energy. With a hesitant progression, it was as if they both realized that if this was to be their last performance, it should be most memorable yet.

Hermione took her hand from his, and, without breaking the kiss, struggled with the buttons on his shirt, choosing to rip it open in the end. He watched in unrestrained awe as she left kisses along his scar, as if to tell him that she loved every inch of him, including how destructive his life had been.

When she reached for him, his eyes slipped closed and she heard him breathe her name.

Hermione smiled and caressed his face as he moved over her. She thought he looked so young in that moment, mostly because, with her, he left his guard down. Fully exposed, he wore his emotions for her to see, and no words could replace the way he was looking at her in that moment.

"What shall it be tonight?" she asked with a sad grin.

Severus kissed her once more as he waved his right hand, bringing it back into a fist. As snow began to fall, a soft wind carried it around in a swirling motion, casting a blue haze in the air.

He leaned down to murmur into her ear, "Passionate snowfall makes no sound."

Mortality

Chapter 39 of 41

A novel-length post HBP HG/SS romance adventure. What if Severus returned, trained Harry for the final battle and worked to destroy the final Horcruxes? Story is complete and will be updated regularly.

Disclaimer: All characters belong to JKR.

AN: A very special thanks to Ariadne, my tireless beta.

Severus stood at the window in Minerva's office, his fingertips idly trailing down the smooth glass.

Charlie and Hagrid were on the grounds, herding the dragons to the Quidditch pitch. Norbert followed Hagrid easily, while the others wanted nothing more than to burst from their chains and fly. They flung their wings out, beating them on the ground as they walked, throwing gusts of wind in all directions.

"Severus, is it really necessary? Couldn't we just take down the wards?"

"Minerva, it must appear that I am faithful." He sighed and turned to face her. "Voldemort will not set foot on the grounds if he does not believe I am the one breaking the wards and protecting the last Horcrux. You know that."

He observed her trying to digest what he was telling her. "There is no other way."

Minerva sighed and tried to ignore the sound of the dragons' roars. "It is suicide, pure and simple."

"My life has been one long attempt at suicide, Minerva," he said flatly.

Minerva stared down at her desk, examining her appointment book, an accessory that seemed strangely obscene considering the impending chaos. "Why do I even attempt to argue with you?"

"It does seem to be a futile pursuit," he stated.

Severus watched the various magical objects that Dumbledore had kept, trying to identify which one was making each sound, absorbing the cadence of each movement, remembering the light reflecting off of the spinning metal anything to take him away from Minerva's worried gaze.

A hesitant and tired smile touched her face. "If you must. I will release the wards at noon and await your signal that Voldemort has entered."

After a moment of silence, she said in a hollow voice, "It all seems so peaceful now, doesn't it?"

Severus shifted his eyes around the room, avoiding the still-sleeping portrait of Dumbledore.

"The others?"

She seemed to compose herself, straightened and said, "Yes. Word was spread through the Order, and scores have arrived in the night, in pairs to avoid suspicion. Most are in the Great Hall, but others are in the forest awaiting your signal that Voldemort has passed through the gates. Hermione has distributed small amounts of the Felix Felicis potion to everyone."

Severus nodded, closing his eyes at the mention of Hermione's name. Something in him wished that protocol didn't rule, that he could simply go and play the part of tragic hero without repeatedly passing through the hell that came from viewing his own demise in the eyes of those saying farewell.

"I don't believe anyone saw them arrive," Minerva said with fear in her voice.

With a glance towards the window, Severus mused, "Yes. If he suspects something..."

Minerva noticed he was trying hard to avoid looking at her. "There is no doubt; he will kill you."

Severus slid his eyes towards her and shrugged. "More likely, he'll drag me before you all and perform a public execution."

Pain crossed her features as she admonished him, "Severus..."

"The truth is not always beautiful. Today will be no different than all of the other times I've appeared before him to be tortured and ridiculed."

Minerva said sadly, "All of that will end today."

"Yes," he said, looking out at the clear morning sky. "In victory, death or both."

Hermione saw him before anyone else.

Severus stood in the doorway of the Great Hall and, even from that distance, the look in his eyes sent her heart racing and her blood running cold. When she reached him, he took her hand, led her out into the Entrance Hall and into a cold shadow.

He looked down at her hands in his, searching for words. "Times like these deserve a grand moment full of remembrance, something more than I am prepared to give. I am not a man that will ever say it enough, but I do love you. Whatever may happen, that will not change."

A somber smile shared between them and she leaned closer, kissing him softly, remembering, lingering, concentrating on the brush of his eyelashes on her cheek. How sensual he could be when the world could not see. She raised her hand and busied herself with brushing the hair away from his face, shaking, fingers trailing across his skin in fits.

Swallowing against the urge to cry, she whispered, "I love you, too."

The feel of his hands around her, moving slowly up her back, guiding her to rest her head against his chest. Listening to his heart, how strangely calm it was now that it was all upon them.

It was time. He stepped back and could only study her eyes in the low shadow, ignoring the rise and fall of the noise from the Great Hall. How many lives depended on what he was about to do.

Hermione watched him as he stood before her, searching her eyes for permission to go. She pressed two small flasks into his hand and explained in a hoarse whisper, "Some Felix Felicis for you, and the other is from Neville."

He nodded and slipped them both into his pocket. He could not take the Felix until after speaking with Voldemort, as he would know and be immediately suspicious. When dealing with a wizard as perpetually paranoid as Voldemort, driving that insanity higher would not be wise.

Hermione smoothed the front of his coat. "You needn't say a word."

A crease appeared in his brow, as if he had so much to say, but just couldn't. He instead kissed her hand slowly before backing away.

"Promise me you'll come back," she said, then shook her head, knowing that was not something he could give her.

The faintest smile appeared on his face at the same time tremendous sadness reached his eyes. She thought she saw him nod his head just the slightest before he turned swiftly and left.

Hermione stood in the doorway and watched him stride towards the gates, his robes flowing out behind him just the way he'd want. She needn't study warfare to know that there were two types of bravery. The first, where one is thrown into a desperate situation, reacting valiantly, overcoming all odds through sheer force of will and purity of heart. That is the bravery spoken of most often in stories. Tales of soldiers waging war built on adrenaline, moments in time, action over reason and, above all, fighting for a cause worth dying for.

The other type of bravery is a quiet, but no less remarkable, display of strength which requires no witnesses, no flying banners announcing a journey into the unknown, no cheering lines of well-wishers. It is the stirring sight of someone who knowingly walks into the very shadow of death, placing themselves firmly in the face of great danger willingly with his head held high.

That was how Severus left the castle.

There was one hour remaining. It would turn out to be the longest hour of both their lives and the start of an historic day.

Severus turned when he heard someone approach the gates.

"Lucius."

"As promised, I see," Lucius sneered, his head held high as if trying to regain his dignity after their last encounter. It only served to expose the marks that were still visible on his pale neck. Severus also noticed Lucius' hand twitch. Clear signs of the Cruciatus. Obviously, Lucius' homecoming had not been without its penalties.

"Of course," Severus said, matching Lucius' arrogant expression easily. "I see you decided to take my words to heart. A most beneficial choice. The Dark Lord will surely enjoy this day, and have you to thank for it."

Lucius twitched an uneasy smirk, keeping a trace of suspicion in his eyes. He gestured towards the forest behind him and announced cordially, "Yes, he is most anxious to proceed."

Severus passed through the gates and walked alongside Lucius. Even in the middle of a bright summer day, the thick forest provided deep shade. A strange, low-hanging mist flowed through the trees, obscuring the ground. Dementors. Dozens of Death Eaters and Voldemort-supporters stood in a clearing, their hushed conversations dying as they turned to watch Severus' approach.

Severus mused that it was about as close to a death march that one could come without ropes and the construction of a gallows.

The Death Eaters exuded a barely-checked lust for murder as Severus passed. Their eyes raked over him, most likely contemplating the most entertaining method of destruction. His only hope for survival was to convince Voldemort that he could both deliver Potter out onto the battlefield and protect the last Horcrux. If he failed, he knew, without a doubt, that no more than a moment after opening the gates, they would attack. Part of him hoped it would at least be quick; however, from the pure evil surrounding him, he knew this was not a group that would be above stretching his death into hours if not days.

As they walked, Severus recognized several faces. Masks, it seemed, were useless now. After this, it would not matter if anyone knew whose side they were on. It was particularly disturbing to see how young some were, how very much like he had been when he joined. A slight twinge of guilt passed like a light breeze in the back of his mind at the thought that he could be faced with killing any one of them. How many had he taught over the years? No doubt they would be formidable, but the home advantage the Light had on its side was monumental or so he hoped.

Glancing to his left, Severus saw many more lingering in the forest with the same grim intensity in their eyes. It could only be likened to walking through a pack of jackals, waiting for a kill to be thrown aside by a satiated lion.

The sea of black robes parted, and Severus saw Voldemort for the first time in months. Shutting his mind down, he pushed pertinent thoughts to the forefront, thoughts of protecting the last Horcrux and dragging Potter out onto the grounds to stand before his master.

Severus knelt onto the forest floor and bowed his head low. "My lord."

Quiet consideration. Often, it was this same silence before he would punish those who either performed poorly or failed to deliver. It was never a comforting thought to know that Voldemort was contemplating you in any way.

"Lucius tells me you and he had an interesting conversation. That you had quite the elaborate explanation for your actions these past few months," Voldemort said with suspicion.

Severus knew better than to speak too soon and so waited a moment before responding, "All in order to gain their trust, my lord. As we speak, they are all in the Great Hall, completely unsuspecting of your arrival. I can bring Potter out to you without raising their suspicions. He trusts me completely."

A gaping stretch of silence. Abnormally long. The sound of the breeze seemed strangely loud as it slowly rustled the leaves, easing the trees' branches in a slow swing.

Severus kept his eyes fixed on the ground. He could sense Voldemort circling him and hear the soft sound of his robes dragging the ground.

"You killed Bella."

It was more of an accusatory statement than a question. He was behind him now. Whispers rose from the others, sounding much closer now.

"Yes, my lord. She left me no choice. I regret that she did not believe I was faithful."

More silence greeted his defense.

It is said that in the absence of sight, other senses go into overdrive. Severus stared at the ground and concentrated on ignoring the sound of Voldemort's breathing as he contemplated his words and continued to circle. Dimly, he was aware of the sliding sound of Nagini moving through the brush nearby.

His leg began to ache while he knelt, reminding him that old wounds do not heal well. Voldemort was beside him, staring down. A stray thought occurred to Severus about how deadly silent well over one hundred people could be in the presence of complete evil.

"Stand."

Severus stood. Immediately, Voldemort's wand was thrust in his face and an overpowering presence began examining his thoughts. He offered up all of the memories and images of his faithfulness and complete trust by the Order, his duels with Potter, his convincing them that he loved Hermione, that he would save them all.

The sensation of a moth, crawling across his skin, fluttering its wings angrily. Burrowing, gnawing deeper. His every nerve stood on end, requiring incredible willpower to not cringe or rebel.

When, at last, he felt Voldemort viewing the memory of Harry smiling and going so far as to call him by his given name, he was released.

Voldemort narrowed his eyes, examining Severus' reaction finding nothing.

More Death Eaters had arrived; the random sounds of Apparition distracting. They crowded around, riveted by the exchange.

Voldemort could, by far, strike more terror in a victim's heart by not uttering a word than by exploding in a violent rage. At least with rage, Severus thought, you knew what was coming.

The excruciatingly long silence was, without a doubt, the most terrifying moment of Severus' life.

He knew that Voldemort was contemplating what could happen if the Order was, indeed, prepared to fight. Without Dumbledore, he was sure that Voldemort thought them to be weak, even if they were standing on the grounds with wands drawn. Taking possession of Hogwarts was something Severus knew Voldemort would enjoy immensely. After killing Harry, he would lord over the fallen school and continue his reign of terror in luxury. It was an opportunity that Severus knew would be difficult to resist.

In the distance, Severus thought he saw a movement large enough to be what he suspected. He flicked his eyes in that direction before quickly moving back to Voldemort. More movement and blocking of the light. Giants.

"Admiring our friends, Severus?" Voldemort said with an air of both pride and amusement. Voldemort stood painfully close and observed Severus carefully. "You do realize that even if I believe all of this, you have caused me much trouble. You have destroyed my Horcruxes, killed one of my closest servants, turned two others against me, and captured another. I should have you open the gates and then simply rid myself of you."

In mock sadness, Voldemort leaned even closer, used his wand to move Severus' hair out of his eyes, and crooned, "Oh, Severus, don't look at me that way. You never allow even a flicker of emotion, do you? Unable even to mourn yourself?"

Severus remained still, forcing himself to appear passive.

Voldemort hissed in a deranged shadow of a laugh. He stared into Severus' eyes, threw his hand out, and whispered the incantation to prevent Apparition. The door was firmly shut now.

Severus' eyes caught a movement. It was Lucius, with a strangely concerned expression on his face.

Amazingly, he stepped forward, knelt and said, "My lord, if I may, I believe Severus is telling the truth. They all trust him, and he can deliver Potter alone. If he does not..." Lucius' eyes grew cold as he continued, "I give my word: I will personally drag him before you."

Lucius wanted him for himself as an offering. Severus couldn't help but admire him for the Slytherin strategy in Lucius' plan no matter how foolish.

Voldemort stood and considered the two of them with disgust. Weighing his options. His robes dragged along the ground as he paced, picking up stray leaves with each stride. He stopped, sweeping his eyes around the crowd.

As he passed Severus again, Voldemort suddenly snarled and moved swiftly, leveling his wand on Severus.

Everyone jerked in response except Severus.

Voldemort touched his wand to Severus' chest almost lovingly and curled his lips into a purely evil sneer.

"Not even a twitch, Severus? Impressive, indeed."

Only the slight muscle movement in Severus' jaw-line betrayed the fact that he felt anything at all in that moment.

Even the birds ceased to sing.

