

The Waiting Game

by bound_by_passion

Severus has just five days to make Hermione his. But he also has a murder to solve.
Can he do it in time? Or will his partner, Draco Malfoy, get the girl?

Complete AU. Does exactly what it says on the tin (and no funny business).

Day 0

Chapter 1 of 5

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Disclaimer: I do not own these characters. They belong to JK Rowling. I make no money from this piece of fiction.

A/N: A big thank you to Time Traveller and x_weasley. Thank you for all of your help. You are both wonderful.

Day 0 -- 10:40pm -- 48 Moor Road

Standing at the edge of the pavement, Severus Snape Ministry of Magic Unspeakable, Muggle Relations Investigator let the streetlamps of Moor Road give him the first view of the body.

The dead naked woman lay on her back in the middle of number 48's driveway, legs straight out in front, arms folded chastely across her chest. According to the Muggle police officer, the woman's throat had been slit, and even from this distance, Severus could make out the dark pool of blood that lay around her head. Most likely she'd bled out, the wound transecting the carotid artery. A quick enough death, but always messy.

A police car, lights blurring the night with alternate flashes of red and blue, blocked the open end of the cul-de-sac. Severus' blue Toyota sat just to the side of the squad car, headlights on, illuminating the grisly scene to the full. He was riding alone tonight, though that wasn't unusual. He preferred his space.

Pulling his torch from his trouser pocket, Severus walked over to the corpse, his thick-soled boots crunching upon the gravel of the driveway. He knelt down beside the woman, careful not to disturb any potential evidence, and ran the beam from the torch up her body toe to head.

Lividity was fixed, so the body had been there at least six hours. There were no abrasions or bruises on the skin and no sign of violence save for the wound at her neck. As for sexual activity, Severus couldn't be sure till he was back at the lab, but he thought it likely; the woman had to be naked for a reason.

He shone the light over the face of the corpse: the eyes closed, a narrow aquiline nose over colourless lips... disturbingly peaceful. Drawing back a little, he followed the trail of blood from her throat to where it pooled on the ground.

"Unusual, that. Judging from the extent of the laceration, there should be more."

Severus grunted in agreement, his eyes never leaving the corpse. He heard the rustle of fabric as his colleague, Draco Malfoy, knelt down beside him.

"I thought it was your night off?" came Malfoy's cultured drawl. He'd been put on the nightshift two years ago after a nasty spat with the dayshift supervisor: punishment, apparently, and Severus wasn't sure whether to be flattered or offended.

"It was," he said with a vague sort of air, "but I had nothing to do at home. Besides, I'm needed here." He pulled on a pair of latex gloves and brushed back a lock of the woman's hair. "When did the call come through?"

"About an hour ago. Next-door neighbour was out at a friend's. Came back and found the woman on the driveway." Little pops of daylight flashed through the night as Malfoy snapped off photos as quickly as he could. Two photos of each angle, for safety, covering the body six ways, plus close ups of the neck wound. "What you need is a good night's sleep. I swear, Snape, you look like the living dead."

"I'll sleep when the case is over." Severus took a small swab from his kit, dabbing the cotton tip in the blood. "I think our victim was poisoned before her throat was slashed. The blood should have coagulated by now. Do we have an ID?"

"Naked, Snape," he said, dryly. "She wasn't walking around as nude as the day she was born with her purse."

"Nonetheless... an ID could have come through the neighbour or the owner of the house."

"The neighbour," he pointed to a nervous looking man being questioned by a uniformed Muggle officer, "swears he's never seen her in his life. And the house is empty. Been put up for sale. Previous owners moved out about two weeks ago."

Finished with his examination, Severus stood, brushing away the dirt stuck to his knees. Sighing softly, he made his way to the lower end of the body. His torch flicked across the path before him, searching for tread marks. The body had been dumped, he was sure of that much, and you needed some sort of vehicle for that.

"I've taken prints of all usable tire tracks," said Malfoy, calling across the driveway. "There was some sort of four-by-four parked up on the pavement by the gate. Sped off pretty quickly by the looks of things. Could be our killer."

"Body was definitely dumped. But why here?"

"Easy location? The killer must have known she'd be found. Home of a childhood sweetheart, perhaps?"

"Perhaps."

Severus backtracked, his torch sweeping over the flowerbeds on either side of the driveway. A silvery glint caught his eye and he bent down, picking up the offending object.

"I found our murder weapon."

It was a kitchen knife. The edges serrated, and the handle black. Blood coated both the blade and the handle, but there was a void in the middle where the killer's hand had been. Severus held the knife up, scrutinising it with tired eyes.

"No prints," he said. "I think the killer was wearing gloves."

Malfoy sidled up beside him, peering at the blade.

"Looks like part of a set. Probably taken " he began, but whatever Malfoy was about say was drowned out by the humming of a car engine.

A large, black Land Rover Ministry issue swung into view, parking up beside the squad car at the end of the road. Severus smirked slightly as the door opened and a lanky young woman stumbled out.

She was always late.

"Finally decided to join us, I see," he called, walking over to a flustered looking Hermione Granger. She gave him a lopsided grin, brushing her unruly curls out of her eyes.

"Hey," she said in greeting, waving at the two men. "Sorry I'm late. Got stuck in a traffic jam on the M6." She gave Severus a pointed look. "I thought it was your night off? You should be at home asleep."

"You need me here," he said simply. "Crime doesn't stop just because I need some rest."

"Malfoy and I could have managed without you, you know." She removed her jacket, placing it neatly on top of her kit. Severus noticed her skin pebble slightly in the cold. "What's the deal?"

"Jane Doe, mid-twenties, found naked with her neck slashed on the driveway," Malfoy said, producing a black notebook from his suit jacket. "Been there about six hours, we reckon, though we'll know more after the coroner's finished with her. Most likely a dump; not enough blood at the scene to suggest the murder occurred here."

"Is that the weapon?" she said, gesturing to the knife Severus still held. He nodded, sealing it into a plastic bag to preserve any evidence.

"Killer was wearing gloves, so no prints. I'm going to take this back to the lab and run it for DNA. Killer may have nicked himself with the knife too. Could be multiple blood donors, if we're lucky."

Hermione peered round them, taking a look at the body. Her eyebrows rose as she took in the grizzly sight.

"Any sign of magic?"

"Someone fired off an Immobilising Hex about three hours ago. Hence, our presence. There's nothing else to suggest magical interference, so it could be a coincidence. But the scene's ours now, so we have to see it through, whether Muggle or magical."

She nodded, putting on a pair of latex gloves with a snap. Sunglasses balanced precariously on her head, she leant forward, removing a torch from the front pocket of her kit-bag.

"Looks like you've pretty much finished here. Want me to go process the perimeter?"

Malfoy nodded. "We'll wait for the coroner."

Severus watched as Hermione walked over to the edge of the white and blue 'crime-scene' tape and began to search the area, her slender silhouette prominent against the lamplight. Clumsy and insufferable she may be, but she was good at her job. With the highest solve-rate record under her belt, not to mention the top grades; she made a most formidable young woman. The pride of the nightshift, or so he'd been told.

Hermione bent down to examine something closely, the back of her shirt riding up slightly. Severus felt his mouth go dry and he tore his eyes away, feeling guilty though he'd done nothing wrong. Putting the image from his head, he signed the bag containing the knife. There was a movement beside him.

"She won't be single forever, Snape."

Severus turned, coming face to face with Malfoy, his nose inches away. He was smirking dangerously, pocketing the black notebook.

"I'm sorry, but what business is that of yours " he hissed, affronted.

"Come off it, Snape. I've seen you looking. I know you want her." Malfoy narrowed his eyes a fraction, his blond hair brushing his forehead as he lent down. "But, the thing is, I want her too. And I don't take too kindly to sharing."

"And you're telling me this for the good of your health, I suppose." Severus scowled. "Out with it, Malfoy."

Malfoy drew in a deep breath, shoving his hands into his trouser pockets.

"You've got five days to make your move. After that she's mine."

Severus snorted incredulously, unable to believe what he was hearing.

"You've got a nerve, Malfoy. I am your supervisor. I could have you sacked for this."

"But you won't." Malfoy's expression was smug. He knew he was right. Severus couldn't sack him for this, though he'd try.

"I can make your life a living hell," he growled, fists clenching. "What gives you the right to make an offer like that? I'll do whatever I please."

"Fine," said Malfoy, his blue eyes glittering. "But remember this when I'm shagging her and you're all alone: I gave you a chance, Snape. And you were too cowardly to take it."

Malfoy turned, picking his way over the gravel, moving towards the wall. He drew out his camera, snapping off a few shots of the brickwork.

"Five days, Snape," he called over his shoulder. "Five days."

Truth be told, for Severus the ultimatum was a blessing of sorts. Sure, he could stay the way he was; her boss, her educator, potential companion. Safe. But the question he asked himself almost nightly kept rising to the forefront of his mind. "Did he really want that?"

And, as always, the answer to the question eluded him. Nevertheless, he knew one thing for definite.

Malfoy wanted her. And that just wouldn't do.

Day 0/1

Chapter 2 of 5

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A/N: A big thank you goes to x_weasley for helping me sort out all the ideas bouncing around in my head. I don't know what I'd do without you, my dear.

Day 0 11:20pm Ministry Lab

By the time he got back to the lab, Severus was already dragging. The journey had taken twice as long as it should have the traffic jam adding at least twenty minutes onto his drive time.

Until Minister Scrimgeour's recent Evidence Collection Manifesto, the Unspeakables had been able to Apparate back to the lab with the evidence in tow. With only one fully equipped lab in the country, it was a practical solution to a very large problem. Time was the only difference between catching a cold case or a hot one, and the Unspeakables had precious little of that.

However, a ruling from the Ministry had brought that to an end, informing all employees that vehicles were to be used during the transportation of evidence. According to one of their many studies, Apparition affected the chemical structure of any evidence collected, hence making it subject to question in court. Although the new policy might ensure Scrimgeour's advancement in the public eye, Severus knew it was a load of bullshit. It was just another scheme that gave big-shot lawyers a chance to exonerate clearly guilty parties.

