

Crossing The Line

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On the eve of battle, is it permissible to cross certain lines? Is it forgivable?

Part I

Chapter 1 of 2

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Author's Notes: This plot-bunny escaped through a hole in my hutch (along with several others; I think I've found and duct-taped it shut, but only time will tell), and proceeded to drool all over my feet, snogging my toes mercilessly until it was complete. It is extra-fluffy, yet somewhat angsty from all that saliva. Erm...Enjoy? ~Lotm

I.

"...So spend what time you can with your loved ones, tonight," Albus Dumbledore cautioned the members of the Order. He bowed his snowy head, his aged voice roughened further with regret. "It is probable that some of us will not survive tomorrow's battle."

Lifting his head slightly, he met pairs of eyes around the room, weighing each member, including the newest clutch, inducted among their number ahead of schedule based on the information their top spy had just brought to them. Harry and his friends had to know what was coming, to be prepared for it as best they could be. The Headmaster gazed at them as he spoke again, then met the gaze of the Potions Master last of all. His eyes flicked briefly to the far end of the table and back, nothing blatant, but Severus knew it was deliberate.

"I know you would rather be with your families and loved ones for tomorrow's holiday, but we do not have that option. Do not let anything stand in the way of saying or doing whatever you would regret leaving unfulfilled, this night. An untroubled mind and an unburdened soul can be a source of strength, in the hours to come." The head of the Order of the Phoenix sighed heavily, closing his eyes. "Dismissed."

The meeting broke up. Severus sat in his seat next to the Headmaster's abandoned chair, considering the impact of those words. Feeling the weight of the permission implicit behind them. It was impossible. Unthinkable. And yet...

A whispered argument near the other end of the table heated up into the audible range. "--No, Ron, I don't want to 'not die a virgin' with you! We tried dating. It didn't work. End of subject!"

"But, 'Mione--"

"If you're really desperate, go...go snog Harry!"

The corner of the Potions Master's lips twitched upward a little. The youngest male Weasley choked. "I wouldn't--I'm not--he's off snogging my *sister*!"

"Well, then go find Tonks, or someone! Anyone but me. I'm not going to do a...a pity-shag with you, just because you're desperate to get laid on the eve of battle! I *do* like you, Ron," Hermione added earnestly, "but not in *that* way! You're like a brother to me. And you feel same way, too, if you'd only admit it."

Sighing heavily, the lanky, tall redhead pushed away from the table and exited the kitchen. Clearly forgotten, perhaps even unnoticed, Severus held his breath as the Head Girl was left alone. Bracing her elbows on the scarred table, Hermione dropped her forehead into her palms, muttering to herself. "There's only one man I'd like in *that* way...and *he* can't even tolerate me. Let alone like me."

Images flashed through his mind. Memories of tawny brown eyes sparkling with interest, wide with awe, frowning with thought, gleaming with curiosity. Lips parted and glistening as she dared to speak, the nibbling of her lower lip when she thought, the quick flash of her grin when she got an answer right. Her eagerness, her almost pathetic desire to please, her need to prove herself time and again. Annoying...and yet more than endurable. He'd figured out the truth, finally.

And yet he couldn't act upon it; not when she was a student. His student. It was unthinkable. That was a line not meant to be crossed. And yet...and yet his employer had given him tacit permission to cross that line. Severus wasn't a fool; he knew the moment his treachery was uncovered--and the readiness of the Order for tomorrow's murderous raid would reveal his status as a spy--he was as good as dead. He had several contingency plans already laid to help him escape and survive, but there was always a chance that he would die.

There was a chance that *she* could die.

Say the words. Don't sit here like a bloody lump. Say them! Even if...even if your suppositions are wrong...can you dare let this opportunity to unburden your soul slip from your grasp? Of all the regrets in your miserable life, Severus Snape, you know this one would be the worst, if left unfulfilled!

Licking his dry lips, he drew in a soft breath, then forced himself to say the words.

"I do not dislike you...Hermione."

Her head popped up, her hand sliding to cover her mouth as she squeaked, startled at not being as alone as she had apparently thought. Eyes wide, disconcerted, she stared at him. He forced himself to gaze back, holding her gaze levelly, carefully keeping his expression neutral, calm. Not scowling, nor sneering, nor attempting to frighten her, as he had so many times in the past. In fact, he held himself so still he barely even breathed, letting her see him. Hopefully *really* see him. Not the Potions Master, not one of her teachers, not the head of a rival House...just him. Severus.

It took courage to add more. "In fact, I find your company more than...tolerable."

She stared at him, fingers still clasped over her mouth. Fear crept through him. Fear that he'd misinterpreted all those looks in the past two years, the way she seemed more determined than ever before to catch even so much as a single drop of praise from his lips. The way she'd stare at him during meals in the Great Hall. The way she'd overachieve on her homework. She didn't always stare at him during meals, after all, and she did overachieve in the expectations of her other teachers, too. She did have a natural passion for learning...perhaps he'd made a mistake, thinking her muttered words had concerned him. A horrible, embarrassing mistake...

And yet he couldn't bring himself to leave. Severus sat there, willing the young woman to see him, not as a teacher, but as a man. The possibility that she couldn't, or wouldn't, see him as a man threatened to freeze the blood in his veins. Fear added its shiver, too, fear of her rejection, and his humiliation. Yet he couldn't move. Not while she stared at him. If he didn't move, maybe, just maybe she would think he was serious. Maybe, like a forest creature seeing a hiker paused on the path, she might decide he was safe to approach, if he just held still long enough.

She blinked rapidly, hands finally sliding down from her mouth. He noticed a blush staining her cheeks. Hope slammed his heart in his chest; he didn't *think* she looked repulsed by the idea that he... Well, like was an insipid word, for he indeed found her company more than tolerable, forbidden though it was. He hadn't crossed that line, however. He'd pushed her away, in fact--pushed away the temptation of her, to save both of them from himself. If this wasn't what he hoped she wanted...

Flattening her hands on the table surface, she stared down at them for a moment, then cleared her throat, her expression still a bit dazed from his revelation. "Er...I, um, don't want to die a virgin..."

Heat suffused his face, no doubt turning it as red as the flushing of her own. Her head fell, and she buried her face in her palms with a little squeak of mortification. Severus didn't know whether to gape in amazement, laugh with amusement, crow with triumph, or moan with frustration. Here they sat, the two most brilliant yet clearly the most socially inept denizens of Headquarters...about to cross that forbidden line between teacher and student. Between one generation and the next. One House and the next.

Rising from the table, mindful of his pounding heart and his growing arousal, Severus strode quietly down the length of the kitchen table as she muttered something indistinct but self-chastizing in tone into her palms. Swooping around the corner in that move that would have flared his teaching robes had he been wearing them, but could only flare the calf-length hem of his frock-coat alone, he braced one hand on the table next to her, the other on the back of her chair. For the first time, Severus gave himself direct permission to inhale the slightly herbal, somewhat flowery scent of her hair. When his lungs had filled, he exhaled softly and murmured in her ear,

"Ten points from Gryffindor, for having the gall to use a Weasley chat-up line."

"...Oh, God," she moaned, clearly mortified.

Everything they had said and done until now could be pulled back from, could be salvaged. They could walk away from each other with just this much between them, the subtle admission of their feelings. It might be enough to quell that most serious of all regrets, to have never said anything at all...but not the rest of them. Severus leaned down even closer, closing his eyes to enjoy the tickle of those soft yet still bushy curls against his face. Allowing himself another lungful of her perfume, a mixture of shampoo, bodysoap, and that musky sweetness that said *female*...he crossed that forbidden line.

"But I would be honored to fulfil your request."

"Oh, God!" This time her shudder was from something else besides embarrassment, he was sure of it. He hoped for it. Retreating just enough to give her room to rise, he lifted his hand from the table and offered her his palm. A moment of hesitation, then she lifted her own hand, settling her trembling fingers into the curve of his. Assisting her from her seat, Severus turned to let her go first. She hesitated, not quite looking at him. "Erm...where?"

He didn't have quarters of his own, here at the Black house. Her room in this mausoleum to bad taste in cultural philosophies was likely to be overtaken by a different pair of hormonally driven bodies at the moment, if what had just been said about Potter and the youngest Weasley were true--he didn't even want to contemplate that. And yet they couldn't leave 12 Grimmauld Place; it was just too dangerous to venture beyond the walls of this Unplottable, Secret-Kept house. Not even Hogwarts was as safe as this place; moving from here to the school could also open them up to spying and a possible attack.

Wracking his mind, Severus was struck by inspiration. "The library. No one will be interested in reading, tonight."

Nodding, she licked her lips and released his hand, striding through the doorway ahead of him. Lightening his heart with proof that she was willing to go through with this, to cross that line with him. Padding up the hall, he followed her as she opened the library door and stepped inside. Then stopped, nearly colliding with her, as she paused to stare at the library's occupant.

Albus Dumbledore lowered the pipe he was lighting with the tip of his wand. His aging blue eyes took in the sight of the two of them, both of them blushing, and for a moment Severus could have sworn he saw a hint of a twinkle.

"Ah, Severus, Hermione. Come to have a read, have you? A splendid idea, if you ask me. I've just picked out a good book for myself. I'll leave you to peruse what's available," he added, taking a book from the table next to the chair where he had settled. A polite nod to both as they parted to either side of the door, letting him pass, and he closed the door behind them. A soft click caught Severus' attention.

"Oh, god--do you think *he knows*?" the young witch at his side hissed, embarrassment stiffening her body and pinkening her cheeks.

Severus touched the doorknob, confirming his own suspicions when it didn't turn. "He not only knows, it seems he has locked us in for the night." Glancing at her, he saw her freezing further. "I, for one, am glad. Without his words, earlier, without such tacit, twice-given permission...I wouldn't have had the courage to be with you."

She looked up at him, her light brown eyes wide and wondering enough to drown him, and Severus found himself saying more than he ever thought he would.