Minerva watched with Hermione from the castle steps as the hour of noon approached. Behind them, the Great Hall was alive with anticipation. Witches and wizards from all over Britain and beyond were gathered, being briefed by Moody and Remus on basic strategy using a map of the grounds. A reduced number of Xs were on the map now, after the suggestion that it would be impossible for their side to fight without ending up in some magical pit, gnawed by some horrific creature, or catapulted into the lake. The twins' disappointment was allayed with the explanation of their new responsibility. Charlie took them aside and they left with serious, excited expressions.

Minerva placed an arm around her. "Hermione, it's time. Come to the Tower with me."

As she passed through the door, Hermione tried to push the significance of the place from her mind. She watched as Minerva glanced at a small timepiece she held in her hand and then stared out towards the gates. Her distracted mind mentioned to her that the timepiece had been Dumbledore's.

For several minutes they remained silent, watching for any movement, any sign, only to be disappointed by the forest's unrelenting thickness. Hermione thought she saw traces of a Thestral or two weaving in amongst the trees by Hagrid's hut and was secretly in awe of how well all of the creatures obeyed him. It was as if they knew what he was asking them to do was vital to their success. Thestrals and Hippogriffs offered themselves in service, and the way Norbert had turned out was simply astounding. No doubt, the dragon remembered Hagrid, firmly crushing the perception that they were incorrigible, wild creatures with no thought or memory.

Minerva calmly placed the watch back into her pocket and raised her wand. With outstretched arms, she cast a complex series of spells in a strange and ancient language, and then turned to Hermione. With a sad nod, she took out a piece of parchment and touched it with her wand.

The words that burnt into her parchment also appeared on another piece in the Great Hall held by Remus Lupin. He glanced at it, twisted a handful of Wormtail's coat and shoved him towards the doors.

On his way out, he held up the parchment to Tonks who nodded.

"The wards are down," she announced. "We now await the signal."

Severus watched as Voldemort walked slowly to the gates, dragging his eyes over the wrought iron bars, which had been closed to him for so long. It was past noon, and Severus knew that Minerva had removed the wards. When he saw Voldemort touch the bars almost reverently, savoring the moment, Severus' heart stopped. If Voldemort so much as pushed on the gates, they would swing open on their own, exposing that it was all a trap.

Voldemort slid his eyes back to Severus, staring in an expression of either hatred or great suspicion.

"You will take down the wards," he said, and approached with a growing sneer. He raised his wand again and tilted his head as he said politely, "However, first we have some catching up to do."

"Crucio!"

"Move," Remus instructed, pushing Wormtail through the dungeons towards the passageway Severus suggested. From there, they would make their way behind the greenhouses and to the edge of the forest.

Wormtail moved willingly enough in silence, cringing anytime Remus spoke. If he dared slow down, Remus shoved him along, reminding him that he was by no means considered a partner in arms in this and was just as likely to be killed by either side.

Hermione's hands repeatedly moved on their own, trailing across the stone rampart, tearing at the raised texture of the masonry to the point of roughening her fingertips. She stared with grave intensity towards the castle gates, unable to move or even fully exhale.

Remembering herself, she held her hands up to her chest, trying to find comfort in logic. How long should this conversation take? If Voldemort had found fault in Severus, he would have forced him to open the gates by now.

Yet more time had elapsed.

Hermione and Minerva both startled when they both saw a large cluster of birds take to the sky suddenly, awkwardly, as if startled from their perches.

His right arm refused to move and his throat was on fire.

Muscles, locked in contraction from the curse, were slowly returning to his control. Eyesight was always the slowest to recover. In a near-blinded state, Severus struggled to rise. The others whispered amongst themselves some dared to laugh.

Voldemort leaned down and spoke softly, "I thought that would extract a reaction from you."

Every breath was like swallowing acid. That voice, so close, chilling, the line of dark and light no longer existing.

Severus had managed to rise to one knee before he was shoved violently towards the gates, barely catching himself before falling. His hands gripped the bars, trying to

hold his weight until his legs could allow him to fully stand. The weakness was infuriating. It was difficult to tell which was more painful: suffering under the Cruciatus long enough to catch a glimpse of his sanity or being humiliated in front of what seemed like hundreds.

Voldemort was near him again, chuckling as Severus forced himself to stand. A deep laugh intermingled with mock concern when a knee gave a little, forcing Severus to hang onto the bars awkwardly.

"Open them," Voldemort said in a cold, deadly voice, placing his wand firmly against Severus' back. His eyes shone with a promise of power, of obtaining what was rightfully his and unleashing a level of destruction never seen before.

Severus took a shuddering breath and painfully raised his arms. A shifting of the horde behind him, waiting, on the torn edge of restraint.

He gripped his wand tighter to keep his trembling hand under control, ignoring the soft sound of Voldemort's amusement from just behind. Instead of an incantation to open the gates, he silently cast the spell preventing the use of the Dark Mark.

In the moment it took for him to reach out to the gates, his hand ceased shaking, his sight cleared, and a great wind arose from the trees, thrashing branches into each other violently.

Adrenaline, Severus thought, is a wondrous thing.

With a great flourish, Severus pushed the gates wide open and stood aside as scores of Death Eaters and giants moved inside and awaited orders. Several minutes passed while Severus gave the impression that he was struggling to defeat the old magic the castle held against such evil intrusion. He tried to ignore the deep despair welling up inside, the outer edges of his sight fading towards black as numerous Dementors sailed past, swirling around just above the treetops and hovering in position.

After Voldemort and Lucius passed through, Severus followed and shut the gates.

Voldemort turned to Severus, shoved his wand into his throat and said viciously, "Bring Potter to me. If you dare fail or turn against me, Lucius will be the least of your worries. Every single one of my faithful will have a turn, and you will beg me for the sweet release of death."

"Yes, my lord," Severus said, his throat unable to clearly form the words.

Lucius stared at Severus, his lips held tight in a perpetual scowl.

Severus made a show of bowing low and turned swiftly to walk towards the castle. When he was far enough away, he took the Felix Felicis from his pocket, drank, and threw the flask aside.

Several minutes later, in the middle of the Hogwarts grounds, Severus stopped.

The silence was startling. If tension had the power to create sound, it would be deafening in that moment.

The sun was directly overhead, casting no shadow.

Even the trees stood still, as if anticipating.

Severus raised his wand, looked up towards the Astronomy Tower, and sent sparks to explode in a green starburst across the clear blue sky.

Minerva and Hermione both clutched for each other's hands as Severus' signal died into gray smoke, the breeze carrying it away.

Minerva raised her arms and not only recast the wards, but added another layer, preventing any passage out. She had found the complex wards detailed in ancient books kept in the Headmaster's office. The castle held many secrets, and the possibility of warfare was not something that had been overlooked in its design.

Hermione took a piece of parchment and touched it with her wand.

In the same moment that Severus appeared, striding across the grounds towards the castle, a great roar arose from the Great Hall.

The parchment in Hermione's hand glowed with the words that would come to define the day: "*It is time.*"

As the last giant entered the grounds, Hagrid watched from the forest as they proceeded to tear up his garden, wrench several trees up out of the ground, roots and all, and toss them easily into the forest. As the trees landed, tearing branches down all around, the birds flew for their lives.

Hagrid had been stunned to hear Severus apologize for what he needed him to do. The reality of it, though, struck him hard.

With a glance to the sky for strength, Hagrid called loudly, "Norbert!"

From the direction of the Quidditch pitch, a deafening roar arose. Between the spires, the wild beating of wings could be seen as Norbert easily broke his chain with a violent thrust of his neck and sprang into the air. He hovered for a moment, throwing his wings forward, before pushing harder to lift higher and leave the encircled pitch.

As Norbert disappeared out of sight, the other dragons erupted into a frenzied madness. They rammed their backs upwards and broke through the tops of their cages, dragging their wings free while screaming into the sky. Once airborne, they hit the end of their chains, only to glare angrily back at the shackles and jerk them free. The sudden release resulted in a turmoil of corrective flight before the three of them rose over the ridge and followed.

As the giants looked around, unsure of what to do next, they were suddenly plunged into darkness. With a raging scream, Norbert slammed into the nearest giant, throwing him into Hagrid's hut, crushing one side completely. Flames burst the windows and the roof completely gave way as Norbert flailed his wings free to turn and face the other giants.

Ignoring the rambling sea of robed figures scrambling for cover, Norbert lunged for the other giants, ripping into anything within reach. A dozen or more converged on him, ignoring his fiery bursts, their skin largely toughened to the point of near armor. They managed to grab hold of one wing, twisting it backwards, wringing it to the near breaking point, dragging him down to the ground in increments. He stayed aloft, flailing the other wing into them and tearing into one giant easily, killing him instantly as he plunged his claws into his chest. At the sight of one of their own killed, the giants released Norbert.

He lifted up and hovered over them, flailing his head in an indescribable fury. No amount of toughened skin could protect against the inferno that followed. Liquid fire flooded the ground, racing in tall, jagged stripes to find its mark. A shimmering wave obscured them all as the air itself burned. Screams of surprise and agony sent them all into mass confusion, scattering, lumbering as fast as possible in any direction.

Norbert rose up, jaws wide, and struck out, taking four down at once and striking others with his tail as he whipped it wildly for balance.

As if in answer to his call, the other three dragons appeared, falling in a swift dive, obliterating the sun, immediately driven to destroy anything and anyone in a large radius. They threw fire indiscriminately in all directions and lunged towards anything that dared to move. When one caught sight of several Death Eaters running through the forest, it spun and flung itself into the thick, crowded trees, shoving them askew. It thrust its head in as far as possible, drawing its wings close to its sides before sending a

firestorm barreling through the trees, scorching everything in its path. Another turned from the giants and followed, repeatedly ramming its body into the trees, flying above, forcing its way closer to any panicked, robed figure in sight.

Those that couldn't be reached with claws or teeth were destroyed by fire.

When Remus saw Severus' sparks in the air, he turned to Wormtail and, with his wand on him, said, "It's time."

For the first time since their reunion, Wormtail looked Remus in the eyes and said, "It is far too late, but I..."

Remus' face twisted in disgust as he took Wormtail's wand from his robes. With a glance to the sky, he interrupted him, "Save your apologies for the dead. It is time to prove it," and thrust the wand into his hand.

Wormtail turned and watched as an unimaginable number of Dementors threatened to block out the sun. They swirled in a mad flight, accelerating as they moved up the grounds, closer, the deepest night bleeding into the day. An incredible anguish preceded them, casting darkness even in the brightest light. A rushing mist flowed like ocean waves up the castle grounds, immune to the sweep of the hills and curling upwards as they reached each crest.

With a glance back at Remus, Wormtail thrust his wand to the sky and cried, *Pareo Mihi!*

An invisible force seemed to block the Dementors, causing them to jerk to a confused stop. They angled themselves to cast their gaze towards where Wormtail stood and collected together to hover in the sky. They remained just close enough to almost cause him to black out from the overwhelming feeling of crushing hopelessness.

He was pulled out of his stupor by Remus, who pushed him and ordered, "Tell them to go."

Wormtail, holding his arms up high commanded, *"Expecto in Silva!"* and watched with relief as they obeyed, drifting easily and descending to the forest floor.

When the first giant fell, the ground shook. When multiples began to fall, it was as if the earth were raging along with the dragons in anger. What no Death Eater knew was that while Norbert was a male, the three others were breeding females. Charlie had left boxes with the smell of their young in the middle of the path with a Disillusionment charm on them. As Dragons function largely on smell, they would rush at anyone even remotely near the scent.

As portions of the forest burned, Fred and George pulled themselves onto Thestrals and reeled up chains fastened to the beast's necks. They looked at each other and grinned.

"Shall we?" Fred asked cordially. Trees fell around them from the force of Norbert crashing awkwardly towards a group of cowering Death Eaters frantically trying to desert.

George laughed and tipped his head, swinging the free end of his chain around in a loop. "Indeed. Let's."

They took flight and rose above the fray, circling over the forest until they spotted Voldemort's army fleeing in chaos and headed back to pass over the grounds. Sweeping down over the boxes, they released the Disillusionment charms, grabbed hold of their Thestrals' necks, and angled themselves over while holding the chains out. As they swept past, the hooks grabbed hold of the boxes of dragon young scent, jerking them up into the air to trail behind them as they ascended once more.

As the twins directed their Thestrals back over the forest, the dragons lunged into the air, spread their wings to full flight, and followed.

As Severus made his way up to the castle, he could hear complete madness explode behind him as the dragons descended. Never had he heard such large-scale rage play out and would have loved to witness the mighty Voldemort fleeing for his life before four amazingly large and ferocious beasts.

Somehow, a young Death Eater had managed to get past the dragons and taken it upon himself to try to follow Severus along the edge of the forest. Spotting him, Severus sneered at the audacity and decided to ignore him, knowing that it would be foolish to delay the destruction of the last Horcrux.

A green bolt of light shot across the grounds, slicing into the ground several feet ahead.

Severus slowed and saw him draw closer, obviously intent on capturing the prized traitor. Severus grinned, allowed him to come within range, then, with a dismissive slash, cut him across the chest with enough violence to send blood flying. As the Death Eater fell in an awkward tumble of robes, Severus shook his head and ran for the castle.

Distantly, Severus heard Wormtail shout, *"Tentatio Lemma!"* and, off to the side, he saw a mass of black rise from the forest.

The Dementors appeared strangely obscene against the bright blue sky as they rose up and, in a wave of twisting robes, flew out onto the grounds. They aimed straight for a large number of pursuing Death Eaters who came to a dead halt in terror and then fled in all directions. Those who made the mistake of heading towards the cover of the forest sprung several traps the twins had laid, one of which, indeed, flung the victim high in the air.

In this case, unfortunately, high enough to come within range as Fred and George sailed past, boxes on chains waving behind them and three female dragons in close pursuit.

Fred and George laughed as they soared low over the grounds. The ground sped below them in a blur of green, rocks, sparkling water, then green once more as they banked over to cross to the forest again. Blind fury followed them, competing for the lead to protect the scent.

They divided, each going in a different direction to fly past the Death Eaters, then raised the chains around their Thestrals' necks, cuing them into heart-stopping dives towards the trees below. At the last instant, the Thestrals angled their wings upwards to lift out of the way, revealing the outstretched claws and teeth of the dragons behind.

Joining side-by-side once more, the twins soared over the castle, angling to fly around the North Tower. They exchanged a glance of both victory and having the time of their lives, tears from the wind streaking along their faces and into their hair.