His feet clicked on the tile floor as he strode down the hall to the Morgue. When he arrived, he found Dr. Luna Lovegood bent over the slab that held their Jane Doe, magnifying glass in hand, hard at work on his case.

The blonde, pale-faced coroner was the nightshift's secret weapon. Her sharp eyes missed nothing, and despite being one of the odder employees at the Ministry, she was able to come to conclusions with a speed Severus could only envy. A lateral thinker to the highest degree.

"Got anything yet?" he asked softly.

She shrugged without looking up, focused upon the victim's neck. "Snape," she said by way of acknowledgement. She didn't answer his question, instead plumping for, "You're late."

"I am never late. I always arrive exactly when I intend to," he replied nonchalantly. Luna gave him a questioning glance, her icy blue eyes blinking owlishly.

Severus ignored her, moving closer to the corpse. For all the time he'd spent studying the dead woman under the beam of his torch, he was more than willing to take

another look under the better light.

Her flesh grey with a slight bluish tinge, Jane Doe had long brown hair, close-set eyes and full lips that were dry and cracked. She was small, for a woman, with wide-set hips and full breasts. A nice figure for a corpse.

Wand behind her ear, in a fashion that reminded him a little of the cartoon painters found on the back of cereal packets, Luna leant so close to the body that her nose almost touched its cheek.

"Hello... what do we have here?" she said, more to herself than to Severus. A tiny pair of stainless steel tweezers gleamed in the fluorescent lighting, crackling distinctively as they closed around the object of her interest. Severus watched as she held it up to the light. "Well, that's interesting. What's a piece of glass doing in your hair, hmm? You don't look like a Glass-Eating Buckshine Elf to me." She placed the clear fragment in a brown envelope ready for lab testing and passed it to Severus.

Taking her wand from behind her ear, Luna grasped it gently between her index finger and thumb and made a small flicking motion over the torso of the corpse.

"*Aperire*," she said, the tip of her wand glowing blue. Severus watched as she passed it over the body, the colour changing from blue to pink as the wood touched her lower abdomen. "There are signs of sexual activity. Judging from the colour intensity, I'd say it was most likely an hour or two before death."

"Consensual?"

She flicked him a look. "I found no tears or abrasions on my initial examination. However, there was a slight bruising to the inner tissues. But that doesn't really tell us much; the skin there is especially sensitive, and the high number of blood vessels close to the surface means it takes very little trauma to cause bruising. I took a swab earlier. See if we can identify our lover boy. If we're lucky, he may not have been wearing a condom."

"Any internal trauma?"

"Not that I've found." She passed her wand over the woman's chest. The colour flickered slightly but remained blue. "There's no damage to the lungs or heart beyond generalised wear and tear. She's a smoker, hence the flickering, but lung degeneration is nowhere near a level that could be considered fatal." She thumbed back the lid of one eye. "And no petechial haemorrhaging in the conjunctivae either. So we can rule out both heart attack, induced or otherwise, and suffocation. The cause of death was probably due to exsanguination, though I'd need to open her up to make sure." She placed her wand on the slab and cracked her fingers.

"Was that really necessary?" he asked, grimacing slightly.

Luna merely smiled. "The killer sliced through the superior thyroid artery, external carotid artery, severed both laryngeal branches of the vagus nerve and her larynx."

"So her throat was paralysed?"

"Yes. Her voice box was immobilised. The damage to the nerve and the tissue around it would have paralysed her throat instantly, like you said." She ran a finger down the side of the woman's face. "Death would have been silent and relatively quick. Poor thing."

Severus leaned in for a closer look. "And the weapon?"

"The wound tract tells us the weapon was sharp with a serrated edge, which could match the knife you found." Luna drew in a deep breath before continuing. "I did find one odd thing though. Her blood isn't clotting, which indicates the victim was given some sort of anti-coagulant before her death. Most likely Warfarin or a Coumarin extract. I sent a sample off to Toxicology along with a greasy substance I found on her arm. It's been put on 'Rush', so the results should be back by the start of tomorrow night's shift."

Severus was about to reply when the door opened. Hermione came in, wearing a pale pink camisole, indigo jeans, and her usual white lab coat. They didn't wear robes at the lab; the long sleeves were a health hazard.

"Hey," she said, placing a hand on the edge of the door. "We've got a hit on our Jane Doe."

Severus' eyebrows rose. He followed Hermione out, barely hearing Luna's call of, "I'll keep you posted if I find anything new," as the doors to the Morgue clattered shut behind them.

Seated on a stool in the DNA lab, Severus watched with rapt curiosity as Hermione moved the onscreen cursor over the minimised window, blowing it up to full-size. A head shot, complete with fingerprints and personal details, appeared on the small screen.

"Our Jane Doe is one Eleanor Bones. Twenty three. Address: 59 Embassy Way, Manchester. Works as a waitress at the Three Broomsticks, travelling daily from Permanent Portkey Position 5703," she said with a smug smile.

Severus squinted at the slightly blurry screen, reading the tiny writing that flashed across its surface. The Lab was a low budget affair, scrounging ex-display technical gear from stores like Currys and Comet and running it off the excess magical energies collected at the main Ministry building, which meant that most of the computerised equipment was either broken or on its way out.

"Sentenced to four weeks community service for shop lifting, which explains why we have her prints on the database."

"Exactly." Hermione swung round on her chair and picked up a printed sheet that lay on the desk. "Ministry sent through a log of her wand use over the last two days. No defensive or offensive hexes registered, so either she knew her killer or it was a surprise attack. Last known spell performed by her wand was a Prophylaxis Charm at 3:55pm."

"Ties in with Luna's findings." Hermione raised a quizzical eyebrow. "She found signs of sexual congress about an hour before death," he said by way of explanation.

"I think we need to find this mystery lover. He could have seen the killer."

"Or he could be the killer. Seduction gone wrong, perhaps," he said, flushing slightly under the intensity of her gaze.

Hermione smiled. "Lust and anger are such close relatives."

"Indeed."

Severus drummed his fingers against the desk, thinking. They had a location and a possible theory, but with the key elements missing, they could only guess at the motive. Though not a man inclined to gamble, Severus was hedging his bets on a revenge killing. Pretty young woman found dead and alone, plus an unaccounted for lover, gave him an answer he didn't much like the look of.

"What's that?" Hermione asked, startling him out of his reverie. She pointed to the envelope Luna had given him. Severus flashed her a rare grin, pleased to have the upper hand for once.

"This," he said, peeling open the top and walking over to a battered looking microscope, "is a glass fragment Luna found in our victim's hair." Carefully, he placed the tiny piece on a backing plate and fed it under the microscope lens. He looked into the eyepiece and fiddled about with the black knobs at either side until he got the focusing

just right.

"Ah ha!" he exclaimed, motioning for Hermione to come and take a look. He moved out of her way, placing a hand on her shoulder as she leant in. He felt her shiver a little under his touch. "Cold?"

"No," she said without looking up. "Glass isn't polarised, so it's not from a pair of glasses or a car window. It also has a slight bluish tinge under white light observation." She drew back a little. "My best guess is an ordinary window pane or part of a glass tumbler. But there was no glass at the scene. She must have picked it up before the dump, though where is anyone's guess."

"Well, there's only one way to find out."

"House call?"

Severus smirked at her.

Day 1 00:55am 59 Embassy Way

Before long, they were turning off the main road and into the maze of smaller streets that made up the outskirts of Manchester City. It was a quiet night, and the neighbourhood was asleep save for a few windows flickering with TV watching. The streetlamps gave off a sickly orange glow, and Severus had to blink to keep his eyes firmly fixed on the road ahead.

A rundown leftover from the 1920s, 59 was a narrow, two-up-two-down terrace with a slate roof that seemed more black than grey under the mercury-vapour streetlights. Large, double-glazed windows were at either side of the door with a small tinted window to the right that was, possibly, the bathroom. The garden was almost non-existent, the pitiful amount of grass peppered with splotches of yellow denoting the season.

The temperature hovered around the twenty-six degree mark, just hot enough to make Severus feel uncomfortable under his button-down jacket. Hermione had put on her robes, light blue ones this time, and he could make out a tiny bead of sweat rolling down the back of her neck.

"This weather's going to be the death of me," she groaned, fanning herself lightly with an empty hand. Her other carried their large, black kit bag.

The pair walked up the concrete driveway, Severus with his wand out. The house had been cleared moments before, but Severus had learnt the hard way that it paid to be vigilant. The front door, white and thick with city grime, was ajar. He walked through into the cool, dark hallway, sighing with relief.

"Are you the lot from the Ministry?"

Severus turned, spotting a bulky-looking Auror in green robes gesturing towards them with the tip of his wand. "Yes."

"Then I think you'd better start over here," he said, holding open the door to what appeared to be the bedroom.

Hermione and Severus pushed forward, walking past the Auror and into the room. She let out a low whistle as she surveyed the scene.

The murder had definitely taken place here. There was a pool of blood on the bed, originating from a point about a third of the way from the bottom. Arterial spray covered both the far wall and the headboard, stark against the light wood and cream wallpaper. The bed sheets were rumpled with signs of a struggle and had been pulled out from underneath the mattress. Half a broken wine glass, empty save for a few drops of ruby-coloured liquid, stood on the bedside table, the sharp edges glinting dangerously in the light.

Hermione set the kit down on the floor, opening it up and removing a UV torch from the very bottom. She tossed Severus a pair of orange tinted goggles, then put a pair on herself, tucking her curls behind her ears to keep them out of the way. Severus flicked off the lights, plunging the room into semi-darkness, so it was lit only from the weak light of the streetlamp that shone through the flimsy net curtains. Hermione switched on the torch, running the beam up and down the bed spread. Moving from left to right, she paused occasionally to look at something a little closer, lifting hair, fibres and other objects of interest with a small section of plastic-backed tape.

"Signs of sexual activity," she said as she flicked the blue beam over the end of the sheet, marking where the fabric glowed. Severus stepped closer, stilling her hand with his own. He pointedly ignored the tingles of energy the contact brought.

"Stop right there," he commanded, pulling a pair of tweezers from his pocket. He reached down onto the bedspread, picking up a red fibre. "Dyed thread of some description. Most likely from a shirt or robes."