"You may not want to die not knowing what it feels like to make love, but I do not want to die not knowing what it feels like ~~to be~~ loved," he confessed. "If you could just...pretend for the night--"

Her fingers flew up to his lips, stopping his words as she shifted closer. "No. No pretense. Nothing but honesty between us."

He liked the word 'us', on her lips, even as a shy near-whisper, but he wasn't sure about not pretending, at least a little. He murmured against her fingertips, "If you cannot bring yourself to--"

"Shh. I...I already do."

Severus froze. That was not a line he had expected her to cross. Her name escaped him in a stunned breath. "Hermione..."

"Severus." She almost stumbled over his name, blushing faintly, shyly. She parted her lips to draw a breath, then licked them. It was the lick that undid him. The glide of that tongue over such rosy flesh drew him down to her, until his own lips brushed against hers. She lifted her chin a little, pressing their mouths closer together. A barely audible moan escaped him when her hands clutched at his shoulder and scalp, digging into his flesh in her urgency. Sliding his arms around her as lips parted and tongues met, he gathered her close against him, close enough that she squeaked when she felt his arousal.

She only stiffened for a moment; to his gratification, Hermione softened against him in the next moment, then actually clung to him. Her hips shied away from his a little when he flexed against her, but she didn't withdraw from his arms; her kisses were sweet and innocent, unpolished, yet undeniably eager. In all things, Hermione Granger was a quick, able student--all things, but rumors of her utter inability to master something as simple as broom-flight, he'd heard--but in this, she was an apt, wholehearted pupil. Eager enough that she slid one of her hands all the way down his back, until she tentatively cupped, then squeezed one of his buttocks.

Severus found himself having to suppress an undignified urge to squeak himself, from the sheer boldness of the move. No, not squeak; groan, dammit. He would groan, which wasn't so undignified.

He definitely groaned as she cupped his backside with both hands. Breaking off the kiss, Severus put a few inches of space between them. It was a struggle to get enough oxygen into his lungs. She was willing to return to his embrace, by the way she strained against the gentle pressure of his hands on her arms. That simple, physical act of yearning meant more to him than mere words. Yet there were certain things that had to be attended to, before they could continue.

"Hermione..." It was an awkward conversation to initiate. "We need to discuss a few things, before we continue," he explained. Hesitating a moment, he stroked her arms through her shirtsleeves with his thumbs, then plunged into what he had to ask. "Are you taking any contraceptive draughts, or a preventative charm?"

Red suffused her face. Still, she cleared her voice and spoke evenly, doing her best to ignore her embarrassment. "Erm, no. It's the whole I'm-a-virgin-and-therefore-hadn't-thought-of-doing-this thing. I haven't exactly had enough warning to think of that, let alone study and practice the charm since I learnt it back in first year. Or to prepare the potion in advance. But...I don't think I'm, erm...fertile, right now."

"I thought as much. I do not have the potion at hand...but I can cast the charm for you," he offered. His chest and throat tightened, and he cleared it. "--Given the danger I'll be in, tomorrow, I'd rather not... It wouldn't be acceptable to put that kind of burden on you. I am a traitor as far as our enemy will be concerned, the moment he realizes I won't be fighting on his side of the fray."

"I'm just as liable to die as you; I'm one of the two best friends of the Boy Who Lived," she murmured back, ducking her head a little so that she could press her cheek to his collarbone. "Take me out, and Harry might go to pieces. And yet, if the battle does go wrong--"

"Shh. The war will come soon enough," Severus found himself comforting and quieting her, enfolding her in his arms. It felt strange, and yet good, to simply embrace her. "Leave it to come at its own pace; it has no place in the here and now."

She held onto him, nestled in his arms with her temple tucked under his chin. As idyllic as the pose was, it couldn't be held forever. Severus wasn't surprised when she stirred after a minute. "If we both somehow survive..."

"You will return to being my student for another three months. What is understandable and even forgivable on the eve of a terrible battle is not quite as forgivable in calmer, saner times."

"But, after the N.E.W.T.s?" she asked him, tipping her head back. That mostly just brushed her mouth against the underside of his jaw, above the collar of his coat. Severus closed his eyes as he felt her lips nibbling on his flesh.

"If you are still interested in me, by then..."

Neither of them could make any promises, and they knew it. Not with a horrific battle looming on the horizon, and both of them prime targets. Kissing his jawline one last time, she stepped back, clearing her throat. "Cast the charm, then. And I'll, erm, Transfigure the sofa."

Nodding, Severus stepped back, extracting his wand from his sleeve. Calming himself, he focused on the goal of the charm, to prevent conception in his partner. This was an important step, in this particular charm; the witch who allowed her lover to cast it on her was offering a great deal of trust in his ability to empower the charm correctly. Raising his wand hand, he concentrated on preventing her from having a child, which he didn't want...but the thought of *her* child, he discovered, wasn't quite the same as the thought of a child.

She would be a wonderful mother, he knew instinctively. Far better than my own--she'd stand up to any man, would never let him abuse her, or her son..Focus, Severus, he chided himself, blinking and reordering his thoughts. She isn't supposed to be pregnant with a child, in her last term at school. Nevermind with your child. You don't like...dunderheads. He'd been about to say 'children', but found himself being more honest than that in his thoughts. But...no child of yours and hers would ever be a dunderhead, unless something went terribly wrong. And the odds of it being a Squib would be astronomically low; I figured out long ago that fresh genetic material is necessary every few generations, to produce truly gifted children--both Albus and the Dark Lord are half-bloods, and they're the two most powerful wizards I know...

Again, his hand hesitated. Closing the eyes, he did his best to banish such absurdities from his thoughts. He had to focus on the spell--

Fingers closed over his own, sliding and folding over his wand-hand. "It's alright, Severus."

"No, it isn't." Opening his eyes, he looked down into her own. "You trust me enough to cast this charm, Hermione, and I have to get it right--"

"You don't have to get anything right," she murmured, lowering his wand hand with gentle pressure. "It's right after...that time. The odds of my c-conceiving are low. The fact that you want to get it right enough for me is enough," she murmured. "That you...that you understand how much I trust you. The fact that you're also unsure is, well, flattering in a way. I mean, I know you cannot abide children, and--"

"--Idiots," Severus corrected her firmly, covering her fingers with his own for a moment before removing them gently. "I cannot abide idiots; I am certainly not patient enough to train them. You are not a dunderhead, Hermione; far from it. Unless there was something grievously wrong with the intermingling of our particular genetics, a child created by us would not be an imbecile. But I will not leave you alone to raise that child."

He raised his wand again. She covered his lips with her fingers briefly. "Then don't die. It's that simple."

Her overstated simplicity made him snort. "More like it's that complicated. It is not my intent to die, Hermione, I assure you of that. It is my intent, however, to leave no loose ends in this matter, simply to be thorough in covering the possibilities." Severus raised his wand again, his mind finally clear and focused. "*Fertilamora!* ...There. If you do conceive despite my charm, it will be a matter of fate."

"...Like our being here, tonight," she murmured, moving close to him again.

"Yes." They'd crossed enough lines, tonight; Severus threw in a touch of honesty for free. The part of him that wanted to scream he was her teacher, she was his student, this was illegal and immoral, he threw into a closet, barring and warding its mental door against opening for the rest of the evening.

Lifting his hand to her cheek, he touched the smooth softness of her skin. She swayed closer, enjoying his touch. It was an unusual sight; most people flinched from touching him. Even Albus didn't do so gratuitously. Severus felt the urge to touch her back, in ways where clothing would interfere. Being vertical wouldn't be overly comfortable, either.

"I believe you were going to Transfigure us a bed?"

She smiled wryly. "If you can put up with my 'foolish wand-waving'."

He snorted again, but dropped his hand as she turned away. Drawing her own wand, she concentrated and flicked her wrist at the sofa centered before the crackling hearth. It widened and squashed down, forming...a twin-bed? Neat and clean, with a pillow, crisp white sheets, and a greenish, patterned coverlet that resembled the upholstery of the original furnishing, it was as narrow as any student four-poster back at the school.

Sighing, Severus lifted his wand. He might make a show of 'detesting foolish wand-waving', but he wasn't a slouch in the Transfigurations department, himself. A flick of his own wrist, and the bed widened to the width of a queen, much more adequate for their needs. When she glanced over her shoulder at him in inquiry, he found himself quipping dryly, "...How many times have I told you in the classroom to ensure that your workspace is adequate for your needs?"

She blushed. He enjoyed it, knowing his mouth had curved up in a rare display of real humor. It seemed to transfix the girl, making her study him intently. She even lifted her hand back to his lips again, this time tracing one corner. "You look better, when you smile for real. More handsome, and more approachable."

He opened his mouth to argue the point, that the less approachable he was, the less people were likely to realize where his true loyalties might lie. Her phrasing caught up with him. "...*More* handsome? I know what I am, Hermione. A bitter, unattractive, aging--"

"Shh. Tonight," she murmured, lifting up on her toes so she could brush her lips against his, "you are a compassionate, attractive, handsome wizard just beginning to enter your prime."

"Compassionate!" he scoffed, seizing on the first in her list of absurdities.

"You're compassionate enough to make sure I don't die an unloved virgin," she pointed out, arching her brow at him before he could denigrate her other choices. "And I do find you attractive. You're not *Witch Weekly* beautiful, but you are handsome in your own saturnine, Byron-like way. And you're definitely only just entering your prime as far as wizarding lifespans are concerned. Now, shut up and kiss me."

Severus felt his brows lift at that. He thought about chastising her for her bossiness, but she took advantage of his distraction and kissed him again, a wobbly bump of her lips against his, since he was just tall enough it wasn't easy for her to reach his mouth with her own. Dipping his head, Severus met her next effort halfway; his hands caught and cupped her waist before she could rise up on her toes again as he did so. She wasn't small, but he was tall, and if he didn't meet her halfway, it made for an awkward kiss. But when he did meet her halfway, it was a near-perfect fit. There was something to be said for the fine art of compromise, he supposed.