George's face suddenly grew serious as he pointed downward. Watching the sea of black swirling as it covered the grounds, the twins kept high, above the spiraling mass. When the Dementors froze, then began to attack the Death Eaters, the twins pushed downwards once more, flying through so fast that there was no time to feel the Dementors' effects.

Suddenly, a bolt of green light struck George, throwing him violently off his Thestral to the ground below. The riderless beast flew upwards, then banked right to aimlessly fly towards the castle, the box still attached and two dragons following. Fred screamed for George as he fell, but, seeing the disaster about to occur, turned and went after the loose Thestral. He angled alongside, took hold of the chain around its neck, and kept them both together to fly out over the grounds again, all barely in time to keep one dragon from doing more than clipping the Astronomy Tower.

Looking down, he saw his mother reach his brother's body and scream as Tonks and Hermione dragged her away.

Fred grimly wrapped the chain his brother had used to control his Thestral around his free wrist and, through the tears, pushed both of them down toward another group of Death Eaters. Hoping the killer was amongst them, he flew straight past, leading all three dragons directly at them as they threw their claws out to kill.

Fred heard Charlie calling his name and turned, struggling to see through the wind and tears. Charlie was aboard Buckbeak and flew swiftly ahead to pull alongside. Without a word, Charlie leaned over to Fred and reached for the chain. In one motion, he took it from Fred's hand and pulled himself from Buckbeak onto George's Thestral.

Charlie looked at his brother, nodded sadly, and turned to fly out over the forest again, leaving one dragon with Fred, leading two of the females behind him.

The ground shook in response to the dragons' screams, the air alive with raging fury as chaos reigned near the gates.

Willing his still tentative muscles to cooperate, Severus ran towards the castle, concentrating on the ground to keep going. Grass, long, then short and sparse, rocky terrain, the sharp lift before the steps, including the third which laid at a slight angle, the smooth floor in the cool shade of the Entrance Hall, through the corridor, turning a corner and directly into Hermione.

A spell it was in his mind, through his raised wand and, thankfully, cut off by his heart.

Severus took hold of her shoulders, unsure if it was his hands or her body that was shaking. He lowered his head, trying to regain his breath, his fingers driving into her shoulders. Painfully tight. Touching bone. How close he had come. Flasks were crowded in her arms, softly shifting against each other as she looked at him with relief, anxiety, and something else.

Fear.

"You're..." Hermione said softly, hesitating at the wild look in his eyes when he raised his head, knowing he had come dangerously close to attacking her. "You're bleeding."

He blinked, lost in the moment, before he touched his face and looked at his hand.

In a raspy, torn voice, he said with a slow shake of his head, "It's not..."

She nodded quickly that she understood, that he needn't explain, and backed away.

Severus looked at her once more before turning and running towards the corridor where the griffin stood. Turning the corner, he slowed to a walk. The air around it was different, tainted, more alive with a disturbing strength, aware of his intentions.

Taking a deep breath, Severus raised his wand to determine the level of magic. He closed his eyes in quiet concentration, even when the battle roared to life as the Death Eaters reached the castle. The din of duels coming from the nearby window reached him, an explosion, a shrill scream.

Almost immediately, the griffin, the color of dusty brass, descended to an impossible blackness, an absence of presence, a raging tear in reality. Tilting, the statue rose up, leaving the floor, twisting in a slow, deliberate gathering of strength.

Its head, thrust back in a proud pose, began to turn and found Severus, the eyes now alive with an indescribable savagery, a promise of vengeance.

Severus stepped back, attempting to gain control. The magic reached out in tendrils, twisting invisibly through the air, creating its own wind. The droning had started, filling the corridor, reverberating off the walls, lowering as the wind rose. Suddenly, the griffin swung around, crashing into a nearby display case and spilling its contents across the floor.

Head down, its front legs were stretching. Slowly. The wind was circling now, rising in violence, a whirlwind of excruciating light and darkness, lowering then bursting into a blinding white.

Severus narrowed his eyes against the flare, calculating, weighing. A decision, and he raised his wand, preparing to cast the final spell much faster than he had in the past, knowing it would be the end.

"Traitor!" a voice screamed.

With a loud boom, the griffin slammed back down to the floor, falling over onto its side. As Severus swung towards the source of the voice, he saw Lucius Malfoy standing in the corridor. His robes were torn and he wore an impressive gash across the right side of his face, the blood streaming in long lines, following the angle of his jaw.

A vicious roar and Lucius blindly cast a spell, narrowly missing the griffin, before he realized what he had almost done.

Severus threw himself to the ground as the wall beside him exploded. He rose and returned in kind, missing as Lucius charged, blood streaking back through his hair and his mouth opened in a ferocious snarl.

Lucius reached him, and, in close quarters, struggled to put himself in front of the Horcrux.

Silence fell as they faced each other. To cast a spell this close would be suicide for them both.

Lucius' chest heaved. He leaned back, touching the griffin with a hand, daring Severus to act. "Regrettably, the Dark Lord wants you alive or else I'd..."

A small, deliberate movement a reminder.

Severus flexed his free hand and took a step forward, enjoying how Lucius flinched and backed away from the griffin. Any color left in Lucius' face fled as his eyes darted to Severus' hand.

Eyes wide, Lucius stepped back, stunned at what he was witnessing. The raging droning grew louder, overwhelming all thought, dragging the very air down with its weight. Lucius' eyes shifted from Severus to the griffin, astonished that Severus stood with an alarming calm, his hair whipping in the wild wind, the wicked monstrosity rising behind him.

Lucius hesitated, stepped backwards over the broken pieces of the display case, turned and bolted down the corridor.

Stone cracked and sent pieces falling to the floor as Severus turned, met by the vision of a fiendish and very much alive griffin spreading its wings out to touch both sides of the corridor at once.

It whipped its tail furiously from side to side as it regarded Severus, cutting into the stone on one wall, then whipping through the air to slice into the opposite. Feathers swept along the windows and portraits, bending as they dragged along the walls.

Disturbingly calm, it stood, as if it had just arrived from a long journey. Its eyes shone with a restrained violence, resting, contemplating. Tilting its head, the aura flowing through a range of hues, reversing, traveling towards a blood red.

Severus raised his wand to deliver the final spell, but froze as the griffin suddenly tensed, spread its wings, coiled, and launched itself at him. Visions of Buckbeak's attack flashed through his mind as it opened its beak and screamed, deafening him in the closed corridor. A part of Severus' mind asked him whether he preferred to be torn or blown apart. Backing up quickly, he failed to see the fallen display case and fell backwards.

A rush of feathers and muscles and he was covered, staring into its deranged eyes, its talons, one next to him, the other on his chest, lightly at first, thinking, then pressing harder, lower, slicing through his coat, catching and tearing through the skin and raking over each rib.

The griffin suddenly recoiled, swinging around towards its tail. Severus quickly regained his footing and rose to his feet, staring in utter disbelief as Kitty had his teeth firmly embedded in the griffin's tail and was riding around on the tufted end as the beast attempted to rid itself of the attack. It twisted and tried to reach the cat as it whipped its tail in the other direction, beating it against the wall. Kitty didn't budge and, in fact, deftly relocated to the griffin's hindquarters where he happily sank his teeth in.

Severus moved quickly to the end of the corridor and turned. He sadly had to cast the final spell, even if it meant killing the cat as well. He took a deep breath and called, "Off!" hoping it would obey. Miraculously, Kitty did, neatly hopping off and running towards Severus, turning its eyes up at him in triumph as he passed.

Severus shook his head before setting himself and delivering the final spell just as the griffin twisted itself in the corridor, freeing its wings from the tangle. It glared directly at Severus before screaming once more and gathering its hindquarters to pounce.

In mid-spring, it was struck and appeared transparent for a moment, throwing its head downward and its back up. As it thrust itself sideways, fissures formed across its body, splitting its back open, exposing the both beautiful and terrifying light, overpowering, screaming straight to the heart, the soul, threatening to take the world down with it into the depths of destruction.

An obscene moment of silence, an anticipatory fraction of time before a horrendous explosion tore out the entire corridor, blasting stone out the side of the castle, taking pillars, glass, portraits and anything else in a nearby classroom with it in a high arc out into the midst of the battle playing out below.

The shadow of the griffin, wings spread wide, took to the sky, soaring over the grounds, screaming in white hot fury, flying to the sun, raging at the light before being swept up in the wake of Norbert's flight as he echoed the same scream and dove towards another group of Death Eaters.

Harry stood in a greenhouse with Tonks and Minerva, watching the sky though the roof, even though the murky glass obscured much detail. From time to time, he would see the shape of Thestrals or dragons pass over, but it was the sound that was the most horrifying. The destruction was incredible as screaming, dragons roaring, and the sound of wayward hexes and curses destroyed parts of the castle.

After a huge explosion rocked the three of them enough to almost fall over, Harry pulled out the parchment which moved in his pocket, alerting him to a message.

Tonks and Minerva both placed a hand on Harry's shoulder as they watched him hesitantly unfold it.

Scrawled in familiar handwriting were the words Harry had dreamt of reading for years.

"He is mortal."

End of Time

Chapter 40 of 41

A novel-length post HBP HG/SS romance adventure. What if Severus returned, trained Harry for the final battle and worked to destroy the final Horcruxes? Story is complete and will be updated regularly.

Disclaimer: All characters belong to JKR. I am only a dreamer, a destructive soul whose only pleasure is watching stone exploding out into a sun-filled sky. Oh, and no money made here. None.

AN: A grand bow to Ariadne, my ever present friend, beta and partner-in-crime. Thank you so much for taking me to lunch and stealing the manuscript. It's done.

Ron approached the hospital wing doors, clutching his wand arm where he had been clipped by a wayward hex. A hollow sound was echoing, rising higher than even the hexes and curses from the battle roaring to life outside. His gait slowed; there was no mistaking the voice, the crying, the consuming grief. Standing in the doorway, he froze, his hand slowly relaxing, all sound blotted out except this. The clattering of his wand when it hit the floor barely registered. Molly and Arthur were on the far side of the wing, huddled over someone, and the fact that Madam Pomfrey was simply standing at the foot of the bed told him what he already knew.

When Molly raised her head and looked directly at Ron, she stopped for a moment, before sobbing even harder.

Hermione appeared by his side, picked up his wand and pushed him back out of the wing into the corridor. Ron stared at her with wide eyes as the color drained from his face.

"Who?" he rasped as she gingerly took hold of his injured arm.

Hermione's eyes met his, trying to find the words, struggling because saying it aloud made it real. "Ron, I'm so sorry," she said, holding his arm. He was shaking, his eyes fixed on the open doorway, flinching when his mother's cries worsened. Hermione placed a hand on Ron's shoulder. "It's George."

Ron lowered his head and stared at the floor in shock while Hermione examined him, explaining in a whisper how it had happened, that Charlie and Fred were now leading the dragons after the last of the giants before they could reach the castle. If they did, there was no telling what colossal destruction they could cause.

Suddenly, an earth-shaking explosion that wrenched the corridor at an angle, swinging the portraits out from the walls and slamming them back, rocked the castle violently. With a hand on the wall, Hermione closed her eyes for a moment, praying that Severus had made it safely.

She pulled a healing potion from her robe pocket and handed it to Ron.

"Drink this. Your arm isn't broken, and this will take care of the pain," she instructed, trying to ignore the battle raging ever louder through the halls. Sound carried so far it was as if the fighting was directly around the next corner. She pulled a parchment out of her pocket and read it quickly, sighing in relief. Ron looked at her strangely as he drank the potion and handed the flask back to her. The color in his face had not returned.

"What is it?" he asked, leaning to read the parchment.

Hermione took a deep breath. "Voldemort. It's time."

Ron's eyes darted to the hospital wing doors then back to Hermione. Instantly alive. He reached for his wand, asking urgently, backing away, "Thestral, Hippogriff, broom... anything."

Hermione's eyes widened. "No, Ron, you can't."

"Give me something that has some bloody wings! Tell me!" he raged, his face turning an alarming shade of red and his breath hitching as he glared at her.

"Hagrid has a Hippogriff in the next corridor," Hermione said, pointing reluctantly.

Ron turned and left, running down the hall.

Hermione called after him, "What are you going to do?"

He stopped, turned, and said in a determined voice, "Play chess."

Severus had managed to avoid most of the explosion's impact, but did not entirely escape the debris that followed. He stood in a darkened classroom, the only light streaming in a single beam from a circular window high up on one wall. The dust rained down, filtering through the light, eerily reminiscent of snowfall. Running a hand down his leg, he felt for where his robes were stuck, indicating where shards of glass had torn through his robes and impaled his thigh. With his other hand, he held his side, his coat torn in a jagged stripe from the griffin. There was no need to look; his decision was already made.

Cursing as he threw the shards of glass aside, Severus spotted a set of small eyes watching him from a nearby desk.

"Have an opinion, do you?" he scowled, but then was intrigued to see the cat looking at him expectantly. "I suppose I do owe you a debt of thanks for that act of utter bravery out there."

Severus could have sworn the cat grinned at him before bowing its head slightly. The light revealed only the faint outlines of its fur before they were both plunged into darkness by a shape flying by the window. A horrific roar followed by others filled the air, shoving any hope for coherent thought aside, the sound heard as much inside as out.

The corridor where the griffin had once stood was completely gutted, the floor missing, the wall forced backwards by the blast. Desks, parchment, and a teacher's podium from what was once a classroom littered the floor one level below.

Standing at the edge, Severus looked out over the grounds. Before he could fully process the scene, through the multitude of duels he had the distinct vision of Draco running towards the opposite side of the castle grounds, resolutely ignoring anyone who dared attempt to slow him. It didn't require much to realize that Draco had spotted Lucius leaving the castle after fleeing the griffin.

"Kitty," Severus said, as he watched Draco enter the forest, "today, we avenge your Narcissa."

Severus only hoped he could reach Draco in time.

"Tell them to go back out the gates and attack any Death Eater they see on the way. They're to go back to Azkaban," Remus said with a hand fisted in Wormtail's robes. It was by far better to simply remove the Dementors, as Voldemort could command them to attack again.