Hermione held out a brown paper bag. "Bag it and tag it. We'll take it back for processing."

He placed the thin thread into a brown collection envelope and sealed it closed, cataloguing it with the evidence Hermione had collected. Leaving her to continue processing the bedspread, he turned towards the western side of the room. The wineglass caught his attention first.

"Strange," he muttered, sliding his wand into the loop at his belt and digging into the kit bag.

Hermione looked up. "What's strange?"

"Broken wine glass, yet no wine bottle or glass on the floor." Severus opened a small jar of fingerprinting dust, loading up the large, fluffy brush he now wielded with the black powder. Using feather-light strokes, he began to brush over the glass, resisting the urge to sneeze as the powder cascaded into the surrounding air. "No fingerprints either. Killer cleaned up?"

"Well, we know the killer was wearing gloves, which could explain why you aren't finding anything. Perhaps the glass was broken elsewhere?"

"But why have a broken wineglass in your bedroom?"

Hermione shrugged, dropping to the floor to examine under the bed. Severus heard her rummage around for a while and then a loud crack.

"Shit," she hissed.

"Are you all right?" he said, watching with concerned eyes as she sat up rubbing her head.

"The bed may have been slightly lower than I expected." She gave him a lopsided smile, amused by his worried expression. "I'll be fine. Found something interesting though, so I suppose the bump on the head was worth it." She reached under the bed and pulled out a long strip of soft purple velvet. Sensuous to the touch, the fabric was attached to the underside of the bed, knotted around the bottom of the wooden frame. She gave it a sharp tug, pulling it out to its fullest extent. "Looks like we got ourselves a pair of deviants," she said with a cheeky grin.

"Check the fabric for epithelial cells. The victim was probably tied down, and someone had to fasten the bonds; she couldn't have done that alone, even magically aided." He gave her a puzzled look. "It still doesn't explain the blood pattern though." He strode up to the head of the bed, tracing the line of the spatter with his index finger. "It's too high. By all assumptions, the spatter should be lower. If she was tied down, then her body would have been closer to the bed. Plus the pooling is at an odd position. Neither at the head nor the foot."

"Killer could have repositioned the body after death. With her tied down, the killer would have had to do some smart manoeuvring to remove himself without getting blood everywhere. Apart from the bed and the wall, the scene is unusually clean. Murder is messy, and throat slashing doubly so. The killer had to have caught some of the spatter, yet I don't see any blood drops indicating movement."

"Hmm..." Severus moved round to the opposite side of the bed, careful not to disturb any potential evidence. "I've got a bloody footprint on this side. Looks to be a size twelve definitely not our victim's. The foot was bare, and there's only the one. Perhaps the killer missed it during clean up. Luckily for us, might I add."

There was a small flash of light as Hermione snapped off shots of the print. "Only a partial, but it's something, I suppose. It does narrow down the potential field of suspects."

Severus looked at his watch and groaned. Hermione shot him an odd look.

"It's going to take the rest of the shift to process: we've got the entire house to do," he explained, inwardly cursing any deity he could think of for having the audacity to place him in an enclosed space with her for the rest of their twelve hour shift. As if Malfoy's ultimatum wasn't playing heavily enough on his mind already, he would now be faced with tantalising glimpses of what he couldn't have. He was in two minds over whether to just kiss her and get the rejection over and done with. A planned seduction needed time. Time which he, incidentally, no longer had.

Sodding all to hell, Severus decided to follow his instincts. He licked his lips nervously, his eyes flicking over her face, looking for any sign of affection. Leaning forward slightly, he was about to take the plunge when she spoke again.

"Draco will be along later," she said. "He's just finishing up over at the lab."

He scowled at the mention of the other man's name, suddenly feeling incredibly foolish. "The sooner he gets here, the better," he said, not meaning a single word.

Hermione placed a hand on his shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. Her fingers were soft and warm, sending a thrill through him. For Severus, it wasn't quite the comforting gesture she'd intended.

"Hey, it's not all doom and gloom," she said, giving him a small smile. "You've got me."

'If only,' Severus thought. *'If only...'*

Day 1/2 -- Part I

Chapter 3 of 5

Severus has just five days to make Hermione his. But he also has a murder to solve. Can he do it in time? Or will his partner, Draco Malfoy, get the girl?

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A/N: Once again, a big thank you goes to x_weasley for all over help. Thank you to everyone who reviewed, too.

Day 1 10:01pm Ministry Lab.

It had been exactly one minute into the shift when the call came through. Severus had just arrived, striding through the dark door of his office with blue murder shining in his eyes, when the tinny ring of the phone cut through the air, demanding his attention.

Dumping his bag down on top of his desk, he yanked the phone from its resting hook, glaring at it as though the person on the other end could see. His fingers tightened in a death grip around the black plastic.

"What?" he snapped, foregoing the usual pleasantries. He'd had an exceptionally bad morning. Sleep had eluded him, once again, and for the majority of the day, he'd found himself sat on the floor brooding and drinking seemingly endless cups of coffee black, of course; he found that milk didn't entirely agree with him.

Severus' scowl deepened as he listened to the faint tones of the Ministry Operator on the other end, most of the talk unheard due to the crackling interference on the line.

"What do you mean, 'bad news'?" he said icily.

There was more talking, half of which seemed unintelligible.

"Fine. I'll inform them now," he virtually shouted into the mouthpiece. And with that, he slammed the phone down, taking delight in the sickening crunch the plastic made as it came into contact with the holder.

Frustrated, Severus slammed the door to his office shut, not even bothering to unpack his bag, and marched off to find the others. Malfoy would probably be on his way in now, if he wasn't here already. As for Hermione, she usually arrived about a half-hour before shift change. With any luck they'd both be in, and he wouldn't have to repeat himself.

He checked the Computer Room and the Bullet Lab no sign of them. Wandering the light-grey halls of the facility, a glass-and-metal world of cold institutional sterility, he passed a couple of labs and the door that led off to the Morgue before he finally tracked them down.

They were in the break room, sat on the navy-blue sofa, entirely too close together for Severus' comfort. Malfoy had his arm around Hermione, his hand resting gently upon her shoulder. They were talking in hushed voices, smiling secretively at each other. Hermione was laughing gently, blissfully unaware they had company. Malfoy, however, was well aware of Severus' presence.

With a sly glance in Severus' direction, Malfoy slipped his free hand over Hermione's knee, drawing lazy circles over her skin with the side of his thumb. Jealousy flared inside Severus, making him angry. The man was doing it on purpose simply to irk him. And the worst part of it was that Hermione simply smiled.

Feeling the sudden urge to make his presence known, Severus coughed loudly. Hermione jumped, backing away from Malfoy and flushing guiltily when she caught sight of the 'intruder'. Malfoy simply smirked.

"If you two have quite finished, then I believe we have some work to do," he snapped, glaring at Malfoy, not quite trusting himself to look Hermione in the face. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see her blushing furiously, her red cheeks burning under the flickering fluorescent lighting.

"Someone got out on the wrong side of the bed, didn't they?" drawled Malfoy, throwing Hermione a look of amusement. Severus ignored the jibe, far more interested in the information Malfoy had obtained.

Malfoy reached for the clipboard that lay, hitherto unnoticed, on the coffee table, flicking through the cream-coloured parchment until he found what he was looking for. "I got the results back on that red fibre you found. It's from a pair of spell-tailored robes the residual magic erosion count was sixty, so the robes were made back in 2003. We also managed to obtain the point of origin. The fibre's spell signature was specific to Quigley's Quidditch Supplies in Reading. And there are only two teams that wear the specific shade we found and buy from that supplier: the Winchester Arrows and the Leigh Leopards."

"We only need to search the one team. I just got a call. The Ministry has managed to track down Ms. Bones' next of kin." Severus took a deep breath, gauging their reactions. "One Ronald Bilius Weasley, current Keeper for the Leigh Leopards."

Day 1 11:32pm Leigh Athletics Stadium, Home of the Leigh Leopards.

"Finally. It's taken you lot bloody well long enough to get here. I called station earlier this morning, and some bloke on t'other end told me you'd be along shortly. Shortly? Bunch o' liars. Thirteen hours I've been waiting. You're damn well lucky there's a practice tonight, or I would 'av been long gone, mate."

Severus stared in distaste at the man in front of him.

Balding and slightly larger round the middle than he ought to be, Tom Middleton was the kind of man you'd expect to find sat behind a desk somewhere, pushing paper, not in the middle of a Quidditch Pitch wearing coach colours. Muscle, obviously gone to pot, stretched his slightly too small robes, and his heavily set features creased as he regarded the Unspeakable. With a large hand, he rubbed the underside of his square set jaw.

"Mind you, you don't much look like one o' Pigs. But they take all sorts these days, don't they?" he said with a thick northern accent. "I'm just glad someone finally took time to come and help us find Milly."

"Pardon?"

"That's why you're here, innit? To investigate Milly's disappearance." At Severus' bewildered look, the coach elaborated. "Milly's our mascot. You know, Milly the Leigh Leopard. The lads are so disheartened without her."

"We're investigating a murder, Mr. Middleton. A lost cat is not our priority. A dispatch team will be sent when one is available," said Hermione, watching as Severus picked an invisible piece of lint from the front of his robes.

"A murder? Well, I can't say I know anything 'bout that, love." The coach removed his wand from his pocket. "How's 'bout we go inside an' discuss this over a brew like civilised people?" he said, motioning to one of the many doors in the stadium wall.

"I think not, Mr. Middleton," said Severus. "We don't have time for tea. We would like to talk to the team."

"You think one o' them's involved?" The coach bristled slightly. "They're good lads, them. True, some o' them ain't sharpest tool in box, but none o' 'em are murderers."

"Good or not, we'd still like to talk to them. All information is useful information," said Hermione, giving the coach a forced smile.

"Fine. Though I don't want you harassing any o' my players. There's a big match on Friday. They need t' be at their best."

Severus watched with a detached sort of interest as Middleton blew on his whistle, calling the flyers down to ground level. Whilst none of the players possessed any particular finesse for the sport, they weren't half bad for an amateur team.