Something delicious, in fact. Virgin or not, her tongue was as adept at kissing and caressing as it was at questioning and answering. It was her hands, he realized, that were a little tentative. She swept them over his chest, gingerly palming his pectoral muscles through the layers of his clothes, then stopped awkwardly at his buttons, as if not sure she was supposed to unfasten them just yet. As much as he was enjoying their kiss, this was something else they needed to discuss. Pulling back, Severus cupped her face in his hands when she swayed closer for more.

"...Hermione," he breathed, catching himself before he could say the far more habitual 'Miss Granger', "if this is your first time, then I will teach you whatever you wish. But you will have to do something for me."

She blinked up at him, focusing on his face. "Er...what?"

"Pay attention to the lesson at hand. When you have a willing partner in your arms, and you have both agreed that the object is to make love, wouldn't you think that disrobing your partner be *permissible*?" he asked her dryly, glancing down at the hands resting on his chest. "And, in fact, automatically encouraged?"

"Er, well...I didn't want... You always seem so stuffy and untouchable in these robes," she mumbled, blushing. "I didn't want to offend you if I..."

"What do you want?" Severus prompted her as she stopped speaking. "Gryffindors don't lose their nerve. What do you want to do to me?"

"R-Rip your clothes from your body."

Lust spiked in his body. *She wants to rip my clothing off! She's that eager for me?* No one was that eager for him; he knew his own reputation. And yet he didn't believe she was lying to him. Licking his lips, Severus managed to remark dryly, "It's high-quality wool, Hermione; I doubt it would rip all that easily. But you may certainly unfasten my clothes, if that is your wish. Provided I am permitted the same liberty with your own, of course."

She trembled. Her teeth nibbled her lower lip, indecisive. An unsteady smile curved her mouth as she stared at the black-clad chest under her fingers. "I've always wondered what you looked like...um, without your coat and teaching robes. Just in your shirtsleeves." She started to unfasten the first button, up by his throat, then giggled. At the arch of his brow, she waved her hand vaguely. "It's, erm, a Muggle thing. Tom Cruise in his shirtsleeves and little else. It's in one of his movies... Um, there's a scene where he's in his skivvies and a white shirt, socks and sunglasses, and that's all...but I--" she giggled again, "--I'm sorry, but I just cannot imagine you sliding across a polished floor, singing loudly to a rock tune. You're far too dignified for that."

Severus held back the urge to mutter an affirming expletive. Really, comparing him to a Muggle actor! And laughing about it. But...she had a nice laugh. And she hadn't been laughing at *him*, per se. Severus held himself still as she worked her way down the dozen buttons that fastened the front of his frock coat. She continued to explain her thoughts as she worked.

"He's about your age, I think; he's got a bigger nose, and I think he's got a really cute grin, but then I've never seen yours, so I wouldn't know how it compares. I can imagine that when you do actually let loose with a real smile, you'd be stunning to see."

"If I am ever stunning when I smile, Hermione, it will be because everyone around me has fainted from the shock of it."

She laughed. He'd made it a jest, a very dry-voiced jest, and she'd not only comprehended it, but had laughed. There was something to be said for intelligence. Of course, he was half serious, too; odds were if he ever did relax enough to grin--if the world ever righted itself long enough for him to feel like grinning, presuming he survived tomorrow--everyone who knew him would be shocked senseless.

Unfastening the last button, she hesitated. "Um, do your sleeves need unbuttoning, too?"

"No."

Nodding, she plucked at the folds of his coat, pushing the edges up over his shoulders. The wonder in her face as she ran her gaze over the white linen of his high-collared shirt soothed his uncertainties. There were many reasons why he wore such formal clothes: to assert his authority; to keep warm in the chilly depths of the castle dungeons; because the cut was elegant and flattering; but baring the body that lay underneath was another matter. The appreciation he saw in her eyes as he tucked his hands behind his back to free his arms from the sleeves warmed him.

And then she played her fingers across his chest. With his hands still caught in the sleeves of his coat, Severus felt peculiarly vulnerable, even a little helpless; he couldn't prevent her from touching him, from sliding her palms over his ribs, from grazing her fingertips over his nipples. She inhaled sharply when she realized the little nubs were hard with desire. Freeing his hands, ignoring the untidy fall of his coat on the floor, he lifted his fingers to the buttons of her cardigan. Starting at the bottom, since the topmost ones strained over her curves and might be too intimate for her to feel his touch so directly, so soon, Severus carefully and methodically unfastened the pearlescent buttons.

One at a time as she watched his fingers working, he slipped each circle free of the soft blue knit. Severus noted carefully how her breathing grew unsteady, the closer his knuckles came to brushing against her breasts. His fingers grew increasingly unsteady, too; as deft as they were at handling various ingredients, this was more than just saying he was going to make love to his student. This was actually, physically crossing that line.

His knuckles brushed against her curves. She inhaled, holding her breath as his hand slowed, returned, then pressed gently, intentionally against her cloth-covered flesh. Only the backs of his fingers as he unfastened the last two buttons, but it was a deliberate touch all the same. He could feel his own breath catching in his throat; in fact, it was almost as if he could feel such softness all the way to his groin.

"Breathe, Hermione," he reminded her quietly. She let the air escape her lungs in a rush, then gulped in another breath, holding it again. He smiled slightly as he peeled the edges of the smoky blue cardigan away from the white blouse she wore underneath. "More than once, if you please. That's how breathing works."

That made her laugh. She choked on it, then snorted, but there was a laugh buried under her efforts. Her hands quickly abandoned his chest in favor of covering her nose and mouth, though it was too late to smother such an undignified sound. Brushing her arms back down, he pulled the cardigan off, dropping it on the floor behind them. It seemed appropriate to cover his clothing with hers. And only fair; in just a little while longer, he would be covering her body with his. Returning his hands to her waist, he decided to not press things too quickly. They had all night; he wasn't likely to be summoned into the battle as a Death Eater until it was time to actually fight. Gathering the masked and robed wizards and witches any sooner than that invited the risk of being ambushed by the Aurors, and most unfortunately, the Dark Lord was not a fool.

But now wasn't the time to think about such things. Lowering his head, he brushed his lips against hers. He was supposed to be teaching her, so Severus said, "And now we kiss again, between layers."

"...You make this sound like we're snogging an onion," she murmured as she pulled back after a moment, smiling.

"I should hope my breath isn't that bad," he muttered back, worried but not wanting to be blatant about it. He hadn't exactly had an opportunity to rummage in the nearest bathroom cupboard for a breath freshening potion..

"No, you taste like coffee," she agreed. "It's a little bitter, but not nearly as bad as an onion."

He supposed it technically wasn't an insult, though he could have wished for something a little more flattering than such blunt honesty. But she had requested it, so he would give what honesty he could to her. "You, on the other hand, taste like butterbeer."

Hermione rolled her eyes in a brief, pained look. "Mrs. Weasley has a gimlet eye; legally we may be adults now, but she still treats us like children."

"I assure you I will not make that mistake, tonight." Lifting her chin with a knuckle, Severus reclaimed her lips for a kiss. It was hard to believe the mouth that could spew a thousand answers to a thousand questions could be so sweetly silenced with something as simple as a kiss. A pity he couldn't apply the technique in class...but he couldn't kiss a student. Couldn't...

He almost stopped, disconcerted, but reminded himself that they had already crossed the line of saying they would make love, and the line of touching, the line of kissing, and now, their toes had nudged firmly across the line of undressing. He did not want to turn back, though it wasn't easy giving himself permission to go further into the realm of the forbidden. And yet, as he drew her body against his, felt her soft curves against his hard muscles, he couldn't deny she wasn't a child anymore. This was definitely the body of an adult in his arms.

She felt good, fitting well against the proportions of his own frame. Severus couldn't remember another embrace that felt quite this perfect, before. Perhaps it was just the emphasis of the moment, the tragic romance of two people trying to find a scrap of pleasure and affection on the eve of a terrible battle, but there was something solidly real about the way the two of them embraced. Wishing it would last forever, Severus instead made himself move on to the next point in the evening's seduction; the removal of their shirts. While they kissed, while his hands were behind her back, he worked to unfasten his cuffs so that she wouldn't have to deal with them herself. That made her draw back from their kiss with a puzzled look. Puzzled, but thankfully trusting.

Bringing his wrists into view, he finished unfastening the material. "We should remove footwear as well, before it becomes an impediment."

A smile curved her mouth. "That's kind of funny. Shoes, feet, *pedis*, *impediment*..."

That was clever of her, Severus had to admit; she had a quick mind to pick up on the root-word connection. Letting himself smile, however made her blink at him. Defensively, he asked, "What?"

Her mouth curved again. "You *do* have a nice smile. It's, erm, not quite up to stunning-strength, but it's definitely nice."

"Nice, Hermione, is a four-letter word to man. As is *cute*," he mock-growled. "Pick another adjective, or suffer the consequences."

Thankfully, she played along with him, affecting a mock-considering look. "Okay...how about 'sexy'? Oh, wait, that's a four-letter word, too. I guess I can't call you 'sexy' after all."

"Impertinent woman."

She grinned. "Eleven and five letters respectively, Professor. You'll have to try bett--"

He covered her mouth with a finger, silencing her. "Severus. Not that. We've left *that* part of our lives on the other side of the library door, tonight."

"Sorry...Severus." She ducked her head, finishing the unbuttoning of her own blouse cuffs, then toed off her shoes, leaving her standing in socks, trousers, blouse, and whatever underthings he would soon be briefly acquainted with, before tossing them aside.

Unfortunately, he couldn't do the same with his own footwear; his boots, black dragonhide suitable for withstanding potion spills and even a dropped cauldron or two, were not meant to be toed off quite so casually as that. Stepping away from the door, Severus caught her wrist, pulling her gently towards the bed in the middle of the room. Drawing his wand with his other hand, he stoked the fire with a casual charm, then turned and sat on the edge of the broad, low bed. Crossing leg over knee, he tugged one boot off, then the other, setting the boots under the edge of the bed so that they wouldn't be a tripping hazard.