Wormtail nodded and complied. Remus watched as the Dementors twitched in mid-flight, turned, and flew to join the others. As they reached each other, it was as if the word had spread and each one turned and slipped away. When one Death Eater made the mistake of leaving the cover of the forest, he was immediately set upon by several Dementors, who spiraled briefly, then swooped in to deliver the Kiss.

Wormtail suddenly looked to the sky with stark terror on his face and bolted out onto the grounds.

Remus, assuming he was leaving to join Voldemort, yelled after him, "Run all you like, Peter! There's nowhere left to go!" and reentered the castle to join the fight.

After the Hippogriff acknowledged Ron with a bow, he hesitantly mounted and mumbled to himself, "Just like a broom. Just like a big, four-legged, people-eating broom with bloody wings."

Ron directed the Hippogriff to take flight out of an open corridor and swoop low over the grounds before angling over the trees. His eyes teared from the wind, and through his bleary vision, he saw Charlie and Fred directing the dragons near the gates. Giants were attempting to make their way towards the castle, reaching up each time a dragon came within range.

Trees rushed by below, revealing several packs of Death Eaters running in different directions, completely disorganized. Ron brought the Hippogriff down lower and several Death Eaters fell as they frantically looked up at him, eyes wide with fury as he swept past.

Flying low over the treetops, Ron leaned over the Hippogriff's shoulder, staring down into the forest. Taking a second pass, Ron's hand jerked on the Hippogriff's chain hard.

It was Voldemort. The words screamed in Ron's mind. Nothing else. His heart was both soaring and stopping in the same instant as he brought the Hippogriff into a sharp dive, directing it straight at the few Death Eaters still at Voldemort's side. Some stood their ground, while others turned and bolted for the safety of the thicker woods.

Voldemort glared directly at Ron and drew his wand. In a haze, Ron almost forgot to take evasive action as a jet of green light flew up through the canopy, blasting leaves up and startling the Hippogriff into almost throwing him off. Fistfuls of feathers and the Hippogriff's wing under his leg was all that kept him aboard.

Dragging himself back aboard, Ron flew around in a larger circle, dodging spells and herding Death Eaters towards where Charlie and Fred led the dragons on their rampage. Norbert had voluntarily joined in, as if he recognized that the giants were the enemy and needed no further incentive to attack.

One last group stood defiantly between Voldemort and the gates, repeatedly throwing hexes and curses up at him as he rode by. Ron, remembering his brother, turned and threw the Hippogriff into a terrifying dive straight at them. In a horrific moment, he recognized the young faces of Crabbe and Goyle before the Hippogriff stretched its neck out to slash at them. They turned with the rest, glancing over their shoulders at him as he pulled up and rushed back up to the sky.

Ron watched the last of the Death Eaters turn and move towards where his brothers led the dragons.

Leaving one lone figure.

As he circled around the area where Voldemort was isolated, Ron raised his fist to the sky, calling, "Check!"

The Entrance Hall was in near-ruins from the fighting.

Hexes and curses had destroyed most of the staircase, leaving it a semi-ladder with holes along the way just begging to break a leg or cause enough hesitation for an opponent to deliver a final curse. Order members and Death Eaters fought through the Great Hall and to the upper floors. The staircases continued their calm changes even as a full-scale battle raged around them, causing momentary confusion when dueling partners were suddenly sailing apart from each other in mid-strike. Severus' lab door had been blown open and the equipment destroyed as Death Eaters searched for healing potions to resume fighting. They failed, however, to break Severus' wards on the supply closet, and were soon cornered and taken by Remus and Bill.

Ginny and Hermione raced out onto the grounds to search for the wounded. They spotted Moody far off near the forest and headed for him, keeping low and throwing hexes and shielding spells to avoid the incredible number of curses flying through the air. Already they had both been hit by several stinging hexes and Ginny had narrowly evaded a Killing Curse. They had been using the Marauder's Map to spot anyone who ceased to move, so they could find them even if they were out of plain sight. When they reached Moody, he had been hit by several hexes and his good leg lay at an angle that made Hermione slightly ill. She offered a grim smile when he waved his hand towards several prone bodies and proudly informed her it had taken four Death Eaters to take him down. Four.

Hermione glanced around quickly to take in the state of the grounds. Death Eaters were in Full Body Binds or covered in hexes, and, thankfully, no giants were in sight. She thought of what could have been if that large of a number had reached the castle, and firmly pushed that thought aside. There was no argument; without the dragons, it would have been a completely different situation.

Her eyes traveled up to take in the completely unsettling view of the interior of the castle on display from Severus' destruction of the last Horcrux. Portraits, stone, glass and several desks littered the grass, their placement a testament to the tremendous force of the explosion.

Turning back to look towards the gates, Hermione saw a Hippogriff hovering over the forest. It angled quickly, as if heading off the progress of something, then circled around before dipping down low. Ginny bound Moody's arms and legs so he could be transported and lifted her head.

Ginny squinted, then grasped Hermione's arm hard.

"Is that Ron?" she gasped, shaking Hermione as she stared up in the sky. The Hippogriff moved lower and hovered below the treetops so they could no longer see. By the frantic beating of its wings, Hermione could tell it was engaged in a fight. Hermione nodded to Ginny as a fact swam lazily to the front of her mind.

Hippogriffs were carnivores.

They watched as the Hippogriff rose up but then twisted to the side. Several green bolts flew up around it, coloring the sky, blending into the treetops.

The sight of Charlie aboard a Thestral rising over the treetops broke Hermione out of her thoughts. Two ferocious dragons followed him, throwing an immense shadow across the grounds, casting dueling pairs into darkness for a fleeting second in time. Charlie had made the turn and was heading back towards the gates when several bolts of light shot up from a group of Death Eaters, striking one of the female dragons hard. Her wings jerked and folded sideways as she spiraled, twisting, turning completely over. Duels all over the grounds halted at the sight of something so colossal falling from the sky and in anticipation of the destruction that was sure to come.

The battle nearly forgotten, silence reigned in a surreal instant.

Frozen.

The dragon splayed her wings out and threw them; inverted, however, this did nothing to correct her flight. She slammed into the ground, throwing huge pieces of earth upwards in a blinding spray. Her body cart-wheeled over, tail whipping into anyone and anything within range, finally crashing into the base of the North Tower. She tried to right herself, screaming in utter fury, but then the Tower shifted, sank, and leaned at a disturbing angle.

Hermione absently clutched Ginny's hand and watched in horror as the dragon thrashed her head from side to side, beating it against the stone with each pass, effectively slicing further into the Tower's base, undermining its structure. The roar was of both pain and rage as the beast thrust her back up, freed her wings and attempted to fly, even as part of the castle crushed her chest to the ground. Dirt and rocks flew as she beat her wings furiously, pulverizing the rubble around her.

In response, the Tower slid, jerked, then tilted at an impossible angle, dangerously close to falling.

Hermione watched in helpless awe as the Tower shifted yet again, dropping huge pieces of stone onto the grounds. What she saw next shocked her even more. Harry had emerged from the side of the castle, and, while far enough from the action, he was directly in the path if the Tower should fall. She tried to scream to warn him, but was drowned out by the dragon's roar as it thrust itself upwards and rocked back.

The Tower swayed drunkenly and began to fall, its shadow rushing up over the grass, plunging Harry into darkness. Someone was screaming. Ginny. Hermione grabbed onto her, shoving her to the ground before she could bolt from her side. Not enough time. The darkness; she couldn't see him anymore, screaming his name with Ginny, her voice failing.

The sun was blocked as the Tower passed, outlined in a perfect silhouette before it collapsed, coming apart in the end. The ground disappeared from under Hermione and Ginny before they came to rest several feet away. The sky gone, choked with a hail of stone and dirt, raining down, covering everyone.

The obscene moment of silence that followed allowed them to hear the birds from the other side of the castle the Owlery every school owl had taken flight, screaming over the grounds in a collective wail, frantically beating their wings to rise into the sky and flee.

Remus had just left the Room of Requirement after Levitating three Death Eaters in full Body-Binds into the makeshift jail. Moody had not returned, and Remus feared that his bravado at throwing himself headlong into battle might have backfired. The jail now held forty or so prisoners in various states of incapacitation and couldn't hold many more. He replaced the wards and was descending the stairs when he felt a wand shoved into the back of his neck.

He froze, cursing himself for coming alone.

"My, my, you've grown," growled a voice dripping with murderous sarcasm.

Turning slowly, Remus was met with the foul sight and deranged eyes of Fenrir Greyback. The truly insane have a look of helpless drive; however, Greyback knew exactly what he did - and loved every minute.

"Remus? Is it? I usually don't keep a record of my *conquests*, but I remember you," he breathed, spreading his grin wider as if to display his teeth. "Oh, yes, I particularly enjoyed you. So young."

Remus gripped the handrail, his wand angling in readiness.

"Busy during the full moon these days, are we?" Greyback asked in mock politeness, enjoying the hatred, reveling in it.

Remus backed down the stairs as Greyback approached, holding his wand out, waiting.

Greyback drew first, screaming, "*Avada Kedavra!*"

Remus barely had the thought to duck, wrenching his wrist, trying to hold onto the handrail to keep from falling. The spell blasted through the wall behind him, forcing the

portrait occupants to scream and flee their broken frames while others fell onto the staircases below.

Stepping backwards, Remus continued to descend, throwing multiple Disarming spells while dodging Greyback's rebounds.

Greyback's face held a contorted grin, appearing permanently amused, a shattered window into what was left of his soul. Each step down was taken dramatically, in complete control and with a flourish, spreading his arms wide, inviting another round.

A blinding lattice of red and green as they both struck, spells rebounding everywhere; fire, it was racing up the handrail, flying by as Remus let go. Greyback lunged at Remus with a wide snarl, tendrils of spit hanging like spider webs between his jaws.

Another barrage of spells and the handrail gave way, almost sending Remus falling backwards.

Remus had reached the sixth-floor landing on one staircase when he backed onto the stairs to go lower. He had managed to block several spells, the last of which rebounded, knocking Greyback backwards to land against the banister. Greyback literally roared with unintelligible rage, losing any semblance of the refined facade he had displayed earlier, lunging at Remus with pure animal instinct before stumbling and almost falling.

Suddenly, the normally calm staircases came alive with a raging fury. Greyback's staircase jerked, disengaged from the landing and swung with such force that he was thrown against the handrail, clinging frantically as it flew. It accelerated as it turned, slamming into the opposite wall, slicing completely through it and throwing dozens of portraits down to the Entrance Hall below. Greyback still held onto the banister, panting from the impact. As he went to pull himself up, the staircase began to break free from the upper landing and twisted sideways, allowing its bottom stairs to crash into the lower level. The impact completed the break, and the entire structure arched over in a slow, deliberate rotation, beginning its descent into the stairwell, with Fenrir Greyback screaming the entire way. Remus called to those below to get out of the way as several tons of solid stone and marble crashed down past other floors, tearing stray staircases down with it.

A huge plume of dust exploded in solid, rolling thunder as Greyback and the staircase hit the Entrance Hall floor and shattered, sending stone crashing out the front doors in a wave of marble and remnants.

Remus stood in utter amazement as the rising dust obscured his downward view. Through the haze, he watched in astonishment as the staircases slowly shifted into motion, calmly rearranging themselves to replace those that had fallen.

Harry was suddenly shoved to the ground, knocking the air out of him. Someone's hands were on his shoulders, pinning him down. It was Wormtail, panting hard, his eyes fixed upwards in complete terror. Before Harry could say anything, Wormtail threw himself onto him and the world exploded in a dragon's roar, descending into a twisted declaration of immeasurable pain, silenced as stone, dirt, and utter chaos drowned it all out.

Ginny she was screaming his name and then the absurdity of rain in the form of rocks and tumbling chunks of stone.

Harry looked up to see Wormtail groan as he pushed himself up and looked around. The Tower lay in ruins just inches from them, looking strangely deflated. The calls of dozens of owls, howling, their screeching a siren as they blotted out the sky, rising over the castle. Blue returned, the bright sun; how he'd always thought a battle happened in the dark of night, blinding wind, rain or something sinister, not on such a day as this. The battle resumed on the other side of the fallen structure with stray hexes and curses flying up into the sky.

Harry shoved himself backwards, staring in disbelief.

"You..." he said, needing a second glance at the fallen Tower as if to confirm reality. A crystal ball rolling to a stop nearby told him it had been the North Tower. "You saved me."

Wormtail nodded, suddenly appearing both exhausted and determined. He rose to his feet and drew his wand, unflinching, as Harry stood as well.

Several emotions crossed Wormtail's face before he stepped backwards, turned and ran towards the forest.

Lucius rose to his feet, staggering a slight step to keep from listing after having been struck by several wayward hexes from the main battle. Before he could fully stand, he saw someone appear at the edge of the forest and stop. Staring at him.

With a feral snarl, Lucius shoved himself forward, forcing his legs to support him, adrenaline granting the ability.

Standing tall, Lucius sneered, "Why, Draco, how nice to see you."

Even with the battle raging around him, Lucius' eyes locked onto his son and shut everything else out. Draco did the same, descending the slight hill to draw nearer. They both held their wands tightly, begging for a reason to strike first.

"Worthless traitor..." Lucius spat, his voice dripping with viciousness. The blood trailing from his mouth and face did nothing to quell the vision of the complete wreck of a wizard he had become. He raised his wand, standing at an angle.

Draco remained silent, taking in the image of what had once been his father. He approached slowly, his wand held high. Several Thestrals galloped by behind him, flailing their wings for balance as they leaped over a trench.

"Better to be a traitor to the losing side, *father*. Look around. Does it seem like you've chosen well?"

Lucius snarled, "You're not worth my energy. Always a failure. Your wretched mother's side of the family producing nothing but an inferior waste of magic." He stood his ground even as Draco drew closer. "Speaking of which, give your mother my best."

Before Lucius could complete his sentence, Draco lunged for him screaming, "*Crucio!*" only to watch in horror as his father not only dodged the spell but sent it back at him.

Draco managed to avoid the rebounded spell, falling to his knees as it tore past. Throwing a leg out to rise, he tried to move to cover as two more spells just missed his head.