There was a flurry of red and black as they descended, coming to rest gently on the ground. He watched for one player in particular, his expression grim. He really hated this part of his job.

"I'm Severus Snape." He gestured briefly in Hermione's direction. "And this is Hermione Granger. We're from the Ministry Crime Lab. We're investigating the murder of a young woman, and I'd be grateful for your assistance. If you could please make a line over by the black van at the entrance, my partner, Mr. Malfoy, will take both fingerprints and a DNA swab. We also require you to make a footprint."

"This is a warrant from the Ministry for both DNA and generalised documentation." Severus held up a piece of purple card, Ministry issue, with small black words scrolling across its surface. It fluttered slightly in the night wind. "Any failure to comply with the wishes of Mr. Malfoy will result in disciplinary action."

Several of the players winced. Most of them were old enough to remember when Severus taught at Hogwarts, long before his undue sacking, and thus remembered his wrath. They obediently filed off, making an orderly queue at the back of the van.

Severus held out a slim hand, grabbing Weasley by the shoulder as he passed.

"This way please, Mr. Weasley. We'd like you to come with us."

Day 2 12:05pm The Locker Room, Leigh Athletics Stadium.

"Where were you between the hours of four pm and five pm on Friday the 28th June?" Severus' business-like tone cut through the silence of the locker room.

Weasley frowned, glancing at Hermione for reassurance. Hermione kept her expression dutifully blank, looking only at Severus.

"I was at home. Asleep."

"Can anyone confirm that?"

"No. I sleep alone." He crossed his arms, left hand still gripping his broom. "What's this all about?"

"Last night we found Ms. Eleanor Bones' body on the driveway of number 48, Moor Road. We know you're heavily involved with the woman," said Hermione, her tone carefully indifferent.

"Are you accusing me of murdering my own fiancée?" he asked, staring at Hermione with wide eyes.

"We are accusing you of nothing, Mr. Weasley," said Severus. "We are only trying to establish facts. And, at the moment, these facts point to your involvement in the

crime."

"Why would I murder the woman I love? She was everything to me."

"Revenge, Mr. Weasley. The consequence of a lover's tiff? Records," he lowered his voice a little, "and personal experience show you have a temper. Perhaps you came home to find her with another man and got angry?"

Weasley flushed, his face becoming almost as red as his hair. "She was not that kind of woman," he hissed. "Are you implying that Eleanor was a whore?"

Severus' nostrils flared. "I am doing nothing of the sort. I am merely giving thought to the evidence we collected. And since you don't have an alibi..."

"Evidence?" He sat back on the bench, leaning on the locker, gazing at the pair of investigators with incredulity. "And what so-called evidence would this be?"

Severus flipped open the notebook he held, thumbing through the pages until he found the one he required.

"Your father owns a Muggle Land Rover, does he not?"

"Yes, but I don't see what this has to do with..."

"Tyre tracks, recently discovered to be from a Muggle four by four, were found at the scene of the dump. Did you take your father's car to dispose of the body?"

"No. My father is away on business in America, as the Ministry will confirm, and has taken the car with him. It's impossible to steal a car from the other side of the world. I hope the rest of your evidence is better than this."

"We found a red fibre on the bed at the scene of the crime."

"So?"

"Spell diagnostics and microscopic processing show the fibre to be a positive match to your Quidditch Team's robes."

"I visit her place all the time... doesn't prove anything 'cept me being at her house some time over the last week or so and the fact that perhaps she didn't vacuum as often as she should."

"We also found a bloody footprint, size twelve. We pulled up your medical records. You are a size twelve, are you not?"

"Yes," he said, tight lipped, "but so are about half of the team. Face it, Snape. You have nothing to tie the crime to me. You're just after an easy scapegoat to hide your inadequacies. Can't let go of old rivalries?"

"I simply follow evidence. And the evidence points to you. My own feelings do not factor into the equation." He closed his notebook with a snap and placed it back into the inner pocket of his robes. "It is only a matter of time before the sperm sample recovered can be identified. And with your DNA now on record." He held up the cheek swab Hermione had taken earlier. "Your subsequent elimination or incrimination will be swift. Better to confess now than later, Mr. Weasley. That is, if you have anything to hide."

"Look, if you had anything at all on me other than some poxy fibre and a vague match with tyre treads, we wouldn't be here. I didn't kill her. And, if you're not going to charge me, then I'd like to get back to practice." He turned to Hermione, his eyes pleading. "You believe me, Hermione. You know I didn't do it."

Hermione shrugged. "The evidence never lies," she said, watching with thinly veiled despair as her one-time best friend rose from the bench, spun on his heel and marched off.

Day 2 2:16am Conference Room, Ministry Lab.

The news had spread like wildfire: the Leigh Leopards were under suspicion of murder, the main suspect being their keeper. It seemed even minor celebrities could generate a large enough crowd where their misfortune was concerned. There wasn't a man, woman or child at the lab unaware of the case now, and the media had to be put on lock-down to prevent vital details of the case becoming public knowledge.

The conference room in the Main Lab was packed. About fifty Aurors in civilian robes had come to reinforce the ranks of the Unspeakables, making a grand total of one hundred people of varying positions and job descriptions crammed into a room no bigger than Severus' office. And that was before you even began to include the lab's own technicians and investigators. They'd all been called in and received a verbal thrashing from Head Command. The case, apparently, hadn't been handled with enough care, and as if the lab hadn't got enough problems, three of the players were suing for harassment. The blame, as per usual, was placed entirely on the shoulders of the lab. The Ministry couldn't afford a new cock-up.

Severus was trying to spot Hermione in the throng of reservists that were beginning to file out. She'd seemed a little out of it on the ride back to the lab and had subsequently disappeared before Severus could have a word about it. He tried to tell himself he wanted to see her for the good of the lab a lab is only as good as its investigators, after all, and it wouldn't do for one of them to go AWOL but it was a losing battle, even in his own head. He wanted to see her for the sake of it. He cared about her.

He spotted the curl-covered head he was looking for about five minutes later over by the water dispenser. Making a beeline for her, he strode through the crowd, his head held high.

Still in her dark green robes from earlier, she leant gently against the wall, her eyes firmly fixed on the plastic cup in her hand. Her face was a little red and puffy, haphazardly covered with makeup to disguise the fact she'd been crying. Severus felt a little tug deep in his chest as he watched her stare dejectedly into nothing. He placed a hand on his breastbone, rubbing it gently to ease the slight discomfort.

"How'd you get on with the evidence cataloguing?" he said, shifting nervously from foot to foot. It wasn't what he wanted to say, but it'd do. For now.

"Erm, fine," said Hermione, taking a long draught from her cup before speaking again. "I found four others that could fit the killer's profile. The stuff is over in the Evidence Lab, if you'd like to take a look."

"Perhaps later." He dismissed her suggestion with a wave of his hand. "I... er... Are you alright?" He coughed a little, feeling constricted by the collar of his robes as he managed to force out the words.

Hermione looked up, giving him a piercing stare. "I'm fine," she stated coldly. Severus cursed internally. He seemed to have a knack for saying exactly the wrong thing at the wrong time.

Perhaps it was luck, or (more likely) a coincidence, but just as he was about to press the issue a little further, his mobile rang. With a grimace, he removed it from its place on his belt and flipped the tiny, vibrating machine open.

"Snape," he stated, identifying himself to the caller. There was a slight whirring noise as the Ministry connected his phone to the ancient copper wires of their own landlines. The voice on the other end was as muffled as ever, and he had to strain to catch the words. He didn't reply to whatever was said, simply flipping the phone shut and placing it back on his belt.

"I don't believe this," he muttered, fisting his hands in his hair in a display of frustration. Hermione looked at him quizzically, balancing her empty cup on top of the dispenser. Severus wasn't prone to displays of emotion. This had to be bad. "The knife's been sent back from DNA."

"And?" prompted Hermione, when she realised further explanation was not forthcoming.

"DNA isn't a match to Eleanor. We've just lost our murder weapon."

Hermione's eyes went wide. "Christ," she exclaimed. "You mean we've got a serial killer."

"Of a sort."

"What do you mean, 'of a sort'?"

"Blood isn't even human," he said with a sigh. The case was rapidly turning into a dead one, the trail becoming colder every second. With one piece of evidence out of the equation, and minimal evidence to start with, they were out on limb.

"Do they know what animal it's from yet?"

"No. They had to send it to an outside specialist. We're just not well enough equipped here to deal with it. Bloody ill-equipped Ministry. Reducing expenditure, my arse."

Hermione groaned, shoving her hands deep into her pockets. "It just gets worse and worse, doesn't it?" She flicked him a look. "Well, what do we do now?"

"Not much we can do until those other samples get back from processing. It'll mean overtime; they'll only get back at four, and I want as much done as possible before we leave."

"Overtime? I'm still maxed out from the Wilson Case."

"I'll pull a few strings up at the High Office. Auror Shacklebolt owes me a few favours." Hermione gave him a sceptical look, folding her arms in a gesture reminiscent of Molly Weasley. Severus smirked and, in a flash of inspiration, said, "I'll even throw in breakfast. On me."

Ever the schemer, he'd just managed to ask her out on a date. Well, sort of. In a roundabout kind of way. Besides, doing it this way meant he didn't have to gather the courage to ask her straight out. Slytherin he may be, but seduction was not his forte. That particular house trait seemed to have passed him by, leaving him more of a stuttering wreck around women than a suave sex god.

"You don't have to do that. I'll work anyway, you know. Breakfast or not," she said, letting her hands fall to her sides.

"Think of it as an extra from your kind and generous boss."

Hermione couldn't quite suppress the snort of laughter at his last statement. Severus scowled at her, but his heart wasn't in it. He knew she could see the amusement lurking in his eyes.

"Go on then," she said, giving him his first proper smile of the evening.

Severus felt his heart leap in his chest. He released a breath he hadn't even realised he was holding, trying his best not to grin like a madman. The case may be taking a dive, but the competition seemed to be looking up.

"Did someone mention breakfast and the possibility of paying for it?"

Severus' heart sank. He'd forgotten about Malfoy.