A glance up showed her lower lip caught between her teeth, her brow creased faintly in hesitation. "Erm...would you mind terribly if I nipped out to, er, visit the lavatory quickly?"

She's going to leave. She's changed her mind; she's using this as an excuse to go elsewhere... Oh, shut up, you paranoid old fool. If she does, then she does. What of it? ...She'll break your heart, that's what. So? You'll be dead by the end of tomorrow, most likely. You won't have long to suffer, if that's the case. Just act like she's coming back. You can always hope she hasn't changed her mind.

Nodding, he murmured, "That's probably a good idea. You go first, then I'll go. We won't want any interruptions, afterwards."

Blushing, she headed toward the door. He remembered Albus' spell at the last moment, but it clicked open under the twist of her hand. So it was just a temporary thing. Or maybe the door had simply been stuck of its own accord, and his employer would have his guts for guitar-strings for seducing his student, tonight. This was an old house, after all. Sticking doors and knobs were part and parcel of the 'atmosphere'.

Still, it took her an inordinate amount of time to return.

Severus forced himself to trust that she would return. Peeling off his socks, he tucked those into his boots, then made sure all the curtains were drawn. Not that anyone could really see into an Unplottable house protected additionally by the Fidelius Charm. And the library was located at the side of the house, not up at the front where someone from the Order would might approach to enter. But the curtains were already drawn for the evening. Stoking the fire again to make sure the air would be comfortable, he debated turning down the covers now, or later. He didn't want to scare her away with the sight of sheets blatantly turned down in invitation.

Would she take that as a reassurance that I want to be doing this with her? Or would she take it as the sign of a sex-hungry maniac who cannot wait to get her onto those sheets? I don't want to fumble with them, later. I don't want to make love to her on the coverlet, either. I want her first time to be memorable. In a good way. A positive way. A let's-do-this-again-as-soon-as-I'm-no-longer-your-student-because-I-enjoyed-it-that-much-the-first-time way.

That was a lot of pressure to put on a mere man, ensuring that a first-time was a good time. Severus prayed he would be up to the task of introducing her to the joys of their bodies. He prayed that she would come back soon, too. Uncomfortable with waiting, he decided to turn down the covers just to give himself something to do; he did it by hand, too, to stretch out the time while waiting for her to return.

When he did so, an awful expanse of white met his gaze. *That is scaring me, just to look at it like that. Snowy white sheets look nice, but they're intimidating. Besides, she's a young woman; no doubt she expected to be deflowered on a bed scattered with bloody rose petals, or something.*

Not that he'd conjure such a thing. Except as he paced around the bed, trying to figure out how to make it look less...white...she really was taking forever. With nothing better to do, Severus sighed roughly and pulled out his wand again. Practicing silently a couple times, since the charm was hardly in his common repertoire--Severus was more inclined to blast roses apart out of bitterness at his circumstances than summon them from the aether in tenderness--he cast the spell.

A blizzard of pink and red petals fell across the bed. They perfumed the air with the sweet, heady scent of roses, but looked far too romantic to him. Far too blatant. He wanted this moment to be romantic, but not *look* romantic, if that made any sense. Eyeing the petals, he narrowed his eyes, concentrated, and cast a colour-changing charm. Magic sparkled across the petals, sizzling them from rose-red to snow-white. Now only the faint, creamy-yellow base of each snowy petal provided any colour. A subtle play of shadows cast by each curved surface added to the visual texture. Yet it would take more than a glance to tell that anything had been done to the bed. Perfect.

The door opened. Turning to face the intruder, Severus relaxed when he saw it was her. She didn't come in all the way; that made his heart thump in his chest. It took him a moment to hear the meaning behind her words. He expected her to have changed her mind...but that wasn't what she was saying.

"Um...I'm going to take a quick shower. I won't be long, I promise," she added as his mind struggled to process the word *shower*. "I just want to, er, smell nice, and be all clean and everything for...anyway, fifteen, twenty minutes, tops. If you don't mind?"

She wants to be clean for me. She wants to make a good impression for me. He blinked as her meaning registered. *She's almost putting enough effort into this for it to be a date!*

Dating Hermione.

The breath in his throat lodged for a moment, as he imagined what it would be like to just anticipate being free to date her, to dress for her pleasure, to escort her to a restaurant, to spend hours discussing anything and everything their two quick minds could conjure for a conversation. Severus suddenly realized he had a lot more to live for, beyond tomorrow, than just the prospect of maybe being alive in a Dark-Lord-free world. "That sounds like a good idea. I will do the same, in the spare bathroom. I will also ward this door, to keep anyone else out while we're gone."

"What will be the password, if I get back before you do?" she asked him.

Severus could only think of one word, studying her. Bushy hair, plain white blouse and denim trousers, pleasant but not spectacular features, and modest curves. "Beautiful".

She blushed, as he suspected she would. Letting her exit first, Severus quickly Transfigured his boots into slippers. A bit of magic on the door to guard it from intrusion, and he made his way to the first floor bathroom, suspecting she would use the one on the second floor, where the room she was sharing with Miss Weasley was located. She met him on the stairwell at the first floor landing, looking a little breathless, even abashed.

Here it comes.. He braced himself for rejection. She offered an object to him instead. Frowning, he took it, speaking softly to keep the portraits from waking. "What is this?"

"My toiletry kit. I'll borrow Ginny's. I know you don't stay here," she whispered back, "and that soap Mrs. Weasley put in the bathroom dries my hands horribly whenever I use it; I can't imagine using it on my whole body. I thought you might like some of the stuff I prefer."

Images and thoughts clashed in his brain. Her delicate feminine toiletries. The herbal, flowery scent of her hair on *his* body. Her body, naked and slippery with lather. His hands doing the lathering. Somehow, he managed to get a coherent noise through the images and urges threatening his self-control. It was even polite. "Thank you."

She flashed him a smile. "It's all self-explanatory; just read the bottles!"

Hurrying back up the stairs, she left him with the small, zippered black bag in his hands. At least it wasn't covered in a garish print, such as brightly-hued flowers. If anyone caught him wandering the halls with a flower-printed toiletry bag in his hands, he'd have to decide between Obliviating them and outright murder. Probably just Oblivate; the Order couldn't afford to lose a single member between now and the attack planned for tomorrow.

Locking himself in the first-floor bathroom, he used the facilities, then unzipped the case. The contents were Muggle. Severus warily poked one of the plastic bottles with a fingertip. *She actually uses this...stuff...on her body?*

Body. Naked. Wet. Lathered. Smells nice...and she probably knows what these things smell like, so if you use Molly Weasley's soap, she'll know you refused her 'gift'...

Sighing in resignation, Severus read the bottles, stripped his clothes, and took the relevant unguents into the shower with him. The water pressure was lousy compared to the plumbing at Hogwarts, but at least it was hot. Squinting through the spray at the bottles, he grunted to himself. *Ridiculous. Body Wash? Shampoo For Oily Hair. Conditioner: Guaranteed To Tame Unmanageable Hair! As if she'd managed to do that in all the years I've known her...*

Well, that wasn't entirely true; the longer her hair had grown, the less bushy and more ringlet-like her hair had become. And it wasn't quite as frizzy as it used to be, though that could've been a symptom of the length. He had to admit she'd done a beautiful job with wrestling it into that sleek, sophisticated style back in the year of the Triwizard

Tournament...

...And what in Merlin's name is methylisothiazolinone? What makes it different from methylchloroisothiazolinone, other than the 'chloro' bit? Sighing in disgust at the peculiarities of Muggles, Severus grabbed a washrag and applied the bloody 'body wash', lathering face so that he could cast his usual shaving charm with the minimum of chafing.

The results, when he applied a Drying Charm and stepped out of the tub several minutes later, were unnerving.

His hair. His hair was soft. It was silky. It was NOT greasy. It had a sheen reminiscent of black rabbit fur, but it didn't hang in stringy clumps about his face like it normally would. *Oh, dear god--the Dark Lord would kill me for this one change alone* Severus thought in despair, closing his eyes against the image in the mirror. *Especially if he ever learned I made my hair so...attractive...because of some bloody Muggle cleansing products! Damn, he'd better die soon--I've got to figure out what goes into this stuff, and replicate it the proper wizarding way...*

His skin felt different, too. None of that dry tightness that bespoke of soap-residue. Instead his flesh felt softer and smoother under his fingertips. A tentative sniff at a forearm told Severus he now smelled pleasant, fragrant with more herbs than the usual jumble of potions ingredients that usually clung to his skin. It was the conditioner that smelled the most feminine, though at least chamomile wasn't too flowery a scent. It had a large number of useful potions properties, after all.

Muggle toiletries. Hmph. Opening his eyes, he stared at his hair again. It floated around his face, picking up a little volume, softening the lines of stress that had begun to age his face. He actually didn't look bad. *Well, maybe they do have their uses. But if I can figure out what 'methylchloroisothiazolinone' is, along with all the other jumble of words, I'm sure I can come up with an even better wizarding equivalent.*

But that was a thought for Later, the kind of Later that came after the death of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. An optimistic thought. Albus was constantly cajoling him to think in optimistic terms, mumbling something about magic being just as much about the thought as about the wand-waving and the word-chanting. Or as much alike as his ingredient-chopping and cauldron-stirring.

A brief use of the toothbrush and Muggle paste--cloyingly minty; he preferred something with a touch of cinnamon--ensured his breath was fresh, not coffee-laden. A cleaning charm on his clothes freshened and readied them for wear. As presentable as he could be, Severus exited the room with her toiletry bag tucked under his arm. There were noises coming from one of the bedroom doors he passed; Molly and Arthur, from the sound of it. He winced. They, it seemed, were either doing their best to console each other on the eve of battle, or they were deliberately trying to make his future life as a teacher a living hell with the conjuration of a ninth redheaded brat. Hurrying away from the door before his mind could make sense of the words Arthur was moaning--*Bear it? Ferret? Wear it? No, no, no, don't think of that!*--he padded quietly down the stairs and unlocked the wards on the library door.