Lucius slashed his wand to the side, a low laugh as Draco gasped and lurched sideways to fall up against a tree trunk.

White hot pain tore through his arm. Draco clutched it tightly, feeling his own heartbeat, the blood flowing at a terrifying rate, quickly drenching his sleeve and wand.

"You're absolutely right, Draco," Lucius taunted with a grin. "Let's draw this out. After all, a slow death for a traitor is tradition. Besides I have nowhere else to go."

Draco scrambled behind several trees and crouched low, cradling his wand arm as the muscle refused to adequately cooperate. He flexed it experimentally and hissed in pain, the feeling of his tendons working under his fingers almost as disturbing as the amount of blood, drenching everything, leaving small pools on the ground.

His father began to blast bushes apart, set trees on fire, and rant about blood, traitors and justice.

The last... justice.

As Lucius walked confidently towards where he hid, Draco lurched across the path, casting several Stunners. The bolts illuminated the shadows red as they screamed past Lucius, who dodged at the last moment. True shock registered on his face at the near miss before arrogance returned, then vengeance. He raised his wand, bared his teeth and began casting an unimaginable number of spells.

"Come out and face me!" Lucius raged as he awkwardly negotiated the deeper brush. As he looked down to pull his robes over the brambles, he was struck by a red jet of light and thrown backwards into the thorns. He screamed into the sky more in rage than pain as he struggled to rise. Before he could stand, he was struck again, this time tearing a gash across his shoulder.

Draco moved slowly from behind a tree and found himself greeted with the opportunity he had been replaying in his mind for days. Lucius had his back to him, searching for him in the brush. Draco told himself it was for his mother, it was in the heat of battle.

It was not the same.

His mind quieted silent the pain a distant echo as Draco raised his wand, even as it dripped with his own blood.

Harry looked away from where Wormtail had disappeared into the forest to see Minerva and Tonks fighting their way to him. They exchanged worried glances before running for the cover of the forest where Remus and Bill waited.

Minerva was nervously brushing dirt from Harry's robes. "All right, Harry?"

Harry, along with everyone else, glanced in the direction that they had seen Ron fly, seeming to share the same thought. He would lead them to Voldemort.

Minerva looked to the sky and stated decidedly, "Safer flying, Harry."

With a look of relief, she spotted Hagrid approach with several Thestrals following him and Buckbeak.

Hagrid turned and motioned to Buckbeak as the others climbed aboard Thestrals. "He's all yours."

Harry nodded and moved forward in a bow which Buckbeak promptly returned.

As Hagrid helped him up, he said, "Now, Buckbeak, you take care of our Harry here. He's got important work to do."

"Thanks, Hagrid," Harry said as he took hold of Buckbeak's chain.

Hagrid wiped a tear away while giving Buckbeak's neck a firm pat. "You'll be fine, Harry. Remember, you have something he will never have. Friends who love you."

Harry's face hardened, and Hagrid swore in that instant he looked so much like his father. He nodded, and Harry cued Buckbeak into a gallop to take to the sky with the others following. As the ground fell away, he took in the sight of the battle.

Brief moments in time. Death Eaters struggling to escape from invisible bonds that were clearly one of the twins' traps, chased by Centaurs, and driven by Ron into a clearing where Order members and supporters waited. Dozens of red and green bolts of light flew through the trees, surrounding Ron as he worked fearlessly.

Hagrid's hut it was on fire, caved in on one side. Giants. Death Eaters. The dead too many to count. One of the dragons, lying on its side amongst the bodies, a wing torn at a sickly angle.

Harry watched Minerva, Tonks, Remus and Bill land and fight the Death Eaters, keeping them away.

Looking down, Harry's heart froze at the sight of Voldemort glaring up at him, repeatedly touching his wand to his arm, becoming more enraged when it did nothing.

Most importantly, he was alone.

Draco held his shaking wand, closed his eyes, drew back and screamed, "Avada-", but was violently struck from behind. He fell in a twist of robes, onto his mangled arm, only registering pain for an instant before he was knocked unconscious and Petrified.

Lucius swung around to find Severus standing over his son's body.

Sputtering, his eyes filled with pure, unadulterated fury, Lucius tore his robes from the thorns and roared, "He was mine! HOW DARE YOU!" He awkwardly lunged for Severus, seemingly too far gone to complete a spell worthy of his state of mind.

Severus strode calmly towards Lucius so that they met in the middle of the clearing. He reached out, fisted Lucius' robes in his hands and slammed him against the nearest tree. With a grip not nearly as careful as in the Room of Requirement, Severus crushed Lucius' throat and shoved his wand up under his jaw, twisting it.

"Shall we continue our last conversation?" Severus drawled in a low voice. He laughed softly as Lucius clawed at his hands, his wand forgotten. "Oh, but Lucius, I do mean business now. You see, out here..." he said and gazed at the trees for a moment, "Out here, it is not considered murder. I will be liberating the world from your wretched existence. A hero."

Lucius' knees buckled and he slid down, the rough bark of the tree against his robes slowing his downward progression.

Through clenched teeth, Lucius gasped with what little air he could, "You killed Draco."

"I did no such thing," Severus responded and drew his wand back slowly. "But I will kill you."

Suddenly, Severus' eyes flashed upwards to the shadow of a lone dragon through the thick forest canopy, not only passing over, but descending, heading straight for them and crushing a path through the trees. Severus lost his grip on Lucius as fire filled the world in an instant, burning everything overhead, lighting the treetops before shoving them into each other.

As Lucius leaped over a fallen tree and ducked under another, Severus screamed, throwing several spells after him. Lucius was struck at least once, enough to make him stumble badly before disappearing.

This time Severus did not choose a different language in which to curse.

Reminding himself as he felt in his pocket that this was far from the end, Severus made his way to the edge of the forest and signaled Ginny to fetch Draco. Nearby, he caught sight of a Thestral trotting aimlessly through the woods, made his way towards it, and painfully dragged himself aboard.

Severus searched the sky as the nervous Thestral danced under him and watched as a Hippogriff swung low out of sight. He then pushed the Thestral into a thrusting gallop, stunning several dueling partners into pausing at the sight of Severus Snape aboard a black, winged monstrosity, thundering through the battlefield.

With precisely aimed spells, even wounded and on a lurching Thestral, Severus weaved through the battle, taking down five Death Eaters as he passed. As they fell, their

opponents stared in awe, both at the sight of him galloping away wildly, and at the stunning sound of his laughter.

Urging the Thestral onward, barreling towards the gates, striking down anyone foolish enough to be found within range. Several times, he swerved to choose particular victims, exacting revenge against those who had ever dared laugh at him.

Severus kept his eyes riveted to the sky as the magical beast expertly negotiated the grounds, leaping over fallen branches and trees. He struck down two more Death Eaters, sending one directly into a pit of Blast-Ended Skrewts the twins had set. He cued the Thestral to take flight to clear a large moat of what looked like quicksand, in which several giants were trapped, obviously Charmed to only activate under heavy weight.

Raising his head, he recognized Ronald Weasley on a Hippogriff, circling over one place near the gates. It could only mean one thing, and his heart rose just at the very thought of it.

Voldemort was cornered.

Voldemort struck out at two Death Eaters who had tried to desert him, even as a raging Hippogriff descended upon them, coming close enough to tear at their robes. Faced with either staying with a lunatic who was clearly losing or running for their lives, they chose the latter.

"COWARDS!" Voldemort raged, swinging around in a full circle to find himself alone, with the exception of Nagini, who raised her head, hissing loudly and baring her fangs. Voldemort repeatedly called the others using the Dark Mark; however, something strange happened as the bolt of light flew from his wand, it immediately faded.

Twice more he tried and failed.

Suddenly, the sound of hundreds of breaking branches and the cry of a Hippogriff grew loud. Before Voldemort could look up, he was struck hard, his arm torn open as Harry and Buckbeak crashed through the clearing. Buckbeak touched down, slid to a stop, and spun while Harry struggled to stay aboard.

"You wretched... HOW DARE YOU!" Voldemort screamed and swung his wand. "*Avada Kedavra!*"

Harry clutched onto Buckbeak's neck as the Hippogriff launched itself upwards and out of the way. Voldemort's spell spiraled into the deep shadows, lighting the way green before it faded.

Sounds of a faraway war played as they regarded each other at last.

Voldemort glanced down at his arm, mocking, "What a touching act of bravery. You are even more stupid than your meddling mother and father." He raised his head and spread his hands. "Your father put up a good fight at least. He didn't scream for mercy until the end."

"That's a lie!" Harry dismounted Buckbeak and cast several Disarming Spells, which Voldemort irritably deflected. He could feel Voldemort trying to invade his mind, and felt a surge of confidence as he was able to keep him out. Voldemort's face took on an expression of mild surprise at the disadvantage of not having an opponent's spells broadcast beforehand.

"Is it?" Voldemort sneered and, without any indication, struck again, sending Harry to dive to the ground and roll frantically. He threw his arms over his head as a tree exploded in a wooden rainfall of branches, limbs and large pieces of bark. Even before the debris had ceased to fall, Harry scrambled through the brush and blindly threw a Stunner back at Voldemort. He missed; however, the scream of rage told him that with each spell he was infuriating him more and more.

"Nothing but a boy!" Voldemort screamed and, without knowing exactly where Harry was, took to blasting any brush within range. Flames danced on young trees and bushes as Harry frantically made his way through to find cover behind a wide tree. After taking a deep breath, Harry thrust himself back out and threw another Stunner.

Harry gasped in shock to see it strike Voldemort in the shoulder, causing him to stagger to the right before catching himself. Harry quickly hid again and tried to keep his wildly beating heart under control.

Taking a chance, Harry peered around the tree, hoping to have time to cast the Killing Curse while Voldemort recovered from the spell. Instead, he saw Voldemort's glare before a spell obscured his vision and rocked the tree backward. Harry had barely enough time to shove himself aside before the tree pitched back at the breaking point, swept through the branches of others, and fell with an earth-shaking boom.

Harry gritted his teeth and told himself hiding was not the answer. It allowed Voldemort too much time to calculate, and one misstep in timing was going to be the end. He stood and swiftly bolted to cover, closer to the clearing. As he ran, he threw a multitude of Disarming Spells, hoping to catch Voldemort once to give time to deliver the Killing Curse. At one point, Voldemort's wand did leave his hand; however, he quickly called it back and in the same motion threw another fiercely green bolt of light. Harry had to stop quickly, or else he would have run directly into its path.

Voldemort began to laugh.

"Fine," Harry muttered as he stepped out into the open. The sight of Harry approaching on open ground brought Voldemort's laughter to an end, just as it had in the graveyard. With every step, his expression moved from wild amusement through anger, ending in bewilderment either at Harry's incredible stupidity or stunning bravery.

"Going to duel in a civilized manner, Harry Potter?" Voldemort asked, his arms spread in a polite manner, even going so far as to offer a bow. His mangled arm bled profusely, but he gave no indication of pain.

"No," Harry said with disgust and raised his wand. "I only do that with opponents worth the respect."

As he had done the previous night against Severus, Harry shut his mind and advanced on Voldemort. He boldly cast spell after spell, hoping that somehow something would make its way through. The air was alive with magic, unfocused, wild, begging to find its mark.

With eyes filled with rage, Voldemort dropped his mouth open in a snarl and blocked everything, sending Harry's spells rebounding wildly through the trees.

Harry didn't stop; rather he became even bolder as he continued to cast. Just as he wondered if Voldemort was going to try to fight back, he saw a movement and felt himself thrown backwards to land hard on the ground. Harry shoved his feet under himself and quickly rose with his wand outstretched, resolutely ignoring how badly his hand shook.

Voldemort bared his teeth and growled as he strode towards Harry, "I'm going to dispose of you, Harry Potter. Whether I have anyone at my side or not, it is you that are alone here. You see, I don't need anyone."

"He is not alone," a voice declared from behind.

Voldemort spun and roared, "*Avada Kedavra!*" casting the curse blindly. It blasted a tree in two, sending one half to collapse into the next, leaving smoke rising from the split.

Severus appeared, striding confidently through the haze, his expression mockingly impressed.

"Interesting," Severus commented with a grin as he approached. He cast a look of amusement at the smoldering tree as he passed. "Is that all?"

Voldemort appeared completely astonished at someone who not only didn't cower before him, but dared to taunt him. After all the years that Severus had bowed and treated him with respect, to see him act in open defiance was surely a shock. Voldemort snarled and raised his head as his eyes searched the forest beyond where Severus stood.

"Have they all forsaken you, *my lord*?"

The subtle smirk on Severus' face drove Voldemort into the upper echelon of rage. His eyes flew wide at the impertinence, the audacity.

"You're nothing without me, Severus!" Voldemort hissed in a low voice, his back arched in a type of posture known only to the trapped.

"Oh, Tom, don't talk like that," Severus laughed as he ran up a short embankment and followed around behind the brush. He motioned for Harry to run for cover.

Severus watched as Voldemort glanced up into the sky, attempting to cast the Dark Mark once more.

With a victorious grin, Severus launched himself out of the brush and roared, "*Crucio!*"

Immense pleasure spread on Severus' face as he listened to Voldemort's screams. Every time he had been tortured, Severus had kept himself sane with the hope that this day would eventually come. Knowing he was not strong enough to hold the curse for long, he was not surprised when the spell was broken.

Severus laughed and disappeared into the woods as a wild array of spells flew after him.

Voldemort rose to his feet and screamed to the trees, "Coward!"

A jet of red light struck Voldemort, almost throwing him off his feet. He stared in disbelief as his hand came away from his chest covered in blood. His eyes widened as he looked up to see Severus standing in the open with his wand up high.

"Do not ever call me a coward, you revolting insult to the wizarding world," Severus snarled.

Voldemort screamed in unintelligible rage and threw curse after curse, illuminating the air green as bolts of light flew in all directions. Harry watched as Severus threw himself aside barely in time, and, even while scrambling to his feet, cast another spell at Voldemort, cutting him again. Even in the heat of battle, Harry couldn't help but be slightly unnerved at how much Severus was enjoying himself.

It was then that he fully realized just how much Severus had been holding back in their duels.