He watched as Malfoy swanned into the conference room, clipboard in hand. He smiled tightly at the blond-haired menace, his mind running through every hex he could think of and some of the nasty ones twice. But the man just grinned, inordinately pleased with himself.

"Severus' invited us all out for breakfast," said Hermione.

Malfoy's grin grew even wider at the thought of breaking up what had clearly been meant as a date.

"That's very generous, Snape. And you know I'm never one to turn down free food. I trust it'll be somewhere nice."

Severus inclined his head, glaring. "Naturally."

"Excellent." Malfoy held his clipboard up. "I've got the victim's blood work back from Tox. There was a large amount of Hirduin in her system, and her blood-alcohol level was high."

"Hirduin?" asked Hermione, curious.

"Hirduin is the main ingredient in most anti-coagulant potions, so we know the killer is definitely from the magical community or has access to it. Muggles can't get hold of Hirduin potions; they typically prefer Warfarin," said Severus. "Hirduin is extracted from the saliva of the blood-sucking leech *Hirudo Medicinalis*, unlike Warfarin, which is synthetic. It inhibits thrombin, the central enzyme responsible for controlling the coagulation process. Very potent and fast acting." He turned to Malfoy. "I take it you found traces of Varinan Root in the screen as well."

Malfoy nodded. "How'd you know that?"

"It must be added to the potion and mixed counter-clockwise with a birch rod, among other things, to make it suitable for oral ingestion. Pure Hirduin has to be injected straight into the bloodstream since it's a peptide it'd be broken down by the stomach acid before it'd even reach the blood system. And we found no needle marks on the body."

"We got the remnants of the wine at the bottom of the broken glass tested too. Also positive for Hirduin." He looked at his notes. "Her heart and blood was healthy, so the ingestion of Hirduin was not for medical use. I don't think she knew she was taking it. The wine would mask the taste."

"Shows premeditation," said Hermione, taking the clipboard from Draco's hands and flicking through the parchment attached. "The anti-coagulant would cause her to bleed-out more effectively. Though why anyone would need a death that messy, I have no idea."

"Well, we can be certain of one thing." Everyone looked at Severus. "We know the potion was store-bought. Hirduin is only released to St Mungo's and generalised apothecaries. And can only be bought on prescription." He turned to Malfoy. "Go and check the local apothecaries. Get me a list of all anti-coagulant potions sold within the last four months."

"Got it." Malfoy shoved his hands in his pockets and walked to the door. "Meeting at seven for breakfast?"

Severus nodded, watching as he disappeared down the corridor. He turned to Hermione.

"I want to go back to the body. See if we can learn anything new since the knife's gone."

With a swish of his robes, he strode out of the conference room and down towards the stainless-steel doors of the Morgue. He was about halfway there when he realised Hermione wasn't behind him. Under the flickering fluorescent lights, he stopped, spinning on his heel until he faced the way he came. He saw her lurking over by the lab door.

"Aren't you coming?"

*Pigs British slang for Policemen.

*Brew Slang (commonly northern) for a cup of tea.

* Swanned swaggered. I'm not sure if this is a common term or not. All I know is that my mother used to use it all the time when I was growing up.

*Hirudin an anti-coagulant found in leech saliva. The leeches are commonly used in reconstructive microsurgery. Commonly harvested from yeast, as it is far too expensive to harvest from leeches. It is one of the most potent natural anti-coagulants, but it less effective and more toxic than Heparin when used to treat coronary heart problems. It must given parenterally (injected).

*Warfarin an anti-coagulant that is synthetically derived from Coumarin. Originally developed for rat poison, but is now used to treat people with blood clots (thrombosis). It is taken orally. It is found in very small amounts in both liquorice and lavender.

Day 1/2 -- Part II

Chapter 4 of 5

Severus has just five days to make Hermione his. But he also has a murder to solve. Can he do it in time? Or will his partner, Draco Malfoy, get the girl?

Complete AU. Does exactly what it says on the tin (and no funny business).

Disclaimer: I do not own these characters. They belong to JK Rowling. I make no money from this piece of fiction.

A/N: Thank you to x_weasley for all her help and hand-holding. And thank you to Melusin, who agreed to beta this chapter.

Day 2 3:16am Morgue.

"Row three, column twelve."

Severus and Hermione crossed the marble floor of the Morgue to a wall almost entirely covered in large, silver drawers. Severus twisted the handle as Hermione pulled, their joint efforts just about managing to release the lock from its stiff hinges and allowing the drawer to slide open in a single, smooth motion. The woman was still the same as ever, only now sporting the hastily stitched marks of a Y-incision.

Muggle butchery at its best.

Severus leant forward, his latex-sheathed fingers pulling gently at the heavily bruised tissue around the neck wound to give Hermione a better look. The grey-tinged skin was cold beneath his fingertips, and Severus suppressed a shudder of distaste. No matter how many times he'd done it, how many times he'd helped out on those long nights in the Morgue, the feel of dead flesh always managed to make his skin crawl.

"The wound's deep," she stated simply, her eyes flicking down to the rest of the cloth-covered body. Severus pulled back the startlingly white material, careful not to jar any of the dead woman's frozen limbs.

Bruises, a deep purple, had blossomed over her body post-mortem. These were in the deeper tissue and would probably have been the sign of serious internal damage had the woman still been alive. They spread extensively over her stomach and thighs, most vivid over the curve of her hips. A bruise lay upon each shoulder, the tell-tale pattern of handprints prominent.

"These weren't here yesterday," murmured Severus, tracing the purple patterns with his index finger.

"Signs of a struggle, perhaps. Maybe Eleanor fought back." She leant closer, nudging Severus out of the way with her elbow. "The hand prints are off." She placed her hand over one of the bruises, twisting it until it fitted the pattern. Her fingers pointed down towards the woman's torso, her palms across the top of the shoulders. Hermione's brow furrowed. "Her attacker came from behind, which makes me wonder how she acquired those bruises across her lower body. If anything, the bruises should be on the backs of her thighs, not the front."

"But why grab her by the shoulders? Surely it would have been easier to grab her by the neck, if killing was the intention?"

Severus watched as Hermione crossed her arms, clearly deep in thought.

"Got something?" he asked.

"Maybe," she murmured, but said nothing more on the subject.

They worked in silence for the next fifteen minutes or so, both busy searching the body for some clue as to her killer. Disheartened after finding nothing, they were about to give it up as a bad job when the large, stainless steel doors that lead into the Morgue opened.

"Why are you here when I've been looking for you in the lab?" Luna, dressed in her Muggle-style lab coat, blinked owlishly at the pair. She didn't wait for a reply, shaking her head, radish earrings swinging furiously with the movement. "No matter. I've found you now. I've got something you might be interested in."

"The bruising?" asked Hermione. "We've seen it. It doesn't help us much. Just gives us part of a 'How'."

"No. Something far more interesting than silly old bruises. With the amount of Hirudin in her system, they could be purely coincidental." Luna held up a brown envelope, beaming widely. "I found a short blond hair in the wound tract during my exploration. It has to be the killer's. The hair was left after the throat was slashed, and the paramedic who pronounced it had brown hair."

"And does it match to anything else?"

"Yes. The hair is a match to the sperm sample we found."

"We have the killer and the lover."

"Yes, we do."

Day 2 8:56am Evidence Lab

It had been time-consuming and utterly pointless, not to mention horrendously expensive.

None of the players were a match for the mystery killer.

Severus sighed heavily, setting yet another negative autorad down on the stainless-steel table, the barcode-like pattern on the x-ray film standing out against the silver, mocking him. It had taken three precious hours of the shift to profile each team member and nearly as long to run each DNA set against that of the killer. And that was with both himself and Hermione working at burn-out-rate.

Out of the seven collected (eight if you factored in the coach's DNA), only four flagged up enough markers to show distant relation to the killer. And even then it was relatively little help. All four were purebloods. And heaven knows they're almost too inbred to function.

"Here."

Severus glanced up, taking the hot cup of coffee Hermione offered him. He cradled it gently in his hands, warming his fingers out of comfort rather than cold. Steam wafted up from the dark liquid, bringing with it the satisfying aroma of freshly ground beans. He inhaled deeply, a lazy smile just touching the corners of his lips. Working for the Ministry seemed to have done wonders for his temperament; he found himself content here and often allowed himself a small smile of satisfaction, though usually when he thought no-one was watching. A fearsome reputation was a handy thing, and the Bat of the Dungeons (or in this case, ex-Bat) couldn't afford to be seen as anything other than truly terrifying.

"Was that Ron's autorad?" asked Hermione, hiding behind her cup. She was nervous, though, trying her best to hide it.

"Yes." He placed his free hand on top of hers, drawing it and the cup down until it was resting firmly on the table top. Her skin was burning to the touch, and it took almost all his willpower not to recoil, scared of the feelings she was igniting in him. "And it's not a match. Markers and RFLPs were different. He was telling the truth. He's innocent."

The smile she gave him made his stomach flip. Tears wetting her eyes, face bright and beaming, she let go of her cup, lacing her fingers between his. "I knew it."

"And so, it seems, are the other players. No matches, whatsoever." He sighed heavily. "It seems like we're back to square one no suspect, limited evidence and no eyewitnesses."

Her face sobered slightly. "Not quite square one, Severus, though not far off. We know who it's not. It's not a woman. And it's not one of the players, or the coach." She pursed her lips, thinking. "What about another man connected with Eleanor? Someone who has access to her records, perhaps?"

"Nothing came up when the killer's DNA profile was put through the National Database. Which means it's neither a Ministry worker nor a member of the Public Sector. That rules out that theory, I'm afraid."

"Unfortunate, but it does narrow it down to about forty percent of the wizarding population or so. Still a wide search area, though. It's not feasible."

"Forty percent's not feasible, but what about twenty percent?" Hermione narrowed her eyes, looking at Severus curiously. He elaborated. "The killer's a male with size twelve feet, which, by my estimation, means he'd be just under 6'2" in height if we work by the law of averages. Add to that the fact that the hair Luna found was blond, and we narrow the field further."

"But it's still no help. There are hundreds of men out there that fit that description."

"Maybe Malfoy will get something. If we cross reference his lists with the evidence we've collected, we could get a couple of hits. Who knows, we might even get lucky first time."