She wasn't inside, yet. The room smelled of rosepetals and a hint of woodsmoke; it was now pleasantly warm from the fire. Resetting the wards, Severus tucked her shoes under the Transfigured bed next to his own, then draped his frock coat and her cardigan over one of the wingback chairs that used to flank the sofa, and now flanked the bed. He smoothed a few wrinkles in the bedding, rearranged a couple of rose petals, and checked the curtains one more time, just in case. This time, his fidgeting was less stressful. If Hermione was willing to bathe, and not just to bathe, but to loan her toiletries to him, then she expected to be back in here with him. She expected to complete the progress to consummation begun with her muttered words at the kitchen table. Perhaps it was not an inevitable fate, but it had begun, and he wanted to complete the process with her.

The wards on the door tingled, and she stepped inside. She, too, had resumed her original clothes, denim jeans and white blouse, cuffs rolled to her elbows. Bare feet, too; she'd taken off her socks. He spotted them rolled up in her hand. Aside from the material and the quality--her shirt was cotton, her trousers denim; his shirt was linen, his trousers wool--they were more or less on equal footing. Perhaps she had an extra garment, but visually they were equal.

It was one more crossing of the line dividing them; Severus almost never let himself be caught in his shirtsleeves by any of his students. Shirtsleeves were casual. Shirtsleeves were informal. Shirtsleeves were *not* intimidating. In fact, they implied intimacy, or at least an open invitation to relax in that person's presence.

Strange how he didn't feel very relaxed at the moment, looking at her in her own shirtsleeves.

Part II

Chapter 2 of 2

On the eve of battle, is it permissible to cross certain lines? Is it forgivable? Hermione and Severus attempt to find out...

II.

Drawing his wand as she stepped away from the closed door, he reset the wards, adding an additional layer to prevent anyone from hearing what was about to transpire. Setting the slim shaft on the end-table that had stood between armchair and sofa, and now served as an impromptu nightstand, Severus watched her approach, her expression somewhat diffident as she dug her hand into her pocket. She drew something out and offered it to him.

"Um...here. You'll want to have this set out, too."

Bemused, Severus accepted the object. It was a small, clear vial, about an ounce in size at most, and etched with tiny runes. It had a wire-strung cork that was etched with more runes, and it was empty. Squinting at them, Severus realized it was enchanted with spells that were self-activating. A stasis spell, and a collection spell. "What is this for?"

She mumbled something indistinct.

"Speak clearly, please."

"My...my virgin's blood. I thought...you know, if either of us survive...well, *someone* will have a use for it. I remember the lecture from my first year--um, when Madame Pomfrey gathered all the witches together to talk about...feminine stuff. That was one of the things she talked about, how a witch shouldn't squander her first time in a moment of careless heat. She then told us where to go to learn how to make little collection bottles, and how expensive it was, and how a smart witch saved it and sold it to an apothecarist's for a tidy little sum...and I, er..."

His lips twitched upward involuntarily. "...And you, being the overachiever you are, researched the spells and made the bottle."

"And carried it around with me ever since," she shrugged. "Well, sort of. I just threw it into my toiletry kit and left it there. I took it out tonight, in case you didn't notice it and it shattered on the floor, or something. I'm lucky I even remembered it."

Uncorking the tiny bottle, Severus turned and set it on the side table, next to his wand.

She moved up beside him, bending over the bed for a better look at the sheets. "Oh! These are rose-petals..."

He turned to see her scooping up a few of them into her palm. They trickled back to the bed through her fingers. Severus cleared his throat. "They seemed appropriate."

"Wow. Severus Snape, closet romantic." She lifted another handful, smiling indulgently.

Now, *that* was uncalled-for, in his opinion. Shifting behind her, Severus caught her hips, pulling her back against him. She squeaked as his loins bumped her buttocks. "I assure you, I am *not* a romantic man. It just...it seemed appropriate for a first time. I am more accustomed to incinerating rose petals, or brewing them in potions, than scattering them across my bed."

She leaned back against him. Severus told himself the shifting of his arms to encircle and embrace her was simply necessary to keep both of them balanced. "Still," she murmured, closing her eyes and tipping her head back, "it's a very romantic thing to do...and now I wish I'd thought of it first. It makes the recipient feel just a little bit...loved."

Her voice trailed to a whisper, her cheeks tinting a little. Severus drew a breath to reply; the meaning behind her words froze the air in place before it could escape. *I wish I'd thought of it first...makes the recipient feel loved...*

A hundred or so rose petals just didn't seem like enough, anymore. His own wand was out of easy reach, but she'd tucked hers into a pocket of her jeans. Drawing it, he flicked his wrist. "*Rosifolacea blanca*"

Magic sparkled over the bed in a cloud of glittering blue-white light; it coalesced and formed a fluttering rain of fat, white, scented snowflakes. He couldn't give her promises, couldn't even give her words, but he could give her this. He'd said he wanted a facsimile of being loved from her, but if he were truthful, he needed to express love in some small part, too. And how her friends would laugh, and his colleagues stare at him, if they ever knew. *Maybe I am a closet romantic...but I'd rather lick my own genitals in public like a dog than admit it.*

She appreciated the spell. He could tell from the shine in her eyes as she twisted in his arms, facing him. It was also easy to tell from the way she twined her fingers in his hair, pulling his mouth down into range for a kiss. *Nubile young woman in arms. Don't think, you dunderhead--act!*

Severus could be a man of action, when the circumstances demanded it. Pulling her against him, he cupped her hips, then her buttocks. She squeaked when he lifted her into him, but given how enthusiastically she was returning each open, deep, tonguing kiss, he didn't think she minded a little assertiveness on his part. From the way she tugged on his hair, tilting his head to a better angle, she apparently didn't mind a little assertiveness on her own part, too. The kiss ended when she tugged his head back and pried open the buttons of his collar, then feasted on the skin she bared.

Lust slammed through him when she suckled on the hollow at the base of his throat; he could feel the play of her tongue and the scrape of her teeth all the way down to his scrotum. He cupped her hips and ground his erection into her through the placket of his trousers, growling with arousal--dammit, he was supposed to be teaching her about sex, not suffering under some bizarre sexual extra-credit attack! The moment that sub-thought fluttered through his mind, Severus choked on a laugh. She pulled back, a quizzical look in her light brown eyes. That look changed to a gaping one. It took Severus a moment to figure out why; mainly he succeeded because of the ache in his cheeks.

He was grinning, that was why. She looked stunned, staring at him in shock. Severus threw back his head and laughed again, this time without restraint. As soon as he could breathe again, he pulled her into his arms again, hugging her for a moment, then released her and started unfastening the buttons of her Muggle blouse. Dropping to one knee, sinking onto his heel, he tugged on the shirttails of her blouse, but they were firmly entrenched inside the waistband of her jeans. She squeaked when he quickly unbuttoned and unzipped those, too, but he didn't pull them down, just pulled loose the fabric of her blouse and unfastened the last two buttons.

Gripping the edges, he pulled them apart, and stared at the dimple of her navel, revealed by the unfastened placket. It was framed by the vee of denim, and the edges of her blouse, with an expanse of soft, smooth, feminine skin above...and the lace-trimmed waistband of a pair of silky white knickers below. Somehow he doubted she'd started out with silk-and-lace knickers. She seemed more of a plain, comfortable cotton type to him. Still, Transfigured or not, Severus admired the packaging. The edge of the lace came up almost to the bottom of her navel. He'd never really considered navels all that interesting, but hers did look delectable, presented this way.

Leaning forward, he licked his lips, then licked the rim of that dimple of flesh. She squeaked, then giggled, touching his hair tentatively. A glance upward showed enough of the blouse had parted to give him a beautiful view of her breasts. The size of apple-halves, they, too, had been dressed in white silk-and-lace, a perfect frame for her flesh. Rising up off of his heel, he found he was the perfect height for nuzzling her breasts with nose, brow and cheeks. The contrast of scratchy lace and soft cotton tantalized him; lifting himself a little higher on his knee, he traced first his tongue along the edge of one cup, then his tongue, tasting the soft warmth of her skin. Whatever unguents she had used in her own ablutions, it smelled faintly of strawberries and peaches; the taste of her skin, however, was female. There was no other way to describe it.

Her breath caught in her throat. Fingers tangling in his shoulder-length locks, she pressed him into her breasts, encouraging his efforts. Severus suckled one curve with firm pressure, overcome with the need to mark it, ensuring that the reddish stain that his lips drew into her skin would stay through the battle tomorrow. Perhaps she'd point to it as a silent epitaph for him, if she survived; she had the damndest luck for such things. *Here lay the lips of Severus Snape, slain in bed by the little death, before he was slain in battle by the greater...*

A morbid thought. He chased it away by licking the valley between her breasts. That made her groan. Intrigued, Severus did it again, tracing the line of her sternum. She pressed his face to her flesh. Something hard at the base of the vee formed by her undergarment drew his attention. He wasn't very conversant with Muggle garments, but it seemed to be a clasp of some kind; reaching up, he wiggled it in his fingers, nibbling on her other breast until the clasp popped free, giving him access to her flesh. He didn't free her breasts, however; not wanting to unnerve her by pushing too fast, he licked her centerline again, this time unimpeded by obstructions. He licked at the edge of her other breast, pressing his nose into it so that he could mark the underside of that mound with his lips, too.

She moaned and caressed his hair, her hips squirming restlessly into his chest. A moment later she tugged him back, dropping down to straddle and sit on his braced right thigh. Fingers tugging at the fastenings of his shirt, she muttered, "Off... Off!"

Aroused by her demand, by the plucking and tugging of her fingers, Severus lowered his own to the waistband of his trousers. Unfastening them as much as he had hers, he pulled his shirttails free. Their hands met below his waistline as he started on the buttons; being a gentleman, he let her finish the task. Grabbing the linen edges when she finished, Severus shrugged out of the garment, discarding it on the floor behind him. He watched her as she lowered her gaze to his chest, studying him.