Harry shoved those thoughts aside and launched himself at Voldemort, who was distracted while pursuing Severus. He set himself and drew his wand back to cast the Killing Curse, but, at the same time, caught sight of something out of the corner of his eye.

A red bolt. It was streaking out of the forest straight at him.

Harry was thrown and heard a sickly crack, exploding his world in pain as he clutched his arm. He quickly rose to his feet to see Lucius Malfoy laughing as he stood on a hill at the far side of the clearing.

The sounds of ferocious dueling reached him as Order members fought off the Death Eaters who were attracted to the sounds of their fight. Before Harry could react, Buckbeak screamed and charged directly at Lucius.

Lucius stood in complete amazement as the frenzied Hippogriff bore down on him with his beak open, intent on slicing him apart for hurting his friend. Lucius turned, running for the thicker trees with Buckbeak close behind.

Chaos reigned as they plunged into a massive duel, holding off the last of the Death Eaters who had a deep desire to be at Voldemort's side should he be victorious.

At some point, Remus heard Tonks scream Ron's name, staring in horror at the sky as a Hippogriff twisted in mid-flight, flailed its wings backwards and fell.

Remus stepped over the Petrified body of another young Death Eater and ran closer to where Harry must have landed. Dread filled him at the thought of Harry trying to face Voldemort alone until he spotted Severus land a Thestral nearby, glance at him, and nod as he charged over the hill.

As Remus drew closer to the clearing, he caught sight of a hunched figure standing in the shadows, raising his wand.

Nagini curled around tree trunks and through the low brush, undulating over exposed roots as she entered the clearing. She approached Harry and twisted around in front of him while he distractedly held his broken left arm. As she rose up and stared him in the eyes, he was startled and flung his wand out before him. Nagini opened her jaws wide and lunged to strike, only to be frustrated as Harry stumbled quickly backwards. She hissed loudly and drew back to lunge again, but was struck by a bolt of green light. She fell sideways, her jaws still stretched open.

Harry looked up to see Wormtail lowering his wand.

Their eyes met as Harry said in a stunned voice, "But you didn't have to ..."

"Traitorous wretch!" Voldemort screamed, turning from his pursuit of Severus. It was done without a seconds' passing. Voldemort's lips curled in a feral sneer, retracting over his teeth like a trapped animal about to thrust itself at an attacker's throat.

He thrust his wand arm out and screamed, "*Avada Kedavra!*" striking Wormtail dead.

Completely unnerved by the murder of his precious Nagini, Voldemort suffered a moment of deadly distraction.

A voice, tearing though his mind, commanding in a voice that offered no option, no hesitation. A simple word encompassing everything, centering the moment, and forcing action devoid of emotion, contemplation, nothing but that one instant of decision.

"NOW!"

The rage that Severus had taught him to control welled up as flashes of everyone Voldemort had destroyed flew through his mind. Focus descended, cloaking him in a surrounding aura of calm. Watching his own wand thrust forward, the sun etching its shadow on the ground, pointing directly at the source of it all.

"*AVADA KEDAVRA!*"

They all watched in utter astonishment as Voldemort turned and, with a stunned expression on his face, fell next to Nagini and Wormtail.

Harry stood in amazement and kept his wand on Voldemort's body, assuming that it couldn't possibly be over. Too simple. Surely something more spectacular should have been required.

Staring down at Voldemort, a wizard, a mortal, Harry thought that what Severus had told him was right.

That when both opponents can cast the Killing Curse, the only variable is the timing.

Vast amounts of splintered wood were strewn across the forest floor, as it was impossible for a spell to miss and not strike a tree. Limbs hung precariously from the lower branches, caught only by the thickness of the growth. As Voldemort fell, the screams of the remaining Death Eaters rose, the Dark Mark burning brightly as their border died.

Looking back at the clearing, Severus watched Harry slowly lower his wand and sink to the ground as Remus and the others reached his side. He turned his back on them and knew in his heart that there was one more thing that must be done. He could not allow the opportunity to pass as it meant much more to him than anyone could possibly imagine.

He removed a makeshift map that Fred and George had made for him from his inside pocket and unfolded the parchment. While it looked very similar to the Marauder's Map, it did not show everyone within the whole of Hogwarts and its grounds. In fact, it only showed one person whose cloak carried a certain charm.

Lucius Malfoy.

Watching Lucius' dot moving further into the forest, he was almost glad the Hippogriff hadn't killed him yet.

Severus grinned as he set off. "Time's up, Lucius."

According to the map, Lucius' dot had stopped near the edge of the forest where the castle grounds ended. Not far, by Severus' calculations.

Coming around a bend in what passed for a trail, Severus stopped to check the map again, furrowing his brow and angling the parchment to catch the light through the deep tree cover. What he saw was the dot labeled "Lucius" was not only moving.

It was coming straight for him.

Cursing under his breath, Severus clutched his wand as he climbed up an embankment off the path and out of sight.

Kneeling down, Severus waited as he heard Lucius approach. As he prepared to strike, Lucius came crashing through the brush, trying to run and twist around to check if he was still being chased. Severus slid down onto the path with his wand drawn and grinned as Lucius stumbled and fell into the dirt.

Lucius looked murderous as he thrust himself to his feet, refusing to give in to the multitude of injuries he had acquired throughout the day. He was completely covered in a mixture of blood and dirt, his robes torn in far too many places to determine the cause.

Severus approached him and sneered, "Stay down, Lucius. Accept it and I'll consider killing you quickly."

Before Severus could cast, a rush of wings and a piercing cry startled him into falling backwards. Severus clutched his side, gritted his teeth, and, as his eyesight cleared, he saw Buckbeak standing over Lucius, pinning him to the ground, holding his wings forward as if protecting his prey. Severus struggled to sit up and push himself away, startling the Hippogriff, who raised his head and stared towards him.

Lucius continued to shout and struggle, even as Buckbeak pressed a hoof on his chest harder.

Two predators. Buckbeak and Severus regarded each other, deciding if a battle over prey would ensue. Severus thought for a moment, lowered his wand, and slowly rose to his feet. This was the beast that had almost killed him and would now save him the trouble of murder. He bowed to Buckbeak deeply, with far more respect than he had ever done in the past. Buckbeak proudly pushed out his chest and lowered his head as well.

As Severus solemnly nodded, effectively communicating that he would not challenge him for his prey, Lucius managed to turn his head. Their eyes met for a startled moment in time before Severus shook his head and turned away.

Severus closed his eyes as he walked away, ignoring the sound of Lucius screaming his name as Buckbeak attacked.

Not long ago, Severus knew he would have been furious to be deprived of the chance at revenge, to own the honor of being the one to take a life in the name of justice. He would have ensured Lucius understood that simply being sent back to Azkaban was not high enough payment for his actions. He would have mocked him for a time, degraded him to the point of begging for mercy, then viciously delivered the Curse.

Now, he was strangely content to simply walk away, intent on going home.

"Poppy?" Minerva called as she entered the hospital wing. She walked alongside Harry, who was still pale but had a relieved expression on his face. At the same time, he looked like he'd want nothing more than to sleep for a year. Poppy picked up her wand from a nightstand before rushing over to him.

As they walked him over to an empty bed, Poppy muttered under her breath, "Arm is broken, yes... no, nothing else. Just a bit worn." Ginny swiftly appeared at his side and took his hand. She pushed his hair away from his eyes and kissed him desperately as she took his wand from the tight grip he still held on it.

Harry suddenly looked at her with dread. "Did everyone? I mean..."

Ginny's eyes were red from crying. She shifted herself to avoid having to look at the bed where her brother's body lay. "We lost George, but everyone else will be alright except... except Severus is missing."

"He was there I saw him after. He was wounded, but he was still standing."

Ginny shook her head slowly and touched his face. "We haven't found him yet. He showed on the map, but very faint. I think Hermione has gone with the others to search."

Harry nodded and looked towards the windows as Ginny put an arm around him. "I can't help but feel guilty."

At Ginny's questioning expression, he said, "I should be happy I guess but I just can't."

"You're not alone, Harry," Ginny said sadly.

Severus gripped the bark of a tree, his fingers cutting into the rough surface until it gave way. It is true what is said about adrenaline - that once it subsides, the pain comes roaring back. He had walked as far as he could while ignoring his body's protests. The pain was near the level which required some sort of groan; however, he wouldn't allow it, choosing instead to hold his breath. Even in the early afternoon, the thickness of the forest closed out the sun, casting near darkness in places, although he was sure this was partly due to his failing eyesight.

Checking his wound, Severus found that he had bled completely through both his shirt and coat. He did not have much time at this rate, and a voice in the back of his mind

stubbornly reminded him how foolish he was to allow his heart to drive him on to do such a thing. To die now would be nothing but stupidity on his part.

Negotiating the undulating terrain of the wilder parts of the forest was made much more difficult by dizziness caused by blood loss. Severus had walked for what seemed hours, and he feared he was becoming disoriented enough to become lost. He thought he had seen the castle through the trees and was heading for it, but now he saw nothing but more trees, gnarled brush, and several paths leading in all directions. He seriously considered lying down to rest, but knew in his heart that he would likely not rise again. The thought of being found out here and, worse yet, by Hermione, drove him to keep going. He had tried to cast his Patronus but had failed miserably, lacking the energy to perform such a draining spell, and had lost the parchment along the way.

Besides, he thought, he had no way to tell where he was.

He took Neville's flask from his pocket and held it up to the light. Taking a deep, hitching breath, Severus opened it and drank. Trusting a student's work was lunacy on a good day; however, there was no such luxury now. Overhead, he heard the loud sweeping sound of wings as what he assumed was one of the dragons passed over him. A cluster of Dementors followed, floating along in a winding pattern, their tattered wisps of robes indicating the movement of the breeze behind them. Part of his mind noted that they must be headed in the direction of Azkaban.

With measured movements, he eased off his outer robe and proceeded to negotiate the buttons of his ruined coat. Once the sea of black was parted, he could see the true carnage. His white shirt was completely soaked red and clung to him sickly. Baring his teeth in disgust, he removed the shirt and pulled it off of the wound. He stretched out the shirt and used the sleeves to tie it tightly around himself, stifling the scream that threatened to escape by clenching his teeth and severely straining his throat.

Severus thought he could faintly hear commotion that sounded like shouting and voices. When he shifted to head in that direction, the trees spun completely around, then shot upwards as he fell.

Watching birds quietly make their way across a patch of sky, framed by a maze of intertwined branches, he thought, interestingly enough, how birds are immune to things such as this, free to fly over everything without becoming involved. Something that Hermione would notice.

Severus felt himself slipping away just as bright orange eyes met his.

A rocking motion along with the sun on his face woke him gently. If he hadn't been lying on the cool forest floor, he would've raised up, felt for his wand, and closed the drapes like any other morning. The events of the day, however, swam back to him in a haze, along with his last thoughts before sliding towards the dark. He moved the hand still resting on his side and was shocked to find that the bleeding had slowed to a manageable rate. He squinted as he tried to open his eyes, and was startled to feel a hand on his head.

The silhouette of a face surrounded by bushy hair moved over him.

"So, here we are again," Hermione said with a somber smile while she ran her fingers through his hair. She laughed with tears in her eyes as Buckbeak rocked Severus again by wedging his beak under him and pushing him gently. Severus shifted away from the huge Hippogriff and hesitantly placed a hand on its head.

Severus stared at Hermione as if he couldn't believe she was truly there. "I should be..."

She stopped him with a kiss as fierce as she dared without knowing how badly he was injured. She gripped his hair tightly, as if to confirm that he was still alive, holding him, pulling him closer. They lingered for a moment, before Hermione leaned back on her knees and placed her hand on his side.

"You have two 'thank yous' to give," she said, frowning as she moved his robes and coat away from his middle.

She said thoughtfully with a nod towards the Hippogriff, "Buckbeak, for one. He circled outside the hospital wing windows, screaming over and over. When I went outside, he lay down and here I am. He's very bloody, but not injured except his wing, a little."

Severus blinked in disbelief. Buckbeak raised his head and gazed at him for a moment before turning back to a hole in the ground where he was pawing, to flush out rodents he supposed. His beak and chest feathers were mottled with dried blood, and there were large areas where the feathers were torn out.

"Lucius," Severus stated, looking at Buckbeak.

Hermione grimaced, then nodded as she pushed his coat over his shoulders. "Draco was furious at what you did."

"I couldn't allow him to do it."

"It was a very noble thing to do," she said, looking at him with such love and admiration he didn't know how to react. "Very noble. Even though you almost got yourself killed."

"Again," she added, trying desperately to inject some form of humor into an intensely surreal day.

Together, they watched Buckbeak as he rooted in another rodent hole. Hermione grinned with sadness in her eyes as she looked back at Severus. "It's ironic how things come full circle, isn't it?"

Severus nodded distractedly, as he was still trying to grasp the fact that the same Hippogriff that had almost killed him had helped to save his life. He remained in a haze until she reached for the shirt and tugged on the knot.

"Didn't see yourself surviving this, did you?" she said, sighing as she untied his shirt where he had it tightened around his middle. She tilted her head as she ran her hand over the wound that stretched halfway across his abdomen. Without Neville's experimental healing potion, there was no chance he would have survived.

As they heard voices approaching, Hermione helped him to his feet. "Nice to see you've learned to take your medicine."

Severus attempted to scowl at her, but couldn't.

Hermione kissed him softly. "It's healing already," she said and added, "Ah, here's your other 'thank you' now."

Severus looked up to see Remus and Neville arrive on Thestrals. As Neville dismounted, he looked at Severus with relief and smiled proudly.

Taking Hermione's hand, Severus said, "In light of the fact that my dangerous, death-defying and, no doubt, suicidal days appear to be over, do you still wish to marry me?"

Hermione grinned. "Will you wear that lovely coat?"

He laughed before catching himself. "As you wish."

"Will you dance with me?" Hermione asked, placing her hand up onto his shoulder.

"Absolutely."

She moved closer and whispered, "Of course I still want to. How can I ever hope to resist you? Better yet, why would I ever want to try?"

Severus allowed a genuine smile filled with relief and tremendous love. He could barely breathe in that moment as she reached out and touched his face.

"I love you too."