Hermione smiled a little at that, their interlaced fingers forgotten.

Day 2 7:32am The Bay Horse

Zacharias Keddle's inn sign showed a majestic bay stallion rearing up on its back legs. The inn stood opposite the shabby-looking Post Office in the middle of a sleepy northern village. Its tatty, slightly peeling façade wasn't much to look at, and the grimy windows prevented one from seeing much of the interior.

The heavy brass knocker on the front door was shaped like a hand with a closed fist. It glinted softly in the light of the street lamps, the only dab of colour on the black door. Muggle teens often dared each other to touch it, but those who ventured to do so were left with a strange mark on the tip of their index finger.

But it disappeared within a matter of hours. Zacharias wasn't a cruel man.

Once inside, the view was completely different. The interior, lit by the fire that burned in the grate, was a friendly mixture of light and dark. A mismatch of tables and chairs were dotted around the inn, rising like islands from a sea of Persian carpet. Frescoes of great battles and daring deeds adorned the walls, enchanting in their detail, begging to be looked at just a little closer. The scent of good wine and cigarette smoke hung heavy in the warm air, making it all the more enticing.

Zacharias Keddle stood behind his bar. A tall man with a well-rounded stomach, he watched his clientele with warm, brown eyes. His jovial face, creased with lines of both age and laughter, was flushed red with the heat. Long silver hair fell down his back, shining in the little light, and he looked very much the part of a wizard.

Keddle's inn was frequented by those witches, wizards and Squibs that lived on the fringes of magical society. It was a welcoming place and served a decent pub lunch. And people returned to it with pleasure and astounding frequency, but it didn't get a mention in any of the local guide books.

Not bad for Wednesday morning, thought Keddle. A few guests lounged in overstuffed armchairs, drinking cups of aromatic coffee Keddle's special blend, naturally and gorging on a variety of foodstuffs. The inn never closed since the majority of its clientele seemed to work the most irregular hours, and in accordance, was staffed in shifts, though Keddle spent little time in bed. The inn was his life.

Severus pushed the door of the inn open. A few heads turned. Severus, despite his 'celebrity' status, had few contacts within the wizarding world these days and not

because he'd been fired from Hogwarts. Half the people in this room were from the Ministry; the other half researched up-and-coming theories or wrote novels, and even included a fortune teller whose predictions were no more accurate than Trelawney's. It was just that Severus was choosy about his friends.

He crossed the room, Malfoy and Hermione in tow, and went round behind the bar to greet Keddle.

"Severus, lad!" bellowed the landlord fondly, clapping a broad hand around his shoulder. "You're a sight for sore eyes."

Severus coloured lightly as he heard the others begin to snicker. Choosing to ignore the pair rather than, as his inner child had suggested, stick his tongue out at them, he returned Keddle's greeting with a friendly nod.

"I would have thought it more the other way round," he said with a sly grin.

Keddle winked at him before turning to the rest of the group. His sharp eyes took in the pair before him, assessing them like he would a bottle of vintage wine.

"A Malfoy, if I'm not mistaken," he said, extending his hand in a gesture of welcome.

Malfoy took it without hesitation, introducing himself fully to the wizard. "Draco Malfoy. And it's a pleasure to meet you."

The landlord's eyebrows rose a fraction before he replied with a carefully bland, "quite."

He turned to Hermione next. Keddle captured her hand, drawing it to his mouth. He placed a small kiss on her palm in a gallant gesture. Hermione blushed prettily.

"Zacharias Keddle at your service, my dear lady," said the landlord, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

"Charmer," muttered Severus, folding his arms and smirking.

"I deny nothing." He beamed at Hermione. "And what might a beauty such as yourself be called?"

"Hermione Granger," she said, smiling back. Keddle's good humour was infectious, it seemed.

"Ah," he gasped, "Shakespeare. Midwinter's Tale, if I'm not mistaken. A particular favourite of mine."

Keddle drew back, straightening his care-worn robes. "A table for three, I take it?" he asked Severus, rubbing his hands gleefully when he replied with a nod. "Excellent."

"So, you're thinking this blood's feline?"

Severus watched as Malfoy sat back in his chair, folding his arms gently. His blond hair, a little too long in the fringe, flopped forward, and he had to shake his head to clear it from his vision. Keddle had seated them in one of the more secluded areas of the inn in a quiet corner lit by gently burning candles held in the necks of empty wine bottles. It was peaceful and without distraction; the perfect place to talk.

"From the missing Leopard, yes. The Ouchterlony test came back not-human, and the leopard seems to be the most likely candidate for the blood donor," said Severus, taking a sip of his tea.

They'd ordered breakfast, or, in their case, dinner, a little over a minute ago, and the first of the morning's refreshments had already made their way to the table. Keddle was renowned for his tea, pure Darjeeling and brewed to perfection. A good cup of tea, his father had once said, was the cure for all ills. And though Severus highly doubted it was true, he did enjoy a cup or two of Keddle's best. He closed his eyes a little, savouring the taste.

"But isn't that a little too convenient?"

"Perhaps. But the majority of killers are not known for their astounding intelligence. Why connect the two?" He sat back, crossing his legs in a dignified manner. "Because the likelihood of two crimes committed in the same area with a link, however tenuous, between them spells not coincidence. It spells conspiracy, and in this case, murder. Murder begets murder, Malfoy. And it is more likely than not that the Leopard killing was a warm up for something far more sinister."

"Like the killing of Eleanor Bones," murmured Hermione, picking at a button on the front of her shirt.

Severus' eyes were drawn to the tiny movement, and he found himself unable to tear his gaze away. His pulse quickened as he took in the fullness of her figure; the way her breasts stretched the front of her shirt, the tapering of her waist before flaring into the sweet curve of her hips; the way she was looking at him with those beautiful brown eyes, frowning slightly.

Severus flushed, snapping his eyes away in embarrassment. He coughed, mortified to be caught ogling her figure. In a hasty decision to avoid confrontation, he kept his eyes firmly focused on the table before him.

"Besides, where else could the blood have come from? It's not like we have any other leads on the case at all apart from that hair Luna found."

"Hair?"

"Luna found a short, blond hair in the wound tract. It has to belong to our killer since it was deposited after the slashing, and the paramedic who pronounced it was a brunette." Severus gave Malfoy a sharp look. "And before you ask, the skin tag doesn't match any of the players' DNA, but it does match the sperm collected. Our lover is also our killer."

"It has three markers in common with four of the players and four markers in common with the Seeker, Adrian Nott," said Hermione, "but that means nothing. They're all purebloods and, no offence, Draco, as inbred as yourself. All we know is that it was committed by someone with close ties to the Family of Nott. Which could be almost any pureblood going."

"Or half-blood with pure ancestry," said Severus.

"Well, if it helps, the lists I compiled contain a Nott. One Ellis Nott, to be exact. Buys his heart medication from Black's Apothecary just on the outskirts of Preston. Could be the connection we're looking for." Malfoy sucked on his teaspoon, removing the last of the sugar with his tongue in a show of bad manners. "A fourth cousin twice removed from my father's side, naturally I believe. Very distant, even in the realms of pureblood."

Severus was about to reply when the main course arrived, the house special: a thick slice of gammon accompanied by roasted potatoes, mixed vegetables and stock gravy. Severus dug into his meal with enthusiasm.

"I hate to admit it, Draco, but you do seem to have your uses," said Hermione, busily smothering a thick knob of butter over her potatoes.

"I know." He nudged her with his elbow, shooting her a friendly grin. "And it just kills you all to admit you just couldn't do without me."

"True," commented Severus, his expression one of carefully schooled nonchalance. "We'd have no-one to do all the donkey work."

Hermione laughed, taking a sip of her tea. "Scutter-bot boy."

Malfoy and Severus frowned in confusion. Clearly it was a Muggle thing.

The main meal was eaten with much relish and little conversation, finishing the dish taking priority over case notes. Severus sighed and leant back in his chair, his arms folded across his chest and his face the very picture of contentment. Eating at the Bay Horse always put him in a good mood, whether the company be Keddle himself or someone entirely different.

Draco excused himself to the gents, having had a little more to drink than was entirely prudent and beginning to feel the effects. Once he was gone, Severus cast a lazy glance over at Hermione, who met his gaze with a friendly smile.

"I take it this place meets with your approval."

"Oh, it's lovely." She leant her chin on her palm. "Though I'd never imagine you to be on such friendly terms with the proprietor."

"Zacharias is an old acquaintance. I spent many an afternoon here in my youth listening him tell his tall tales. Don't let him fool you: the old goat knows far more than he lets on. He's as sharp as you and me, if not more so." He narrowed his eyes a little, smirking. "And it seems he's taken somewhat of a shine to you. You'll never be rid now, you understand."

Hermione laughed. "He's so very dear. I haven't seen that amount of charm in a man since Lockhart."

"Which is all fine and dandy if you prefer flattery to intelligent conversation. Lockhart was decidedly lacking in that department, for all his charisma. Though, I must admit, he had a certain talent for Memory Charms."

Hermione snorted into her cup, her eyes shining. "That's just sour grapes, Severus."

"Excuse me?" he said with mock incredulity. "I can be very charming when I put my mind to it."

"I'm sure you can," she said airily, teasing him. It was a challenge, and Severus could never resist a challenge.

He winked at Hermione, the corners of his mouth curving into a small smirk. Taking her hand in his, he began the first assault.

"Glad we concur. Though it makes me wonder whether you will be able to resist my charm once I unleash it."

"Why? Dangerous, is it?" The teasing tone was still there, but her eyes held more than amusement.

"Exceedingly. I am a master in the art of flattery, my dear."

"Then flatter me. Show me your talent."

Severus let his fingers wander from her hand, caressing the smooth skin on the inside of her wrist. Hermione drew in a steadying breath and began to reciprocate, stroking the pale skin that lay just under the sleeve of his jacket. Severus barely managed to suppress a moan. The contact was electrifying. Emboldened by her move, he continued, lowering his voice to a silky smooth purr.

"If the lady wishes." He gave her a sly wink. "But where to start? Everything about you is intoxicating. Even the scent of you. It makes me want to touch you. To run my fingers across the perfect skin of your collarbone. To kiss you."