He wasn't a hairy man, but there was a thin patch of black hairs over his sternum, and a trail of them that led down into his trousers, below the waistband of the black boxers peeking though the opened vee. There were also a few scars, remnants of curses and hexes flung at him, and the Dark Mark on his forearm, black and stark for the past few years; the most noticeable scar curved across his left pectoral over his nipple, and was old enough it was mostly only visible in the way it carved a fingerlength bald patch into the dusting of chest hair he possessed.

Severus knew he was also gaunt, whipcord lean from stress and tension, ribs visible under the lines of muscle and sinew; any spare flesh he'd gained before the Dark Lord's return had burned away under the complications of his life. Her first reaction at the sight of his sparse, marred frame wasn't to flinch, though. Hermione's expression was somber, befitting the sober history of his body, but she touched his chest without hesitation once she'd looked her fill.

Spreading her fingers over its lightly haired surface, Hermione slid her hands down his sternum and up his ribs, hesitating only briefly before gliding her fingertips over his

nipples in a featherlight caress. A soft gasp escaped him. That made her shift her hand quickly away, to less volatile territory. Knowing it was out of shyness, Severus covered her hands with his own, coaxing them back up to the sensitive discs. He was supposed to be teaching her the joys of lovemaking, after all. "Touch them again; it felt good."

She ducked her head a little, no doubt to hide the hint of rose in her cheeks, but let him guide her fingers into circling his areolas, whisper-light touches that stimulated both of them. As shudderingly good as her touch felt, Severus found himself equally encouraged by the heat radiating into his thigh from the apex of hers, straddling his upraised leg as she was. And by the slight way she rocked against him. Their position, while hard on his left knee from the worn, thin carpet underneath it, did make it easy for him to dip his head a little and lick her collarbone. Leaving her fingers to trace their own patterns on his chest, Severus smoothed his palms over her hips for balance, and slowly tasted his way down the slope of her left breast.

An enthusiastic nuzzle of his nose in response to her soft moan disturbed the precarious rest of her bra-cup. It popped free, baring a generous portion of the curve underneath, and part of one rose-dusk nipple. It was a lodestone to him, the moment he glimpsed the passion-shriveled tip. Sliding his hands up to her ribs to hold her still, he brushed aside the rest of the lace-edged cup with his chin. A nuzzle of his mouth captured that tip, but not to suck as strongly as he had done to the side of her other breast; in his experience, women didn't like them suckled quite that strongly. They liked the little buds flicked and swirled, not mangled and mauled.

Truth be told, he preferred fondling for the texture, rather than suckling for the taste. At least, up here. And it could be a subtle tease, especially after he'd had the chance to nuzzle a different bit of her flesh, further down her body. Though she wouldn't know until later what he could do, Severus bathed her nipple exactly as he would her clitoris; he intended to keep her in that Transfigured bed long enough for her to learn the relationship between the two. Time permitting. Midnight was still a few hours away, but the hours following it would not keep dawn at bay for long.

From her little moans, gasps, and whimpers, from the way she tugged on the strands of his hair as she clutched his scalp, from the way her thighs clenched and released around his leg and her hips scooted closer and closer to his groin in a rocking motion, he knew he was doing an excellent job of arousing her. The laughable excuse for a carpet under his knee was uncomfortable, though. Time for a new location. Sliding his hands to the small of her back, Severus wormed them into the waistband of her jeans, though not yet under the lacy band of her knickers. When a kneading caress of her buttocks only made her groan and pull his head back for an open-mouthed kiss, he knew he could make the change in position without scaring her.

Tightening his muscles, Severus pushed upright, lifting her by the sweet curves of her derrière as he rose. A slight flexing of his wrists, and her jeans loosened, falling to the floor. She even kicked her legs a little, freeing her feet from the last, stiff folds of denim as she continued to kiss him...and took his breath away as she wrapped those legs around him. Now it felt like he was the one being seduced. For an intense, mind-shattering moment, all he could think of was ripping off those knickers, shoving down his own clothes, and burying himself in the damp heat he could feel radiating through the fabric separating them. Only for a moment, though; he hadn't survived a brutal underground war for this long without being able to think through even the most distracting of moments.

It helped that her legs, hooking around his hips, had dislodged his own unfastened trousers. Subtle shifts of his legs allowed him to step out of them as they slumped to his feet. A step to get out of them, and he bumped his knee against the edge of the bed. Convincing her to stop kissing and let go long enough to lay her on the petal-strewn mattress wasn't as easy. Giving up trying to untangle the thankfully humanoid, feminine octopus clinging to him with legs, arms and lips, Severus shifted one knee onto the mattress, then the other, balancing both of them carefully--the last thing he needed was to fall over and crack open his skull on the hearthstones of the fireplace. He could only picture Weasley or Longbottom being that graceless in a seduction scene, and did not want to leave the young woman in his arms with that as her last impression of him.

It worked; he now knelt on the bed with a lapful of squirming, panting, hungrily nibbling Hermione. Aggressive Hermione, too; she tugged his head to the side and latched onto his ear like an eel. A sexy, hungry eel. One who, in the midst of writhing on his lap with the slipperiness of eel-like qualities, managed to somehow rewire all the nerves in his body, stripping them out of his pleasure-numbered limbs to link the greatest amount of sensation between his left earlobe and his penis, which was being rubbed beatifically by her mound as she wriggled in his arms. *Oh, yes, mustn't forget the scrotum and testes, too...*

The combination of stimulation unwired his brain. She oofed when he landed on her, slain by a completely befuddled brain. For a moment, all he could do was struggle to breathe and wrestle with the primitive need to thrust. An ineffectual need, given he was still wearing his undershorts and she was in those damnable, lacy-white knickers. Somehow, without his noticing it, his erection had hardened to the point where Severus could have sworn he could puncture a steel plate with it. The thought was inane, but his need was almost painfully acute.

Prying her hands from his hair, he pinned them one at a time to the bed, fingers laced awkwardly with hers. Levering himself up a little, Severus looked down into her lust-dazed eyes. A shudder passed through him, a conflict between the need to orgasm now now now, and need to hold back and wait. *Maybe if I can get her to suck the first one out of the way--no, no, I'm going to do this right even if it kills me! Oh, dear god, this is going to kill me...*

Slowly, excruciatingly slowly, Severus lowered his mouth to hers, feeling both breasts--the other one had been bared at some point during her squirming--brushing against his chest. He touched their lips together, pulling back when she lifted her head to try and deepen the kiss. Her hips twitched and rolled underneath his, trying to rub her femininity against him; for his sanity's sake, and to appease his own need, Severus bore down into her, letting his greater weight and leverage pin her in place. In contrast to the hard strength of his modified push-up stance, his lips continued to tease hers in whisper-light touches, until she whimpered.

"Please...I need more...I need...something more..."

If there was a part of him that would have gloated to an ungentlemanly degree over her capitulation, it was off in the lavatory at the moment. Capturing her mouth firmly with his, Severus plundered it, grinding his erection into the hot valley between her thighs; some tiny, still-cogent corner of his brain registered the fact that he could *feel* her clitoris, engorged with blood, prodding against his penis despite the cotton of his boxers and the silk of her panties, and the sheer disparity in the size of the two organs. That part of his brain directed the rest of him to rub against that turgid little spot, until she gasped and cried out, tossing her head back in a wordless ululation of pleasure as she climaxed under him. Leaving her mouth to part and pant for air between crooning moans, Severus latched onto her throat as surely as she had his ear, earlier.

Here lay the lips of Severus Snape, murdering a maiden most thoroughly with the littlest of deaths...

He had to taste her. While she was still dazed, incoherent and unaware of her surroundings, Severus squirmed down her body and tugged on those lace-trimmed knickers. Freeing them from her legs, he pushed her thighs apart and settled himself between them. Her breath hitched, startled, but it was too late. A nuzzle of his nose to part her folds, too long and thin for everything but this, and he lapped at the moisture seeping from her core.

Delicious...

"Oh, god!" She shuddered and clutched at his head, but it was too late. Severus had selected his weapon of choice. Now the slaying would begin. The salivating, too. And the licking, and the lapping, the nuzzling and the nudging. Flicking, swirling, sipping, suckling--that one made her shriek and bow her back, when he managed to get his lips on her clitoris, prying back the folds of her labia with his fingers. In fact, those were the only two words she could manage to say, when she could manage anything intelligible. "Oh" and "god!"

He would've stopped after her second orgasm, not wanting her to get too sensitive for what would come next, but when he tried to move away, she pulled painfully on his hair. Gritting his teeth--damn, the know-it-all of Gryffindor Tower had a strong set of fingers!--Severus reasoned that he could teach her enough fellatio techniques to sate himself during the time it would take her to recover after a third orgasm...but she didn't let him go. Nor after a fourth orgasm... Did that little shiver and squirm count as a fifth? *...Holy sweet Merlin--isn't she sore, yet?*

The greedy female sprawled wantonly on the Transfigured bed humped his face, all but using his ears like handles for leverage. She whimpered hungrily, encouragingly when he inserted a finger inside of her, preparing her gently, gradually for something larger. She groaned when he eased a second finger inside with the first, challenging him with the tightness of her flesh. When he found and pressed against a spot deep within her vagina, fluttering his paired fingertips against it, she squealed loud enough to make him cringe, hoping the silencing charm he'd ward off around the room was strong enough to at least muffle her lusty cries.

Who knew Hermione Granger, bloody know-it-all and overachieving bookworm, had more sexual appetite and stamina in her littlest toe than most of the women he'd known had in their whole bodies?

This was now well beyond the line a teacher was never supposed to cross with one of his students. Oral exams were one thing, but oral sex was entirely another, as was such intimate fondling. There was another line waiting to be crossed, though. A line his loins demanded he attend to as soon as possible. Coitus. Intercourse. Copulation. Pulling back from the slippery heat of her quim, Severus shoved his undershorts down off his hips. He almost didn't take the time to fully remove the last of his garments from his body, but knew his leverage would be better without any restrictions or impediments to get in his way.