The Accumulation of Small Acts

Chapter 41 of 41

A novel-length post HBP HG/SS romance adventure. What if Severus returned, trained Harry for the final battle and worked to destroy the final Horcruxes? Story is complete and will be updated regularly.

Disclaimer: For the final time: A special thanks to JK. Without her and her wonderful imagination, we wouldn't have this universe to play in.

AN: Thanks for the lovely reviews. I appreciate every single one. Another thanks to Ariadne for reaching across the country to hold my hand when I reached the end.

What a sentimental fool I turned out to be.

George was buried on the Hogwarts grounds with full honors as a war hero, including an Order of Merlin, First Class.

It was a solemn affair, made worse by the utter strangeness of losing a twin. Fred stared ahead resolutely as he helped carry his brother's casket to the gravesite, while Molly sobbed inconsolably in Arthur's arms. She had been unable even to glance at Fred since the battle ended without bursting into tears. Minerva, along with customers of the joke shop and several students, tearfully shared their memories of George.

Several attendees were in different states of injury, including Ron, who, after isolating Voldemort, had been struck down by an unknown spell and had fallen from his Hippogriff. It was Tonks who had found him, and luckily only his leg had been broken. Severus sat at Hermione's side with a wound that was well on its way to healing completely. He had properly thanked Neville for his work on the potion and offered to tutor him in his career choice. Neville had expressed that he wanted to develop more healing potions, effectively combining Potions and Herbology.

What Severus did not share was how much of a relief it was that only one life was lost, regardless of whose. It would be considered cruel by the non-cynical to express relief at only losing one life when it could have been many more. He had not planned to survive the war and had been fully prepared to die as he walked to the front gates that day.

This should be his funeral.

Sitting in the late July sun felt surreal, anticlimactic and, for lack of better words, wrong. In his mind, he had no right to live while someone so young lay before them, ready to be put into the earth forever.

He glanced at Hermione and found silent tears moving down her face. She clutched his arm tightly, as if to confirm that he was still there, still alive. Even though they were in public and the visiting students stared strangely, he did not push her away. An aptly aimed glare in their direction easily refocused their stares elsewhere. Part of him wondered what the coming school year would bring.

The remaining Death Eaters had been easily captured as their burning Marks had driven them to scream in excruciating pain. Once the Ministry announced that Azkaban was open and the Dementors in place, the trials had begun. This time, all claims of being under the Imperius fell on deaf ears. A Death Eater by the name of Amycus had admitted proudly that it was he who had killed "that fool on the Thestral," and had been promptly thanked for saving the trouble of a trial, dragged off, and given the Kiss within the hour.

The Ministry, it seemed, was no longer in a forgiving mood.

Hogwarts itself stood proudly, bearing its wounds as if stating quite clearly that it would remain forever standing, even as the cycle of evil turned another revolution in time. Extensive repairs were required, with little time available before the fast approaching school year. With the collapse of the North Tower, the Divination classroom had been destroyed, leaving cushions, tea cups and tattered tapestries strewn across the grounds. Several staircases from Remus' bout with Greyback were lost and, while the castle had quite smartly rearranged those remaining, some landings were left with nothing but broken marble at their ends.

The open corridor which had once held the last Horcrux made the castle appear disturbingly gutted. Portraits hung askew, and a lone piece of drapery fluttered in the summer wind, from time to time knocking another piece of stone to tumble out onto the grounds. At the far edge of the ragged opening, another display case leaned close to the edge, eerily reminiscent of the Malfoy mansion's last moments before it fell.

Days later when Severus had recovered adequately, he ventured down to the Potions lab to take in the carnage. Hermione approached the door later in the day to find both doors still half-destroyed, one twisted up onto itself, the other at a drunken angle and threatening to fall. Desks were strewn about and it was obvious that a furious search and duel had taken place. Severus' old desk had been destroyed in a way that clearly had been deliberate, and mangled cauldrons were scattered around the floor. It was difficult to walk without stepping on glass, parchment, broken chairs or nameless ingredients, any of which could be dangerous when mixed.

She found him in the middle of it all, sitting on a table and holding a wand in his hands, turning it end over end.

"Want company?" Hermione asked, moving to sit next to him. In the just over two weeks since the battle, Severus had kept himself busy in the lab working on research while she had absorbed herself in planning their upcoming wedding, trying hard to not feel guilty for hoping for happiness so soon after tragedy.

"This," Severus muttered, holding the wand by both ends. Bending it. "I almost died for this."

Tilting her head, she said in a low voice, "Is it his?"

Severus nodded briefly.

Sitting with her hands on the table, Hermione waited, unsure what to say.

"It was foolish, I know," he said, shocking her into looking at him questioningly.

"It means a lot to you," Hermione said softly, watching his expression as he turned the wand in his hand.

A pause and then a small nod before he turned his eyes to her.

She smiled sadly and ran her hand over his back, the sound of her nails over wool breaking the silence. "Was it worth it?"

Without hesitation. "Yes."

Hermione rested her arm around his shoulder and sighed. "Then, at this point, that's all that matters."

Severus raised an eyebrow, impressed at her wisdom and lack of condemnation of his recklessness other than chiding him that day.

"Seem too soon to repair things?" she asked, surveying the state of the classroom. It wasn't like him to leave things so messy. This was, after all, a man who struck fear in the hearts of thousands over the years if they so much as dared spill anything on his precious floor.

"A thought similar to that, I suppose."

"That, and a part of you enjoys destruction," she said, trying to lighten the mood. She shifted against him, pushing him gently. "Admit it."

"That, I have never denied," he agreed with a slight grin. "However, this is no longer my classroom and it needs to be righted." He drew his wand and cauldrons began to make their trek through the air to rest neatly on the shelves lining the walls. Soon, Hermione joined him and they spent the better part of an hour clearing the room.

As Hermione finished up, Severus emerged from his private lab with a goblet.

"Wolfsbane so soon?" she commented as they left the classroom together.

"Basically, yes," Severus said, fully expecting her to question him thoroughly on why he was brewing Wolfsbane so early before the full moon.

Instead, Hermione moved close, avoiding the goblet as he held it out, and kissed him gently. "I'll see you later. I need to attend to a few things for our upcoming ~~event~~."

Severus rolled his eyes, just as he did at every part of the Muggle traditional wedding that Hermione insisted she wanted. "And in Muggle tradition this excludes me of course?"

"Yes and no," she responded with a grin.

"Interesting. Will I at least be informed of when my presence is, indeed, warranted? I am still invited, am I not?" he asked innocently.

"Severus..." Hermione warned. "Look, you may know that it will be held on the Quidditch pitch at dusk on Friday. You *can* find your way to the pitch, can't you?"

He ignored her attempt to bait him. "How do you know I don't have plans?"

The look on her face clearly stated he should quit while he was ahead.

"Look, can we skip the drama and just say that yes, it involves you, no, you cannot see what is planned, and move along?"

Severus raised an eyebrow at her statement and observed how she had set her hands on her hips, silently awaiting his next counter-point. Instead, a smirk played about his lips as he simply nodded and left her. He had no intention of allowing her the knowledge that sparring with her, in his opinion, was the pleasure of a lifetime.

"Quite impressive," Severus commented, gesturing to the horrifically mangled Entrance Hall. The doors still lay on the lawn, the partial remains of a staircase stood stubbornly in the doorway, and cascading mounds of broken marble littered the front steps.

Remus shrugged and grinned despite himself. "Through no fault of my own. However, I thought you'd appreciate that." He gestured to present the torn open corridor where Severus had destroyed the last Horcrux. "I learned from the master."

Severus grinned and offered him the goblet. "Something experimental."

Remus looked at him expectantly, as it was still days before the full moon. After drinking the potion, he handed the goblet back to Severus.

"Hermione tells me I require something called a 'best man,'" Severus said as though he were seeking a difficult to find ingredient. "Know where I may acquire one?"

Remus smiled and kept his eyes on the castle. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Severus examining the goblet's engraving. "I think you've found one. Someone has to ensure you appear presentable. I believe I've succeeded in that respect once to date."

Severus twitched a smile. "Indeed."

"Although..." Remus said with a glance at the goblet, "I may not look all that wonderful, considering."

Severus said, "I think you'll look fine. Trust me."

Severus' eyes suddenly slid to the side quickly and muttered, "Act remorseful."

"An utter disgrace. Just look at it," Minerva complained as she approached and turned to take in the sight of the castle. "Years of history destroyed. And Sibyll's tower, it's just... what do you find so amusing, Remus?"

Remus shook his head, saying, "Nothing. We're just so shaken up about the castle. Very sorry." He glanced sideways at Severus, who was doing infinitely better at hiding his amusement.

"A tragic loss, but unfortunately one that couldn't be avoided," Severus said with careful sincerity. "I'm certain that Sibyll will be quite comfortable in the guest quarters near the kitchens, where the elves can cater to her *hobby*."

Minerva pressed her lips into a thin line and stared at Severus for a space of time. "Watch yourself, Severus. You are not too old. Besides, one more step like that and you can assist Slughorn by teaching first-year Potions again. Would you enjoy that?"

"I wasn't aware that I was still teaching," Severus stated, clearly not interested in reverting back to avoiding catastrophic fire or explosions on a daily basis.

"Well, now you are. I suggest you gather yourself together," she stated with a hard eye. "The new term starts soon. That is... if we can fit the students into the castle," Minerva said loudly, toward Hagrid and Filch, who were still trying to move monumental amounts of marble out of the Entrance Hall.

She shot one last withering glance at Remus, who had found the ground interesting, and turned to leave. Entering the castle required her to hitch her robes up and step carefully to make her way through the small path Hagrid and Filch had managed to clear.

"Did you learn nothing by hanging out with those idiots in your youth?" Severus asked incredulously.

Remus shrugged. "That was long ago."

Silence passed between them until at last Severus said, "Yes. It was."

Severus pushed a long, low-hanging willow branch out of the way and stopped, his hand still holding onto the leaves. It would never get easier, the sight of him there. It wasn't hard to know where he'd be he never went far.

"You cannot stay here forever."

Draco sat, his legs drawn up against his chest, his chin on his knees. A fist held onto one pant leg, gripping it with more force than necessary, twisting the material. It was a position that bespoke both physical and emotional pain. A light breeze dusted stray hairs across his eyes, sweeping forward along his cheek. It had been months since it had been cut, and now it was uneven, in disarray.

Shifting to place his forehead on one of his knees, Draco muttered, "What do you want?"

Severus looked down at his hand where he had crushed the dry leaves into his palm. Shaking his hand clean, he moved closer, drew the wand from his pocket and held it in front of Draco.

Slowly, Draco lifted his head, saw the wand and looked up at Severus.

A questioning expression and a confirmation without words.

Draco threw his hand out, awkwardly stood and stared at the wand with near wonder.

"Take it. This is your right, but I could not allow you to do it. You must understand that, " Severus said, shifting his eyes away from the area just on the other side of the hill, where Dumbledore's grave marker stood, a pearlescent reminder of what he didn't want Draco to experience.

Draco kept his eyes on the wand, his hand raising seemingly on its own to take it from Severus' hand.

Stepping back, Severus watched as Draco closed his eyes and stood holding Lucius' wand, moving his hands to each end. He paused, the wind at a lull, the tree's branches near still. The end of a wizard's life is a symbolic event, the wand dictating if it was an honorable passing or not. To break a wand is to break the spirit, and it was believed that by doing so, any hope of rest in the afterlife was ruthlessly denied.

Severus turned and dared to look out towards the white structure, visible just over the rise, the branches of the willow tree filtering most of the light. Behind him, he heard Lucius Malfoy's wand break and Draco speaking to his mother in a low voice; an apology, promises for the future a farewell.

When he turned to see Draco place the broken pieces on Narcissa's grave and stand, Severus knew that he would no longer need to come there to find Draco anymore.

That time had passed.

With only two days to go before the wedding, Hermione finally found the dress she wanted. While it was certainly odd for the seamstress in Hogsmeade to work on a Muggle wedding dress, she did a beautiful job, embroidering red and gold along the neck line, the only hint of color in a sea of white. Hermione had kept it in Ginny and Harry's rooms, explaining to Severus, once again, how he was not to see the dress before the wedding. This was again met with much rolling of the eyes and mumbling about Muggles and silly tradition.

"No," Severus stated in a flat tone, and continued to eat his breakfast as if the matter was closed.

"You said you'd go along."

"I'm not wearing that," he growled.

"Because it's a Gryffindor color."

"No."

"Because it's any color."

"Hermione..."

"Oh, so now you don't want to be tainted by anything Gryffindor?"

"Please..." Severus put his fork down and closed his eyes, searching for patience. He knew he was not destined to win, but had to put up a fight. Over the previous few weeks, they had developed a virtual points system and with this wedding he feared he was falling behind. All that was missing were miniature hourglasses.

"What then?"

Severus groaned. "Tainted is a strong word."

"You didn't seem to feel *tainted* by something Gryffindor before."

Severus glared at her. "*That* is different."

"Really now," Hermione scoffed. She picked up the fabric and began to fold it.

"Severus, just agree to wear it, would you?" Remus said, grinning at his plate. He knew better than to look up at the murderous glare Severus was giving him. "We'd all like to see."

Hermione held up the red fabric and placed it at Severus' throat. He adopted the strategy of trying to ignore her by staring at the ceiling.

Remus laughed. "Nothing up there is going to help you now."

"I'd hold my tongue if I were you," Severus growled, looking every inch his usually intimidating self even while Hermione tied the silk around his neck and arranged the folds. "You'll be next at your pace."

Severus sat back, resigned to his fate. Before Remus could offer a retort, Tonks arrived and snorted a laugh at Severus' pained expression.

"And the other piece goes here," Hermione said and moved towards his lap. "Really, must you look at me with such fear?" she laughed. "It's called a cummerbund. Goes around your middle."

"Must you attempt to dress me at the table?" he muttered and stabbed his eggs forcefully.

Hermione ignored his brooding. "Yes. It's the only time you stay still."

"The *lovely* coat will cover that you know," Severus pointed out, hoping to rid himself of at least once red item.

Hermione leaned closer and whispered into his ear, "I want to know you're wearing red under there too."

His eyebrows shot up and couldn't help but look at her.