He rose from his chair, releasing Hermione's hand and circling the table until he stood behind her. His mind screamed at him to stop, to quit whilst he was still ahead, but he didn't. He leant into Hermione's personal space, brushing back her fall of curls with a trembling (damn it) hand and exposing her neck. His fingers brushed against the delicate skin, and he felt her shiver, watching with fascination as her skin pebbled. He heard her breath hitch a little, and before he could think the better of it, he placed a light kiss just below her ear.

"I told you I could be charming," he whispered, the words slightly huskier than he'd intended. Even if the contact wasn't affecting her, it was definitely affecting him.

And that brought him back down to earth with a bump. All the confidence he'd possessed in the face of her challenge deserted him. With little ceremony, he let her hair drop and stumbled back to his seat. He was horrified at what he'd done. That he'd let himself lose control like that.

He couldn't bring himself to look at her, to see the revulsion that surely must lie on her face. The silence between them became oppressive. He opened his mouth to apologise, but nothing came out. He just sat there, gaping like a fish.

"Severus?"

He heard Hermione call his name but was saved from having to answer by the return of Malfoy. Instead, he stared resolutely at the painting on the wall, waiting for one of the many waiters to come and take their order for pudding.

The remainder of their breakfast/dinner passed pleasantly enough, and there were no more disasters on the Hermione front. He'd managed to spend the rest of the meal avoiding eye contact. Mostly he'd just stuck to drinking his tea, eating his sticky toffee pudding and inserting mildly witty comments whenever the mood took him.

Waiting by the Permanent Portkey Position for the next free gate, he watched as Hermione readied herself for off. Wand out, hair wild about her shoulders, she looked very much the part of a witch both beautiful and dangerous. Perhaps that's why he found himself so taken with her; the strong, fearless woman that haunted his dreams with teasing caresses, leaving him ashamed when he awoke hard and aching. It was always her face he imagined.

"Thanks for dinner, Severus," she said, leaning up to plant a kiss on his cheek and breaking him from his reverie. Despite himself, Severus leaned slightly into the touch, wanting to prolong the contact for as long as possible. His eyes closed, and he could smell her perfume: the sweet scent of oranges with base notes of myrrh and something uniquely her. He'd smelt it earlier, but in the heavy air of the inn, it hadn't been nearly as noticeable.

"And thank you for showing me one of your better qualities," she whispered against his ear.

Surely she couldn't mean... could she?

His eyes snapped open only to find her disappearing in a swirl as the Portkey activated. Going home to sleep.

*Scutter-bot the service bots from Red Dwarf.

*Skin Tag the part found at the start of the hair when it's pulled directly from the root. Unlike the hair itself, which is mainly keratin fibre, it contains the DNA of the person it was pulled from. This is why not all hairs are useful when identifying subjects only the ones with tags can be used for DNA identification.

*Autorad Short for Autoradiograph. It is the final 'barcode' produced in DNA profiling. Done using electrophoresis (DNA fragments are separated by weight passing an

electric current through the gel in which the DNA is placed). It takes place on a nylon membrane and is photographed against a x-ray film.

*RFLP Restriction Fragment Length Polymorphism. A way of identifying DNA due to the different lengths of DNA fragments. Each length is unique to the person in question.

*Ouchterlony Test a clinical test that determines whether collected blood evidence is human in origin or comes from an animal.

Day 2/3

Chapter 5 of 5

Severus has just five days to make Hermione his. But he also has a murder to solve. Can he do it in time? Or will his partner, Draco Malfoy, get the girl?

Complete AU. Does exactly what it says on the tin (and no funny business).

The Waiting Game Chapter Five

A/N: I'm sorry for the huge delay in posting this chapter.

For all those of you who watch CSI:Vegas, you'll note that I owe a great debt to **Invisible Evidence** (4:09) in this chapter. This entire case was inspired by that episode and what could have been.

Thank you, once again, to Talesofsnape for all of her help and advice.

Day 2 11:04pm Snape's Office

Severus Snape sat at the table in his office shaking his head. The greasy substance on the victim's arm had been identified. It was hair cream. The kind used for styling. Very common too; one of the Sleakeazy brands. They'd searched the house, but had come up trumps. It appeared that Eleanor preferred regular styling mouse, of the Muggle variety. The cream was the killers, most likely transferred during the crime itself, but it brought them no further with the identification. A six-foot plus male with blonde hair, possibly sleeked back, was no help. There were thousands of wizards out there who matched that description. And only one of them was the killer.

Sighing in frustration, Severus rubbed his hands across his face. His eyes stung, the lack of sleep once again getting to him. He'd had to adjust the lights in the office to deal with it, the new, lower-light threatening to send him off into a sleepless daze. But, even with fresh eyes, he wasn't sure he'd have much luck.

For the past hour, he'd spent his time checking and rechecking the evidence. They just had to have missed something. It was impossible that the killer could leave behind this much evidence yet still remain unidentifiable. True, they had no fingerprints, but they had DNA, and that was the body's fingerprint. Even wizarding DNA followed the laws of biology. Magic could not alter a cell's make-up; the killer could have been polyjuiced, transfigured, charmed and subject to a whole host of other clever disguises, but the DNA would remain unaffected. Always phosphate, pentose sugar, base. It never differed. Draco had run the DNA through the National Database yesterday whilst he and Hermione had been busy with the players' autorads, but nothing concrete had come up. Only a series of partial pure-blood matches, as was to be expected. A few alleles in common here and there.

Severus sighed, gently fingering the handle of his coffee cup. The killer was clever. No DNA on record meant that they had to rely on other, less accurate methods of identification. And with no witnesses... He supposed he should be thankful that the Lab had come up clean. Their record was spotless and he wanted to keep it that way. The thought of a killer within their ranks chilled him to the bone.

Everything for this murder was wrong. It didn't add up. They had unidentified DNA, a bloody knife that wasn't the murder weapon, a set of Muggle tyre tracks, unaccounted for blood spatter, a dead body filled with anti-coagulants, and, perhaps the most puzzling of all, a single broken wineglass. That was before you even added in the missing leopard, if, indeed, the mascot was connected to this case. The external blood test had yet to yield results in favour of that theory. All in all, it was giving Severus a headache.

He was busily examining the remnants of the shattered wineglass, magnifying glass in hand, when he heard a quiet knock. Scowling at the thought of being interrupted, he set the evidence down on the table and flicked his gaze over to the door.

"Enter," he said, irritated.

His expression changed as he saw Hermione open the door and peep inside his office. She didn't come fully inside, choosing to hover in the corridor. Her whole posture spoke of barely contained energy; the way she shuffled on her feet, the way she kept glancing back to the door of her lab. Something was up.

"Severus, I think I've found something," she said, twisting her fingers in a nervous gesture. Whatever it was, it was obviously important.

Severus got to his feet, swaying a little as his knees, stiff from sitting, threatened to give way. He gripped the table, his knuckles white, steadying himself before he moved towards her. Hermione looked at him with concern, but he waved her away. He hadn't slept enough. That was it.

"What have you got?" he asked, striding out of his office and locking the door behind him. His face, unflatteringly sallow in the fluorescent lighting of the corridor, showed his curiosity. It could be the break they were looking for. Severus knew from experience that even the smallest of things could catch out a killer.

Hermione smiled at him, though her eyes still held a note of concern. She looked as though she was about to reach out to him, to take his arm, but she didn't. Instead, she thought the better of it and stuffed her hands deep into the pockets of her pinstripe trousers. "Follow me," she said, leading him off into her lab.

The first thing Severus noticed when he entered Hermione's lab was the mess. Stacks and stacks of books were piled upon every available surface. Books on anthropology, psychology, blood spatter, anything you could imagine. They were all there somewhere, just waiting for their owner to pick them up and find the answer. Amongst the books lay all sorts of odds and ends. In fact, Severus was sure he could see a human skull amongst the vast collection of literature. It seemed so odd that this, of all the labs, would belong to Hermione Granger. She was the most organised woman he knew. Surely it was some sort of crime for a woman like herself to live in such disorder?

Picking up a clipboard from one of the piles, Hermione made her way over to the other side of the lab.

"I've been looking at those sheets," she said, flipping through the charts as she walked. "I've tried to replicate the splatter found, but so far I've had no luck. Well, until this morning, that is." She sent him a shy smile before continuing. "I was getting ready for bed when it came to me. Anyway, in lieu of my discovery, I ran up a second set of sheets with identical spatter pattern using blue ink."

She pointed to a large white sheet draped over the top of a table. The blue marks on the sheet were identical to the original, which hung in the corner, and positioned on the make-shift bed as they had found them. Curious, Severus wandered closer, taking in every detail, still trying to figure out what she'd seen. To him, the sheets looked just as they did at the crime scene: odd.

"I want to replicate the scene, but it needs two, and it's Draco's day off," she said. Severus could see the slightest hint of a blush creeping across her cheeks. He felt his heart sink to the floor. Clearly, something had gone on between them; Draco hadn't kept his promise.

"Couldn't you have found someone else," he snapped, his tone cold. He could see the hurt in her eyes, but he forced himself not to react. "I was busy."

"I'm sorry," she said, clearly not. "I'll bear that in mind for next time."

Severus kept his eyes firmly fixed on the sheet, afraid to look at her. He bent down, brushing the top layer with his fingers. It was fine and silky. The sheets must have been her own. The lab couldn't afford something like this. At that moment he was struck with something akin to guilt. She had spent all this time, all this money, on solving the case, and he had snapped at her. He had let his own feelings get in the way once again.

"Tell me your theory," he said, avoiding her gaze.

"I'd rather act it out, if it's much the same to you. That's why I asked you to come here. I could have easily explained it in the office." She dropped her head, staring at her feet. "Besides, I'm not entirely sure this will work. It is, as you said, just a theory."

Sensing the self-deprecating tone her voice had taken, Severus forced himself to look at her. "Everything begins in theory." He placed a hand on the top of her arm. Certain that this would only lead to trouble, Severus sighed, "What do you want me to do?"