Tossing them free, he studied the panting, dazed witch sprawled before him. His fingers clenched in the bedding as he fought with the primitive instinct to claim her without thought or preamble. Soft, cool petals crushed under his hands, reminding him of his gift. Distracting him from his lust. Scooping up a handful, Severus trickled them over her breasts and belly. She sighed and arched up into the tickling caress, then squirmed upright long and shrugged out of the sleeves of her blouse and the straps of her bra. Shoving the tangle of fabric off the bed, dragging a small flutter of rose petals, she stared up at him. Smoldered at him, with all the bravery of a Gryffindor and all the obliviousness of a Hufflepuff, where her naked, aroused state was concerned.

Severus took half a second to silently preen over his handiwork. Hermione Granger had started out shy and hesitant. She was shy and hesitant no longer. In fact, he had to intercept the hand that reached for his erection before a single touch from her fingers could ruin his self-control completely.

Pressing her back into the bedding, grateful she was willing to be subdued, he slowly covered her with his body. Another trickle of rose petals crushed the heady scent between their skin. Nudging her thighs, Severus braced himself over her splayed her own legs, giving him room to settle his hips. A rubbing glide made her gasp and arch her head back, as he toyed with the length of his prick through the folds of her quim, coating it in her own moisture.

A shift, and he freed a hand from bracing the weight of his torso long enough to aim the head at the right spot on her quim. And then, a slow, firm, careful press into her body, until his glans lodged in the mind-numbingly tight entrance to her femininity, evoking a grunt of discomfort from her. Another shift, and the tip of his finger circled the very tip of her clitoris, massaging and stimulating the pearl of pleasure with the lightest of touches. Now was not the moment for heavy-handed tactics. Now--now was the moment when she keened and gasped her two-word vocabulary. Now he braced his weight with both hands, and thrust inside as she shuddered with pleasure, feeling the tingling of magic as the runes on the little vial came to life.

Now was the moment when she gasped out an expletive, an epithet, a slur on his parentage--

Not taking anything she said in this moment personally, Severus wrestled his basest lusts into submission, biting his lower lip as he sunk to the hilt in her too-tight body. Hermione was biting her lip, too, though her face was scrunched in pain, her breath rushing through her nostrils in rapid pants. He wanted to keep control, to give her time to adjust, but the feel of her flesh, hot, tight, soft, and wet, the shivering induced by the spell collecting her virgin's blood, the way she tightened and squirmed in discomfort, it all swirled together in a whirlpool of sensation and set him off. The only thing Severus could do was hold himself very still as all of his muscles clenched, as his scrotum tightened and his penis twitched.

"Oh...goddess..."

The broken praise accompanied the fire bursting through his nerves, igniting his brain. Each spurt squeezed itself free in an orgasmic pleasure distinct and separate from the rest, yet jumbled together as he bit his lip and did not, did not...she gasped, and he moved. Bracing his weight on his left elbow, he shifted his right arm down, until he could grab and hook her thigh, urging the crook of her knee up over his forearm. Slowly, smoothly, he withdrew roughly halfway and pumped back into her. Air hissed through her teeth for a moment, until the liquid spilled in her depths provided some extra lubrication. She relaxed, then tentatively moved, trying to match and meet his thrusts. Severus couldn't really spare more than a braincell or two in gratitude; most of what passed for cognitive thought was caught up in the chant of *slow-ly slow-ly slow-ly*, orchestrating the rhythm and gentleness of his thrusts.

Though he had spent himself, the feel of her under him, around him, moving with him kept him aroused. His shaft had softened a little, but not for long; the steady friction aroused him back to full salute at about the same time her timid movements and tight muscles eased into willing softness. If she was beginning to enjoy it, then he was doing his task rightfully; Severus shifted her leg to his hip, then urged the other one up, tilting her groin up into his. That permitted him to sink more deeply into her flesh with each rhythmic stroke.

Sweat beaded along his cheekbones, tickled along his hairline, trying to cool the flushed state of his body. Those tawny eyes stared up at him, trusting him to show her more pleasure. Hands sliding up over his shoulders, she bit her lower lip, this time with a soft moan of pleasure. Lowering his mouth to hers, Severus teased her lips, brushing in featherlight touches, dampening their curves with the tip of his tongue, enjoying the way she lifted her head from the bedding, seeking a deeper kiss. He gave her one, enjoying the intimacy of kissing while copulating.

It was time to change position, though. Breaking the kiss, Severus eased her legs down. She blinked up at him in confusion. "What...?"

"There are...other positions," he murmured, slipping out of her body, "in which to find pleasure."

"Oh." It was barely a sound, as her eyes widened and her cheeks turned pink. Severus moved beside her, shifting to his back as she sat up. The look in her eyes, wide with wonder, let him know Hermione was eager to learn.

"Come here," he directed her, holding up his hands. "Straddle me."

"Like this?" she asked, shifting awkwardly over his thighs. Her fingers feathered over his shaft, damp with their combined essence. Aroused as he was, the too-light caress made him suck in a breath through his teeth. She sucked in a breath of her own when his shaft twitched under her touch. "Does...does that... Is that bad?"

"--No, no," he managed, releasing breath he hadn't realized he'd held. This was going to torture him, but... "Give me your hands--there, you cup your hands, and stroke. Like that..."

"Oh. It's...wet." She wrinkled her nose, lips curving wryly. "Is that all from...from me?"

The breath that left his lungs could've been mistaken for a laugh. Coupled with the way the corner of his mouth quirked up, it probably qualified. What was one more embarrassingly honest revelation? Just another line to cross, that was all. "No, I lost my mind, the moment I was inside of you."

"Oh. *Oh*," she repeated, as comprehension dawned. "You--? As soon as you...? That's kind of a compliment to me, isn't it?" Hermione added, blinking at him in wonder.

Severus, ready to bristle with a defensive rationale for being so precipitous, absorbed her words. Relaxing, he nodded. "Very much so. You are very passionate, and I find that highly arousing. Come, mount me," he directed her, beckoning with his hands. "I would rather you rode me than played with me, at the moment. There will be time for that later."

She hesitated, looking at her damp hands. "Erm...I kind of need to wipe my fingers on something."

His lips curled up at one corner. "Sex is supposed to be messy, Hermione," Severus murmured, amused by her fastidiousness. "At least, if you're doing it right, and enjoying yourselves. Come here..."

Placing her hands in his, she let him help her into position over his loins. His prick twitched against her thigh, making her shy away, then she released one of his hands, reached down boldly, and positioned it. There was only a moment of awkwardness, then she had found the right spot and was sinking onto him. Again, her teeth--fixed from their fourth-year rabbit-ish state--fastened on her lower lip, eyes closing as she analyzed the sensations she was experiencing. Severus found himself doing the same as her snug, wet heat enclosed him.

"It's very...tight," she murmured, making him twitch again. Her eyes opened; she stared down at him, and Severus twitched himself again, this time deliberately. "Oh. Erm...are you...you know, average, for a male?"

If he hadn't been so aroused, her question might've unmanned him. As it was, Severus gave her a pained look. "Hermione, you do *not* ask a man that question! Not while..." At her subdued reaction, he sighed. "Forgive me; I should've realized you would ask it out of mere curiosity. The average length is six inches. I exceed that by half an inch," he informed her. "The girth...I have no bloody idea. I'm proportionate, neither thin nor thick, and that's all I ever needed to know--and don't ask me to 'drop trou' and compare willies with some other wizard!"

She ducked her head, shoulders shaking. It was the muffled snerk-sounds and the reddening of her cheeks that told him she was trying not to laugh out loud. A peek at his face was met with a stony glare. "Sorry! ...Sorry. I just never imagined *you* saying--'willies'!"

The nickname came out in a squeak. Severus knew he could choose to be offended, or choose to let it slide. He chose the latter; she did have a point, after all. He *wasn't* the sort of man who went around saying 'drop trou and compare willies'. Not normally. Permitting a small smile, he slid his hands over the tops of her legs, tracing patterns down to the soft, delicate skin of her inner thighs. Her breath caught, and her humor vanished, replaced by wonder.

"Ride me, Hermione."

She blinked "Erm...how?"

Shifting his hands to her hips, he lifted her, then let her sink back down again. Those tea-brown eyes widened as she did so. The second time, she did it on her own, flexing her muscles. Smirking, Severus purred, "Now, roll your hips a little when you reach bottom..."

Her eyes fluttered closed when she complied, mashing her clitoris against his pubic bone. "Oh, yessss." Severus bit his own lip; it was obscene, how low and purring her voice had dipped. She splayed her hand below her belly button, covering the slight, feminine swell of flesh. Her hips rocked and rolled, twisting as she experimented. "I can feel it...so deep!"

Damn! Overcome with lust, Severus gripped her hips tightly, lifting his knees enough to brace his heels against the mattress. Leverage assured, he lifted her, then slammed her down, bucking up into her. His young lover cried out, her shout hoarse with shock. He stilled, battling the urge to buck into her like a hexed broom. "Are you alright?"

"Ohhhh..."

Definitely obscene. Bracing himself again, he bucked into her a second time, then a third, bracing his shoulders as well as his heels so that he could bounce her on him. He quickly tired, being out of practice for such things, but it was alright; overbalanced, unaccustomed to such a rough ride, she dropped down over his chest, catching herself awkwardly with her palms on the mattress before thumping into his chest. That allowed him to pull her down onto his shaft without having to lift her weight.

The rocking motion made her moan, made her add her efforts to his, but that popped him out, when she rocked too far. Squeaking, she blinked at him. Severus, breathing through clenched teeth, reached down and guided himself back into her. "Not...not so far. Short strokes are best, in this position."

Nodding, she let his hands corral how far she bounced and slid. Severus could only withstand it for a minute or two. Stilling her efforts, he focused on breathing rather than on feeling, then urged her off of him. He was damned if he'd climax precipitously again.