"Really?" he said before clearing his throat and pushing his food around some more a nervous habit that Hermione noted with a grin.

She trailed a finger along his neck, just where his hair parted. "Besides, I'm wearing green right now."

Severus' eyes searched her. "I don't see..."

Dawning realization spread over his face before he slid his eyes sideways to make sure no one had heard.

"My, you're quick," she laughed and rose to leave.

Severus watched her leave and muttered to himself, "And so it begins."

The night before the wedding arrived, and Hermione explained to an irritated Severus that tradition dictated they not see each other. She left him to stay with Harry and Ginny, even while he complained about Muggle foolishness. She soon found that, whether it nerves or missing him, she could not sleep. Deciding to take a walk, she slipped out and wandered the halls in the hopes of tiring herself out.

Her mind traveled over the previous few months, how it had all started out on the grounds that night. The feeling of him in her arms for all the wrong reasons dying. How far everything had come. If someone had told her just months ago that she would be unable to sleep without Severus Snape lying next to her, she would have thought them mad.

She had just turned a corner when a hand was thrust over her mouth, an arm around her shoulders and his voice was in her ear. "Good evening."

Pulling her into an alcove, pushing her hair back from her neck, breathing deeply before laying a single, maddeningly light kiss. The cold wall, against her palms, him pressing closer behind her. She tilted her head back against his shoulder.

Her breath, gone in an instant. A low hushed whisper to the arches above, "We're not supposed to see each other."

"As I am well aware," he murmured, shifting behind her, laying his chest against her back. Moving slowly, he picked up his robes, spread them wide and encircled her, pulling her against him. "However, it is not yet midnight."

A smile spread on her face as she turned to face him, staying within the circle of robes. "Skirting the rules, as usual."

"When it suits me," he said dismissively, staring at the base of her neck. Fingers, lightly trailing along her collarbone, dipping into the center, his hand wrapping around her neck, gently holding her as his lips just brushed that place lingering.

Just as Hermione was starting to lose herself in him, the bell began to toll midnight. She started to extricate herself; however, Severus only drew his robes tighter around her and pinned her against the cold stone. Ignoring the bell, he caught her eyes for a second before kissing her deeply.

Somewhere in the middle of things, Hermione managed to whisper, "It's... midnight... bad luck..."

"You believe in such silly Muggle things?" he rasped as took one of her hands and held it high against the wall. She had a grip on the front of his coat so tight he wondered if it would tear soon.

"Severus Snape, step away from her this instant!"

They both startled and turned to see Minerva standing in the hallway, her wand alight and the Marauder's map in her hand. She cast a hard glare at Severus and twitched her wand to the side, indicating that he should step away. She had learned of the interesting list of Muggle traditions, and was obviously taking them very seriously.

"Minerva, you can't possibly..." Severus began.

A knowing grin appeared on Minerva's face as she interrupted, "At least you didn't make me go all the way out to the Quidditch pitch."

Silence stretched as Minerva's grin grew slowly, clearly proud of how she had unnerved him.

The midnight bell tolled the fifth time.

"Yes, Severus. I knew it was you," Minerva said with a slight chuckle. "I let it go because of the things you went through."

A flicker of surprise passed through his eyes as the bell struck seven. Severus scowled, but remained silent.

Hermione miraculously managed to not laugh out loud; however, she couldn't quite hide a strained smile. Severus' eyes slid in her direction and narrowed slightly before moving back to Minerva.

Minerva approached him as he obediently stepped away from Hermione's side.

"Now that I have your attention if you are still in my sight by the time that bell ceases to toll, there will be a high price to pay. Perhaps our earlier discussion regarding first-year Potions? I know you love that class so."

Severus regarded the two witches for a moment, then decided it wasn't worth the battle. "Point taken."

As the bell tolled for the eleventh time, he glanced at Hermione one more time, swiftly turned, and left.

"Pleasure doing business with you, Severus," Minerva called after him. She smiled as he angrily waved his hand back at her before turning the corner.

Hermione grinned. "You knew it was him all this time?"

"Oh, he shared that transgression with you?" Minerva asked. "I didn't know for sure, actually. Only a suspicion; however, the look on his face confirmed my guess."

Hermione looked impressed. "Almost Slytherin."

Minerva chuckled. "Oh, he knew I was bluffing, but his initial shock had already given him away. He's definitely relaxing, though; no chance of getting even a shadow out of him just weeks ago. Make no mistake, Hermione. He's a smart one."

"I know."

"I will share one thing, though," Minerva said thoughtfully. "The smart ones are never dull."

Remus groaned in frustration, "Severus, move once more and this pin will end up in your neck."

"Do it and you'll find yourself waking up next week if you are lucky."

Remus snorted and finished getting the red silk piece that Hermione wanted tucked into Severus' coat. Severus had managed to stop looking disgusted at the sight of it, but had groaned loudly while putting on the cummerbund. When Remus stood back to admire his work, Severus scowled and crossed his arms.

"Not too bad. Hermione is right; you do clean up well," Remus said, ignoring how Severus looked both irritated and awkward at once. "You could stand to cheer up a little, you know."

Severus rolled his eyes.

"Speaking of looks," Remus said. "Thank you."

"For?"

"Severus, you know what for. The potion this month. There is a reason why I don't look... how did you put it before? Like I've been run over by the Knight Bus? The full moon is three days from now, but I'd never know it."

Shaking his head, Severus said, "I didn't want to get your hopes up. It's not finished, so it's weaker than I'd like."

Remus looked impressed. "Really?"

"Yes. One step at a time. There are other enhancements I have in mind, if you're willing to try."

"I am," Remus said immediately.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "You are certainly quick to trust."

Remus contemplated the strange thought of trusting someone like Snape before saying with confidence, "I have no reason to doubt you anymore."

Severus studied him for a moment, as if determining his sincerity, then nodded.

Remus handed him a piece of leather. "Now tie that mess back and let's get you married."

The Quidditch pitch caught the dying sunlight perfectly, reflecting light in a way much stronger than the night before the battle. More alive, the colors holding hope rather than the ominous, soulful emotion of that last evening on the edge. Hermione stood with Tonks and Ginny admiring their work. It had taken an exhausting day of charms to create what Hermione had wanted. She couldn't wait to see the look on Severus' face, but would have to watch from under the stands where she was hidden until it was time for her to appear.

"It's beautiful, Hermione," Ginny said as she reached out to tuck a stray hair back into the style she had battled for hours to achieve.

Hermione smiled. "I hope he likes it. He thinks I've been silly keeping him from everything."

Tonks said after a deep breath, "If he doesn't like it after all the work it took, I'll hex him myself. Leaving the important bits in working order, of course."

"Thanks," Hermione said, laughing.

Ginny crossed to the other side and peered through the fabric facing the grounds. She shushed them, saying, "Here they come."

Tonks moved to look with her and reported, "Yeah, not a clue. Looks kind of frightened actually. Is he usually that pale?"

"Oh, get on then. Leave him alone," Hermione said as she pulled them back.

When Remus and Severus passed into the pitch, the three witches moved to the other side and pushed a banner aside to watch them enter.

"Seriously, Severus, I think you looked better when fighting Voldemort," Remus said with a trace of amusement. "Feel all right?"

Severus only groaned and glanced up at the pitch only long enough to ensure they were on the right path. With his hair tied back, there was nothing to hide the look on his face as he approached the imposing spires of the Quidditch pitch. Remus went ahead and stood at the entrance, which was covered by a hanging tapestry.

"Ready?" Remus asked with a smile.

"As I will ever be."

"Look," Remus said, reaching a hand out to Severus' shoulder. "In a minute, I think you'll see just how much she loves you. If Tonks and I can have just half of what you two have... well, I could be very happy."

Remus then stepped aside, pulling the tapestry with him.

The light's reflection was the first thing that struck Severus, forcing him to shield his eyes. Blues, grays and the rose color of the dying sun all reflected off of a perfect blanket of snow. He stood transfixed, unable to do anything but take in the scene. Not only was the entire Quidditch pitch covered in a thin layer of pure white, there were also snow flurries floating on the evening breeze. Every so often, a surge in the wind spun the falling snow into swirls. They would take on a short life of their own, twisting and turning over before dissipating back into the mix.

While Severus stood, speechless, the audience turned to see his arrival and, more importantly, the expression on his face. Few knew why they were sitting there on a summer day with snow falling all around them; however, no one could deny that it obviously meant something significant.

Remus' voice shook him out of his thoughts. "Go stand up where Neville is. See? Even Harry and Draco are behaving themselves. I'll follow you."

Severus moved slowly and commented in his mind at just how much effort did it take to marry just two people. It seemed like half the school had come, along with a collection of Muggles who were clearly Hermione's family. An older man in particular was watching him intently as he passed by; no doubt Mr. Granger.

"I think he's going to be sick," Draco muttered.

Harry and Neville both snorted and stood with restrained smiles as Severus arrived, while Draco appeared completely innocent. Minerva then approached Severus and shocked him by kissing him on the cheek. She wiped a tear away, then turned to stand at his side, indicating that he should turn as well.

Severus forced himself to look out over the audience, noticing several students and the entire Order in attendance. Hagrid was easy to spot in the rear, holding onto Buckbeak's chain. Buckbeak was in the process of happily pushing his beak around in the snow.

Severus was in shock at what Hermione had done. To remember such things and then act on them was impressive enough. To do it on this scale was amazing. No one had ever done anything so personal for him. It all looked so absolutely stunning and, at the same time, so simple. There were so many arbitrary things about the wedding he had dreaded pertaining to dress, social responsibilities, and customs. In the end, this one gesture turned it all into a personal expression of her love.

He almost didn't see her until Minerva touched his arm. To say she was breathtaking would be an understatement. Everything else fell away except the vision of her as she approached. He forgot all his apprehension at following along with what he thought was silly tradition, of still living in fear of presenting himself as anything but fearsome.

In that singular moment, it was his turn to forget to breathe.

Her father had joined her, and she walked with her hand on his arm. Severus decided he now appreciated Muggle fashion. The dress was simply amazing. When they reached him, her father kissed her on the cheek and gave her hand to Severus. He looked Severus in the eye and nodded before returning to his seat.

Hermione smiled after her father before looking into Severus' eyes.

"You remembered," he whispered as the Ministry official found his mark in a parchment. Another Muggle was there, wearing all black.

Hermione tilted her head slightly, a warm smile spreading on her face as she said, "Someone told me once that it is the accumulation of small acts such as these that express true love."

"Indeed. However, this is no small act. This is..." he said, looking past the Ministry official to where the snow was completely untouched, "... incredible."

She smiled. "Too romantic?"

"I wasn't aware that there was a limit to romance," he said with a grin. "Certainly there must be a book on such things."

The ceremony itself was a blur. The Ministry official spoke of love and life-long dedication to one's partner. Soon he was asking for their wands. Severus instinctively felt uneasy about handing over his wand until Minerva's expression told him he had better obey, and quickly. The official held the two wands together and passed his own wand over them. A strange glow briefly ignited around them, intertwining with itself. The Muggle made a strange sign towards them at that point.

"Severus," the official said, indicating that he should place the ring on Hermione's finger.

"Severus Snape, do you take Hermione Jane Granger to be your wife; to be with none other, to promise to stand by her side, encourage her, love and honor her, be open and honest, bound by your love, for as long as you shall live?"

"I will."

"Hermione Jane Granger, do you take Severus Snape as your husband; to be with none other, to promise to stand by his side, encourage him, love and honor him, be open and honest, bound by your love, for as long as you shall live?"

"I will."

"By the powers granted to me by the Ministry of Magic, I declare you husband and wife," he said and handed them their wands.

Minerva said, "Severus, in Muggle tradition you may kiss the bride."

When Severus only looked at her, Minerva leaned forward and said, "Severus, the bride is Hermione."

Hermione laughed and didn't wait for him to take it upon himself. She reached up and pulled him down to kiss him with as much passion as she dared show in public, especially with her parents watching. She leaned into him, and it was as if they were the only two people in the world. As they kissed, thunderclouds that had waited patiently off in the distance swelled and multiplied across the sky. Like gathering forces, the mass stretched at a long angle as it glided towards the pitch, blocking the sun. The first bolt of lightning struck as the last twilight left the sky, silently illuminating the pitch, throwing sharp shadows across the white of the snow. Tonks glanced over at Remus and smiled as she indicated the looming storm.

When the first cool mist of rain fell, some of those in attendance cast spells to keep dry, while others remained transfixed on Severus and Hermione's kiss. In the space of only a minute, the sun had set and a fierce thunderstorm had moved in, all while the two of them held each other in that ultimate, meaningful kiss of a lifetime. No one said a word, leaving the sound of the rising wind to stand alone. A distant rumble rolled just before another flash lit the grounds once more.

"Couldn't have planned it better myself," he murmured. "Nature even approves."

Taking the opportunity, Severus moved to whisper in her ear, "They are only words, in the end, and nothing more, simple reminders of emotion, moments in time, memories. Things I never thought I'd ever express to anyone, I say to you. I have nothing to offer but the hope that you know what you mean to me, that with everything I say, everything I do, no matter how ordinary, it is a silent reminder of this bond. I swear that you will always be my partner in all things, and most importantly, my best friend. This needs no declaration in front of witnesses, as I am bound to you hopelessly, and never wish to be free."

Hermione stood motionless, ignoring how everyone continued to watch them. Only a moment or two had passed, but it seemed like an eternity. The rain had begun to fall in earnest, carrying the scent of the earth on the night breeze and the thunder reminded her that she was still connected to the rest of the world, rolling, silence, then a distant rumble.

Hermione leaned close to him. "That's all I need. Nothing more. This, don't ever lose this."

With the same fierceness that had been in her voice that night, he swore, "Never."

Final author's note:

Even though Debts was finished in February of 2006, each review is treasured. You'll never know just how much your words meant to me.

To Ariadne: What can I say to express my thanks? Without your help as a beta and friend, this rewrite wouldn't have been possible. I learned more than I could ever dream

about writing and how to "trust that style." That alone is more valuable than anything else to me. This is exactly what I wanted.

It's been quite a journey and a memory I will cherish forever. Thank you all for allowing me and my vision of a lovestruck couple into your lives for a little while.