Hermione looked up, her face unusually solemn. She flicked her hair back out of her eyes, the brown curls tumbling over her shoulder. Her eyes closed for a fraction of a second before opening and looking straight into his.

"Tie me down."

Severus' breath caught, the words stopping his heart momentarily. They sounded just like they did in his dreams, in those lonely hours between morning and night. He placed both his hands on her shoulders, steadying himself. Schooling his face into a mask of courteous indifference, he counted backwards from ten, calming his racing heart. It wouldn't do to let his feelings show through. He must be professional. He was her boss.

"How?"

"So that my waist touches the end of the bed. I need to be about half way up for this to work." She gave him a shy smile. "My wrists about midway."

"Bend over," he whispered, letting his hands trail down her arms as she stepped away and turned towards the bed.

Unable to tear his eyes away, he watched as she leant over the edge of the bed, the gentle curve of her arse pressed tightly against the fabric of her trousers. His fingers itched with the urge to run them across her backside and up her spine. To touch the soft skin of her shoulders and her neck. She was beautiful, all legs and hips. A goddess sent to tempt him.

Clamping down on the urge, he walked over to her side, crouching down at the point where her wrist met the edge of the bed. She'd spread her arms wide, waiting to be tied. He reached beneath the sheet, searching for the velvety fabric he needed. Moments later, his hands clasped around the long strip tied to the leg of the table. He brought it out, encircling her wrist in a loose slip-knot, the ends positioned neatly so she could pull herself free if needs be. He was careful not to touch her bare skin as he tied.

He did the same to her other wrist, feeling the heat of her gaze on him. He avoided it, afraid she would see his desire in his eyes. When he was done, he rose, moving out of her line of sight.

"The killer ties down Eleanor," she said, shifting her stance a little wider to cope with the strain now placed on her back. "She doesn't struggle, she knows the killer. Or is at least comfortable enough to turn her back on him."

"The killer takes her from behind?" Severus asked, his voice low. "It would account for the bruises on her hips and thighs. The bottom of her bed was solid wood. With the anti-coagulants in her system, she'd bruise easily. And from what Luna said, he wasn't gentle with her."

"Exactly." Hermione turned her head, raising it from the bed. Her eyes met his, and for a moment they both forgot where they were. Who they were.

Severus moved behind her, placing his hands on her hips. He flexed his fingers lightly, feeling the gentle curve of the edges of her stomach through the fabric of her shirt and trousers. He had to will himself not to move any closer, not to press himself against her.

"The killer then moves his hands up to her shoulders. He bruises them too."

Severus followed the killer's movements, concentrating not on her words, but on the feel of her body. Sliding his palms up from her hips, he mentally catalogued the dip of her waist, the lightly covered bones of her ribcage. He watched as she arched her back into his touch, the muscles in her shoulders contracting and drawing the blades back as his hands smoothed over them. The sound of a sharply drawn breath was enough to tell him he wasn't the only one affected. He leant forward, feeling the heat of her body across his chest.

"He grips her hair, pulling her head back to expose her neck," Hermione whispered, shivering slightly as she felt Severus wind his fingers in her curls.

"Then he draws the knife," completed Severus, making a swiping motion across her throat with the tip of his finger.

"The blood spatter arcs higher due to the angle of her head. When he drops her, it pools. And voila. We have our pattern."

"And the hair cream transferred when he collapses beside her." Severus leant down, his head falling beside hers in an approximation of the killer's move. He tucked a loose curl behind her ear, his touch lingering on her cheek. Hermione's eyes closed a fraction, her pupils heavily dilated. He flicked his gaze down to her lips, feeling the heat of her breath upon his own. She was so close.

Too close. Only then did he realise he was pressing against her, his hips flush against her backside. She could feel everything. And the realisation stung.

Severus leapt away, his cheeks burning. Without pausing to look back, he swept out of the lab.

Severus slammed down his cup of coffee with ill grace, flushing under the looks of barely concealed disgust from the other customers. He'd made an utter fool of himself with Hermione, acting like that. And there was no way he could talk his way out of this one. She'd felt everything. His reaction to her, their nearness had been unmissable. She knew. She had to know. It was like he was in school all over again; only it was infinitely more embarrassing, as sex was a very real factor rather than a potential one.

There was no way on God's green earth that she would even consider looking at a man like him in more than a platonic manner. He was her supervisor, her one-time teacher, and if that wasn't enough to contend with, it wasn't as if he was devilishly handsome either. He was average. Average with a very large nose, which wasn't a euphemism. In other words, not a woman's wildest dream.

He sighed gently, wondering what he was going to do. He couldn't face her again. Not today. But there was no way he could avoid her save pulling a sickie, which wasn't an option. Some things were more important than his dignity, and catching a killer was one of them.

No, he was simply going to shut himself away in his office when he got back and tell himself that he wasn't hiding. Draco could bloody well have her. Anything to avoid the humiliation that would surely follow were he to try again. He was such a fool. A fool who couldn't control his emotions.

Cracking his knuckles, he opened the plastic packaging of his sandwich. A spot of lunch first, and then it was back to business as usual. He took a bite, closing his eyes to will away the nausea. It was a nice enough sandwich, but he found himself unable to appreciate it. Somehow, he'd lost his appetite.

Day 3 03:57am The House of Nott

Severus stepped from the Toyota, his black-booted feet crunching heavily upon the gravelled driveway. A soft breeze blew, brushing against his skin almost as though it were caressing him. The night was once again exceptionally warm, and he left his jacket on the front seat, walking up to the house in his shirtsleeves. It was dreadfully bad-mannered, he knew, but in this heat he'd collapse with heatstroke were he to preserve formality. Cooling spells had their limits.

The house itself was impressive. Dating back from the mid-1700s, it stood like a sentinel guarding the wild and unkempt lawns. Whilst not as grand as Malfoy manor, it most certainly had its charm. Even lit by the red and blue lights of the squad cars, it managed to hold a regal air.

Severus dragged a hand through his hair, traipsing up the large stone steps to the door. He placed a hand upon the golden knocker, pushing it gently. The door creaked open, but before he could walk through, he found himself face to face with a haggard-looking Auror. Thick grey stubble coated his jaw, covering skin flushed an ugly shade of red. The man had a rumpled, just-crawled-out-of-bed look about him, stains covering his crinkled robes. Dark blue eyes stared at him from beneath bushy eyebrows, watching him expectantly.

Severus suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. From the way he was treated, anyone would think he was a nobody, not a decorated war hero.

"I've come to talk to Ellis Nott," Severus said, holding up his badge as a form of identification.

The Auror's thick eyebrows rose, the tired cogs of his mind clicking into place as he managed to match the face with the name.

"Snake," he said, gesturing for him to move inside with a chubby-fingered hand. "You'll have a job."

Severus walked inside, about to question the Aurors rather ambiguous statement, when the answer hit him square in the face. The unmistakable stench of decomposition. His stomach clenched as he suppressed the urge to gag. It wasn't the first time he'd come across something like this his work brought him bodies in all stages of decomposition but he could count on one hand the times he'd experienced something as potent as this. And it was only going to get worse as he got closer.

Fishing a small jar from his trouser pocket, he dabbed the gel inside just above his top lip. Vicks. The menthol would block out most of the smell, making it at least bearable. He offered the tub to the Auror who followed suit, his pig-like nose snuffling.

"Thanks," he said, his upper lip glistening in the light. "I take it you didn't get the call we sent through then?"

"No. When was he found?"

"About half an hour ago. Housekeeper found him. Comes once a week to do the dusting and such. She smelt something strange and went to investigate." The Auror began to ascend the stairs, his nose crinkling as the stench got stronger, the menthol unable to mask it entirely. "Got the shock of her life, the poor dear. It's not pretty."

"I can imagine," said Severus, thinking of the kit he'd left in the car. He only had one pair of gloves and his UV torch on him, and he had a feeling it was going to take a lot more than that to get this scene processed. "I take it you have the housekeeper in custody?"

"Naturally, though she'll be released once all the formalities are over and done with. Poor woman's well over a hundred. She can barely walk, let alone wield a weapon. Squib too, so no curses either."

"Family?"

"Grandson, Adrian. Estranged," said the Auror, guiding into a room at the end of the landing. "Can I ask what you wanted to speak to him about?"

The stench hit him full force as he entered what appeared to be the bedroom, rendering the Vicks all but useless. The room looked as though it had been ransacked. Pieces of parchment lay scattered upon the floor, chairs and tables had been overturned, drawers tossed carelessly to the side as the intruder searched. Bottles upon bottles lay on their sides upon the dresser, pills and potions spilling onto the wooden surface. Severus let out a groan, thinking of all the cataloguing to be done. All the prescriptions would have to be found, along with the receipts of store-bought potions. And he had the horrible feeling that one prescription in particular would be missing.

He turned, his dark gaze falling upon the corpse that lay upon the bed. The hot weather had sped up the decomposition process considerably. He took as deep a breath as he dared, trying hard to quell the nausea he felt at the sight of the bloated body. This was not going to be pleasant.

"You can ask all you like, but don't expect an answer," he said, rummaging in his pockets.

"Top secret, eh?" said the Auror, his gaze carefully avoiding the body on the bed.

Severus pulled on his gloves with a snap, his face a mask of concentration.

"Something like that."

Day 3 7:06am Severus' Office

Severus arrived back at the Lab with a heavy heart. Yet another body for Luna's table. Another possible connection lost to the case. Things were going from bad to worse. He had one hope left. The Apothecary. But that would have to wait until tomorrow, along with Nott's autopsy. He was dead on his feet.

He sat down in his chair, his eyes sore. The smell of decomposition still hung in the air, woven into his clothes and hair. He would need a long, hot shower when he got home.

Sighing, he dragged his gaze down, ready to finish up for the day. Upon his desk lay the results of the external blood test along with a small, hand-written note. He picked it

up, the parchment heavy in his long fingers.

Severus,

Middleton called. He says Milly was at Eleanor's house the night she died, in the back garden. Apparently a few of the team took her for a practical joke, intending to return her the next day, but when they went back, she was gone. He says they confessed this morning. They've got him in custody downstairs.

Hermione

He turned the paper over. There were two words on the back. He felt his heart clench as he read them.

I'm sorry.