"Hands and knees. You'll like it," he added as she flushed and ducked her head. Catching her chin, Severus stilled her as she started to dismount. Drawing her mouth down to his, he murmured, "No more blushes." Their lips met in a kiss that was both tender yet firm. "...You're a passionate woman, Hermione. Revel in it. Now, on your hands and knees."

"Yes, sir," she murmured, shifting off of him to comply.

Severus followed her, and smacked his hand on one buttock as he shifted onto his knees. "Don't call me 'sir'. Not here and now."

"Sorry, s...Severus," she corrected. She peered at him over her shoulder. "Do you, um...have you ever done that spanking-thing?"

His eyebrow rose. "What do *you* know about 'that spanking-thing'?"

"Well, I *have* read trashy romance books, as well as my textbooks. I'm not *all* study and no play, you know," she defended herself. "It just...I read one of those books, and it sounded...strange. And yet...strange."

"So you were aroused by it, were you?" he asked her, his voice a silken drawl as he grasped his shaft to position himself.

"You don't have to mock me about it!" she protested, frowning over her shoulder.

"Oh, but I do. Not half an hour from your deflowering, and already you're eager to experiment on the wilder side of making love?" Severus dared to tease her, smirking. Sinking the head of his penis into her flesh, he reached under her body, cupping her breasts. Plucking at her nipples. She gasped, tightening around him in response. Aroused by her reaction, Severus slipped his hands back to her hips and thrust into her, as deep and hard as he could.

"--*OH!*" Her head flung back, slithering her tangle of curls over her shoulder blades and spine.

"...More?" he inquired archly, pulling back and thrusting sharply again. It was difficult to sound like he was in control of himself, difficult to *be* in control, with such heat and wetness sliding tightly around him.

"*More!*" she gasped. "You...spot...deep inside--*ungh!*--Oh god, yes!"

Nothing could have been more sexy than the grunts and gasps that escaped her as he gripped her hips firmly enough to later bruise and pounded into her depths. Once again, he reduced her to a two-word vocabulary of 'oh' and 'god', punctuated by the meaty slap of his hips against her buttocks. And then even that limited vocabulary vanished, as she growled and clawed at the bedding, shuddering and moaning and squirming with an intense climax as she snagged a pillow and pressed her face into it, muffling only some of her lusty cries. Her vaginal muscles clamped down around him, squeezing him, dragging him into his own orgasm with a ragged groan.

Slumping over her, Severus panted heavily in counterpoint to her own moaning breaths. Every handful of seconds, her muscles spasmed a little; the squeezing effect sent a shiver down his spine, affecting the friction-sensitized skin of his deflating shaft. As his heart rate gradually slowed, Severus found enough energy to press a few kisses to her spine. Slipping out of her body, he guided her onto her side, collapsing behind her. Catching one of the two pillows, he pulled it under their heads with his right arm; his left, he wrapped around her belly, pulling her snug against him.

Eventually they'd want the covers, despite the crackling fire heating the room, but for now, it felt good to let the air dry the sweat from the skin. Using his bent arm as an additional support under the pillow, Severus tucked his head into the ticklish, scented warmth of her curls. Though he was tired, sated for the time being, he let his left hand play over her stomach, stroking down to her thighs and the damp curls between, then sweeping up to fondle her sweat-sticky breasts and the softening buds of her nipples.

"Thank you." The words escaped him in a breath, but she heard.

"You're welcome... I mean, if anyone were to thank someone, it should be me thanking *you*," Hermione murmured, twisting her head slightly to speak over her shoulder.

"That was...incredible. Brilliant. I didn't know you could...you know. Be so...intense. Well, I *knew* you were an intense man, but not in something so nice as love-making..."

"Hermione, I would appreciate it if you would *never* use the word 'nice'," he managed to half-sneer, too sated for further effort than that, "in conjunction with myself ever again. I am *not* a nice man." He waited a couple heartbeats, then added mock-thoughtfully, "*Kinky*, maybe..."

She laughed at that. Still chuckling, she squirmed around in his arms, forcing him to straighten his legs so that she wouldn't bump into his knees. Her hair was a mess, her face was blotchy from still being flushed with sexual excitement and exertion, and she'd wound up with a faint crease-mark on one cheek, having dropped her face and upper body into the bedding near the very end of their last position. But she was grinning, and her eyes were lively with the glow of her spirit, and Severus lifted his hand to her forehead, brushing some of her knotted light brown hair back from her face.

"You are very beautiful, Hermione. Inside and out," he clarified as she blinked, bemused. Somehow, in this moment stolen out of time, it was easy for him to say all the things he normally would never voice, but knew he'd take to his grave in utter regret if he didn't. "Your intellect is as brilliant as a watchtower light, a beacon shining over the dull-witted idiots who crash in futile waves against the shoals of academia. I regret not seeing your true thirst for knowledge and your potential from the very start. I regret being jealous of your academic fervor, so like my own days as a student, and I regret being envious of how easily you made friends."

She gave him a wry look. "I wouldn't call it 'easy'. It was only because of the mountain troll, in my first year. I didn't have any friends until after going through that."

"I regret being angry over every lie you've ever told me--starting with that one," he added dryly. "Going after a troll on your own? I knew you had more sense!"

"Well, it sounded braver than saying I'd run into the loo to have a cry because no-one liked me," she admitted, wrinkling her nose.

Pulling her head close, he tucked it under his jawline so he could whisper in her ear, "I like you..."

She stilled in his arms for a moment, then moved again, hugging him. Clutching him to her. Severus returned the embrace, feeling his blood pounding again. Her voice whispered in his own ear, "I like you, too."

Now was the moment when his tongue threatened to harden into Muggle concrete. Forcing himself to say the words--he *wanted* to say them, but it was hard to escape his taciturn shell of far too many years--he told her, "I...more than like you. I cannot... I wish you weren't my student anymore."

"I wish you weren't my teacher," he heard her whisper. "I wish both of us had a guarantee we would live, beyond tomorrow..."

Throat threatening to close, eyes stinging, Severus clutched her to him, burying his face in her hair. It was back: the looming threat of tomorrow. "I *want* to live beyond tomorrow," he hissed, striving hard not to do something as unlike himself as cry. "I want *us* to live! I want so *much*... But I'm as good as dead."

Was that a sob? Her breath hitched again. So did his, if he were honest. There wasn't much time left for useless honesty, just what was necessary.

No promises could be made; at least, not aloud. But he could make promises of his kisses, which he bathed each inch of her face in tenderness with, brushing back her hair. And vows of the touch of his hands; he swore his emotions to her in loving strokes, devotions that she returned with trembling but increasingly bold touches. And as she pulled him back into place over her soft curves, he gave her the oath of his body, neither saying a word as they stroked the tears from each other's skin.

They had to sleep, soon. Rest would be needed, to be able to face the coming battle with a clear and ready mind. But there was enough time for a second loving before he pulled the covers up over their bodies. And time for another, lusty round, when she woke him in the night with tentative, exploring touches. And time for one last, tender coupling in the earliest hours of the morning.

When they finally dressed and restored the room to its original condition, when they shared one last, desperate, regretful kiss, then took down the wards...the others were already up and making their way toward the kitchen for breakfast.

There was barely enough time for a cup of tea and a slice of toast before Severus clutched at his arm: the sudden burning trailing along the outline of his tattoo let him know he was being Summoned. As the others exchanged silent, anxious looks, he headed for the front door, needing to be out of the house before he Apparated, needing a moment to be away from so many pairs of stricken eyes. He'd risked his life to spy on the Dark Lord, risked his life to overhear about this final battle, and was risking not only his life but everyone else's that this emergency was genuine, that it wasn't a set-up for an ambush. A calm, unruffled mind was absolutely necessary, if he was to survive the next few hours.

He didn't quite make it to the front door. Hearing something hurrying after him, he turned to see what was needed. It was Hermione. Her face stricken with fear and worry, she flung herself into his arms, clinging with every ounce of her trembling frame. A glance over her shoulder, over the curls she'd had to tidy with a spell to make them look right, showed a couple of faces at the kitchen door, down at the far end of the hall. More than a couple of faces, as the first ones gaped at them, then briefly withdrew to report the unseemly way the Head Girl was embracing the Potions Master.

Damn them all--I want this! Squeezing his eyes shut, Severus returned her embrace equally hard, feeling his own muscles trembling with emotion.

"Don't leave me," she whispered. "Swear you'll come back to me, dead or alive--swear it!"

"Upon my soul," he vowed in a thick whisper. "If you'll have me, and swear the same."

"Upon my very soul!" she promised, clinging to him as desperately as he clung to her.

Holding her a long moment more, Severus finally couldn't stand the itching, burning pain in his forearm anymore. It was long enough, though, for his anxiety to drain into her embrace and ground itself in her fierce longing. Aware the others were watching, though they were forced to stay silent thanks to the painted harpy hanging behind the nearby curtains, he pulled back far enough to tip her face up for a final, thorough kiss. Giving her the only promise he could, the promise of his lips, his arms, his breath, Severus ended the kiss and set her at arms' length. Composing himself, Severus ignored the gaping faces, opened the door, and stepped out into the grey twilight of dawn.

It was Easter Sunday. The very day Lord Voldemort had hissed to his most trusted lieutenants would be perfect for resurrecting the full glory of the Death Eaters in a massive bloodbath, as Severus had listened from deep in the shadows less than two days ago. It was the day that would decide whether a reformed sinner and a newly awakened innocent would have anything left worth living for, by the time that the grey twilight of dusk fell.

God help them all...and God forgive him for crossing that line.

Author's Note: This story is complete. If you want to know what happens next, you have my permission to imagine in your mind whatever ending you personally feel suits this tale best. In fact, if you go to the Petulant Poetess forum boards, and look under 'Challenges', you will find the Crossing the Line Challenge, where anyone may write up what they think happens next, and how this relationship is resolved, happily, sadly...or even weirdly, if they must! ~Lotm